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What do business school deans do? Insights from a UK study

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Abstract

Purpose

During the last 40 years, the growth and impact of UK business schools have been significant. Relatively few studies have reviewed how business school deans emerge and grow. This paper aims to explore the experiences and psychometric profiles of UK business school leaders to understand their tenures, problems, dilemmas and succession issues.

Design/methodology/approach

The study comprised 16 semi-structured interviews with business school deans and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) questionnaires completed by deans and aspiring deans (associate deans and heads of department). The study uses the executive life cycle and concepts of social capital as theoretical frameworks to understand the dean's role.

Findings

The study revealed a pattern of individuals working in their first deanship at their third business school. Their career trajectories highlighted the usefulness of consultancy skills similar to those of a partner in a professional service firm. The importance of the dean's role in terms of business school fit, creating a differentiation strategy and team building were emphasised. The psychometric preferences of the deans in the sample indicated Jungian extroversion, tough mindedness, seeing patterns and making connections, strategic thinking and a tendency to bring issues to closure. Recommendations are made for the development of a more heterogeneous, transnational cadre of business school deans and improved dialogue with heads of universities to understand the positive contribution of business school leaders as changing business models are needed in turbulent times.

Originality/value

There are few explanations of the roles and functioning of business school deans in practice. The insights gained are valuable for business school deans and are, more broadly, of interest to heads of universities and executive search firms. The paper is theoretically and practically relevant to building leadership

capabilities in knowledge intensive organisations and professional service firms.

Keywords

- Business schools Principals Leadership United Kingdom

Introduction: perspectives on deanship

This inductive study is distinctive in its exploration of the experiences, profiles and challenges of a sample of UK-based business school deans. It also examines the reasons for the apparent shortage of applicants for the role. Relatively few studies have presented such an in-depth perspective on a cohort of deans and even fewer during a recession. Research on business school leaders in the UK has focused on élites ([Fragueiro, 2007](#), on IMD, INSEAD, LBS; [Goodall, 2007](#)). [Bareham \(2004](#), p. 26) explored a range of deans' attributes, such as strategic thinking, communicating to build effective relationships internally and externally and decision making in both British and Australian business schools, which may be features of any senior executive. [Williams' \(2009\)](#) single in-depth longitudinal UK case study of Cass Business School emphasises the dean's capability to focus on strategic dilemmas, external stakeholder relations and culture change. [Lorange \(2008\)](#) in reviewing his 13 years as dean at IMD, discusses the processes of strategic decision-making and change at IMD, a top ranked autonomous private executive education provider and “thought leader” in Switzerland. This insight possibly has limited transferability to the UK or USA where such long tenures are relatively rare and most UK deans are strategic business unit leaders, not heads of autonomous institutions. An exception may be the chief executive's role at Ashridge, another niche private executive education provider. [Peters \(2006\)](#), who has been at Ashridge since 2003, sees himself as a “poster child” and “jack of all trades”, responsible for strategy, finance and energising the various business school activities held together like a “souk”. From an American perspective, [Dhir \(2008\)](#) has compiled anecdotal reflections on “deaning” and the cultural gap between dean and faculty. [Baba \(2007\)](#) portrays the dean from a Canadian viewpoint as the “custodian of intellectual, social, and reputational capitals” who can reflect the school's cultural capital. Furthermore, the web site BizDeansTalk (www.deanstalk.net/) hosts blogs by top business school professors and topical discussions on management education globally.

The literature on academic deanship not specific to business schools presents some interesting insights. For example, [Rosser et al. \(2003](#), p. 2) studied the

metaphors applied to the multiple roles of deans: “deans have been variously described as “doves of peace” intervening among warring factions, “dragons” holding internal and external threats at bay, and “diplomats” guiding and encouraging people who live and work in the college” ([Tucker and Bryan, 1991](#), p. ix). [Gmelch \(2004](#), p. 75) has extensively researched the transitions to the role in the USA and Australia, noting the Janus-like identity of deans:

[...] they mediate the concerns of the university mission to faculty and at the same time try to champion the values of their faculty...they must learn to swivel without appearing dizzy, schizophrenic, or “two-faced”.

[Fagin \(1997](#), p. 95) also sees the ambidextrous professional school dean “as a person and position in the middle.” This suggests new forms of organising for the dean in “hyper-turbulent” times to cope with managing at the “edge of chaos” ([Smith and Graetz, 2006](#)). More pragmatically, [Starkey and Tiratsoo \(2007](#), p. 55) portray the increasing complexity of the role of the business school dean over time:

[...] forty years ago running a business school was something that a senior professor might well take as a matter of duty shortly before retirement. Nowadays deans almost constitute a profession in their own right, a cohort with unique and specialist skills [...] Deans may be likened to sports coaches, hired to improve performance, fired at will, but with one eye always on building their own careers [...] the truth is that financial performance now largely makes or breaks a dean's reputation.

[Symonds \(2009\)](#) has echoed the dean's increasingly difficult position during a recession:

There was a time when becoming the dean of a major business school was like winning the lottery. It meant a comfortable gig with good pay, prestige, the opportunity to mix with the great and good of business, politics and academia and, perhaps best of all, the kind of job security enjoyed now only by popes. In today's credit crunch world, however, things are very different.

This paper seeks to reveal the experience and challenges of a dean's role from UK business school deans’ perspectives more widely and in greater depth.

Changing models and contingencies

From debates on business schools in the literature, it appears business school deans have always grappled with multiple identities as chief academic officer, CEO, entrepreneur, scholar, in the context of contested organisational identities. [Bennis and O'Toole \(2005](#), p. 103) challenge: “why have business schools embraced the scientific model of physicists and economists rather than the professional model of doctors and lawyers?” They suggest business schools

are envious of the academic prestige and high ranking academic journals of other disciplines and yet do not adopt either the model of academic practitioners, for instance professors of surgery may still carry out surgical operations but professors of management do not necessarily practise business. Typically in professional schools, tensions exist between rigour and relevance ([Zell, 2005](#)) and between academic and professional practice ([Grey, 2002](#)), overcoming the double hurdle ([Pettigrew, 2008](#)) by creating reputations in both scholarship and practice ([Aram and Salipante, 2003](#); [Baden-Fuller et al., 2000](#); [Dossabhoy and Berger, 2002](#)).

