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Are business school deans doomed? The global financial crisis, Brexit and all that

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to focus on different types of university-based business school dean (BSD) in a context of insecurities within the business school business and more widely with changing business and educational models and disruptions such as the global financial crisis and Brexit. The position of the BSD is contextualised within the industry sector, institutionally, and in relation to individuals' tenures to make sense of how BSDs are operating on a burning platform. A well-established middle management strategic role framework is applied to the empirical data.

Design/methodology/approach

In total, 50 one-to-one interviews were conducted with deans and their colleagues. Deans' behaviours were analysed according to attention paid to "facilitating", "synthesizing", "championing", and "implementing" strategic activities.

Findings

Behaviours from primary professional identities as scholars and educators were identified as prevalent. It is suggested that to achieve greater legitimacy in declining mature markets, future deans will need to re-negotiate their roles to champion as public intellectuals the societal impact of business schools more widely in a context of shifting business and educational models.

Practical implications

The study is relevant to current and aspiring deans and for those hiring and developing business school deans.

Originality/value

The dean is conceptualised as a hybrid upper middle manager besieged by multiple stakeholders and challenges. Novel first-order insights into a typology of strategists are highlighted.

Keywords

- Roles Typology Business Schools Deans Middle Managers Hybrids

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

[...] Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance ([Eliot, 1943, pp. 15-16](#)).

This paper offers a moment of stillness to reflect on the roles of business school deans (BSDs) amidst a context of turbulence. First, we consider the business school terrain and commentary on the BSD's role. The second section outlines different categories of dean. Third, we explain [Floyd and Wooldridge's \(1992, 1994, 1996\)](#) typology of middle managers' strategic roles which underpins the research design interviewing deans in the UK and their colleagues. We present findings on six types of behaviours and discuss implications for deans in uncertain times in terms of their visibility and linkages to societal goals. The final section includes recommendations to investigate further leadership teams and dyads.

Doomsayers might point to declining MBA enrolments, failing/merging business schools, deanship churns, and scandals (e.g. [Murphy, 2016](#)), the 2008 global financial crisis (about which [Starkey \(2015\)](#) thought academic management journals were mainly silent), Brexit ([Murray, 2016](#)), and even the retirement of Della Bradshaw (the doyenne of business schools rankings since 1999) from *The Financial Times (FT)* ([Bickerstaffe, 2016](#)) to suggest that BSDs are operating on burning platforms and halcyon days are over. Hence, business schools (and their deans) must change ([Bisoux, 2016](#)). Amidst shifts in the business school landscape with alternative providers and new business/educational models, T.S. Eliot's lines above encapsulate simultaneous stillness and movement that we suggest is important for a dynamic higher education sector. In this paper, we seek to reflect on the business school deanship at a point in time when we wonder how future historians (like [Sellar and Yeatman, 1930](#)) will parody shockwaves such as Brexit. In particular, we examine different types of dean based on what they actually do, the "dance of the deanship", while also considering the point, the purpose and strategic choices deans face. We explore how attention is concentrated on thinking about the purpose or "point" of the business school, including the vision, deliberate strategy, and the bottom line. We also consider how time is spent on action, the rhythms of the academic year, and the improvisation of emergent strategy and hustle to achieve targets. Images of a whirling dervish or pirouetting ballet dancer convey this ability to focus on a "still point" – the strategic mission – while at the same time engaging in the frenetic daily "dance", an academic leader's whirl of back-to-back meetings, relentless e-mails, and general "busyness" that generates income which in turn supports time and space for contemplation and scholarship. Constant diary appointments and events to implement strategy (such as the research excellence framework (REF), impact case studies, National Student Satisfaction Surveys and Teaching Excellence Framework agendas – as well as Brexit – in the UK) may be viewed as distractions from reflective moments to formulate strategy and capture thought leadership, however, these behaviours are mutually reinforcing as deans reflect in and on action ([Schön, 1983](#)). Yet without the business of relatively high fee paying activities such as executive education, and teaching overseas students, in institutions with low research income there would be little financial support for research opportunities. Calm fixation on a clear ambition allows for spinning without becoming disoriented. Indeed, [Gmelch \(2004, p. 75\)](#) suggests this is important for deans as 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'".

