

# Leadership of Business Schools

Perceptions, Priorities and Predicaments



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The Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM) develops UK-based world-class management research. AIM seeks to identify ways to enhance the competitiveness of the UK economy and its infrastructure through research into management and organisational performance in both the private and public sectors.

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- Engage with practitioners and other users of research within and beyond the UK as co-producers of knowledge about management

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## AIM research themes

### **Current AIM research projects focus on:**

#### **UK productivity and performance for the 21st century.**

*How can UK policymakers evaluate and address concerns surrounding the UK's performance in relation to other countries?*

National productivity has been the concern of economists, government policymakers, and corporate decision-makers for some time. Further research by scholars from a range of disciplines is bringing new voices to the debates about how the productivity gap can be measured, and what the UK can do to improve the effectiveness of UK industry and its supporting public services.

#### **Sustaining innovation to achieve competitive advantage and high quality public services.**

*How can UK managers capture the benefits of innovation while meeting other demands of a competitive and social environment?*

Innovation is a key source of competitive advantage and public value through new strategies, products, services and organisational processes. The UK has outstanding exemplars of innovative private and public sector organisations and is investing significantly in its science and skills base to underpin future innovative capacity.

#### **Adapting promising practices to enhance performance across varied organisational contexts.**

*How can UK managers disseminate their experience whilst learning from others?*

Improved management practices are identified as important for enhancing productivity and performance. The main focus is on how evidence behind good or promising practices can be systematically assessed, creatively adapted, successfully implemented and knowledge diffused to other organisations that will benefit.

UK business schools have grown rapidly over the last forty years<sup>1</sup>. Despite a tentative start, when many commentators (including some vice-chancellors) appeared to question the status of management as an academic discipline, business schools have now come of age. They account for a substantial proportion of students and overall income (especially from overseas), with one in seven undergraduates and one in five postgraduates studying business and management related subjects. Underlying this robust picture, where business schools are integral to their universities' successes, some interesting issues arise about the future for business schools and particularly the leadership pipeline. Business schools, like other professional schools in universities face a challenging, complex and ambiguous future<sup>2</sup> and there appears to be a limited pool of candidates applying to become deans.

Leadership has long been heralded as a crucial variable enabling organisations to survive and advance in uncertain and turbulent environments<sup>3</sup>. Leaders, it seems, are responsible for creating a vision of where the organisation is going and implementing initiatives to achieve the vision. They generate enthusiasm for goal achievement and seek to engage employees in contributing to the organisation's strategy. Furthermore, effective leaders engage with the external environment, building collaborative relationships within the wider community, in order to promote the necessary change orientation. Although leadership in contexts outside academia has been widely studied, far less is known about what constitutes effective leadership for universities in general and business schools in particular. These are important questions when one takes into account the complexity of universities, the increasingly international profile of UK business schools and the dynamic context within which they operate. The question is all the more pressing since the logic for appointing business school leaders appears frequently out of line with approaches adopted elsewhere. Appointments in universities tend to be based on research and teaching excellence, rather than managerial expertise, although the pattern outside academia is to recognise and reward achievement as exhibited by a successful track record as effective leaders.

The purpose of this report is three-fold. First, we wanted to know more about the challenges that business school leaders face, as perceived by the deans themselves. Our second objective was to examine the roles that business school deans perform – again, drawing upon insights of deans themselves in order to capture concerns and tensions as well as opportunities for influencing the strategic agenda. Finally, we hoped to gain a useful understanding of the qualities that deans themselves believed to be important in shaping success.

In our view, exploring these topics is important for several reasons: first, doing so highlights where further support and development can be offered for existing business school leaders and those aspiring to the role. This, in turn, has a bearing on strategy formulated by influential bodies like the Association of Business Schools (ABS).

Secondly, our study may provide assistance for university senior management teams (including vice-chancellors) to identify what they can realistically anticipate business school leaders to achieve and how they can further develop a model of distributed leadership<sup>6</sup>, taking into account the many demands and challenges associated with the role of dean. Thirdly, we hope that our report will offer insight both for deans and aspiring deans about the experience of operating at this level; the potential pitfalls, challenges and opportunities.

