WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: THE NEED FOR A RETHINK ON LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN UK UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOLS*

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Abstract

This paper explores the effects of current dominant ideologies of leadership, management and governance exercised in UK University Business Schools. The paper argues that our current models of leadership and management practice are fundamentally flawed and have led to a wider crisis in the role, function and purpose of Business and Management education in the UK. The paper claims that an over emphasis on the application of management and leadership approaches based on the neo-liberal agenda of New Public Management (NPM) coupled with a growth in privileging the student as a consumer has resulted in the over commodification of UK University Business Schools. The effect of these dominant paradigms it suggests places at risk the legitimate place of University Business Schools in the university sector and equally their ability to respond to society's and business needs. An alternative model of academic management is advocated that draws on notions of shared and co-created models of leadership, authentic management and socialising notions of governance.

Introduction

Business schools have attracted a steady drumbeat of criticism over recent decades; that they promote greed in their students, prioritize academics' concerns over managers', shy away from the tough ethical and sustainability issues around

doing business, overlook the students' professional needs for "soft skills," are little more than a recruiting pipeline and "finishing school" for the privileged, and so on. (Spender, 2014)

It is in response to a growing body of criticism of the role, purpose and function of contemporary Business Schools, such as that outlined above by Spender, and the recent revitalisation of interest in debating the idea of a university (O'Byrne and Bond, 2014; Collini, 2012; Boden, Ciancanelli & Wright, 2012; Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Holmwood, 2011; Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2011) that I address the critical question posed by this conference of the pivotal role of the Dean in the Business School. This context is further imperative in the UK where in the past twenty four months there has been an increased focus on exploring the critical nature of leadership and management (CMI, 2014a; CMI, 2014b).Simultaneously there been a focus on the role that the University Business School (hereafter referred to as UBS) should play in contributing to wider issues of leadership, management and governance in society (Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014; Rayment and Smith, 2013). Thus the question that this conference poses on the critical role of the Dean in the Business School is both timely and relevant.

This paper aims to make a contribution to the aforementioned discussions and is largely conceptual in nature. The paper builds on and applies earlier writing and research by the author in relation to governance in UK higher education (Bond and O'Byrne, 2013; O'Byrne and Bond, 2014) and research into notions of leadership as social process (Guerrier and Bond, 2014; Bond, 2014). In the first part of this paper I outline what I perceive to be some of the major paradoxes facing the UBS and explore my assertion that current models of leadership and management have failed to assist Business Schools in meeting or working with these. In the second part of the paper I review how the current dominant ideologies of manageralism and consumerism have contributed to the over commodification and marketization of the UBS. The final part of the paper draws extensively on work that proposes an alternative conception of the pivotal role of the Dean in the UBS. This advocates the Dean's role as being part of an approach to leadership and management within

a wider collegiate structure that embraces a model of the UBS as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

A series of paradoxes facing UK University Business Schools

Whilst most established and reputable universities in the UK now are the proud hosts of a Business School their location in universities is fairly recent in comparison to other disciplinary traditions in the overall history of our seats of learning. Indeed Oxford and Cambridge only recently relented to the establishment of Business Schools in 1996 and 1990 respectively. The UK has adopted a model of embracing the UBS within its university structure. However, this is not the only model as other countries such as France with its development of Grande Ecole's and India with its esteemed Institutes of Management have chosen to adopt a differentiating rather than integrating structure for delivery of business and management education (Thietart, 2009). There are arguments both in favour of integration and separation but that is not the main focus of this paper.

The challenges that contemporary UBS face are complex and sustained. As the world of business becomes increasingly global sed these challenges become a lived existence of tension, paradox and challenge for UBS academics and those in management and leadership roles within them. Below we explore a few of these paradoxes to set a broader context for an examination and critique of current models of leadership, management and governance that are privileged in UBS.

The first of these paradoxes relates to the very nature of business and management as a subject of study and its place in a university context. This challenge relates to legitimate conceptions of knowledge in a university context and the tension between disciplines and fields of study. Both business and management suffer from the fact that they are not disciplines in their own right and thus constantly have to fight with older and more established disciplines to make their voice heard in the cacophony of disciplinary discourses that comprise a university. Whilst business and management draws on many disciplinary traditions such as economics, psychology, sociology, theology, history, social anthropology to name a few it often lacks the maturity and grounding that many of these established disciplines have in generating new knowledge through sustained research, discussion and

enquiry. The generation of new knowledge that can genuinely inform practice in these areas becomes further complicated when we consider the range of applied professions that now occupy and populate business schools and the different lenses and interpretations that they bring to a study of business and management. Whilst this can be a challenge it can also add value to discourses about issues that society faces and the role that business and management might play in assisting with these. The challenge relating to the role of the university in both creating and transmitting knowledge is not a new dilemma. Habermas (1987) sums up this tension when he states:

> Universities must transmit technically exploitable knowledge. That is, they must meet an industrial society's need for qualified new generations and at the same time be concerned with the expanded reproduction of education itself. In addition, universities must not only transmit technically exploitable knowledge, but also produce it. This includes both information flowing from research into the channels of industrial utilisation, armament, and social welfare, and advisory knowledge that enters into strategies of administration, government, and other decision-making powers, such as private enterprises. Thus, through instruction and research the university is immediately connected with functions of the economic process. (Habermas, 1987, pp. 1-2)

The second paradox relates to the research/practice divide that has developed between academics in UBS and practising managers. The current frameworks for measuring the quality of research in UK UBS and thus ultimately funding it are driving this divide further. Academics are driven to publish in lofty academic journals that managers never read and have little relation to informing or developing practice. This tension between rigour and relevance relating to business and management research has been widely discussed and debated within the academic community (Hitt, 1998; Rynes et al., 2001; Baldridge et al., 2004; Adler and Harzing, 2009.). Ultimately as Chia (2014: 444) notes: *'what is at stake is the perceived (in) ability of UBS to simultaneously address the needs of business whilst remaining true to its own ethos of rigour and scholarship'*. Further exacerbating this paradox is the tension developing in many UBS of a culture that further reinforces

a divide between teaching and research and thus totally undermining notions such as research informed teaching or evidence based practice.

Another key paradox relates to what is appropriate curriculum content for UBS and how responsive are our curriculum to societies and business needs. Newman's ideal university *'contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production ...; its function is intellectual culture ... It educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and grasp it'* (Newman, 1891, pp. 125-126). This leads to a critical tension amongst business and management academics as to whether their key role is to educate the mind or develop technically proficient managers to serve the needs of business and the economy. Recent debates about employability and the skills agenda exemplify the tension that is emerging in UBS about the nature and content of business school programmes and curriculum (Holmes, 2013a, 2013b). These debates focus not only on tensions linked to broader concepts such as the notions of employability but strike at the heart of our curriculum offering and challenge our flagship programmes such as the MBA (Mintzberg, 2004) . The result of many of these tensions and challenges is that critical issues that business and management students should be debating such as globalisation, sustainability, ethics and inequality often become marginalised rather than foregrounded in our curriculum content.

In other writing I have identified the paradox that processes of internal and external regulation have placed upon the development and delivery of knowledge in university contexts. (Bond and O'Byrne, 2013). With a plethora of accrediting and monitoring agencies and a focus on delivery of professional education for areas such as HRM, accountancy, marketing etc. this has also impacted considerably on the UBS. In our critique of burdensome quality assurance processes and over rigid structures for course design and delivery O'Byrne and I note:

> As academics have been disempowered and higher education has been regulated to a fine art students themselves unwittingly now become part of the great machine that drives for efficiency at the expense of delivering a personal education. Students now have to download their own teaching materials from impersonal virtual learning environments, communicate largely with academics

via email or on-line discussion forums, participate in mass lectures where there is little room or space (physically or intellectually) for discussion, debate and enquiry, work to assessment specifications that leave little or no room for creativity and innovation and be assessed on such a regular basis that both students and academics start to suffer from assessment fatigue.

This drive for a technical-rational approach to quality coupled with the fact that UBS are often seen as the *cash cows* of an impoverished university sector ultimately manifests itself in high staff student ratio's, stressed out academics and disenfranchised and unengaged students. The result of this obsession with external monitoring has manifested itself in the academic time now being spent on producing learning outcomes, module descriptors, programme specifications, programme annual reviews and other documentation required by the new quality bureaucrats to justify their often inflated levels of responsibility and commensurate salaries.

Thus, it is within the context of wrestling with such paradoxes and challenges as those noted above that UBS School Deans and Directors have to operate. One might expect that in such a complex and turbulent environment these leaders would seek to use approaches to management and governance that recognised this complexity and sought to use the best practices that many a business school academic publications and research advocate. Regrettably, I contend, many of our senior figures in UBS are locked into systems of university management and governance that further exacerbate these paradoxes and turn them from challenges to threats to the very continued existence of the UBS.

The challenge of leadership and management in UBS

Over the last decade, the dominant paradigm of leadership and management in the UBS has been that of New Public Management (NPM). NPM is strongly influenced by public choice theory, principal-agent theory and transaction cost economics (Gruening, 2001; Aucoin, 1990; Dunsire, 1995; Pollitt, 1990). The privileging of this ideology of management has seen a move away from collegiately based models of management to a growth in command and control approaches and the increasing influence of Taylorist approaches to management in the UBS.

