Addressing oxy'moronic' educational practices: Examining and engaging paradox for embedding SDGs into postgraduate capstone projects

ABSTRACT

Paradoxes are prevalent in (responsible) management education. A primary example relates to profit maximisation versus contribution to society (often considered to be profit sacrificing), i.e. a dominance of capitalist and neo-liberalistic values underpinning how business and business education is conducted. This paper applies and examines 150 mainly MBA (and some other postgraduate) capstone projects and six follow-up interviews to assess the contributions towards, and impact on, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This includes understanding and examining how embedded SDGs appear to be in programme design, as well as whether this educational impact transcends into industry practice. Intrapreneurship skills are examined as a core component of postgraduate programme design and potential facilitator for enabling effective change back into industry. We use Organizational Ambidexterity as a paradoxical lens to offer unique perceptions within this complex realm and offer academics a novel reflective state, whereby they can contemplate increasing levels of achievement for SDGs and enable greater transcending of responsible management education into practice. Our findings present distinct paradoxical themes that highlight the complexity of why we might be failing to effectively achieve SDGs through postgraduate education.

INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT

Simply put, paradoxes are prevalent in (responsible) management education (Baudoin at al., 2022; Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Dobrow et al. , 2011; Parker, & Jary, 1995; Smith et al., 2023). One considerable (perhaps insurmountable) paradox sits within the dichotomous realm of profit maximisation versus contribution to society (often considered to be profit sacrificing), i.e. a dominance of capitalist and neo-liberalistic values underpinning how business and business education is conducted within the 21st century (Smith et al., 2022). As a result, this dominance could be argued to be a considerable hindrance for achieving the much discussed and affirmed UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, we arguably have an inability in business to overcome the *status quo* and therefore there is a need to adopt much needed 'paradoxical practices'.

A failure to adopt 'paradoxical practices' can be seen in (responsible) management education. These shortcomings can be considered through, for example: the lens of the 'hidden curriculum', whereby capitalistic and neo-liberalistic virtues dominate (Blasco, 2011, 2020; Hinchcliffe, 2020; Lourenço et al., 2012); a culture of short-termistic capitalistic worldviews (Colombo, 2022); and/or an obsession with 'managerialistic' performance measurements (Smith et al., 2023), e.g. accreditation 'badges'. If such dominance of practices were allowed to continue, we could argue significant limitations would remain when attempting to address and achieve SDGs. The challenge is considerable and one we must be prepared to face (as academic practitioners) through core changes to our educational practices.

The focus of this paper is set within postgraduate (PG) education across three UK higher education institutions (HEIs) – specifically the 'capstone' project – and strongly underpinned by MBA delivery. Our aim is to explore and examine how these capstone projects generate impact at the time of study and beyond its educational setting, i.e. impact transitioning from education into practice. We want to understand how student research, especially when we

apply frameworks relating to SDGs (e.g. EntreComp and Organizational Ambidexterity), demonstrates impact whether through, for example, recommendations, plans of action, forward thinking, supervisor feedback, or other indicators present within 150 completed capstone projects (50 per HEI). We will also focus on student intrapreneurship skills for contextualising and fostering impact within these capstone projects – this focus helps to bring together and align a rich diversity of student research conducted. Following this, we use 6 interview participants with MBA Alumni to further explore how projects may have achieved impact beyond the educational setting they were originally designed and developed in.

We want address two overarching research questions:

RQ1: How is impact on MBA capstone projects transcending education into practice?

RQ2: How can the lens of Organizational Ambidexterity enhance perceptions and practices for embedding impact for sustainable development/SDGs?

Conceptual Lens: Organizational Ambidexterity (OA)

To examine paradoxes, we apply the lens of Organizational Ambidexterity (OA). This is a theory that can pertain to paradox, but our application here can be considered unconventional, but examples exist (e.g. Smith et al., 2023). This is because many academics, similar to PRME (2021), attempt to 'balance' the main dichotomous position we are about to present. Crucially, we want to bypass such a limitation and embrace the paradoxical extremes we endeavour to highlight and analyse (Smith, 2016), as we feel this is essential to realistically achieving the SDGs.