The structure of this report is as follows. First, we describe the background to our discussion with participants at the ABS 2007 Conference. We continue by presenting an overview of the results of our analysis, and conclude by highlighting implications, both for future research and for schools reviewing policy and practice for the appointment, development and progression of their senior teams, including deans.

**...we hope that our report will offer insight both for deans and aspiring deans about the experience of operating at this level; the potential pitfalls, challenges and opportunities.**



## understanding the perceptions of business school leaders

The report is informed by an exercise that was undertaken at the 2007 ABS annual conference. Participants in the conference included 44 deans, 14 deputy, assistant or associate deans, 13 senior academic staff and 6 senior managers. In terms of institutional representation, 9 were Russell Group deans, 1 from a private business school and 60% of delegates were from post-'92 institutions.

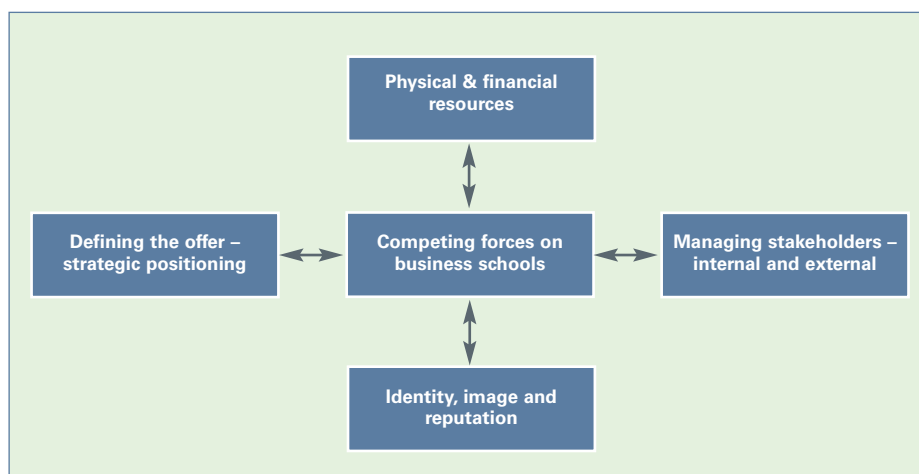
In the opening session of the conference business school leaders were nominated to join groups comprised of between eight and ten individuals for open discussions. Relative homogeneity within each group was actively fostered by the conference organisers, so that groups were similar in terms of the position of individuals within their organisations (e.g. not all participant attendees were deans) and in terms of the broad ethos of the school (e.g. research-led or teaching focused schools). The composition of the discussion groups also took into account whether members were long-serving deans, newly appointed deans, from metropolitan business schools and/or recently established universities. This strategy was important to avoid as far as possible a polarisation of perspectives which might have made analysis of 'group' insights problematic. All conference attendees were assured that inputs to the group discussion would be confidential and no names would be attributed to views expressed. AIM scholars were nominated to work with particular groups both to clarify the research questions and, on occasions, to assist in summarising group feedback.

The first stage of the exercise was for individuals to work in pairs with one other group member to put in numerical order a list of pre-conceived 'qualities' of successful deans. Each pair returned to this listing at the end of the exercise, when they scrutinised the same listing, with a focus instead on the qualities required for success five years' hence. There was also space on the schedule for deans to add qualities not captured by the questionnaire provided. In the intervening period (between the two paired discussions), the group as a whole focused on two questions: firstly, they were asked to use imagery to describe what they believed the business school dean role to represent, and secondly, they worked on the question of challenges, developing a consensus within groups about where the challenges exist and how they impact on the dean's role. Although the question concerning imagery was intentionally light-hearted, this in our view by no means detracted from the value of our responses; on the contrary, through participants feeling relaxed we could release their creativity and yield useful insights into widely-shared perceptions of the role of business school deans. In sum, the questions that we sought to address through these activities were as follows:

- What are the challenges facing business schools today?
- What are the implications of these challenges for leaders of business schools?
- How should we conceive of business school leadership in the future?

