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A Tale of Two Objectives: The challenge of meeting diverse targets in UK Business Schools

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Abstract

Business Schools in Great Britain are currently facing a number of major challenge due to the conflicting objectives that need to be met. The movement towards a metric-driven, performative approach that has occurred in the last decade has meant that the need to meet set measures that focus on the outcomes of students' study have become imperative. However, focusing solely on these outcomes neglects a second set of objectives that relate to the journey students take during their studies. The need to ensure that both the process and the outcome of students' studies are stressed is particularly challenging in British Business Schools which are often characterised by a large and diverse student and staff population. This think piece posits that by using a loose/tight cultural approach alongside a Schrödinger's leadership style, leaders can mitigate some of the challenges that are currently faced in the sector.

Keywords: Educational Leadership; Schrödinger's leadership; Business; Culture; Communication.

1. Introduction – The Twin objectives for universities

The recent closure of English Language and Literature programmes at Sheffield Hallam University (Guardian, 2022) has caused consternation, concern and anger throughout the higher education sector. This drastic action is symptomatic of a wider dichotomy that exists throughout the sector. The official reason for the closure, that the programme would not meet the target specified by the Office for Students (OfS) (2022) that 60% of graduates should be employed in graduate level jobs upon completion of their studies, provides some evidence of the balancing act that university leaders need to perform in meeting twin objectives that are explored below.

The first objective is to ensure that the metrics that are used to judge the success of the organisation are met. This performative (Ball 2003) approach means that league tables and benchmarking against expected outcomes within the sector, such as the example above, have become commonplace and are increasingly used by external bodies to judge quality. Whilst there is not yet sufficient evidence to suggest that metrics are used exclusively by prospective applicants to determine choice of destination, there is evidence that there is a movement in this direction. Brown and Oplaka (2015), as part of a thematic search in the literature, have suggested that university quality outcomes are ranked second as a deciding factor for students making their choice of university and given their increased prominence and the way in which they are now linked to funding, their importance is likely to grow in the future.

The 'datafication' of education (Stevenson 2020), combined with the introduction of a neoliberalist culture that stresses the efficacy of the free market (Courtney 2015) ensures that an economic imperative, measured by metrics and stressed to everyone working in education, has been commonplace. This increased focus has accelerated in recent years with the retreat from regulation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), who have historically taken a more holistic view of 'success', and the increased prominence of the OfS and their focus on descriptors of quality such as outcomes, retention and the proportion of students who achieve 'good' degrees (defined as a 2(i) classification and above). In short, the focus has moved from the process of educating within Higher Education to the quantitative outcomes of those participating. Whilst, this culture has become increasingly embedded in education in the last few decades and those within it have learnt to be 'fluent in the language of performativity' (Orr 2012), it fails to capture the full complexity of working within higher education.

Whilst the data driven approach described above has become the dominant paradigm within the sector, it must be balanced by the second objective which is linked to the educational imperative described by Hyland and Merrill (2003). This stresses that for many practitioners the key component of any programme of education is the process that students go through rather than the end result. This means that organisations will often stress the quality of teaching and the relevance of assessment. There are measures within the sector that help support this, prime amongst these is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) whose stated purpose was to improve standards of teaching and learning within the sector (Wolstencroft, de Main and Cashian 2021). The most recent TEF specification (OfS 2017) stresses teaching quality as a key way of judging the success of a university and this suggests that whilst metrics remain important for the sector, the process by which the desired outcomes are obtained is also of key importance. This creates a balancing act for any organisation between the process of education and the outcomes achieved and means that universities need to be mindful of how outcomes are achieved rather than focusing solely on the end result. This can create contradictory objectives, for example when deciding how much support to offer students. This is particularly true when looking at the assessments students complete. Extensive formative feedback can have a beneficial effect on student outcomes but it needs to be balanced by the importance of developing independent learners.