[Thomas and Thomas \(2011, p. 529\)](#) argued that "it is necessary to strengthen and professionalise business schools' leadership". We need to re-examine the dean's multifaceted

challenges in a post 2008 financial crisis world. Although the professional services firm Deloitte has produced a report on BSDs which concluded that deans have four faces: strategist, catalyst, steward, operator ([Kambil and Budnik, 2013](#)), curiously, there are few research studies on leaders of business schools. While much has been written about different business school models, for example, their evolution ([Augier and March, 2011](#)) from what [Simon \(1991, p. 139\)](#) called “a wasteland of vocationalism”, different regional and national characteristics ([Antunes and Thomas, 2007](#); [Thomas et al., 2014](#)); branding clusters ([Thomas and Li, 2009](#)) and orientations ([Ferlie et al., 2010](#)), little is known about different categories of dean. In light of [Hommel et al.’s \(2016\)](#) fears of failing business schools, Martin’s ([Byrne, 2015](#)) questioning whether American business schools are “headed for a GM-like catastrophe” and [Spender’s \(2016\)](#) comments that business schools are under-administered and so represent a high risk to universities and higher education systems, it is important to examine the predicaments of business school leaders.

In this qualitative study, the primary data comprise deans in a typical European model of a full-service business school in a state university. Usually a comprehensive business school encompasses undergraduate, postgraduate, executive and doctoral education, research and engagement with organisations. In the UK, and increasingly in other countries, deans’ behaviours are shaped by impact and innovation agendas ([Lejeune et al., 2015](#)) to support national growth. In this paper a contingency approach to the deanship is adopted, like [Alajoutsijärvi and Kettunen’s \(2016, p. 327\)](#) paper which contended that “the match between the dean’s worldview and the university context ultimately determines the appropriateness, survival, and success of deanship”. Findings presented in this paper highlight industry, institutional, and individual factors that influence these academic leaders who are located in a centrally networked position. By adopting a behavioural approach, we gain first-order insights into what deans actually do as socially situated strategic actors. This provides a novel perspective on how those who profess strategy actually practise it. Intensified industry competition globally and institutional structural changes that are replacing the title of “BSD” with “pro-vice-chancellor” or “faculty dean” suggest that the role is vulnerable. While “Executive Dean” may sound powerful, in some cases when it is combined with a pan-university role, there is little time for the incumbent to attend to the business school. Many academics view the BSD role as a “poisoned chalice”, an impossible mission, because of the wide range of stakeholders involved. Nevertheless, this paper concludes optimistically that there are T-shaped deans with teams who are considerate thought-leaders, cross-breeds and digitally savvy public intellectuals who are adept at facilitating positive impact to transcend local disasters and engage positively with wider challenges such as the UN’s 17 sustainable development goals ([UN, 2015](#)).

The business school leadership landscape

High turnovers, short tenures, and sudden exits of BSDs ([Bradshaw, 2013](#)) suggest that the role merits serious attention. In the context of many business schools like Harvard claiming to produce future leaders who will “make a difference” in a post-industrial, post-heroic world, it is timely to explore the dean’s role from the inside. On the one hand, the university-based dean attracts “business school envy” ([Arbaugh, 2010, p. 280](#)) from less financially well-endowed academic units. Indeed, Garratt says the BSD role is preferable to a university president’s job whose attention is consumed by “big ticket STEM activities” ([Aedy, 2014](#)). BSDs who have become pro-vice-chancellors may bemoan the loss of their ability to generate income directly or the autonomy to manage a large budget. Some incumbents view the deanship as a privilege, the best job in the university and an exciting intellectual challenge ([Bolton, 1997](#)). Howard Thomas once declared that he would be happy to do the job for

nothing (*Times Higher Education, 2007*) because he found being a dean so interesting. He commented, “I’m one of these people who really got into academic administration because other people pushed me into it, rather than essentially having a career plan in my mind [...] I’ve kept up my research all the way along – that’s a tremendously important element”. On the other hand, typically advertisements for the BSD position appear to ask for a “superhero”. For example, a search for the Indian School of Business specified that: “The ideal applicant to lead the School will possess exceptional academic credentials and a proven professional track record”. They will be capable of “sustaining the vision” and “enhancing the global standing through a focus on rigour, research, education, policy and societal impact”.