The deans and business school leaders involved in the discussions reported that they faced a number of stimulating challenges in their roles, some of which may be typical balancing acts for any university dean anywhere in the world<sup>6</sup> and others that may be a specific feature of business school deans. First, they have to formulate their school's strategic direction and positioning. Second, they have to manage their school's financial performance, whilst ensuring the necessary resources are available to deliver high quality programmes and research outcomes. Third, they have to manage their school's external reputation and image, not least because the public face of the school affects the school's ability to attract staff, students and support. Finally, they have to do all of the above in a multi-faceted stakeholder environment, dealing with their colleagues both in the school and in the broader university, the international business school community, employers and employer representatives, alumni and other national and international stakeholders. Together these challenges make the role of business school dean an extremely challenging one. Deans cannot afford for their school to lose focus on any of these dimensions, which is why many deans report that they have to balance the competing forces shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Competing forces on business schools**



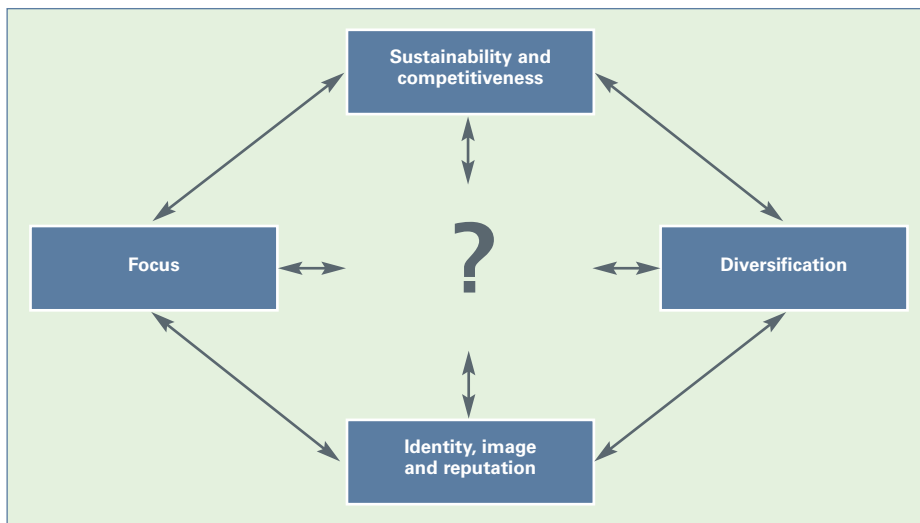
Drilling down to the next level of detail, even a short list of the specific challenges faced by business school leaders illustrates the range and complexity of the task:

- 1 Recruitment, retention and the development of faculty/staff with track records and future potential.
- 2 Understanding how much 'value' an individual contributes and managing underperformance.
- 3 Raising the necessary capital to renew existing facilities and fund expansion.
- 4 Managing the process and outcomes of the Research Assessment Exercise, National Student Survey, accreditations and rankings.
- 5 Developing a differentiated brand image.
- 6 Internationalisation (competition, faculty, students).

- 7 Determining the appropriate balance between different income streams.
- 8 Understanding when and how to engage with business.
- 9 Developing appropriate strategies for different markets.
- 10 Creating an appropriate student experience.

Business school leaders have to address these challenges in a context typified by complex governance relationship with central university administrators, advisory bodies, alumni networks and other regional, national and international stakeholders. Successfully managing relationships with these entities, especially with the university centre, is crucial if schools are to benefit from centrally provided systems and processes, in return for funds being top sliced and for paying what is often a substantial proportion of school income to the centre.