2. The Application to Business Schools

Nowhere is that balancing act more apparent than in Business Schools within Great Britain. There are 120 Business Schools (CABS 2022), teaching over 400,000 students (British Academy, 2021) and the majority could be described as large in scale. The size of the Schools, allied to the fact that members of staff are viewed as professional practitioners, creates a number of problems for educational leaders operating within the sector and trying to meet the twin objectives described above. The wide span of control that is often linked to a large School means that traditional, hands-on leadership styles are more difficult to use in higher education (Parkin 2020). This means that the compliance culture (Silverman 2008) that is used elsewhere in education is more difficult to implement and hence an empowered culture (Jameson 2013) is often cited as the dominant approach. Empowerment requires leaders to put trust in people they line manage and ensure that they are able to meet the objectives that are set for them. Given the complexity of ensuring that both metrics and quality of teaching, learning and assessment are considered, this means that the process of leading in a large Business School can be a difficult task.

In this think piece it is our proposition that in order to balance the twin objectives outlined above, as well as the multitude of other objectives that exist within Higher Education, two approaches should be used. Whilst no solution is perfect when faced with the dichotomy of ensuring that both process-driven and outcome-driven objectives are met, by implementing these two measures, you are ensuring that everyone is given the opportunity to meet the objectives set.

3. Twin Solutions for Business Schools

The first approach we are suggesting revisits the work of Peters and Waterman (1982) who described the ideal culture as being one that is 'simultaneously loose/tight'. Whilst there have been criticisms of Peters and Waterman's overall approach (McCollum and Sherman, 1991), there is a lot of detail that could be applied to a modern Business School. Simultaneous loose/tight procedures refer to the way in which culture is structured within a successful organisation; the 'tight' part is the non-negotiable, overarching part that everyone must work towards, the 'loose' part is where people are able to find their own way to the final destination (Peters and Waterman 1982). Within a Business School an example of a 'tight' culture might be the need to ensure that programmes engage with the local community. This is something that might be checked at validation, at the periodic review of programmes, during regular internal quality checks and also reported back on in team meetings. These fixed objectives are common throughout business and help inform both business planning but also business decision making (Mintzberg 2009). John Lewis' assertion that they were 'never knowingly undersold' provided a foundation to their business for decades and ensured that employees had a reference point for decision-making. Given the large number of Business Schools operating in Great Britain, having that unique characteristic also helps provide a sense of identity for the school.

The 'loose' part relates to the empowerment leadership style which allows employees to meet the 'tight' objective in a way which suits them. Returning to the example above, the engagement with the local community might well embrace a number of different approaches and inform curriculum development including consultancy projects, Business Clinics, guest speakers and live assessment briefs. This stressing of community engagement is something that is included by the OfS as part of their measurement of quality within universities and so engaging with it is a vital objective for Business Schools. The advantage of the loose/tight approach is that responses can be tailored to suit the needs of students and the curriculum, yet there is a clear objective that everyone will be working towards.

By embracing this part of Peters and Waterman (1984) theory we are allowing lecturers in British Business Schools to enact creative solutions to teaching which provide independence in a defined framework, however, this alone is not enough to ensure that both measures of success are met.

The importance of leadership in education cannot be overstated (Jameson 2013) and whilst the size and complexity of Business Schools mean that it is often not possible for leaders to be available and visible constantly, it is important that lecturers feel supported when carrying out their role (Wolstencroft and Dinning 2022). The approach we are suggesting is referred to as Schrödinger's leadership (Wolstencroft, de Main and Kivits 2021) where a leader is present when needed, but fades into the background when not needed. Hence, being both simultaneously there and not there, according to the need of the employee. This approach has become particularly important in the last few years with hybrid and remote working becoming prevalent (Dale 2020). This means that corridor conversations and informal meetings are more difficult to enact and the fact that far more home working takes place can mean that workers feel isolated if leaders are not visible. The practical implications for adopting this style often revolve around balancing the need to be both physically in the workplace but also available online. Adopting a Schrödinger's leadership approach means that a leader is likely to need to be hypervisible via an online presence. Replying to MSTeams or Zoom messages swiftly and commenting on message boards helps ensure that staff feel as though the leadership team are present in their working lives, indeed the use of online technology has helped increase the visibility of the leader as you can actually see the person, something that is not traditionally the case with a phone call.

