Introduction

Nottingham University Business School (NUBS) has campuses in the United Kingdom, China, and Malaysia and is among a select group of AMBA and EQUIS accredited business schools. The School has global reach and a reputation as a leading research institution offering undergraduate, master’s, MBA, executive MBA, PhD, and executive education programmes. In particular, NUBS has achieved high standing in business ethics and sustainability research and education over the last decade. The School continues to pursue the goal of embedding sustainability within educational offerings and scholarly activities. This case focuses on one strand of work that challenges traditions of leadership in business and management and proposes an alternative theoretical and pedagogical approach to leadership education.

Challenges

In the latter part of the twentieth century the number of students enrolling at business schools grew dramatically, and critics started to raise concerns about the role of business schools as a social institution (Hambrick, 1993; Starkey, Hatchuel and Tempest, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). Criticism was levied at the dominance of economic perspectives in business schools, the preoccupation with a narrow set of business values and excessive attention to developing technical competence at the expense of the human dimensions that shape individuals and organisations. But the voice of a small number of agents provocateurs was all too easy to ignore until the financial crisis of 2008, which amply demonstrated the shortcomings of this approach and spawned global initiatives, including high profile examples, such as PRME, to challenge the status quo. The challenge of shaping business schools into social institutions that more positively impact society concerns all subject areas, but there is a particular role for leadership research and education to meet the urgent demand for developing future leaders that can contribute to a sustainable global society. Yet the unbalanced economic mind-set of business schools has dominated thinking on leadership, and education programmes, especially MBAs, have focused students too much on a narrowly defined, economic bottom line.

Actions taken

NUBS Professor Ken Starkey, who has long been engaged in the debate on business schools’ contribution to society, is addressing this problem in collaboration with Professor of Human Relations, Carol Hall. Pursuing forms of business and leadership that are more generative, transcultural, ethical, and sustainable, Starkey and Hall challenge the ‘economic narrative’ of management and leadership education and, instead, propose a ‘social narrative of leadership’ that acknowledges the human dimension with all of its social, cultural, political, and moral complexity. They have developed an intercultural perspective on and a teaching practice of leadership that combines insights from a range of the social sciences and humanities—particularly sociology, psychology, education, and philosophy—drawing on theory and practice, both Eastern and Western. Grounded in critical realism, this approach emphasises critical reflection on personal, organisational and cultural narratives. The pedagogical approach is primarily experiential (Kolb, 1984). In supporting the development of social (Goleman,
The spirit of leadership: New directions in leadership education

2006), emotional (Mayer and Salovey, 1993), and spiritual intelligence (Zohar and Marshall, 2000), alongside and in balance with intellectual functioning, it gives weight to the emotional component of the reflection cycle, using structured exercises to facilitate personal exploration of thoughts and feelings, which have their roots in cultural narratives.

This approach to leadership education has been integrated into NUBS’ Masters and MBA programmes and runs as an executive education module. MBA modules are run over intensive blocks in order to maximise learning and capitalise on the group process. When offered to executive education clients, NUBS recommends a three-day course segmented in the following way: a two-day workshop typically comprising a balance of case study, experiential exercises, tutor input, and personal reflection, followed by an opportunity to apply what has been learned in the clients’ own work environment. Blended learning is used such that classroom learning is supported by meetings as learning sets using the web to link members across the globe. The course leaders provide on-going mentoring/coaching. Finally, the group reconvenes to focus on personal and organisational learning from the course and to think through next steps in developing a more balanced philosophy and practice of leadership for the future and what further work needs to be done individually and organisationally. Starkey and Hall’s work on leadership education, and their model of ‘Leadership as a Balancing Act’ has been published as an essay in the ‘Handbook for Teaching Leadership: Knowing, Doing and Being’ (edited by Snook, Nohria and Khurana, 2012), which captured the output of a Harvard-led initiative on the challenges of educating global leaders.

Figure 1: Leadership as a Balancing Act
results

This approach to leadership education has been practiced at NUBS since 2011. It is a core module on the Full time MBA and around 50 students graduate each year engage with a social narrative of leadership that includes a strong emphasis on sustainability. It is available on the Executive MBA programme as an elective module and has been integrated into MSc elective modules that focus on strategy and leadership. It was delivered as an executive education module for the first time in 2012 and has, so far, been run with two cohorts of around 20 senior managers from large global companies. Feedback from students consistently affirms that the module challenges pre-existing ideas, helps them to appreciate the importance of soft skills in business and management, and develop their capacity for reflective practice and self-awareness. One participant of an executive module remarked:

[The module was] really provocative and rewarding… particularly interesting and holistic in its approach… truly inspirational, informative and interesting. Thank you.”

Personal reflections submitted by the students also indicate that this approach to leadership prompts deep reflection on their ideas about leadership, management and sustainability.

The role of PRME/sustainability principles
The PRME initiative has added considerable weight to appeals for management education that supports a sustainable global society. The social narrative on leadership espoused by Starkey and Hall, developed through leadership scholarship and teaching practice at NUBS, argues for leadership education that attends to longer term societal impacts, rather than short term economic goals. Their perspective has strong resonance with the ‘Purpose’ principle of PRME, which focuses on ‘developing the capabilities of students to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy’. It is also consistent with the Values and Methods Principles that focus on the ethos and processes of our educational frameworks. As such, the PRME provides a strong mandate for embedding sustainable leadership education into our programmes and supports engagement with our external partners on these issues.

References