

## Challenges and conundrums

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# **Challenges and conundrums: teaching and learning from a UK Dean's perspective**

## **Abstract**

In this article I present some of the teaching and learning challenges faced from the perspective of a UK Business School Dean. There are many challenges that I could have chosen, but my focus is upon the unpredictable external environment; the conundrum of teaching evaluation; developing teaching staff; and the curriculum issues we face.

## **Introduction**

Management education is a vast business. There are more than 13,000 outlets for business and management studies across the world and, in the UK, more students study business and management than any other academic subject. It is, therefore, an extremely lucrative market to be in, and a market that benefits many Universities and Colleges.

I have spent my career working in UK Business Schools and have had a number of academic leadership roles before I became a Dean. My students in the past have described me as passionate about my subject and committed to the delivery of excellent student experiences, though my Dean role means that I no longer have the space to teach. Instead, I now find myself leading a large UK Russell Group School, with nearly 6,000 registered students. The Russell Group contains 23 UK Universities that see themselves as exemplifying research-led education and knowledge generation. They are characteristically large, civic institutions which are extremely popular with both UK and international students.

In presenting a UK Dean's perspective on teaching and learning, I discuss some of the current challenges that we face in delivering excellent teaching and learning. There are many

challenges that I could have chosen, but my focus is upon the unpredictable external environment; the conundrum of teaching evaluation; developing teaching staff; and the curriculum issues we face.

### **The unpredictable external environment**

It is a truism that organisations are characterised by ongoing change and flux, and universities are no exception. Higher education has seen many changes during my time in academic leadership roles, all of which have an impact upon how we deliver teaching and learning. The UK political climate continuously offers up a number of challenges. Traditionally, UK Russell Group institutions have been very successful in recruiting international students; however, recent visa policies are perceived to be hostile to international students who are counted in the nation's immigration statistics. The decision to leave the EU and the continuous negotiations over the form that BREXIT will take has led to some uncertainty about the future recruitment of international students, most notably those from the European Union. Changes closer to home mean that more UK students than at any time in the past are experiencing a University education and there are – quite rightly - increasing expectations that all Universities will make themselves accessible and friendly to those from less disadvantaged backgrounds.

The introduction of undergraduate fees, a recent change for UK students, has resulted in increasing demands to ensure that the teaching and learning we provide offers value-for-money. When evaluating 'value-for money,' those aspects that we know are crucial for effective management development, such as soft skills (Ingols and Shapiro, 2014) and opportunities for reflection (Cassell, 2017), can often be lost from curricula as students are increasingly desperate for a good return on their investment. Our students are far more demanding than they may have been in the past, with high expectations of what they will

achieve from their programmes in terms of the grades they expect and their future employment outcomes. Advancing communication technologies and our students' comfort with using them means that we all need to become familiar with using them and being open and able to use technological innovations in the classroom. Moreover the skills that students need as part of the emerging fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016) mean that the curriculum needs to be constantly adapting. Hence the concern of the Dean becomes how to run an agile and progressive School to deliver the experiences now demanded by students whilst responding and trying to be proactive in an ever-changing external environment.

### **The evaluation conundrum**

With the pressure on the higher education sector to demonstrate value for money for students, there is no doubt that we are escalating the measurement of all kinds of aspects of teaching and learning and the student experience. Within the UK, the National Students Survey (NSS) has long been a vehicle for critiquing the performance of our teaching and learning at undergraduate level. Based on a series of 27 items, including the important final question "*Overall I am satisfied with the quality of my course*", performance on the NSS contributes to a School's positioning in a number of different and important league tables, and has become a thorn in the side of many undergraduate providers. The survey consists of 27 questions where students are asked to rate their institution on a number of themes including teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback, academic support and learning resources. Over 320,000 students completed the 2018 survey.

Student survey response is just one example of the increasing audit culture that is associated with UK teaching and learning. The interest shown by University executives and the impact of the associated rankings means that we spend a lot of time within UK Universities focusing upon how to increase our NSS scores rather than taking a holistic view

of our teaching and learning. It also stops us from taking risks. For example, in my own School we have recently tried to move towards a paperless policy so that all student notes, handouts etc., unless there is a good pedagogic reason for otherwise, are all on the virtual learning environment. Apart from saving the University money, our commitment to responsible business and a green agenda means that we should be moving in this direction. Some colleagues are concerned however, that if they don't give the students the handouts as they wish, their individual feedback from students and their NSS scores will go down. I have spoken to management educators elsewhere who are scared to innovate because they cannot afford the risk of a fall in their student satisfaction scores. Therefore, the unintended consequences of the over-assessment of teaching and learning can have a negative impact on a Business School's propensity to innovate and experiment with respect to teaching and learning.

Moreover, this performance culture also has a potentially negative impact on individual members of Faculty. Assessment of the student experience and teaching feedback can be useful if it used in a developmental way. However, we know that students – like any other population – are guilty of unconscious bias. For example, there is now considerable evidence from experimental studies that women tutors systematically receive lower teaching evaluations scores than their male colleagues (Mengel, Sauermann and Zölitz, 2018). Numerous real-life studies have also produced similar results. Hence, in evaluating teaching and learning based on module evaluation questionnaires alone, we leave ourselves open to accusations of unfairness while, paradoxically, in order to be fair we need to be more sophisticated and reflective in how we evaluate.