Debates over the nature of business and management education ([Hayes and Abernathy, 1980](#); [Cheit, 1985](#)) and the professionalisation of managers ([Khurana and Nohria, 2008](#)) have been renewed during the current financial crisis. Carolyn Woo, dean at the Notre Dame Business School in the USA, stresses, “this is definitely an opportunity for business schools to do more to make ethical thinking part of the fabric of their curriculum” ([Adenekan, 2009](#)). [Antunes and Thomas \(2007\)](#) observe that European business schools provide more heterogeneous offerings than the dominant US model that has been widely adopted ([Pfeffer and Fong, 2002](#)). For Europe, [Durand and Dameron \(2008, p. 103\)](#) challenge the current dominant model that has made North America the Mecca for management education by suggesting “the ‘catching up’ mode with a ‘differentiating’ strategy.” In the UK, [Starkey \(2008\)](#) called for business schools to learn from the lessons of history of past mistakes in business and leadership and to create a model of the MBA beyond merely a passport for careers in “hedge funds, private equity, investment banking, venture capital and consulting.” Starkey argues:

[...] business schools will need to reflect on [...] how management education has contributed to the mindset that has led to the excesses of the last two decades [...] They will need to cultivate an appreciation of the role of the state and of collective action to counter the fixation on [...] greed and selfishness [...] The *Financial Times* also has a role to play [in changing values and attitudes].

Its league tables (of full-time MBA programmes) are heavily biased to the salary returns that accrue to MBAs who join these “professions.” It is time to develop a more robust measure of what constitutes effective, sustainable management education.” [Starkey \(2009, p. 12\)](#) believes “the economic sidelined the behavioural” and business schools must take greater account of ethics and aesthetics in the curriculum. De Meyer ([Bradshaw, 2009](#)), dean of Judge Business School, added to the debate from a UK based dean's viewpoint:

[...] we will have to rethink the basis of finance, we will need to understand how to adjust globalisation to a more regulated world. We need to give our

students more insights into what the new role of business in society will be and how business has to take the rest of society more into account in its strategies.

[Podolny \(2009\)](#), a former dean of Yale School of Management, argues for US business schools to:

- integrate a range of academic disciplines to connect analysis with values;
- team teach with hard and soft skills;
- promote qualitative research;
- abandon rankings based on graduates' salaries; and
- enforce a code of conduct.

He warns, “unless America's business schools make radical changes, society will become convinced that MBAs work to serve only their own selfish interests” ([Podolny, 2009](#), p. 62). It is interesting that as a response to criticism of the Harvard MBA, several hundred of its new graduates pledged an unofficial oath in June 2009 to: “guard against ‘decisions and behaviour that advance my own narrow ambitions, but harm the enterprise and the societies it serves’” ([The Economist, 2009](#), p. 70). It is timely that [Ferlie et al. \(2008\)](#), p. 12) argue for a public interest business school model focused on social science and issues of “major public importance”. Clearly, factors such as deans' affective learning, their absorptive capacity ([Cohen and Levinthal, 1990](#)), the ability to learn, and their adaptive capacity ([Hitt et al., 1998](#)), and the ability to change, will be tested by these new contingencies.

The dean's role in the UK national context

Collectively, the deans of the more than 100 business and management schools in the UK employ over 10,000 academic staff and are responsible for 14 per cent of undergraduates, premium priced postgraduate and executive education and a significant proportion of overseas student income (on which the country is probably over-reliant, [Böhm et al., 2004](#)). During 2008, there was a 25 per cent turnover in business school deans in the UK with replacements sourced overwhelmingly from the British professoriate and other UK business schools and only one appointment was made from outside the UK ([Davies, 2008](#)). Indeed, the premier UK school, London Business School has had five deans in 11 years (1998-2009). Executive search firms report relatively short long lists of candidates. The population of current deans comprises mainly white UK born male career academics. There is a slight trend in the UK to create “super deans”, for instance in Birmingham, Kingston, Portsmouth and Surrey, who are responsible for ever larger academic units in addition to

business and management education. In the post-1992 sector, there is also a trend in some institutions to create dean/pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) roles. Government policy in particular drives third stream activities (enterprise, commercialisation, knowledge transfer as distinguished from first and second stream activities, i.e. research and teaching), employability and green agendas ([Lambert, 2003](#); [Leitch, 2004](#); [HEFCE, 2009](#)). Business school deans must pay attention to professional bodies (e.g., Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, Chartered Institute of Marketing, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development), business school accreditation bodies (AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS), government quality assurance and the kind of dysfunctional behaviours that the research assessment/excellence frameworks generate ([Piercy, 2000](#)).

Another consideration is that the number of PhD candidates from the UK is insufficient to replace retiring faculty in business schools ([Francis, 2006](#)), probably a global phenomenon. Moreover, the vagaries of media rankings ([Gioia and Corley, 2002](#)) and national student surveys (NSS (www.thestudentsurvey.com)) add to managerial complexity. The business school is often viewed as a “cash cow” for the rest of the university. One differentiating feature, perhaps, is that UK business schools do not depend on endowment income which has seriously affected, for example, the investments of leading US schools such as Harvard Business School in the current credit crunch. Like the Australian context where the proportion of overseas numbers is also very high, arguably there are probably too many universities in the UK given projected demographics. Mergers that resulted in the restructured Manchester Business School and London Metropolitan Business School may become common occurrences, particularly with increasing global, online ([Tieman, 2009](#)) and private provision of lifelong and work-based management education.

Within the Universities UK report *The Future Size and Shape of the Higher Education Sector in the UK* ([Brown et al., 2008](#)), several possible future scenarios are envisaged. In the high tech, high employer input scenario, employer funded part-time programmes delivered virtually are likely to result in strategic alliances, mergers (like Henley Business School and Reading University) and in private providers, such as Pearson, attempting to acquire the profitable vocational market. There will probably be a need for more commercially focused business school faculty members who are entrepreneurs as the higher education landscape changes. In April 2009, the Apollo Group announced that its majority-owned subsidiary Apollo Global had bid for BPP,

the UK's only profit degree awarding institution ([Fickling, 2009](#)). The Apollo Group owns the University of Phoenix, the world's largest MBA provider.