How has the deanship evolved over time? [Starkey and Tiratsoo \(2007, p. 55\)](#) traced the evolution of the business school deanship from a position that 40 years ago was “a matter of duty shortly before retirement” for a senior professor in a professional bureaucracy ([Mintzberg, 1979](#)) to the scenario today where highly paid executive deans are similar to “sports coaches hired to improve performance, fired at will”. Over time, the pace of change has intensified with deans experiencing the “Red Queen effect” of having to run to stand still ([Iñiguez de Onzoño and Carmona, 2012](#)). In practice, the role entails herding cats ([Hammond, 2002](#)) as deans need to respect academic autonomy ([Raelin, 1995](#)), grappling with a broad portfolio, and ensuring that the university’s “cash cow” ([Starkey et al., 2004](#)) produces surpluses. Traditional university-based BSDs are managing expensive castles with high walls in a disruptive, networked economy ([Cornuel, 2014](#)). This now requires internal walls to be lowered for interdisciplinary collaboration ([Ferlie et al., 2014](#); [Currie et al., 2016](#)) and greater external boundary spanning.

Some commentators might argue that the appointment of faculty deans such as lawyers without business school or business backgrounds who are responsible for business schools or the case of joint executive dean/pro-vice-chancellor positions responsible for line managing heads of departments of management are threatening the existence of the BSD’s role as it is simultaneously upgraded and demoted. If vacancies for deans become so difficult to fill because faculty are reluctant to step up to senior academic administration leadership positions, then the deanship may disappear entirely as departments and institutions merge into larger units. With insider doomsayers predicting the end of the MBA ([Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011](#)) and the loss of half of US business schools by 2020 (Rich Lyons at Haas – see [Clark, 2014](#)), business schools merging internally with other schools (e.g. Cornell), together with “merger mania” ([Bradshaw, 2014](#)) as we have seen in France where the number of business school deanships has reduced significantly (and elsewhere the merger of Thunderbird with Arizona State University, Ashridge with Hult), the question arises: what kinds of BSDs do we need for the future?

What do we know about deans?

Deans have tended to write about the deanship anecdotally rather than on the basis of systematic or theoretically underpinned research. For instance, [Aspatore \(2006, 2008\)](#) and [Dhir \(2008\)](#) provide compilations of advice from North American deans on how to manage a business school. [Frost and Taylor \(1996\)](#) offer a few personal accounts about recovering from the deanship in the USA. [Gallos \(2002\)](#) reflected on her own US experiences as a dean being squeezed in the middle. More recently, [Thomas et al. \(2016\)](#) explored deans’ perspectives in their study of the business school landscape in Africa. Like Gallos, Thomas ([Fragueiro and Thomas, 2011, p. 247](#)) portrayed deans like “the meat in the sandwich between the central administration and the school staff, students and faculty”. He believes that BSDs need to be attentive listeners, “straightforward, approachable, honest, direct and

diplomatic” with a sense of humour and effective negotiating skills ([Fragueiro and Thomas, 2011](#)). [Thomas et al. \(2012, p. 19\)](#) suggest that amongst the world’s BSDs there are only a “few who have experience, time and the courage, determination and resilience to follow through their chosen path and strategic direction” successfully. There is a danger that deans become trapped as chief compliance officers managing noisy urgent rather than important matters. Despite national research and innovation policies, deans’ value creation activities and agency become constrained over time by centralisation within universities that respond to external crises by stifling imagination.

In her research on senior academic leaders, [Goodall \(2009\)](#) advocated that highly cited scholars should head research intensive business schools. [Davies and Thomas \(2009\)](#) found that psychometric profiles of deans in the UK tended towards extroversion, tough mindedness, seeing patterns and making connections to think strategically, with completer-finisher predispositions. Amongst the AACSB International membership, [McTiernan and Flynn \(2011\)](#) identified growing gender diversity in hiring BSDs. Subsequently, in a more international study to extend AACSB’s annual survey of deans, [Davies \(2015\)](#) provided reflections from BSDs on the multiple demands placed on them and how the role is evolving. Various epithets have been applied to the deanship. For example, as a general breed [Tucker and Bryan \(1991, p. ix\)](#) grouped deans into three categories: “doves of peace” who intervene among warring factions, “dragons” holding internal and external threats at bay, and “diplomats” guiding and encouraging key stakeholders. Other alliterative epithets might be added, such as despot, demagogue, disillusioned, deans in denial – or “Davos deans” who participate at the World Economic Forum. Typically, juggling, plate spinning, and a “balancing act” are metaphors applied to the deanship ([Ivory et al., 2008](#)), as well as dualities such as standard-bearer and lightning conductor, bragger and beggar. [Hay \(2013, p. 84\)](#) suggested that depending on the unit’s size and complexity, the BSD may elect to play four non-exclusive roles: finance-focused CEO; ambassador enhancing the school’s vision and profile; primary fundraiser; catalyst to raise intellectual capital. This encompasses [Gallos’s \(2002\)](#) account which concentrated on internal pressures as well as increasingly external facing activities. As the business school industry has matured and become more externally directed, deans are increasingly subjected to media rankings, accreditation bodies (with opportunities for them to join peer review teams of deans from accredited schools to gain useful market intelligence by assessing other business schools), and government regulations despite cuts in state funding in many countries.