**Figure 2: The challenges Deans face leading up to 2012**



In moving from the consideration of today's challenges, to those that are on the horizon in 2012, the deans that we consulted reported a tension between whether to focus on a small number of areas or to diversify into new areas of activity (e.g. executive education, working with local businesses, international expansion, etc.) as a route to sustainability and competitiveness. Many linked choosing the appropriate strategy (focus or diversification<sup>7</sup>) to the creation of the right image and identity of the school. For example, some participants talked about closing MBA programmes (a focus strategy) and others about international expansion of the same programmes (a diversification strategy). Both can be seen as factors that can enable sustainability (not trying to deliver what you do not have the resources for) and competitiveness (challenging the rise of universities in developing economies on their own territories). Both choices contribute to the image and identity of the school. For example, ceasing to offer an MBA creates an image and identity for a school (arguably more social science than professionally oriented). This will influence the type of faculty the school can attract and develop, which in turn will influence the school's future options in terms of sustainability and competitiveness.

## business school leadership: deans and distributed leadership

Given the complexity of the operating environment and the subsequent degree of strategic change occurring within business schools, it would be fair to assume that deans perceived themselves as performing a *shaping* role. And indeed when discussing what metaphors deans would use to describe their role a number used language synonymous with their role as shapers. Examples, of the metaphors provided as offering insights into the role of deans as shapers can be categorised as:

*Strategists:* Statesman, Director, General, Entrepreneur, Charismatic, Evangelistic, Conductor of an Orchestra.

*Diplomats:* Networker, Skillful Negotiator, Politically Astute, Cocktail Party Host, Broker.

**Table 1: Imagery for Deans**

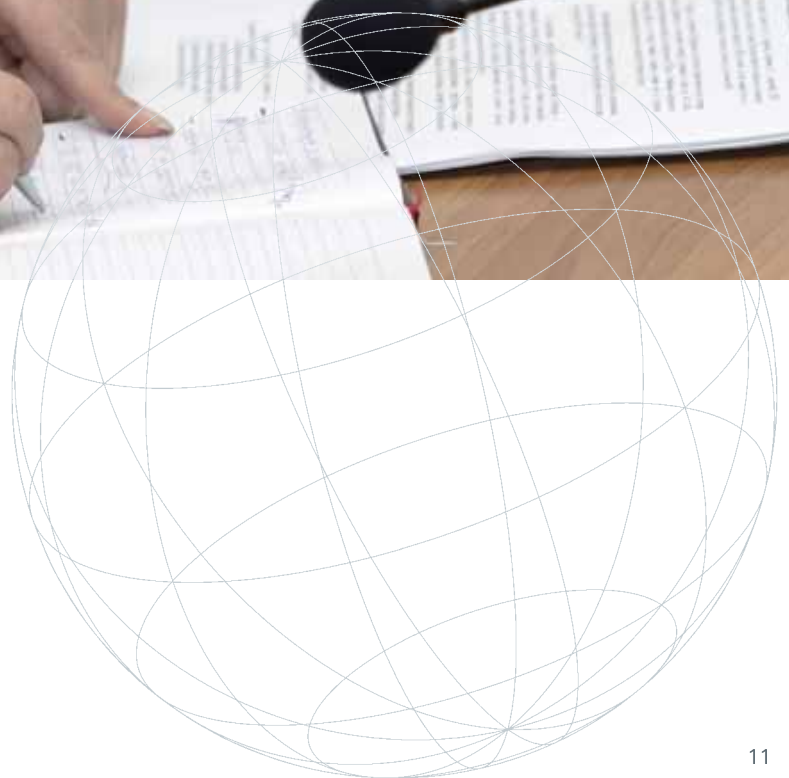
Summary term	Metaphors and other images	Implications
Leader (Strategist)	<i>Statesman, Director, General, Entrepreneur, Charismatic, Evangelistic, Conductor of the Orchestra.</i>	Deans are expected to map out the way forward and 'lead from the front'.
Diplomat (Negotiator)	<i>Networker, Skilful Negotiator, Politically Astute, Cocktail Party Host, Broker.</i>	Deans must maintain their access to resources in the university system. This is achieved with political guile, negotiation, and sometimes a bit of 'sleight of hand' and even bullishness.
Juggler (Manager)	<i>Plate Spinner, Tight Rope Walker, Magician, Illusionist.</i>	Deans must respond to the needs of multiple stakeholders and balance potentially conflicting demands.
Fixer (Bureaucrat)	<i>Engineer, Hammer, Chief Cook and Bottle Washer, Life Boat Man, Worker Bee, Swiss Army Knife, Car Mechanic, Gopher.</i>	Deans also play a basic managerial role in keeping things running smoothly on a day-to-day basis.

