Strengthening Catholic Identity
A Strategic Initiative of Brisbane Catholic Education

Shape Paper • February 2015
Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to provide the background, rationale and overview for the BCE initiative *Strengthening Catholic Identity*. It includes areas of focus and expected deliverables in the 2014 – 2016 timeframe.

Background
Catholic schools have been a major component of the story of Australian education for over 180 years. In recent decades, as both the Church and Australian society have changed, Catholic schools have continued to develop and to grow in quality and public esteem. Today, Brisbane Catholic Education is the second largest provider of schooling in Queensland, in the fastest growing area of Australia.

The nurturing of authentic Catholic identity has been a significant focus for Brisbane Catholic Education as it has grown and expanded. In 2001, in response to a major research study into Catholic schools in Queensland (QCEC 1998-2000), the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocese identified the following defining features for its Catholic schools into the 21st century:

The Catholic school of the future in the Archdiocese of Brisbane would:
• promote the dynamic vision of God’s love manifest in the life and mission of Jesus Christ;
• recognise and nurture the spirituality of each person;
• be a place of quality learning and teaching;
• continue to act in partnership with families;
• provide an authentic experience of Catholic Christian community;
• be open to those who support its values;
• be experienced as a community of care. (BCE, 2001, p. 15)

More than a decade later, increasingly, the alignment and transparency of the vision and values of a Catholic school with its ritual life, curriculum and all the ways in which it operates (policies, procedures and practices) is regarded as critical to a school being recognisably Catholic.

While Brisbane Catholic Education continues to lead in providing quality Catholic education, it does so within a reflective praxis and a constant monitoring of emerging patterns and needs. *Strengthening Catholic Identity* signals a timely opportunity to reflect and re-focus energies into the future.

The catalyst for this new initiative emerges from three sources:
1. Contextual data
2. Ecclesial focus
3. The Leuven Response
1. Contextual data
Cumulative empirical research (Mason, Hughes, Dixon, McEvoy, Belmonte, Cranston and Limerick) and the shared experience of Catholic educational authorities across Australia indicate that Catholic education operates within an increasingly de-traditionalised and pluralised Australian cultural context. In addition, the last 50 years have seen extraordinary changes in the Catholic school community demographic which include both staffing and student/family profiles, with increasing numbers in new generations of staff and families now having no direct and shared experience of the cultural catholicity of current and previous generations. As this corporate community memory recedes, and the wider cultural de-traditionalisation continues, an apparent disconnect is identifiable between those features that are found to be most attractive about Catholic schools and a comprehension of the ethos and purpose of Catholic education.

These shifts and trends in the broader research find resonance in the most recent BCE data from *Who’s Coming to School* (October 2010). A resultant concern is for the mission risk to Catholic education and the maintenance and growth of spiritual capital even as we witness the very success of Catholic schools within this wider educational and cultural environment.

2. Ecclesial focus
Church documents in recent decades reflect a concern to re-establish the ecclesial identity of the school in the face of the “complexity of the modern world” (CCE, 1997, n. 11). While there is shared concern about the increasing secularisation in schools, and encouragement for an evangelising thrust, the challenge is not just for a stronger promotion of core business: evangelisation, ethos, spiritual formation and Catholic education (Crotty, 2002; Holohan, 2009; McLaughlin, 2005). Rather, the challenge appears increasingly for a re-articulation that connects with all stakeholders, including parents, students and staff and the wider culture.

Since Vatican II there has also been a noticeable growth in the importance placed upon the parental partnership in Catholic education and the development of authentic community. *(Gravissimum Educationis*, 1965, n.3: CCE, 1977, n.6; CCE,1982, n.22; CCE, 1988, n. 43; CCE, 1997, n.20). This theme is appropriately emphasised in *Educating Together in Catholic Schools* (CCE, 2007, n.48). The general thrust for authentic witness, connectivity and community is also the central motif for the new Pope’s recent apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 2013).

3. The Leuven Response
In the last 8 years, a research partnership, first pioneered by the Victorian Catholic Education Commission (CECV) with the *Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Leuven* (Belgium) has developed an underpinning theology and a new empirical methodology to frame the identity structure of Catholic educational organisations. This work is now being explored by a number of diocesan education systems across Australia and internationally, in response to the shared contextual challenges outlined above.

There are good reasons for the interest in the Leuven research:
• the theology provides a contemporary hermeneutic to dialogue productively around issues of Catholic identity; and
• the methodology allows a detailed investigation of the expressions of Catholic institutional identity and profile/s of Catholicity present in our community of schools and Office centres.

Together this gives BCE a theologically-based and point in time data-informed framework in which to explore creative and innovative strategies to strengthen Catholic identity into the future allowing for a new and different conversation than has been engaged in before.
Vision For Strengthening Catholic Identity Initiative

The foundational feature of Catholic education is “to create for the school community an atmosphere enlivened by the gospel spirit of freedom and charity” (CCE, 1982, n. 38). Every Catholic educational community is a vibrant community of learning, faith and life, dedicated to academic excellence, fostering quality interpersonal relationships, and with a strong sense of belonging. Catholic education contributes to the Church’s educational mission, promoting a view of the individual and community centred on the human person and the Gospel vision of Jesus Christ.