This shift manifests itself not only in the structures and relationships between professional colleagues but influences the very language that now dominates and has largely replaced the intellectual discourses that used to take place in Business Schools. Its language is a language of performance indicators and league tables, quality assurance processes and their impact on the curriculum, the standardisation of practices and the rhetoric of employability, and continual restructuring. Coupled with this we have over the last 15 years seen a growth of the notion of the business or management student as consumer. This consumerist approach manifests itself in the paradigm of students and parents, employers, the media, and often also publishers. It articulates an obsession with the National Student Survey and the concept of 'student satisfaction'. The rhetoric of employability and skills is found here as well, but in the form of a market-driven obsession with vocationalism. In the consumerist language, the most important indicator of quality is value for money, indicative of the process of commodification. The student-as-consumer is a consummate rights bearer in the tradition of possessive individualism, a consequence of which is the 'culture of appeals' that has recently developed in the sector.

Deans and Directors of UBS have become trapped in these discourses of managerialism and consumerism and as a result have largely failed to engage with the beleaguered but critically important intellectual paradigm that is at the core of what a university stands for and sustains its very existence in society. The intellectual paradigm views the university not as a business, nor is it a feeder to the marketplace, but, rather a space of intellectual engagement, in which the chief values are the inherent value of knowledge, free and critical thinking, diversification and disciplinary integrity, and a passion for scholarship and research. Deans have also become trapped in what Roberts (1991; 1996; 2001) labels as 'individualising' rather than 'socialising' forms of accountability. Roberts clearly articulates the effect that this can have on leader-member relations.

Individualizing effects, which are associated with the operation of market mechanisms and formal hierarchical accountability, involve the production and reproduction of a sense of self as singular and solitary with only an external

and instrumental relationship to others. In contrast, socializing forms of accountability, associated with face-to-face accountability between people of relatively equal power, constitute a sense of the interdependence of self and other, both instrumental and moral. (2001: 1547)

The result of the privileging of these paradigms of managerialism and consumerism over intellectualism has led to a series of dualistic relationships being perpetuated within the UBS context. For example, the managerial model and the intellectual model relate to each other within what we might call the traditional dualism, positing academics against managers within a relationship defined largely by the internal politics of the university. Similarly, the intellectual model relates to the consumerist model in a front-line dualism defined primarily by the internal politics of the classroom, as academics struggle to manage student expectations and students make demands upon academics in respect of the content of a lecture or seminar. But the managerial and consumerist models also relate to one another, in what we would call the dominant dualism, acted out within the formal politics of the higher education sector, and efforts to reconcile the two are resulting in the 'squeezing out' of the academic voice. Spender (2014: 5) supports such an analysis when he states:

The flaws in the standard business school organizational model lie in its pernicious entropy-generating combination of inappropriate axioms and inappropriate methodologies, and in the institutional incentives for Deans to focus on branding, reputation building, and fund raising rather than on intellectual leadership.

This, myself and O'Byrne (2014) argue, has ultimately led to our universities and especially UBS suffering from a squeezing out of their key Unique Selling Point, the intellectual paradigm, and the development of a culture that reinforces these dualisms in a tri-polar relationship. The growth of what are now termed Executive Deans further reinforces the dominant obsession that management within UBS now have with recasting our seats of learning and enquiry into finely homed bureaucratic machines that embrace principles which Taylor (1911) would readily identify with. This tri-polar contract based relationship is represented in figure one.
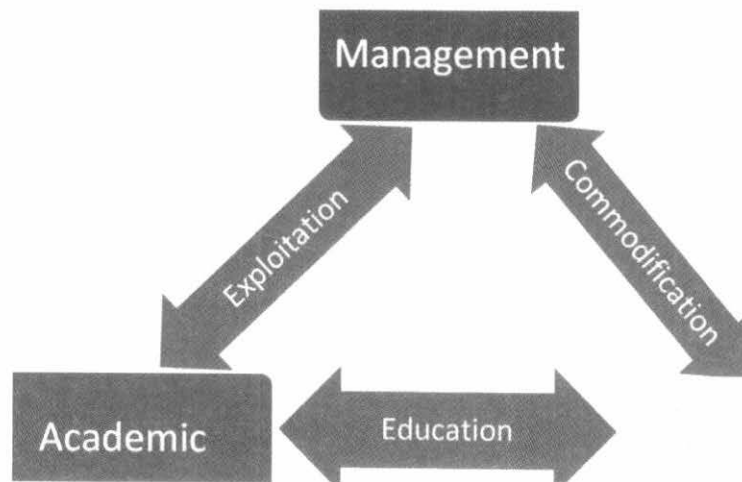
Figure 1: The tri-polar contract relationship in higher education

Exploring alternative approaches to leadership and management

Whilst it is all very well to be critical and polemic about the current state of the UBS and challenge the dominant paradigm of managerialism and leadership practices that are emerging it is necessary to advocate an alternative in the intellectual tradition that I seek to protect. This raises questions about what alternatives may be available and how might these offer a different conception of the pivotal role of the Dean in a Business School. This section of the paper advocates a model of the UBS based on principles of collegiality, shared leadership and bringing the three dominant paradigms together to operate as what Wenger has termed *communities of practice*.