But these were not the only roles that deans perceived themselves to occupy. A substantial proportion of the metaphors presented by deans fell into the category of responding to events, as opposed to shaping them. Examples of the metaphors offered as offering insights into the role of deans as responders can be categorised as:

*Fixer:* Engineer, Hammer, Chief Cook and Bottle Washer, Life Boat Man, Worker Bee, Swiss Army Knife, Car Mechanic, Gopher.

*Juggler:* Plate Spinner, Tight Rope Walker, Magician, Illusionist.

The summary table (Table 1) points to a further key feature of a dean's existence – that of multiple conflicting demands on their skills and their time as well as demand for perhaps an impossibly broad range of leadership styles. The wide gamut of images of deans we collected suggested that not only were deans expected to be entrepreneurial and evangelical (i.e. strategists), they were also expected to be skilful and politically astute negotiators (i.e. diplomats). They must also do this in face of the conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders – primarily we suspect between the needs of their staff and those of the university (i.e. the juggler – the classic Mintzbergian<sup>9</sup> manager). On the other hand they were also expected to keep the day-to-day mechanics of the organisation running smoothly (the Fixer or Weberian<sup>9</sup> bureaucratic manager). Does this suggest, then, that business schools need leadership to be distributed across more than one individual?



## qualities of successful business school deans

As noted in the methodology, at the beginning and end of the exercise conference attendees were asked to rate a list of 45 leadership related characteristics and foci. In the first set, given at the beginning of the session, we asked participants to rate the characteristics in terms of the present context. At the end of the session we asked them to do the exercise again but this time in terms of what might be important in 2012. Table 2 shows the top twenty characteristics and foci that they believed would be important both today and in 2012.

Generally, as one would expect given the results of the 'metaphors exercise', proactive 'shaping' skills were rated high now and in the future. Communication, leading change, political skills and having a 'results orientation' were viewed as important in both lists, with strategic leadership in first position both now and in 2012. It is worth noting, however, that this view of deans as shapers is somewhat inconsistent with the range of metaphors discussed earlier. Being a strategic leader is clearly part of the role, but the demands imposed by the day-to-day running of the school cannot be ignored.

Further interrogation of the data reveals some other interesting points. Trust falls in perceived importance, while performance and results centred characteristics are perceived as more significant in five years' time. *Self awareness* also falls. So what might this indicate? That deans are expecting greater pressure from external and internal sources to perform, and that this will result in a reduction in the collegiate culture (of which trust forms a key element)?

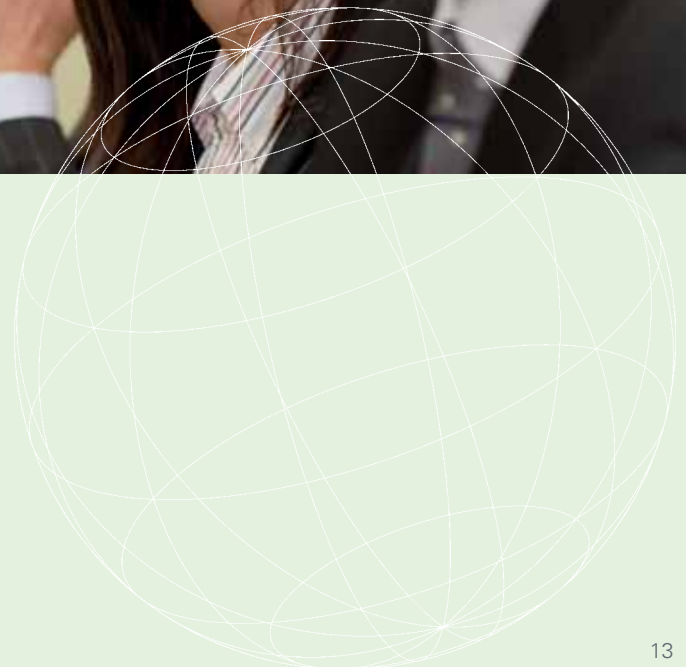
**Table 2: Top 20 qualities of business school deans**