The lens of OA is positioned within two conceptually opposing positions, namely *exploitation* and *exploration* (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; March, 1991; Raisch et al., 2009; Stokes et al., 2015). *Exploitative* approaches can be generally considered as short-termistic, what is known (i.e. normative and convergent thinking) and

centred more strategically on existing customers and markets. As presented in the introduction, this position is exemplified by the dominance of capitalistic and neo-liberalistic values underpinning how business and business education is conducted within the 21st century, e.g. shareholder value, profit-making/maximisation, consumption and consumerism. Alternatively, *explorative* approaches can be generally considered as longer term and moving beyond existing knowledge into new knowledge, embracing elements such as innovation, experimentation, flexibility and divergent thinking. To achieve SDGs, our argument is that more *explorative* approaches are essential for success to bypass the *exploitative* dominance of those capitalistic and neo-liberalistic values; yet, keeping mindful to appease the organizational, individual and societal demand for achieving these *exploitative* approaches successfully at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

Adopting an inductive, phenomenological methodology and qualitative approach, data were gathered primarily through the analysis of 150 UK capstone projects on MBAs or other PG programmes across three UK Business Schools, followed by 6 interviews, i.e. capstone project authors. Our research design and methods reflect our intent to act as reflexive change agents, breaking with traditional methodological norms to more closely engage with contemporary practitioner research and dialogue to collectively transcend education into practice and help tackle increasingly complex, wicked problems (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Williams & Whiteman, 2021).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Table 2 is designed to show how the dominance of the *exploitative* findings hinders the application of contrasting *explorative* practices required in all themes. These contrasting themes are directly related and seemingly working in opposition. Indeed, we can argue that this

dominance of *exploitative* practices creates a paradoxical set of tensions that further highlight why we are falling so short on changes required to achieve the SDGs. The OA framework enables a fresh visualization of shortcomings so that we can start to address these issues ambidextrously, rather than in isolation. In essence, we are suggesting more effective solutions can be sought and applied if *exploitative* and *explorative* dimensions are considered in tandem, i.e. 'embracing the paradox' (Smith, 2016).

DOMINANT EXPLOITATIVE THEMES		EXPLORATIVE CONTRASTS – KEY GAPS AND SHORTFALLS
EDUCATION DESIGN Transactional education; Tokenistic addition of RME/SDGs in modules/courses; The importance of attaining CMI or other related accreditations; 'No structure', lack of structure	Vs	*EDUCATION DESIGN* A need for creative pedagogies; New concepts are needed to address SDGs; A need to assess impact beyond the qualification
INDIVIDUAL IMPACT Personal benefit, e.g. the qualification (certificate), promotion possibilities, increased salaries, and so on	Vs	*INDIVIDUAL IMPACT* A need for social benefit and impact; A need for social media profiling and building communities of practice
SOCIETAL INFLUENCE Monetary focus; Capitalistic conformity creating barriers that restrict collaborations; Capitalistic dominance, i.e. SDGs not top of the agenda for business	Vs	*SOCIETAL INFLUENCE* A need to address the triple line; A need for a transformative leadership style

Table 2: Findings applied to an Organizational Ambidexterity framing

Arguably, within established literature positions and perceptions, to achieve *explorative* dimensions there is an assumed sacrifice of *exploitative* outcomes. This position and perception

requires a core mindset alteration - this is at the centre of our argument. If we are to live within a society of dominant capitalistic values and tendencies, then we need to find a way for these paradoxical tensions to co-exist and then thrive.