Further, the positioning of British business schools and their attitudes to their parent university have changed over time which means the dean has to contribute significantly to the university's top team unless they report to a faculty dean. Several unsuccessful attempts were made in the mid 1980s to mid 1990s for a few UK business schools to separate entirely from their host universities, for instance at City University and the University of Manchester ([Vinten, 2000](#), p. 182). AACSB and EQUIS accreditations now require business schools to possess sufficient financial autonomy within the university. It appears, nevertheless, that in the twenty-first century, university-based business schools are tending towards greater integration within their university, to collaborate with other disciplines, rather than adopting a strategy of trying to break away as seen in the past. There are no current examples of business schools that are disengaging from their host universities.

From anecdotal evidence, perennial internal challenges for business school deans include the high levels of internal taxation for services, e.g. careers advice which they often duplicate locally to ensure greater quality for graduate students and corporate clients. Some business school deans cite a lack of understanding by the university centre relating to the financial and administrative burdens of servicing professional clients and accreditation visits. Corporate and executive education students in business schools expect high quality facilities and so the dean must contend with the competitive drive for impressive new/refurbished business school buildings to enhance the brand. Indeed, the MBA differentiates business schools from other university units – it may represent simultaneously the flagship premium-priced course yet remain a “loss leader” compared with other programmes in a school's portfolio. From a student's perspective, the quality of the student experience and students' employability (based on soft and hard skills, languages, international work experience) are key concerns. Faculty present another challenge, for example long-serving individuals may be supply driven and find it difficult or create inertia to replace low-demand programmes with those that prepare students for new areas such as green collar jobs or work in the digital economy.

Deans, therefore, constantly juggle a series of organisational dilemmas, for example, to create a full service school v. niche position, producing academic research excellence publications v. practitioner demands for immediate relevance, allocating financial expenditure on research stars v. visiting lecturers, or investments in new buildings v. new faculty, addressing the notion

of students as customers v. students as co-producers, and so on. Personal dilemmas are also common. These include time spent on endless internal committees v. generating external enterprise, maintaining scholarship with personal research publications v. communicating the school's brand. They may also balance becoming a dean in another business school v. applying for a pro-vice-chancellorship v. returning to the mainstream professoriate. [Harris \(2006\)](#) talks of three critical dilemmas: namely, being an administrator v. being a leader; spending time inside v. outside and research excellence v. curriculum innovation.

In a 2007 survey, [Ivory et al. \(2008\)](#) found there is also a constant tension between operational demands and time for strategy UK business schools deans in this survey perceived themselves as torn between strategic and operational roles as a leader, diplomat, juggler, fixer. They identified six key attributes required for the job: “strategic leadership, communication skills, leading change, political skills, the ability to develop relationships, and external networking” ([Davies, 2008](#), p. 54). Interestingly, during the 2007-2008 ABS/EFMD programme for international deans visiting Europe and the USA, key challenges for business school deans were identified: differentiating business schools – their place in society; is the MBA appropriate for all students?; talent management; internationalisation; the management of research; new types of students, employer's views on student Facebook usage, challenges of fund raising, friend raising and development ([Davies, 2008](#), p. 55).

This generates very interesting research questions that we try to answer later in this paper – what should a business school dean pay attention to, how should they spend their time and effort? In a helpful paper, [Ocasio \(1997](#), p. 189) defines attention as:

[...] the noticing, encoding, interpreting, and focusing of time and effort by organisational decision-makers on both (a) *issues*: the available repertoire of categories for making sense of the environment: problems, opportunities, threats; and (b) *answers*: the available repertoire of action alternatives: proposals, routines, projects, programs, and procedures.

Further, [Yadav et al. \(2007](#), p. 96) linked attention and innovation processes to demonstrate that CEOs who direct their attention more to the future are faster at “detecting, deploying and developing” opportunities with new technology than those who concentrate more on external or internal issues. This suggests that more future-oriented deans are more likely to be innovative, to explore new trends and exploit new opportunities.

What is the life cycle of a dean? What are the paths that lead individuals to the dean's role?

The notion of a career life cycle is helpful in examining these questions. Any life cycle theory must consider the individual's adaptations and transformations over time in terms of past, present and future, as well as psychological and sociological, objective and subjective views on identity, behaviours and performance. The cyclical view of career paths moves beyond [Levinson's \(1978\)](#) linear, sequential and cumulative model of vertical ladders to a pattern of phases that may be discontinuous. Transitions during tenure, rather than between roles ([Nicholson, 1984](#)) matter, e.g. shifts in power ([Kets de Vries et al., 1984](#)), while changing sources of information ([Hambrick and Fukutomi, 1991](#)), and business strategies ([Gunz and Jalland, 1996](#)) are other significant factors. [Hershey and Blanchard's \(1969\)](#) life cycle theory also suggests that as members of the executive's team become more familiar with their roles and can accept more responsibility, the leader's time is freed up for external activities as their tenure lengthens.

[Miller and Shamsie \(2001, p. 737\)](#) propose a three-stage life cycle that is useful conceptually in this study: "Learning, Harvest and Decline." They observed for the executive life cycle that:

- as tenure lengthens, experimentation is reduced;
- tenure plotted against organisational financial performance is an inverse U-shaped function; and
- financial benefits from experimentation appear late in the tenure.

Early in his/her appointment, the top executive experiments considerably to build up knowledge but makes mistakes in the learning process, which affects performance. As knowledge and experience grow then experimentation declines but financial performance rises as fewer errors are made. Ultimately, experimentation and performance both decline towards the end of the executive's tenure. According to [Miller and Shamsie \(2001\)](#), the executive eventually runs out of steam and atrophies. They observed that a tenure exceeding 15 years would result in a decline in experimentation and performance resulting in rigidity, staleness ([Miller, 1991](#)) and derailment. They do acknowledge, however, that increased self-awareness may overcome this. Overconfidence and inertia based on a comfortable, unquestioning mindset ([Levinthal and March, 1993](#)) in long-tenured top executives can result in out-

of-date products and a stubborn approach to ideas. Alternatively, however, sabbaticals in academia or time spent externally such as visiting other schools as members of accreditation panels may regenerate deans and return them to the experimentation stage of their cycle.