[Fragueiro and Thomas \(2011, p. 194\)](#) emphasize a dean’s skills and competences in synthesizing as aggregators and integrators. They note the facilitating activities of entrepreneurship, and the vision, communications, and political skills required for championing as well as the need to deliver results and demonstrate commitment. [Lorange \(2005\)](#) argues that the purpose of the dean’s role is to create value through balancing internal and external demands by aligning the academy’s and society’s ideals. This focus may change over the seasons of an individual’s tenure. For instance, within [Hambrick and Fukutomi’s \(1991\)](#) model, an executive may shift between responding to the going-in mandate, experimenting, selecting an enduring theme, convergence, and dysfunctional behaviours as they become stale by a process of attrition from the job demands.

The study on which this paper is based provides a more realistic picture of the deanship than public relations pieces like *The FT* “Meet the Dean” column or its compilation of views of deans from *FT* ranked business schools ([Chan et al., 2016](#)).

How might deans be categorised?

Clearly, deans appear in many guises. They could be clustered according to the strategic groups of the type of business schools, for example, research intensive, teaching led, boutique, full-service, triple accredited, top ranked, and by the university's mission. The match between the dean and the business school may be determined by the programmes, for instance an executive education specialist may head a standalone school with a niche offering for big businesses. The predecessor effect also influences the kind of dean in charge. A turnaround change agent, external prophet type is often hired to replace a complacent dean who has presided over mission drift. The stage of the business school's maturity also affects the type of dean with perhaps a pioneering, courageous prospecting figure appointed at the outset and more cautious appointments made subsequently. Universities with a strong science and technology base like Stanford usually prefer BSDs with entrepreneurial, commercial, and possibly science and engineering backgrounds. In contrast, social science focused schools of management or those with a critical management or public sector bias search for a very different individual, for example a political scientist. The type of deanship played out depends on macroeconomic factors such as whether the individual is operating in a head wind or tail wind – austerity or prosperity. The ideology of the head of the university and levels of (de)centralisation also affect the nature of the dean in the same tenure. The life stage of the incumbent, whether the job is immediately pre-retirement or mid-career, typically influences the energy levels and behaviours of the dean and whether they appoint a deputy. The power of the medical school and strength of competitors are other contingent factors impacting on how a dean behaves.

Historically, recruitment processes for deans may be divided into two types – insiders and outsiders: first those who were elected internally by peers for a short term such as three years, and second executive deans who were appointed after a (global – for elite and/or large schools in the UK) campaign by an executive search firm, by the head of the university and chair of the business school advisory board as the main decision makers with limited input from faculty members. The governance of the entity, whether state or private, shapes the form of the deanship, in addition to path dependencies based on mission, size and geography. Charles Darwin University's School of Business in Australia's Northern Territory illustrates a particular model with a regional, equity remit integrated with further education. In contrast, Cass Business School focuses on finance and leverages its position working closely with City of London institutions. Traditional distinctions between state and private business schools are blurring with struggles for self-sufficiency as the MBA is being privatised in state-funded institutions such as UCLA ([Itah, 2013](#)). Copenhagen Business School represents an interesting model as a standalone university business school. If a business school were formed soon after the parent university and it represents a strong business school in a weak institution or if it is relatively larger than the other units in terms of student numbers and surpluses, it may be more powerful than apparently similar units in different contexts. Over time, the centrality of the business school may evolve such as at Imperial College London where it is now more of a hub. Despite many mergers in France, Toulouse Business School has not merged because of its strong links with Airbus. Some deans are very much focused on alumni and fund raising, for example, Lou Lataif, Dean Emeritus at Boston University School of Management who was a former head of Ford Motors in Europe. Others like Andrew Pettigrew who headed Bath School of Management represent research icons. Additionally, deans might also be clustered around their disciplinary backgrounds as economists, engineers, or career experiences in consultancy or (more rarely – see [Biemann and Datta, 2014](#)) in founding their own businesses.