While the expression of Catholic identity is always contextual and always unique to each community, there is a distinctiveness in Catholic education that is found in the distinctiveness of Catholicism itself, and which is always accessible and faithful (Groome, 1996).

Five key characteristics identified by Groome to describe this distinctiveness have been widely used among the Queensland dioceses as reference points for Catholic identity:

- a positive anthropology;
- a sense of sacramentality;
- a commitment to community;
- a commitment to tradition as a source of story and vision; and
- an appreciation of rationality and learning (Groome, 1996).

A surge of renewal in Vatican II heralded a radical extension of outlook and outreach in shaping Catholic identity, and has found particular expression in the activities of Catholic schools. Three areas of specific interest are identified as a strong social justice orientation; a holistic Catholic curriculum and a renewed understanding of evangelisation.

This framework of reference provides a rich and wide canvas on which authentic Catholic identity might be explored and enhanced.

Scope

Strengthening Catholic Identity invites exploration of all facets of the school community and BCE organisational life.

The learning from other dioceses and from BCE and QCEC data already available point to the following areas inviting targeted strategic action:

- Leadership formation
- Student wellbeing
- Curriculum
- Parent and community engagement
- Staff accreditation and ongoing formation
- Recruitment and induction
- Student experiential faith formation
- Religious Life of School and Office

Across these areas, BCE is already harnessing energies and engaging in various projects that seek to enhance Catholic identity. These include the implementation of the Australian curriculum and the R.E. curriculum; Catching Fire Formation Programs; the Equity Project; the re-framing of formation and leadership development.

The BCE Strengthening Catholic Identity initiative provides an umbrella and integrating design for these activities. The “Enhancing Catholic Identity” (Leuven) research in conjunction with other Queensland dioceses provides the bedrock for informed dialogue, gap analysis, identification and refinement of specific strategies that further strengthen identity.
Connecting Strategies and Activities

**BCEO** Identifies ongoing patterns and discerns key areas to target strategically and resource.

**SCHOOLS** Continue to be invited to engage directly in the school-based BCE Leuven Project

**THEOLOGY, METHODOLOGY, PEDAGOGY**

**LEUVEN/CECV RESEARCH**

**Catholic Identity and Formation**
*Forming Our Staff!*
- Embedding a ‘head, heart and hands’ Catholic identity in all formation from induction to leadership
  - Integrating BCE leadership and formation programs
  - Ongoing Formation including early career, mid career and experienced staff
  - Sponsored formation programs for Senior leaders
  - Scholarship programs for study in theology and in RE

**Catholic Identity and Mission**
*Enriching Our Witness!*
- Targeted initiatives to strengthen our collective witness
- Quality tools and resourcing to support our Mission
  - BCE Leuven Project
  - Vision, Mission and Values Project*
  - Equity Project*
  - Masterclass Initiative

**Catholic Identity, Learning and Teaching**
*Shaping Our Curriculum!*
- Catholic Identity embedded within the DELT Strategy
- High Quality Learning and Teaching within RE
  - Implementation of the R.E. Curriculum, including the Religious Life of the School
  - Integration of the Vision, Mission and Values in the implementation of the DELT Strategy.
  - Development of Indigenous Education Strategy
  - Sustainability Project

**Catholic Identity and Culture**
*Growing Our Communities!*
- Deepening Catholic identity within and beyond our communities
  - e.g. School boards
  - Parent groups
  - Outreach agencies
  - Ecumenical & interfaith connections
- BCE orientation and induction programs
- Religious life of Schools and Office
- Parent Engagement
- International outreach projects

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BCEO Goals in Progressing the Vision

- To provide a shared theological language and methodology to dialogue about Catholic Identity
- To support ways to use both qualitative and quantitative data to more clearly articulate the shape of each community’s Catholic Identity, identify areas to be strengthened and to be supported in strategies to do so
- To discern and address those areas across our organisation where re-contextualisation invites innovative and creative engagement
- To mobilise ‘best people for project’ across the organisation to address specific strategies
- To engage school and office leadership in promoting a new dialogical paradigm
- To engender confidence in the rich diversity of Catholicism in School and Office communities

BCEO 2014-2016 Deliverables

- Development of an overall Catholic Identity Strategy.
- Creating a cohesive and integrated approach to the religious life of the school
- Enhance a cohesive and contemporary approach to the faith formation of students
- Deliver a planned and integrated approach to the development and formation of staff for mission
- Lead, resource and support to enhance high quality learning and teaching of religion
- Establish a common language and shared understanding of BCE Vision, Mission and Values.

Concluding Comments

As BCE reflects on all of the ways it lives its mission, it is well positioned to further shape the expressions of Catholic identity across its community of schools and Office centres into the future. The wider interest across Australian Catholic Education providers offers a rich learning community as directions and strategies unfold. The focus will remain firmly on enhancing strategies into the future that foster ‘life to the full’ for all our school communities and to equip all stakeholders to embrace a new dialogical paradigm that sees the heart of the tradition re-imagined for a new time.

* For information on the Vision, Mission and Values Project please contact Marie Previte or Jill Gowdie. For information on the Equity Project please contact Paul Allen.

‘We cannot improvise. We must engage seriously.’

(Pope Francis 2014)
Reference List