[Miller and Shamsie \(2001\)](#) suggest exploratory research taking a longitudinal view of dynamic changes during an executive's whole tenure rather than a snapshot in time. From the viewpoint of this study of deans, [Miller and Shamsie's \(2001\)](#) model would suggest that tenure in the role longer than 15 years would be inappropriate. Further, the dean, following initial exploration, planning and a few false steps would improve performance over time but this would decline later in his or her tenure. Interestingly, in the UK, no current business school dean has been in the same post for a decade, very few have been deans twice and it is rare for an individual to have worked as a dean in three business schools.

[Hambrick and Fukutomi \(1991\)](#) characterised the phases of a CEO's tenure over five seasons ([Figure 1](#)) which may be non-linear and iterative. In the initial stages, the CEO is open to learning and a high interest in tasks. At the midpoint, the CEO begins to settle on key themes. Performance in the latter seasons, however, may decrease as the CEO became more committed to an obsolete paradigm, draws on fewer sources of information and loses interest in tasks.

Methodology of the study on deans

In this study of UK business schools, a convenience sample of 16 deans was interviewed in the first quarter of 2008. The deans were all members of the Association of Business Schools (ABS (www.the-abs.org.uk)) and enthusiastic about the aims of the study. One dean was newly appointed. The others had at least four years' tenure in their current roles as deans of business schools in England, Scotland and Wales. The age range of the 15 experienced deans interviewed was 39-64 and they were all married with children. One was a woman, one was born outside the UK, five were strategists, three were human resource management specialists, two were economists, two were in international business management, one was an information systems professor, one was a lawyer, and another was a professor of operations management. Five were from post-1992 universities and ten were deans in pre-1992 university based business schools. Two had been dean twice and one had been dean three times. Three had worked in US universities as academics and one in New Zealand during their careers but only one, a UK national, had worked in the USA as a dean. Eight were working in their third business school

in their first position as dean. They were asked about their career paths, their motivations for becoming deans, their views on the qualities required, their frustrations, their advice to prospective deans and their thoughts on succession planning. To gain additional data on the psychometric profiles of business school leaders that were not interviewed, an e-mail was sent to all deans and alumni of the ABS' development programmes for volunteers to complete the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) form G questionnaire online as part of the project.

The commentary presented in this paper is based, therefore, mainly on self-report relating to the traits of the leader of a business school rather than other leaders or followers within the unit. It builds on focus group work at a conference of business school deans in 2007 ([Ivory et al., 2008](#)) and forms the basis of a forthcoming diary study of how UK deans spend their time, informed by [Stewart's \(1967\)](#) analysis of managers' diaries. There is scope in future studies to collect perceptions from other sources, including 360 degree feedback from colleagues and documentary analysis and to investigate the practices of the dean's strategy team longitudinally ([Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007](#)), taking into account the importance of time in management research ([Roe et al., 2008](#)).

Findings on the dean's job

It emerged during the interviews that responses on career choice followed a typical format:

I never planned to be a dean. I was a head of department but seeing it done badly spurred me on. My predecessor exited rapidly, my colleagues supported me. I was acting dean for a while first and I enjoyed it. I can articulate a strategic vision and get along with a range of people without being arrogant. I'm confident, tenacious and resilient. I enjoy dealing with people and I walk around a lot, it's very rewarding. I really enjoy the job now, being head of department is much harder. I like the challenge, being able to make a difference, and I'm passionate about applying knowledge.

Several informants felt deanship was a natural progression, for instance from managing research to managing a research team to managing the managers of the research and then the whole school. Further, they felt their experience often in different schools, countries and sectors and their desire to "be a player" and "to make a difference", perhaps not fitting an academic mould neatly, equipped them to run a large unit that required moving between the different worlds of the business school and the central university, academia and industry. A few individuals cited push factors for their adoption of the

dean's role. These include having been passed over for the dean's job or not being reappointed as a dean when their contract was considered for renewal. Others sought to escape the personal treadmill of seeking research funding or wished to relocate with a second wife and family or simply to earn more. Ironically, several said that being dean reduced their consultancy earning capacity and one dean pointed out that other professors in his school were on a higher salary. For several respondents, the business school dean's job is "the best in the university." It was interesting to note that deans with at least four years' tenure indicated they spend at least a third of their time outside the business school.

In terms of what [Hambrick and Fukutomi \(1991\)](#) call the first season of a CEO's tenure, or stage one, the "response to mandate", the deans in this study said they had been hired for a multitude of reasons but typically resulting from a range of organisational problems. They gave examples of schools failing because of strategic drift, a financial deficit or "research desert." Consequently, restructuring efforts to remove duplication and empires, to challenge individuals and declutter programmes also may have failed. It is interesting that two deans observed they were selected because they were the only candidates who could articulate a strategy in the absence of a plan presented by the head of the university who knew little about business schools – only three current heads of (post-1992) universities in the UK have been business school deans. Professor Sir George Bain is unique in having led two top UK business schools (Warwick Business School and London Business School) and he was also Vice-Chancellor of what is now a Russell Group university, Queen's University, Belfast.

Personal attributes mentioned during the interviews included the ability to rise to the challenges of mapping the big picture and making things happen. Many respondents highlighted the need to possess well-developed interpersonal, diplomatic and political skills. The ability to create a vision that people can buy into, prudent use of resources and a clear focus on revenue streams and strong student recruitment were also key. The personal fit between the role itself and the organisation's characteristics was given as an essential contingency when appointing a business school dean.

Priorities from the dean's perspective once in the position include "getting everyone sailing in one ship", refreshing programmes, removing historic anomalies, arresting any decline and ensuring quality standards. In turn, deans reinvented themselves in new roles through re-structuring, engaging with accreditation exercises, the research assessment exercise (www.rae.ac.uk – or

[its successor the research excellence framework](#) (REF

– www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/)) and paying attention to league tables.