There exists a category of serial deans who have filled the role twice, illustrated by Snyder (Chicago, Yale), Blount (Stern, Kellogg), or even three times (Howard Thomas at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Warwick University, and Singapore Management University). There is also a group of exceptionally long serving deans, for example, outside Europe Toemsakdi Krishnamra at Sasin (32 years) and Don Jacobs at Kellogg (25 years). These contrast with deans like Geoffrey Garratt at Wharton who was dean three times in three years. In addition, there is an emerging phenomenon of “serial transnational deans”, nomads like Chris Earley who has headed schools on three continents (two in the USA, Singapore, Australia). Another “tripler dean” is Stephen Watson who described his three very different roles as a pioneer in a start-up at Cambridge University, a divisional manager at Lancaster University Management School, and a charity CEO serving executives at Henley before its merger with Reading University (see YouTube interview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-H5LTERKbM). Jitendra Singh was dean of two highly ranked institutions and made the transition from a professorship over three decades at Wharton which was established in 1881 to become dean for less than two years at HKUST Business School that was founded in 1991, two elite institutions in the West and East at very different stages of their lifecycles. Another interesting case is Sir George Bain who is unique in having lead two research intensive business schools in the UK (Warwick Business School and London Business School) and a research intensive university (Queen’s University Belfast). There has even been a category of co-deans at the University of St Andrews and the University of Sydney. In Barcelona, ESADE announced one of its former deans would become a “strategic global dean” after a new dean was appointed to replace him. There are also many acting or interim deans in the system, for example, Sir Andrew Likierman at London Business School who was Acting Dean in 2007 before he became its fifth dean in 11 years in 2009.

Feedback from deans on the ABS/EFMD International Deans’ Programme 2007-2015 in 20 countries (150 alumni), indicates that BSDs share in common a preoccupation with: reputation; recruitment of quality faculty and students; revenues; and relations with the rest of the university, especially the level of subsidies paid to the central administration. Not only are universities pluralistic organisations ([Denis et al., 2007](#)), but Dame Sandra [Dawson \(2008, p. 159\)](#), former long serving Director of Cambridge Judge Business School, defines the business school as a “tri-fold hybrid organisation” with the objectives of aligning public sector interests, professional service partnerships, and commercial activities. Deans themselves are a form of hybrid middle manager, a “bridge, who both represents the professional agenda and embodies [...] a managerial one” ([Ferlie et al., 1996, p. 194](#)). Hybrid managers must cope in sites of contradictions ([Pache and Santos, 2013, p. 996](#)) with the ability to “combine institutional logics in unprecedented ways” ([Battilana and Dorado, 2010, p. 1419](#)).

Floyd and Wooldridge’s typology of middle management strategic roles

In order to make sense of the university-based business school deanship and the themes of “middleness” that emerged from a pilot study (of deans on the UK’s national business school association executive committee), literature on managers below the upper echelons was explored. While some faculty deans are in the university’s top management team, particularly where the business school is one of the largest academic units, many do not report directly to the vice-chancellor.

In this empirical study, data on the business school deanship were coded by applying [Floyd and Wooldridge’s \(1992, 1994, 1996\)](#) middle management strategic role typology. This comprises four interdependent middle management roles and includes the following two

dimensions: upwards and downwards influencing behaviours; and convergence and divergence from deliberate strategy. The roles are: synthesizing information (upward, integrative); facilitating adaptability (downward, divergent); championing alternatives (upward, divergent); and implementing deliberate strategy (downward, integrative). “Synthesizing is a subjective process by which middle managers inject strategic meaning into operating and strategic information and communicate their interpretations to others” (Floyd and Wooldridge (1996, p. 69)). It includes framing, labelling, and categorising issues and organisational sense making. The second role of “facilitating adaptability” is defined as “fostering flexible organizational arrangements” (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, p. 155). It suggests that middle managers are flexing and adapting rules from the strategic plan and nurturing creativity. They generate slack for experimentation based on interpersonal trust and team building. Activities in “championing alternatives” include “the persistent and persuasive communication of proposals that either provide the firm with new capabilities or allow the firm to use existing capabilities differently” (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, p. 55). Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, p. 96) define the fourth middle management strategic role of “implementing deliberate strategy” as “a series of interventions designed to align organizational action with strategic intent” that “entails an enormous range of intellectual, leadership, and administrative skills” (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, p. 107). This framework provides a broad categorisation of middle managers. It does not differentiate them by seniority vertically neither does it distinguish them laterally by functional expertise as we attempt to do in this paper by focusing specifically on the university-based BSD as a hybrid upper middle manager with a wide remit.