Top 20 characteristics today	Top 20 characteristics in 2012
1 Strategic leadership	Strategic leadership
2 Communication skills	Leading change
3 Leading change	Communication skills
4 Political skills	Political skills
5 Ability to develop relationships	Ability to develop relationships
6 External networking	External networking
7 Trust	Focus on results
8 Self-awareness	Performance improvement
9 Creating energy	Creating energy
10 Encouraging innovation	Encouraging innovation
11 Focus on results	Strategic alliances
12 Providing encouragement	Focus on the bottom line
13 Performance improvement	Innovation
14 Student focus	Managing risk
15 Conflict resolution	Resource management
16 Resource management	Talent management
17 Reducing time on valueless activity	International contacts
18 Team working	Trust
19 Managing risk	Self-awareness
20 Academic credibility	Student focus

The other apparent contradiction in the data is the falling position of *academic credibility* between today and 2012. *Teaching record* also fell, as did *research record* for some institutions. The importance of excelling in activities that are core to what business schools do appears to be growing less important. This may be due to a perception by some deans that the longer they occupy the role, the less important their personal track record in teaching and research becomes, as responsibilities of deanship erode time for personal scholarship. Are business schools increasingly serving such a complex set of stakeholders that academic skills are not sufficient prerequisites of leadership success? If the role of the dean is increasingly to represent the school to outside stakeholders, rather than championing the school internally within the university, then such approaches to leadership may be valid.

So what about activities that would indicate a person has been involved with or advised the management of other types of organisations, with this being a natural alternative place to look for leaders? Interestingly, *being a non-executive director*, *sitting on a government committee* or having *run their own business* are ranked in the bottom ten percent both today and in 2012. What is surprising is that *leadership training* received is also ranked in the bottom ten percent – in a sector that has many authorities on this subject as well as being one of the main providers of this type of education.

Are business schools increasingly serving such a complex set of stakeholders that academic skills are not sufficient prerequisites of leadership success?



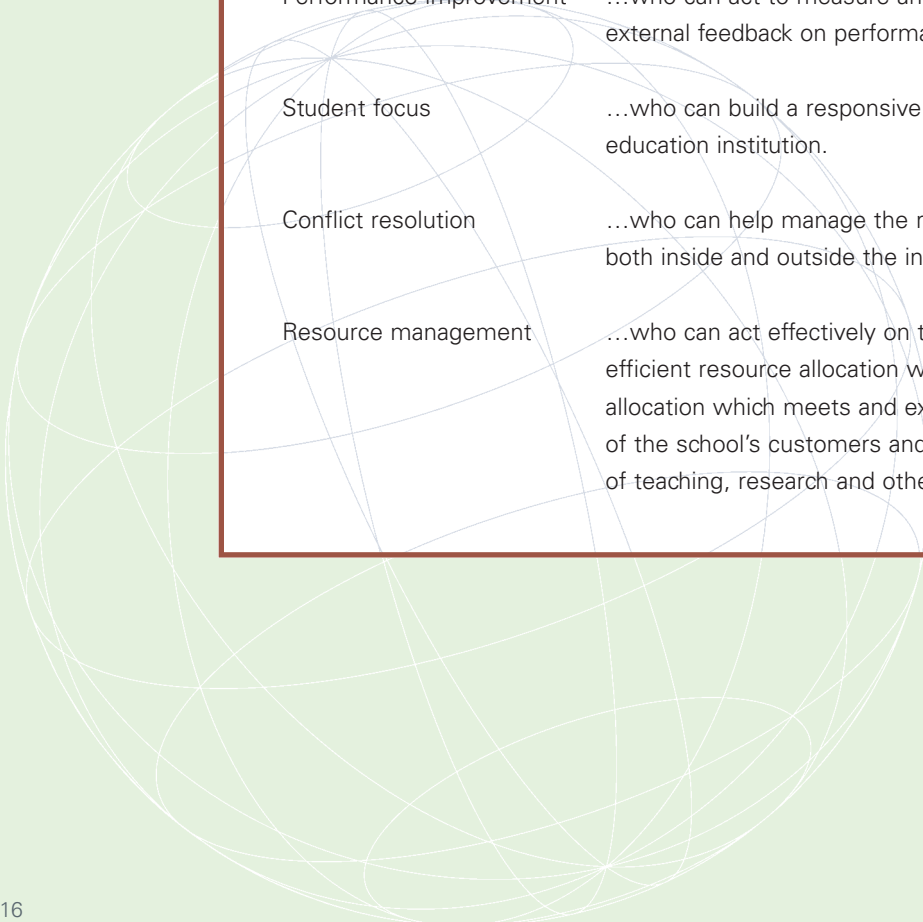
## moving beyond the dean to business school leadership