DISCUSSION

Embedding and Impacting on SDGs

Perhaps what is striking about our findings, and then contemplating the related perceptions, is that MBA and other PG programmes do engage and embed SDGs to some degree. Yet, similar to the potential shortcomings of PRME adoption (Smith et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Séraphin et al., 2021), transcending the implementation of SDGs beyond tokenism (e.g. Weybrecht, 2022) and into actionable industry change is a significant step not yet achieved. We express this as a domination of *exploitative* tendencies and lack of *explorative* engagement within our OA lens. Thus, the complexity of the perceptions around the topic area serve to highlight that the shortcomings are perhaps unintended and there is actually a will to want to change and create meaningful action (expressed by the gaps and shortfalls in **Table 2**). This would align to issues relating to the hidden curriculum – the tension between curriculum design and curriculum in action (Barnett & Coate, 2005) – as adoption of responsible management education appears limited (Mousa, 2022).

Perhaps a key limitation relating to impact of educational practices is the continuous attempt to 'balance' the main paradoxical position we present (akin to PRME, 2021). **Table 2** supports a position whereby within these attempts to 'balance', for example, profit maximisation versus contribution to society, *exploitative* approaches tend to rule and dominate. The need to 'embrace the paradox' and its dichotomous extremes (Smith, 2016) requires a significant change in mindset and educational approach. Thus, we advocate the need for ambidextrous educational approaches that serve to fulfil and achieve these extremes within

paradox – indeed, ambidextrous approaches are considered to exist more widely in this way and many organizations act ambidextrously whether consciously or unconsciously (Smith et al. 2022; Smith, 2016). HE institutions, and more specifically business schools, may need to look to do the same if they are serious about playing their part in achieving the SDGs and having their education delivery impact transcend meaningfully into industry practice.

'What has intrapreneurship got to do with it?'

The above brings us back to the importance of innovative pedagogical approaches (Laasch & Conway, 2015) and the need for intrapreneurship skills (lIonen & Hytönen, 2023). Not only are these skills considered central to MBA and other PG programme designs, the connection to creativity and innovation, and then *explorative* approaches identified as gaps in **Table 2**, highlights the potential for intrapreneurship in helping to overcome the shortfalls presented. The adoption of these intrapreneurship skills is not an easy feat. Indeed, there are challenges around 'planned serendipity' (Hjorth et al., 2015), 'structured flexibility' (Kirby, 2006; Draycott & Rae, 2014; Rae et al., 2014) as well as specialised versus interdisciplinary demands and 'focused diversification' (Anderson et al., 2014; Urbano, & Turró, 2013; van Wetten et al., 2020), both examples of oxymorons in educational action. Yet, the potential for intrapreneurship skills to serve ambidextrous approaches is here.

CONCLUSION

Returning to RQ1, we can be quite clear and highlight impact appears limited, i.e. the projects are not effectively transcending education into practice. The main reasons for this sit within **Table 2**, whereby *exploitative* approaches, via our OA lens, dominate actions and outcomes. We presented the findings from three perspectives, namely education design (related to organizational design and 'structural ambidexterity'), individual impact (related to self-

managing actors and 'contextual ambidexterity') and societal influence (considering multiple societal actors, how they change over time and 'sequential ambidexterity'). This demonstrated how complex the reality is when attempting to engage with and embed the SDGs into MBA and other PG programmes to then achieve industry impact as a result of the capstone projects completed.

With RQ2, when applying OA, we argue we can no longer 'balance' paradoxical scenarios as *exploitative* tendencies still dominate. Indeed, we suggest ambidextrous educational approaches are now needed to embrace paradoxical extremes, whereby we can fulfil the needs of both *exploitative* and *explorative* approaches. We believe this can assist in enhancing perceptions and practices for embedding impact for sustainable development/SDGs. The title of this paper starts with 'Addressing oxy'moronic' educational practices'. The general oxymoron is compatible with the paradoxical elements we highlight within this paper. 'Moronic' is emphasised to show how we, as educationalists and academics, are seemingly trapped within perhaps obvious situations that we are failing to overcome. Thus, we want academics to take a critical reflective stance on what we suggest that prompts a reaction/discussion with others followed by meaningful change in practice.

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