This over-emphasis on performance management and the increasing development of the audit culture has been noted by others in relation to Business Schools, and management research in particular (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Craig, Armenic and Tourish, 2014). My concern here is that such trends are increasingly being transported into management education with potentially similar, negative consequences. My belief is that our performance in teaching and learning is over-measured to the detriment of Schools, and does not achieve the improvements in the student experience that we may be seeking.

### **Developing staff in teaching and learning**

An ongoing challenge within a research-led University is promoting the importance of teaching and learning. Although many institutions may claim that there is parity between research and student education, and that this is manifested in a range of different procedures and practices, there are still challenges to address. In relation to the difference between research focused and teaching focused staff, in many UK institutions procedures for teaching staff to be promoted to the equivalent of full Professor positions have only started to emerge during the last ten years. Moreover, many of the criteria that are used to assess promotions have simply been transposed from research to teaching without really considering the implications. A particular criterion used by many UK Schools is that of pedagogic research. So, whereas we have clear evaluation criteria for a research member of staff in terms of a number of quality publications, teaching focused staff are expected to deliver teaching focused publications. Although scholarship in all its forms is important across our entire Faculty, in practice University strategies in relation to teaching and learning rarely have the University proclaiming that they wish to be world-leading in pedagogic research. Rather, our strategies focus upon attracting quality students; delivering a high-quality student experience; developing creative teaching innovations and technological alternatives to traditional

techniques; and initiatives for increasing wider participation from those groups traditionally under-represented in our Universities. Therefore, it would make sense for us to be rewarding our teaching focused staff for achieving these strategic objectives. This is not to detract from the significance of pedagogic research as something important to engage with, and crucial for the effective development of our teaching and learning practice. My point here is that sometimes the criteria for progression that teaching focused staff are expected to deliver upon might not always be as well-thought through as those familiar practices we use for assessing research. My experience of a number of UK Russell Group Universities is that the notion of ‘pedagogic research’ is used as a simple copy of the criteria for research staff, rather than there being any sustained University interest in its strategic positioning. Rather we should be encouraging teaching focused staff to contribute to a range of research and pedagogic inputs and outputs rather than being too prescriptive.

Hence, from this Dean’s perspective we need to be able to reward our teaching focused colleagues; yet, there are still – perhaps unsurprisingly given the research-led nature of our institutions - underpinning narratives that research should be privileged. Within my own institution it is still common for staff who have been successful in research grant capture to seek to “buy-out” their teaching time. Of course, Faculty need the time to focus upon top quality research but the implication of this narrative is that the everyday teaching that we do in Business Schools is something to strive to be relieved from, rather than being a central activity to be engaged with and enjoyed. We need to think creatively about how we support, develop and value all our Faculty, if we are to achieve the parity that we wish to.

### **The curriculum challenge**

A variety of writers on Business Schools have drawn attention to a range of different concerns around the curriculum and what is traditionally covered in Business School

education. Pfeffer and Fong's (2002) critique is perhaps the most well-known where they question the nature of the MBA curriculum including concerns about the forms of instruction used. They argue for a different model of business education where there is a focus upon learning by doing and seeking to change how people think about business issues. The financial crisis had amongst its implications created a narrative of blaming the Business School and increasingly we have been characterised as money-grabbing, intellectually fraudulent and, and perhaps the most damning, of occupying the newest and most ostentatious buildings on campus (Parker 2018). Parker (2018) argues that in both the hidden and explicit curricula of Business Schools, the virtues of what he calls "capitalist market managerialism" are propagated as the one best way. Although some may see the notion of bulldozing the Business School and starting again as a little extreme, there are important discussions to be had here about curriculum design and who traditionally benefits from the Business School curriculum.

There is now a lively debate about the different stakeholders that are served by Business Schools, and numerous Schools are seeking to engage in curricula that encompass ethical stances. This includes discussions of the impact of business in other areas and the consequences of irresponsible business. More attention is paid now within Schools to issues such as equality and diversity, and our accrediting bodies and rankings also now ask us questions about the diverse nature of our Faculty and our classrooms. However, the key question remains as to the extent to which the curriculum has changed to meet the diverse needs of our stakeholder groups and the challenges faced in responding to the complexities of global events. We know that curriculum change can be slow and journals such as this one play an important role in enabling us to critique what we do in teaching and learning, and to reflect upon how we might do things better. As a Dean, I want our School to be continuously reviewing the appropriateness of our curricula so that we offer our students the best chance of



being prepared to deal with the complexities they will face in a career in future business and management. That, by definition, means a recognition of the different interests across society and the role of business in supporting or squashing those interests.

### **Conclusion**

My account has drawn attention to some of the dilemmas faced by those of us trying to lead Business Schools and, in doing so, facilitate the delivery of excellent student education. There is much in both the present and the future that challenges our traditional methods of teaching and learning and, like many others, we are seeking to constantly adapt in a challenging external environment. Having said all that, in my experience I am faced – and I hope that many others feel the same – with a Faculty who are passionately committed to enhancing the student experience and effectively communicating the subject that they love. Furthermore, there seems to be no end to the number of students who want to learn and engage with business and management. Long may that continue.

Words: 2494

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