The challenges that we have laid out in this paper highlight how varied and complex the dean's role is in most business schools. A question which appears to be receive less consideration, however, is whether a single individual can be expected to fulfil such a varied and diverse role. How many deans can simultaneously be strategists and fixers? Can they couple this with the skills needed to manage stakeholder communities – both inside the school and the University – as well as outside? Perhaps it is time to start thinking of business school leadership teams<sup>10</sup> rather than individuals. The range of skills and talents required are too varied to be vested in and exercised by a single individual, so perhaps those responsible for appointing leaders of business schools should concern themselves with questions of how self-aware the potential dean is about their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as how capable the dean is of building a team with the requisite skills. To perform really effectively, the leadership team of a business school needs to be able to fulfil all of the tasks shown in Table 3. A question to ask as you read this report is – how well equipped are school's leadership teams to deliver on this lofty ambition?



**Table 3: Successful Business School Leadership**

<b>The top 20 skills according to the Deans consulted</b>	<b>Implications for the business school – Does your required schools leadership team include people...</b>
Strategic leadership	...who can provide strategic leadership and guidance? The leadership team needs people who can identify and articulate the challenges and opportunities facing the business school, as well as establishing appropriate responses.
Communication skills	...who can involve and engage stakeholders both internally and externally. The leadership team needs communicators who can persuasively communicate a vision for the school and excite others to join in with the schools efforts to deliver this vision.
Leading change	...who can put forward a compelling vision of where the organisation is heading, and help staff to envisage how and where they can best contribute to the achievement of organisational objectives.
Political skills	...who can work constructively with multiple stakeholders to ensure that success is highlighted and no unnecessary barriers in place to prevent the organisation from achieving its goals.
Ability to develop relationships	...who can forge strong and collaborative links with individual staff members, as well as vice-chancellors, advisory groups and funding bodies, in order to build engagement and personal identification with the leader and his/her goals for the organisation.
External networking	...who can develop successful collaborations outside the university at both national and international levels, so that the school can respond rapidly to new developments and shape the environment to accommodate the needs and aspirations of a particular school.
Trust	...who can build a shared understanding that staff will be supported and acknowledged for their contribution and that ethical considerations will permeate not just policy statements but also the behaviour and attitudes of staff (especially but not exclusively for senior management).