When asked why they had been selected as dean and why they had survived, respondents suggested they had the skill set to map a strategy and to raise the business school to the next level. Personal humility and approachability were recurrent themes. Being able chat to everyone, honesty, directness, integrity, high levels of emotional intelligence, curiosity, listening, determination, patience, drive, sense of humour, not being uptight or arrogant, having an inner locus of control, tolerance and “knowing you're not going to be loved in a job like this” were other attributes listed. Several acknowledged the loneliness of the job and how they drew on their consultancy skills to get things done. They attributed their relative longevity in the role to being able to make hard decisions then switch off and move on. They had to unlearn, for instance, to stop being overly precipitate, “reacting to everything”, or getting drawn into “university neuroses.” Instead, they tended to adopt a well grounded view of life, to value friends and family and outside interests, particularly sports and current affairs. At times of work overload, they said they tended “to plough on with it” And under stress they learned to “ignore e-mails and see people face-to-face”, often only attending the most important university meetings or those they chair. From the interviews in this study, the deans say they have a high focus on people.

Key advice offered by respondents, not unique to business schools, were: “don't lose your talent!” and “find out what motivates individuals.” Several of the respondents who were deans for the second time perceived themselves as enablers and facilitators, taking time to be mentors as they matured, for instance encouraging possible successors to be non-executive directors. One commented, “I hire the best athletes and let them run.”

Some respondents thought it vital for deans to have a solid research track record even if they are not currently research active to establish credibility and to inspire others in top schools. This resonates with [Goodall's \(2007, p. 62\)](#) findings: “business schools that stand higher in the *Financial Times* Global MBA ranking have deans with systematically higher levels of life-time citations.” Indeed, few deans from management consultancy without direct experience of higher education leadership have held lengthy tenures in business schools. Others stressed the value of visiting different business schools and organisations to import ideas (thereby offsetting isomorphism, ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#))). High energy levels and a positive, enthusiastic mindset were perceived as valuable. The ability to speak on public platforms and to be visible was a clear assumption.

The reality of the position, while challenging and “a privilege” in the eyes of many of the respondents and perhaps more wide-ranging than in the USA where some felt the dean just focuses on alumni and fund raising, is characterised by its sheer breadth and interpretability ([Mintzberg, 1973](#), whose PhD thesis was actually based only on a sample of five chief executives). A dean who was in the role for the second time commented that he was spinning 50 plates simultaneously and had 25 performance objectives, none of which was personal research. He emphasised the considerable ambassadorial, advocacy and cross-cultural skills required, while balancing the sheer breadth of the role with the need to “engage brain first before speaking” and to accept responsibility for the well being of the whole school. Another noted the importance of networking with “big hitters” and entrepreneurs and the capability to deal with a diversity of topics and the increasing interdisciplinarity of the current environment.

In terms of advice to new or aspiring deans, one experienced dean interviewed underlined the need for a differentiation strategy:

[...] you need to decide what makes you different. What makes you stand out? Jump on the bandwagon coming towards you (become an expert in a new trend), learn from outside your comfort zone.

Others reiterated being outward looking and politically aware. A relatively young dean exhorted: “work on and trade different types of capital – intellectual, social, political, symbolic, develop lines to government, network, join university level committees, be visible to the staff, to create opportunities for yourself” and enhance organisational performance. Another dean stated, “there's no point being a member of anything unless you're on the board, get yourself elected, create roles for yourself.” This supports [Nahapiet and Ghoshal's \(1998\)](#) work on the value of personal social capital to organisational success. Several deans compared themselves to partners in professional service firms, i.e. they were promoted on the basis of intellectual capital to leadership positions where their accumulation of political and social capital then combines in a virtuous circle to generate economic and reputational capital for the organisation, as [Baba \(2007\)](#) has observed. [DeLong et al. \(2007\)](#) have similarly highlighted the challenges of professionals leading colleagues. Several deans near retirement rued not having completed a PhD or not having lived or worked outside the UK. A few regretted staying more than a decade in one job or organisation because of the potential to lapse into what [Hambrick and Fukutomi \(1991\)](#) term “dysfunction” or weaker performance as [Miller and Shamsie \(2001\)](#) suggest. One highly experienced dean recommended: “if you are reappointed, leave before the end of your

second term or you run the risk of being completely unemployable, you need to move on.” A dean who had been in the role three times warned: “don't fall in love with your organisation because it will spit you out!”

A recurring message was: “it's all contingent”, “it's horses for courses.” Deans with experience in large metropolitan universities felt comfortable leading a business school in a large metropolitan university, deans who had spent their lives in research intensive institutions felt in the right context running a business school with a strong research profile. Very few deans have made the transition between old and new universities; ironically, the new universities house the older business schools. Another key theme in the interviews was the dean's team and shared leadership – “you're only as good as your team [...] ensure they have complementary skills.” A couple of the deans employed qualified accountants who were very detailed and numbers driven, only two had deputies but these were very approachable and willing to chat to faculty. Typically in flat structures, issues escalate rapidly to the dean and the team is important to allow the dean to add value rather than be derailed by routine “noise” or side-tracked by the details of regulations or having to chase debtors. The deans valued their team colleagues for their dynamism, intellectual energy and support. While debate within the team was useful, a unified front was viewed as crucial. [Bolden et al.'s \(2009\)](#) findings that the rhetoric, the perception of distributed leadership is perhaps more valuable than the reality of devolved leadership in UK universities which is necessary because of the complexity of higher education, however, underlying power structures remain.

In terms of life cycle theory, two deans had clearly delineated the phases of the deanship at the outset, typically over a five-year horizon, which often included the opening of a new building. They talked of being tested in the early years with high expectations to deliver, little space to think, being pulled in many different directions. They mentioned the need to listen first and then act, to be crystal clear about strategic priorities, e.g. accreditation visits, recruitment, league tables, attending all major university committees, research funding, focusing on the market, clarifying and nurturing academic groupings. Several adopted simplifying devices like acronyms and one charted the attention they paid to different aspects during each year which reflected both [Miller and Shamsie's \(2001\)](#) career life cycle on learning and [Hambrick and Fukutomi's \(1991\)](#) seasons of a CEO's tenure in relation to an enduring theme and convergence using the framework:

- Year 1 – strategy and structure.

- Year 2 – systems.
- Year 3 – staffing.
- Years 4 and 5 – shared values and culture, new building.

[Hambrick and Fukutomi's \(1991\)](#) model does not explore the antecedents to the CEO's role or consider the life cycle of the strategic business leader who reports to the CEO. From the interviews conducted in this study of deans (who are operating below the CEO level), however, it would appear that what [Bennis \(2003\)](#) calls “leadership crucibles” temper and prepare individuals for business school deanship, i.e. exposure to different countries, consulting, commercial activities, US tenure track experience, working in at least two other business schools, leadership roles, risk taking in dangerous sports, divorce and fierce criticism.