An example of how Schrödinger's leadership works might occur when a new structure is proposed for a university department. Whilst an initial briefing is likely to feature a predominately one-way communication method with the leader informing staff about the changes, it is what happens afterwards that illustrates the benefits of this style of leadership. When any major announcement is made; some members of staff are likely to be entirely happy with the communication and require nothing more. However, given that change can cause increased stress (Lewin, 1947), there will be employees who require greater intervention and support. Schrödinger's leadership stresses the importance of these people being able to access support from the leader, even if much of the day-to-day functions of the Business School might be done remotely. This approach stresses that staff working within a School are heterogenic in nature and should be treated as such. In short it shares many of the key features of situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977) but instead of focusing on the differing styles that a leader might use, it looks at the presence (whether in person or online) of the leader.

The benefit of adopting an approach modelled on Schrödinger's leadership is twofold. Firstly, from an employee's perspective the sense of being constantly monitored is lifted as the line manager is not always visible. Whilst micro management has benefits in terms of achieving set goals, it is not always conducive to a professional setting where multiple objectives are present. The lack of direct supervision is balanced by the fact that support is available if needed. The creation of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) is often associated with this approach and means that employees are able to ask for support from both colleagues but also line managers but it is on their terms, rather than being imposed. Of course, this is not a perfect system and we should not assume that all members of staff will access the support available when they need it. There will be instances where leaders adopting this model will need to intervene to support those who need it even if not explicitly asked to do so. Furthermore this needs to be done without undermining the member of staff. Schrödinger's leadership is an approach that transfers a lot of the decision-making about when to ask for support to those being led, but it is important that it does not lead to a situation where this is the only way in which support is obtained. Sometimes support needs to be more explicitly offered.

The second benefit is that line managers are not obliged to constantly monitor staff and instead can focus their attentions on either strategic goals or alternatively offer targeted support to those who need it. Whilst there are risks associated with this approach, not least the situation described above where an employee needs support but doesn't ask for it, the benefits outweigh those concerns and from a line management perspective it means that you can move away from line management to something more akin to mentoring or coaching.

So, we are positing the view that the difficulties of leading in large Business Schools and meeting the defined outcomes of the sector can be mitigated by jointly adopting these two strategies.

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

The What is clear within the sector is that there are conflicting objectives that need to be met by all educational leaders. Balancing the educational and economic imperatives means that both the process and outcome of students' studies needs be monitored and due to the conflict, that often exists between maintaining a high quality of teaching and learning and ensuring positive results for students, this can create significant challenges for those responsible for Schools within Higher Education. Nowhere are these challenges clearer than in Business Schools. The scale of many Schools means that traditional forms of management, which require greater monitoring, are not possible and so alternative solutions need to be adopted. The loose/tight approach espoused by Peters and Waterman, combined with the use of Schrödinger's leadership can help leaders deal with the challenges outlined.

We are offering three recommendations for leaders within Business Schools that are based upon the approach outlined. Firstly, the loose/tight approach stresses the importance of clarity of objectives and hence it is vital that everyone within the organisation is aware of the key objectives for the school. Multiple repetition of goals, together with consistency of language, message and enforcement, means that the overall objective becomes engrained in the consciousness of everyone who works within the school. However, it is important that whilst the key message is fixed, the ways to achieve it are more fluid. This leads us to our second recommendation which is that leaders need to ensure that everyone is able to work independently towards the goal within the framework set. Given the fact that this way of working can lead to concern from employees who might well be used to a more directed form of leadership, a process of two-way communication where employees are able to check things when needed is vital for this to succeed to ensure that they are given the reassurance that their approach fits into the overall approach. Finally, it is vital for a leadership presence to be maintained, but be discrete, at all times. This can be difficult when leading in an organisation that is likely to be hybrid in nature but can be achieved through the use of access to leaders via MSTeams/Zoom, ensuring at least one leader is on site each day and also ensuring that a culture of openness is embedded into the School.

5. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

6. Open Access Policy

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