Self-awareness	...who can build on his or her strengths, recognising what can realistically be delivered by one person and when it is necessary to draw on the skills and knowledge of others, recognising that effective senior management teams draw upon complementary strengths.
Creating energy	...who can infuse the school with a sense of what can and will be delivered, presenting a positive and compelling vision for the future that empowers staff to envisage how their energy can best be applied.
Encouraging innovation	...who can help staff and other stakeholders to envisage new and different ways of working, to embrace new approaches as exciting alternatives instead of seeing innovation as threatening.
Focus on results	...who can develop and work toward agreed and ideally measurable outcomes that demonstrably serve the beneficiaries of the business school (including students, staff and the university).
Providing encouragement	...who can support the efforts of colleagues to meet the challenges of flexible and responsive work environment.
Performance improvement	...who can act to measure and respond to internal and external feedback on performance.
Student focus	...who can build a responsive and customer-focused education institution.
Conflict resolution	...who can help manage the resolution of conflicts both inside and outside the institution.
Resource management	...who can act effectively on the requirement for efficient resource allocation within the school – resource allocation which meets and exceeds the demands of the school's customers and stakeholders, in terms of teaching, research and other activities.

Reducing time spent on non-value added activities

...who can improve the school's systems, procedures and practices, ensuring that valuable resources are used to best effect.

Talent management

...who can work to position their schools to engage successfully in the 'war for talent' and to be active in creating an environment conducive to retaining excellent staff.

Managing risk

...who can identify the risks inherent in a particular set of actions or strategic direction and take steps to mitigate the effects of those risks.

Academic credibility

...who can represent the school in academic debates and arguments, enhancing the school's reputation for scholarship and attracting high quality faculty.



## conclusions

In summary, this investigation appears to have produced as many questions as answers. It is clear from the wider literature that leaders play a crucial role in enabling organisations to survive and advance in turbulent environments, and that a key part of the leader's contribution lies in his or her ability to develop and implement a compelling vision, reflecting strategic goals. The role of business school deans in this regard is, however, only just beginning to be researched in the UK at the same time as the identity of management as a profession is also being questioned. Our data support the case for recognising that business school leaders must be able to think and act strategically. However, the situation today is that many deans are preoccupied with *responding* type activities. There is also data to suggest that there is a perception among deans that performance orientation will become more important, and there will be a reducing level of collegiality. However, when asking the question 'what type of person will lead schools of the future?' the answer is far from clear. Having a strong track record in teaching and/or research appears to be perceived as something that will not alone equip people with the necessary skills, but neither will leadership development. Moreover, according to respondents, appropriate training grounds for leaders are not to be found in roles that bring them in close contact with, or make them responsible for, managing other organisations<sup>12</sup>.



Key interrelated questions that need further exploration persist:

- (i) how do we configure the roles of deans and their top teams in different types of schools to meet priorities? and
- (ii) how can we change perceptions to increase the pool of talented individuals who apply to become deans?

- <sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of this phenomenon and supporting data please see the 2006 AIM report entitled *UK Business Schools: Historical Contexts and Future Scenarios*, available at [www.aimresearch.org](http://www.aimresearch.org)
- <sup>2</sup> Starkey, K. and Tiratsoo, N. (2007) *The Business School and the Bottom Line*, Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Bennis, W. (2003) *On Becoming a Leader*, Perseus.
- <sup>4</sup> [www.the-abs.org.uk](http://www.the-abs.org.uk)
- <sup>5</sup> Gronn, P. (2002) 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis', *Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 4, 423-451.
- <sup>6</sup> Gmelch, W.H., Wolverson, M., Wolverson, M.L. and Sarros, J.C. (1999) 'The Academic Dean: An Imperilled Species Searching for Balance', *Research in Higher Education*, 40, 6, 717-740.
- <sup>7</sup> Porter, M.E. (2004) *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*, Free Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Mintzberg, H. (1975) 'The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact', *Harvard Business Review*, 53, 4, 49-61.
- <sup>9</sup> du Gay, P. (2000) *In Praise of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization, Ethics*, Sage.
- <sup>10</sup> Hambrick, D.C. and Mason, P.A. (1984) 'Upper Echelons: The Organization as a Reflection of its Top Managers', *The Academy of Management Review*, 9, 2, 193-206.
- <sup>11</sup> Khurana, R. (2007) *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession*, Princeton University Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Note that no question was asked about line management experience in complex organisations such as professional services firms. Participants were asked about the importance of employer focus, practitioner credibility and deans owning their own business, occupying non-executive directorships and involvement in professional bodies/government committees.

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