Serial and older deans in the interview sample reflected on how they had changed over time to develop greater “generativity”, a psychoanalytic term meaning an “interest in establishing and guiding the next generation” ([Erikson, 1959](#), p. 97). They acknowledged they had become more political, softer, more subtle, more extrovert and better able to cope. When asked what they admired in other business school deans whom they regarded as successful, metaphors emerged that evoked tough resolve, controlled drive such as “she had the heart of a lion”, “she's magisterial like a swan”, “he doesn't take prisoners.” Such analogies suggested qualities they would like to possess themselves. As a member of an appointment panel for a new dean shortly after the research interviews, one of the authors was struck forcibly by the lack of appreciation by the novice candidates of the need to shift from the I to the we mode of communication, to focus on nurturing others' successes rather than one's own personal brand, to become the person ultimately responsible for the whole business school unit. It was difficult for them to shift from what Jim Collins calls a level 4 leader (effective and provides direction) to the humility required of a level 5 leader “a paradoxical combination of personal humility plus professional will” ([Collins, 2001](#), p. 70), an attribute of great leaders who leave lasting legacies.

Typical personality dimensions of business school deans

The data from this study also revealed psychometric insights into explanatory occupational dimensions for business school deans. The MBTI form G

questionnaire was used to measure personality preferences on four dichotomies of traits for deans, associate deans and heads of department who responded to an e-mail request. Clearly, this is subject to non-respondent bias.

The MBTI type, designated by four letters, one from each of the four pairings explained in [Table I](#), is more important than the individual traits in the analysis of results.

Although the MBTI is very widely used for individual and team development and should not be used for recruitment, it has attracted considerable criticism. The instrument has high face and construct validity but its statistical validity has been questioned. [Boyle \(1995\)](#) comments on the limited validity of the MBTI and the scope for its misuse ([Pittenger, 1993](#)). Nevertheless, MBTI is considered an interesting personality measure for this study.

Evidence from the MBTI assessments conducted amongst the business school leaders suggests that the majority of UK deans are extroverts in the Jungian sense and future looking strategic thinkers, i.e. “ENTs.” Jungian extroversion relates to a person's preference for engaging with the world around them to obtain information, whereas Jungian introversion relates to obtaining data from within. Clearly, individuals learn to use their non-preferences to become a rounded person. [Lamond \(2004\)](#) distinguishes between enacted (actual) management style and preferred management style – MBTI explains preferred style but with such a small sample, it cannot be said that appointing an “ENTJ” applicant (the most common MBTI type in the study) guarantees a successful business school dean. “Few deans in the study had “S” preferences, i.e. a detailed focus on the present, but this was more prevalent amongst associate deans. During the interviews, many deans stated that they leave the detail of the job to others to enable themselves to operate strategically and to have time to talk to others. Interesting outliers from the general trend of “feeling” traits were found amongst deans in a research intensive university and in a religious-based university business school. Associate deans in executive education roles reported “P” (perceiving) preferences, a tendency to “go with the flow” which contrast with the strong “J” preferences, to get things finished, which was reported more prevalent frequently in the deans’ profiles. All deans in the sample whose academic discipline is strategy were “ENTJ’s, i.e. Jungian extrovert, tough-minded strategic thinkers who like to bring issues to closure. When the four deans who are economists were excluded, 50 per cent of the deans showed an “ENTJ” preference and 80 per cent had “NT” traits (tough-minded strategic thinkers). The deans interviewed with Jungian introvert preferences have since left the position of dean. Amongst the associate deans

and department heads, there was also a high prevalence of “NT” traits (67 per cent and 50 per cent respectively). It would be interesting to track the careers of department heads and associate deans with “ENTJ” preferences, controlling for other variables like geographic mobility and citations records, to see whether they become deans. Only explanations and not predictions, however, are suggested here. The sample is too small to draw any causality between MBTI introversion and tendency not to remain as dean of a full service university based business school for a long time. The scoring of each characteristic relates to the level of confidence the respondent has for a particular orientation, not the strength of the characteristic, for instance a score of 50 on the scale for extroversion simply means the person is consistently highly answering questions that indicate this preference and there is little variation in choosing answers that represent the opposite dimension. In terms of strength of confidence in determining preferences, individual scores across all roles were highest for extroversion and then intuition and the lowest tended to be on the judging and perceiving boundary.

When questioned about their MBTI personality preferences in the workplace, respondents remarked that the sheer pressure to get the job done and meet relentless performance targets left little time for “P” (perceiving) and “F” (feeling) tendencies, although the facility to allow time to go with the flow to explore new ideas and to show sensitivity to others was important amongst members of the university's executive team. Several pondered whether they had been “ENTJs” originally or if the job had forced these preferences. They felt that MBTI introverts might find it harder to cope for long periods with the external relations and the high internal visibility required in the position and the ability just to chat with and energise colleagues, students and other stakeholders. The deans in the sample with MBTI introverted preferences attested to this. A couple of the deans with “S” preferences (focus on the present and on detail) during the interviews emphasised the importance of being strategic. One dean with an “F” preference had succeeded a dean with a significantly long tenure and possibly his appointment was characterised by the phenomenon of the pendulum effect, whereby opposites are recruited to off-set extremes of leadership over time.

Other interesting results from the interviews

Isomorphism and failure patterns

Frustrations expressed by the interviewees included internal bureaucracy, not being able to hold individuals to account for performance in universities, lack of big debates on new models of business schools because of a focus on

compliance with accreditation bodies. Triple accreditations, relentless rankings (*Financial Times*, national student survey, research assessment exercise, etc.) and the recession may move business schools away from innovation and distinctiveness towards mimetic institutional isomorphism ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#), p. 147) with “processes that make organisations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient” and towards dysfunctional behaviour being rewarded ([Kerr, 1995](#)). [Devinney et al. \(2006\)](#) note how the annual *Financial Times* rankings define competition amongst business schools. The one recently appointed dean interviewed was bemused in this study by his position of moving to a less prestigious university that expected a world-class business school while at the same time, paradoxically, the university's executive team treated the business school dean as a “chief compliance officer.”