Research design

A behavioural rather than trait view of BSDs using comparative multiple-case logic Eisenhardt (1991, p. 626) was adopted in this study. A sample of 30 deans of university business schools in the UK were interviewed during 2008-2012, plus 20 colleagues of the seven deans in a single institutional case study. They were asked about their motivations to become dean, their activities in Floyd and Wooldridge’s (1992, 1994, 1996) four roles, changes over their tenures within their particular context, and their advice to prospective deans. Responses were coded and cases compared within tenures and in the example of a single institution between tenures. Secondary documentary data were collected about the deans, for example, web profiles, biographies, their writings, minutes of staff meetings, accreditation visit reports, alumni newsletters. Clusters of activities for each dean in the transcribed interviews were coded according to the four roles of deliberating, facilitating, championing, and implementing deliberate strategy. Two additional clusters were categorised relating to caretaking and non-strategic behaviours. Inter-coder comparisons were made to check for the quality of our interpretations in the analysis.

Findings

The findings revealed preferences in synthesizing information and facilitating adaptability. Respondents drew on their experiences as researchers analysing data and their tendencies as educators to develop others. There was evidence of a focus on cognitive activities in sense making and interpreting the role of the dean and the mandate. A concern with “generativity”, i.e. nurturing future generations of students and faculty stemmed from deans’ previous roles as doctoral supervisors. What many deans struggled with was negotiating and making deals, in transitioning from what Gmelch (2004, p. 76) calls moving from professing to persuading. Being a type of dean who is highly visible in the media was an activity discussed less often. Moreover, issues of performance management had intensified in the sector over time. Dealing with human relations issues to resolve conflict and improve talent management for rankings

and brand seemed to be gaining greater attention in the deans' portfolios of how they allocated their attention and energy, with the result that a few delegated HR issues mainly to their deputies.

The list below summarises behaviours evident in the interview data according to six clusters of deans:

1. Synthesizer: the typical behaviours seen in this type of dean assimilated diverse sources of intelligence to formulate strategy. They focused on ideas and cognitive activities, reflecting on their mandate. Several of these deans' activities included developing mental models and maps to help them make sense of their context and to figure out a strategic vision and plan.
2. Facilitator: these deans demonstrated socially interactive behaviours to support and nurture ideas, individuals, and teams. Facilitator deans' behaviours were concerned with cajoling others rather than criticising them in public. They worked with the grain of the academic context while at the same time making changes without being a micromanager. Networking, mediating and experimenting were key activities to stimulate change.
3. Champion: verbal behaviours in selling, debating, persuading, story-telling, promoting the school and the case for change were evident in individuals who spent much of their time as champions. They actively engaged in dialogue, public speaking, interpersonal communications, and developing effective internal and external relationships to enhance the business school's brand.
4. Implementer: current deans tended to be task focused and results driven, controlling, and ensuring performance management and compliance to achieve targets of key performance indicators.
5. Stop-gap: interim or caretaker deans saw their roles as maintaining a steady ship until a more energetic and ambitious and less risk-averse successor arrived.
6. Non-strategist: this type of dean failed to consult or listen to formulate a shared vision. They did not articulate a strategic direction aligned to the parent university. They were unable to build coalitions or to persuade communities to support each other and diverse stakeholders. Ultimately, this resulted in frustration, disappointing outcomes, and their unexpected and sudden exits from the deanship.