At present, the three paradigms are at war with one another. The managerial model is seen as a necessity in the face of the restrictions imposed upon the UBS by successive governments with their market-oriented ideologies. As a result, the intellectual model is dismissed pejoratively as a luxury, while lip-service is paid to the consumerist model in so far as it can be incorporated into the managerial paradigm. Under the current system, then, university managers, academics and students each possess a vision of the idea of the university which is at odds with the others, and attempts to reconcile these are merely superficial, in so far as the models themselves are presented as totalising projects. In place of this anarchic

marketplace of competing ideologies, a composite model which seeks to identify and satisfy the basic demands of each of the models – a trialogue, if you like – is surely needed.
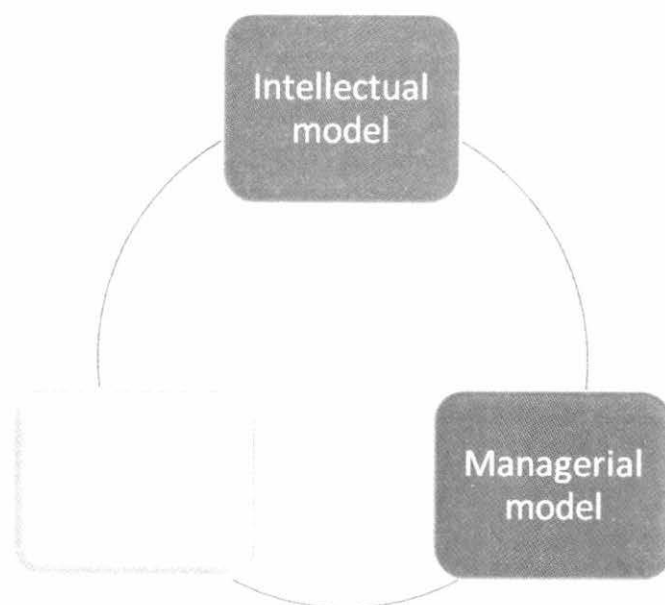

Figure 2: Three paradigms as a trialogue

In developing a model of leadership and management to support a move towards a conception of the UBS as a *community of practice* models of leadership that are based on conceptions of what Denis, Langley and Sergi (2012) have broadly termed leadership in the plural would appear to be a more appropriate ideology for UBS Deans to adopt than that of NPM. Leadership in the plural includes conceptions of leadership that have been termed distributed (Gibb, 1954; Bolden, 2011; Currie and Lockett, 2011), shared (Buchanan et al, 2007; Raelin, 2003), emergent (Hollander, 1961), participative (Vroom and Yetton, 1973) and servant (van Dierendonck, 2010; Greenleaf, 1977). Fletcher (2004: 650) encapsulates what leadership in the plural is when he states it:

'reenvisions the who and where of leadership by focussing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down and across the hierarchy. It re-envisions the what of leadership by articulating leadership as a

social process that occurs in and through human interactions, and it articulates the how of leadership by focusing on the more mutual, less hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative, collective learning'.

These models of leadership serve to decentre the notion of leadership discourses and move the furthest towards recognising leadership as a complex social process which is relational, interactive and interdependent. Conceptions of leadership from this paradigm are more concerned with leadership as a process of participation and collective agency creating and sustaining trajectories of direction rather than exercising control and authority. These are the models of leadership that would best suit our UBS.

Conclusion

Thus this paper does see the role of the Dean in the contemporary Business School as being pivotal, however regrettably all too often it is pivotal in the sense of contributing to what might be seen as a crisis of confidence in the role, function and purpose of the UBS. In contrast if we can persuade our Deans to embrace the model of the trialogue, a model that requires working with different stakeholder expectations, living with difference and working with the tensions that these present without privileging one paradigm over another then we can look forward to a future where the UBS can make a real and sustained contribution to the wider issues that our business and society face. This I contend is where our Deans need to learn to walk the tightrope and perhaps learn the skills of juggling as well if they are to be successful leaders in our higher seats of learning.

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