Potential causes of derailment the respondents had seen in unsuccessful deans included financial failure and revolt amongst staff. Some talked about deans in denial, the “dean rejection” syndrome, for instance how an experienced, competent but dull internal appointee to the deanship had no new ideas or energy for the school, while another “locked himself in his study” for his own research.

Problems in succession planning

In relation to succession planning, many of those interviewed identified internal successors but recognised the institution would probably search for an external candidate. In response to why so few people apply to be deans, one respondent remarked, “there are lots of brilliant academics but few brilliant deans.” Other suggestions were that some deans have different mindsets and MBTI preferences from academic researchers' profiles, that many faculty are just not prepared to relocate their families, or they were not commercial enough or focused on the bottom line. Another comment was that practitioners join academia from industry to relinquish management responsibilities so the management track career is unappealing. Furthermore, the deanship is perceived by many professors as “not worth the hassle” for the financial rewards, loss of consultancy income, lack of personal autonomy and emotional labour. There also appeared to be limited windows of opportunity for career moves involving geographic mobility within the constraints of children's schooling and a partner's job. The issue of sacrificing valuable research and personal time was very real. One dean remarked:

[...] you kind of stop being able to find the time to write papers, you stop reading as much as you used to.

Another commented:

I hardly have any time for research, it's all about problem solving [...] the craziest part of this job is the amount of time that it soaks up [...] there are interesting challenges, being able to demonstrate growth, surpluses, getting extra resources, keeping the show on the road, it's all very rewarding.

Two of the deans with deputies, however, perceived their professional identities as scholars first and deans second; they had negotiated research assistants and time for personal research in their contracts.

Life after deanship

As for life after deanship, the few deans in positions that rotated between professors who were not on fixed-term contracts were anxious to re-establish their academic credibility and return to higher research productivity. Others who were set on a career in academic administration were musing on the prospect of another deanship in the UK or possibly (but not very seriously) Australia, New Zealand, or Hong Kong, or alternatively a promotion to an international or corporate central university role in the UK. Of the 15 established deans interviewed a year ago, one has since returned to the professoriate, two have retired (one to a more prestigious institution as a professor), one dean was appointed to head an Oxford college, one other has relocated for a promotion to pro-vice-chancellor and one respondent left following a merger. None has yet relocated to another country although one of the deans interviewed has accepted a deanship in Asia. Two deans in the MBTI sample have departed involuntarily. Often in the UK in conversations with people working in business schools, premier league football manager analogies emerge when discussing short-tenured deans. Several respondents in this study advised new deans, “not everything is your fault, you can't be derailed by bad results. You have to celebrate your successes.” [Thomas \(2007\)](#) has highlighted the key balanced scorecard metrics for business schools. To these, we would add self-belief and relational capital between the dean and his/her constituency, particularly the vice-chancellor.

Relentless pressures

UK business school deans face relentless pressures, as suggested by a 2009 focus group of senior managers based in UK business schools. Indeed, this pressure may be considerably less than for a FTSE 100 CEO, however, academic cultures require considerable shaping and influencing leadership styles in a knowledge intensive context. The role of ideology in academic cultures ([Clark, 2008](#)), pluralism and inherent conservatism enrich and complicate the dean's role. The university as a professional bureaucracy ([Mintzberg, 1982](#)) may

engender high levels of trust and expertise amongst members of academic disciplines who collaborate on research but inflexible structures tend not to encourage the kind of enterprise and innovation Government policy seeks. For instance, business schools are highly dependant on recruiting home undergraduates and overseas postgraduates. Other challenges particular to business schools include the national student surveys that often rate the quality of feedback and assessment lower in business schools because of large class sizes. Business school deans must accommodate the varying nature of the student experience (different executive education, and graduate school expectations for both PhDs and DBAs in some cases); the need to develop new postgraduate programmes and close unprofitable departments and resist being supply driven. Business schools often employ more professional support staff than other schools because, *inter alia*, data provided by the university centre are inadequate for business school accreditations. Business school deans must pay attention to issues as diverse as the quality of business school buildings, central taxation levels for services duplicated within the business school, optimising the value of the advisory board, the school's brand, scholarship, employee and employer engagement.

Conjectures and discussion

Admittedly, there have always been UK business school deans from engineering disciplines, there are also a few from the world of consultancy, as well as rare examples of third culture kids, i.e. those not living in their original passport country or where they were educated ([Pollock and Van Reken, 2001](#)). The current profile of a homogeneous workforce of deans in the UK in terms of British born male career academics is likely to change, however, as business school faculty has become more internationalised over time. We expect that by 2020 there will be greater diversity at the level of dean – more women, more transnationals (as [Mintzberg and Gosling \(2002\)](#) promoted the case for transnational student experiences), more former practitioners with PhDs, deans from pre-1992 business schools leading schools in post-1992 universities. There are now many deans in their 50s and 60s without an MBA who graduated from schools of social or physical sciences, however, with the growth in business schools over the past 40 years, future deans are more likely to have gained postgraduate education in business schools, e.g. DBA. In essence, we expect to see greater fluidity, boundaryless careers ([Arthur and Rousseau, 2001](#)) and transferability in a global labour market. This will reflect the ability of UK business schools to renew themselves, to learn from different worlds and other cultures and for the leadership to be more representative of the student population. There is also likely to be greater diversity in the curriculum offered by private and off shore providers in the management

education marketplace, with more focus on technology and flexibility and UK students sourcing their education internationally. This will require entrepreneurial, highly flexible deans/deans' teams, sufficiently versatile to sustain a strong brand, quality education and innovative, timely and customised solutions both relevant to society's needs and academically rigorous. Individual deans who can walk the talk, possibly exhibiting MBTI "perceiving" preferences more commonly, who are media savvy and can co-create knowledge with scholars and practitioners will be attractive.

There should be a transnational market for business school deans but this has yet to emerge despite the Bologna Process

(www.europeunit.ac.uk/bologna_process/index.cfm). Certainly, the importance of leaders in higher education is increasing. The 2008 PA Consulting Group report "Keeping our universities special: surviving and thriving in a turbulent world" stated:

[...] it is sometimes said that the endurance of the university sector over many decades has been due to its talent for transforming itself gradually from within whilst remaining outwardly stable. What is needed now is for the sector to transform itself from without, from the outside-in, while remaining true to its defining values of independence and learning. It is some challenge ([PA Consulting Group, 2008](#), p. 17).