Discussion

The study has theoretical implications for categorising types of strategist. It also offers practical value for deans with respect to how they balance attention to different behaviours over time. Aspiring deans and those hiring and developing these important business unit managers may also find this study useful. As the business and educational models of designing and delivering business and management education and research are changing ([Thomas et al., 2013](#)), clearly the dean of the future is also influenced by funding, technology, government policy, markets, and other disruptive drivers, including grand global challenges in society. The professionalisation of management project ([Khurana and Nohria, 2008](#)) remains work in progress. Deans are essential strategic players to ensure that business schools do not lose their way as [Bennis and O'Toole \(2005\)](#) suggested they had. In a context where businesses like Google, Apple, Exxon-Mobil, Wal-Mart are more powerful than some nations, where business and management education is so popular (e.g. according to the Australian Business Deans Council, Australian business schools graduate one in three Australian university students), and where there is a rise in the number of small firms (for instance, 95.5 per cent of UK businesses employ fewer than 10 people, [Young, 2014](#)), deans must be responsive to changing and paradoxical circumstances. Trust between big business,

governments, social enterprises, and civil society needs to be restored to create shared value ([Porter and Kraemer, 2011](#)). Moreover, engaged scholarship is becoming more important in the public policy agenda. For instance, UK BSDs must submit impact case studies for the national REF to produce a narrative about the societal, economic, cultural, political, technological, environmental, health and legal impacts of excellent business and management research to users of this research.

Conclusion

Overall, we suggest future models of the business school deanship may reflect more publicly visible and social media savvy deans (champions) who can articulate the tangible positive impact of business schools on social and economic progress. We advocate the role of BSDs as public intellectuals, activists, and thought leaders (synthesizers and facilitators). This combines reflection and the ability to dance with the zeitgeist and norms of the society of which business schools are a part (rather than apart from), beyond the narrow self-interest of faculty members' fixation with A-rated journal publications ([Mingers and Willmott, 2013](#)) and pensions or students' concerns with salary uplifts on graduation. Deans who can shape rankings and accreditation "games" and develop new models of business and management education to fit pressing needs in society are to be welcomed. Moreover, governments often consult with economists (instead of management scholars) and do not appreciate the significant contribution business schools can make to the innovation and commercialisation of scientific and technological inventions.

Further research on business school leadership might examine dyads such as presidents – deans, deans and their relationship with the chair of their advisory board, the dean – business school chief operating officer/head of central administration axis, deans – deputy deans, and leadership teams. Moreover, the rare phenomenon of the serial, long-serving, respected transnational dean is very interesting in stark contrast with short tenures. It would also be useful to seek the views of external stakeholders on business schools and their deans. As our theoretical models of leadership are shifting in a post-heroic, post-recessionary age of digital disruption in what is arguably the Asian century as Brexit discussions fragment the European Union, we can socially re-construct and re-enact the business school deanship.

Certainly, one size does not fit all for strategic leaders ([Powell and Angwin, 2012](#)), particularly not for BSDs as their roles differ from that of deans of other professional schools in universities. New models of business schools and higher education in general are being called for based on global challenges (e.g. [Carlile et al., 2016](#); [The Economist, 2016a,b, p. 54](#)). [Kring and Kaplan \(2011\)](#) at Korn Ferry argue that BSDs will need to focus on "CEO-style breadth and organisational expertise over more narrow academic mastery" and to demonstrate "strategic skills, enterprise management, innovation, and people and relationship effectiveness". The Insights from the 50 respondents we interviewed extend Kring and Kaplan's findings to the need for BSDs to demonstrate championing behaviours and visibility beyond the walls of the business school. It is interesting that the design of independent community sponsored TEDx events is about "ideas worth spreading" for the public good, yet surprisingly few BSDs have given such a talk. Exceptions in the USA, Europe, and China include [Nohria \(2011\)](#), [Muff \(2013\)](#), and [Dixon \(2014\)](#). We conclude that in future, if the deanship is not doomed amidst the "dance" of everyday busyness, high turnovers of deans, and insecurities such as financial crises and Brexit, we must in T.S. Eliot's words allow time for a "still point" of reflection. As the Indian proverb says, before it pounces, the tiger takes a step back. We need to change traditional models of the dean ship to match the zeitgeist and interact with scientists and others who ask to what extent we are all doomed (e.g. [MacKenzie,](#)

2008). We need BSDs and teams who display T-shaped depth and breadth and who can articulate more visibly (and digitally) in public our legitimate purpose aligned with grander aspirations such as the [UN's \(2015\)](#) sustainable development goals for 2030. Indeed, we would all benefit from BSDs who have “ideas worth spreading” and who actively spread them – more TEDx type deans.

About the author

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