This suggests that business school leaders need to innovate with a clear awareness of the relevance of business schools to external and future changes in society. Moreover, as [Vinten \(2000\)](#), p. 180) notes:

[...] business schools cannot be all things to all people, they need to prioritise their mission objectives in the light of those stakeholders for whom they will decide to dedicate most of their energies.

So, to answer the question "What do business school deans do?" it seems they perform a complex job as a buffer between the business school and the central university and the external world. They are delivering the bottom line for the vice-chancellor, straddling academia and management professions, building a brand, raising their position in league tables, gaining business school accreditations. In addition, internally they have to build teams, consult, energise, create positivity, align staff around the strategy, recruit and nurture talent, communicate, make tough decisions, develop social and relational capital and make connections. They keep sane by being sufficiently disengaged to have their own identity and outside interests, not taking themselves too seriously. How do they emerge? It appears from British born white male career academic routes, as individuals with preferences for strategic thinking and

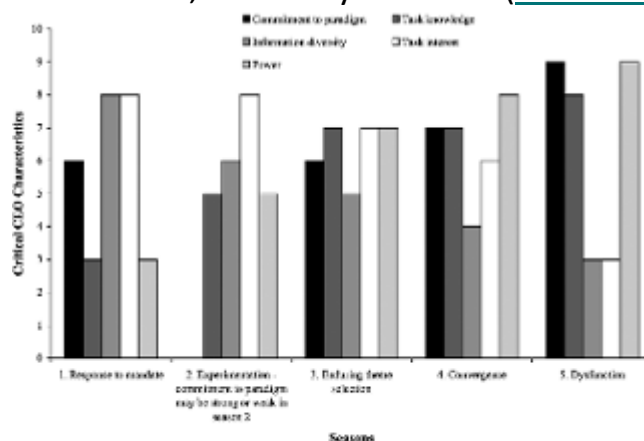
dealing with people, who have experienced leadership roles in several business schools. How do they grow? Apparently, through self-belief, developing resilience, hard work, devolving work in teams and being open to changes in the external environment. They pay attention to building success through playing the homogenisation game, e.g. rankings, accreditations, while at the same time experimenting with entrepreneurial and collaborative projects to differentiate their brand in a mature industry sector. British deans rarely remain in the job for more than a decade and as their tenure progresses, their personal research record generally declines. In the current economic downturn, the UK government favours science, technology, engineering and medicine in universities. The Greek word *krisis* is derived from *krinein*, “to decide”, which suggests we need business school deans to be decisive in an economic downturn rather than procrastinate. They need to ensure ethics and governance are included in the curriculum, students are retooled to the new economy, modules with low recruitment are dropped, staffing is reduced to accommodate reductions in executive education, performance and costs are more tightly managed and lean techniques and vacancies are scrutinised. Certainly, the role of a dean, what they pay attention to, how they behave to keep their tenures, is much tougher during an economic crisis, particularly as universities move to increasing centralisation in difficult times. [Clark \(1998, p. 24\)](#) in his study of entrepreneurial universities refers to [Shattock \(1994, p. 4\)](#), a former registrar of Warwick University who noted cross subsidies which still exist to some extent:

[...] the Business School [... is] more obviously capable of generating external income than say Sociology or the History of Art [...] It is accepted that it is to the university's advantage that those departments that can generate income should support those departments that are simply unable to do so.

It follows that heads of universities should appreciate the complex array of activities UK business school deans undertake with relentless competing pressures during their tenures. Deans from their position in the middle must pay attention to value-adding initiatives that demonstrate clear impact (as the REF proposes) on society, the economy, culture and the quality of life. From the evidence in this study, the business school deans say they particularly pay attention to people, strategy, measures that affect the brand and the overall health of the school. In practice, however, they sense they are not spending enough time externally or on strategic issues such as scenario planning and enterprise. Deans need to pay attention to creative industries and global outreach, not just matters of internal compliance. Another point expressed during the interviews is that heads of departments/academic groups in business schools may emerge as more suitable candidates for deanship than

associate deans who often choose a pro-vice-chancellor career route, for instance concentrating on the organisation's research only or learning and teaching only with limited direct line management or budgetary responsibilities. [Uhl-Bien et al.'s. \(2007\)](#) work on complexity theory may yield further insights into how adaptive, administrative and enabling leadership combine in the complex systems of universities within which business schools deans operate. CEOs of professional service firms can learn from business school leaders how to incentivise knowledge workers to manage complexity without big bonuses. Further research may look beyond a leader-centric approach and investigate cross continental comparisons of business school top teams.

Finally, evidence from the study presented suggests that leadership development in team building, generating different types of capital throughout the exploration, experimentation and convergence on key themes during the middle seasons of business schools deans' tenures are important to avert the fifth season, that of dysfunction ([Hambrick and Fukutomi, 1991](#)).



Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991, p. 729)

Figure 1

The five seasons of a CEO's tenure

Dichotomy		
Extraversion-introversion (attitudes or orientations of energy)	<i>Extraversion (E)</i> Directing energy mainly toward the outer world of people and objects	<i>Introversion (I)</i> Directing energy mainly toward the inner world of experiences and ideas
Sensing-intuition (functions or processes of perception)	<i>Sensing (S)</i> Focusing mainly on what can be perceived by the five senses	<i>Intuition (N)</i> Focusing mainly on perceiving patterns and interrelationships
Thinking-feeling (functions or processes of judging)	<i>Thinking (T)</i> Reaching conclusions on logical analysis with a focus on objectivity and detachment	<i>Feeling (F)</i> Reaching conclusions on personal or social values with a focus on understanding and harmony
Judging-perceiving (attitudes or orientations toward dealing with the outside world)	<i>Judging (J)</i> Preferring the decisiveness and closure that result from dealing with the outer world using one of the judging processes (thinking or feeling)	<i>Perceiving (P)</i> Preferring the flexibility and spontaneity that result from dealing with the outer world using one of the perceiving processes (sensing or intuition)

Table 1
The four dichotomies of the MBTI®

Source: Myers et al. (2003, p. 6)

Table 1

The four dichotomies of the MBTI®

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