Reconstituting Relevance: Exploring Possibilities for Management Educators' Critical Engagement with the Public

Todd Bridgman
Lecturer in Organisation Behaviour
Victoria Management School
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600
Wellington
New Zealand
Tel: +64 (4) 4635118
Fax: +64 (4) 4635253
todd.bridgman@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

This paper considers the possibilities of, and threats to, the performance of a critical public role by business school faculty, based on an empirical study of UK research-led business schools. Its reference point is recent debate about the 'relevance' of management education to management practice - a debate which has become polarised around nodal points of 'critical' and 'engaged' with the implication that engagement with external constituencies requires the suspension of critique and conversely, that critique of received wisdom is of little relevance to stakeholders. The notion of a critical engagement with the public asserts that business schools can serve a valuable democratic function as scrutinisers of organisational activity. This role is largely marginalised in prevailing conceptions of an increasingly commercialised business school, but the empirical study suggests there is some cause for optimism. The demonstration of 'relevance' does not have to involve the pursuit of a narrow commercialisation agenda where the business school propagates a strictly managerialist view of the world.

Key Words

Management education; commodification; public role; critical management studies; critical thinking.

Introduction

'Relevance' seems to be the word that dominates current discussions about the future direction of management education. Business schools are criticised for focusing too much on theory-building and not enough on practical application (Starkey & Madan, 2001). For others the particular approach to theory-building is the problem, especially a scientific approach that is held to have little relevance for practitioners (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). It is claimed this scientific approach denies a role for agency and any consideration of ethics and morals and is seen to provide business school graduates, particularly MBA students, with a justification for engaging in unethical management practices (Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004).

There is consensus that business schools need to be relevant, in order to justify continued funding from the state and to repel the competitive threat posed by non-university providers of management education. However, there is no agreement about what relevance means and to whom business schools should be relevant. There are signs that the relevance debate is becoming more urgent. Whatever the successes of the past, in terms of expanding enrolments and revenue generation, the 'golden days' for business schools may be over. More questions are being raised about the value of an MBA, the competency of business school graduates and the usefulness of knowledge generated by faculty. Coupled with concerns that MBA programmes have become the training ground for future corporate fraudsters following Enron and other high-profile scandals in the U.S, it is a difficult time for business schools. It is timely, therefore, to consider the critiques, forms and prospects of the MBA and management education.

Debate about the relevance of business schools has become polarised around nodal points of 'critical' and 'engaged'. By 'critical', it is meant activity that challenges conventional ideas and received wisdom. Being 'engaged' refers to the interactions faculty have with constituencies outside the university, through relationships with practitioners, membership of committees or advisory groups related to public policy, involvement with think tanks and political parties and appearances in the media. One view is that faculty should pursue the issues and problems identified by business as most relevant to their needs, which infuriates those who argue that defining relevance so narrowly will compromise both theory building and critical aspect of management education. Faculty, they argue, must be free to pursue diverse research agendas, even if this is not considered by external stakeholders to be relevant at the time. The impression given is that this is a zero-sum game – to engage more with practitioners we must soften, or even conceal, our critical edges.

This paper seeks to contribute to the relevance debate surrounding the MBA and management education by concluding that there is opportunity, despite real pressures within the system, to explore the possibilities of being critical *and* engaged in ways that demonstrate relevance and affirm the democratic function of the university as a source of independent criticism. This asserts that in a free society a university has a moral purpose, combining an intellectual purpose of free and open inquiry and a social purpose as a source of social criticism independent of political authority and economic power (Tasker & Packham, 1990). This requires asking difficult questions, highlighting inconvenient facts and challenging received wisdom – precisely what critical management education should be about. As a former journalist I identified with the notion that journalists are not just employees with loyalties to their

paymasters, but have a civic responsibility to break through the 'spin' and hold those in authority accountable for their actions. Now as an academic, I identify with a similar role, believing that academics have an opportunity to challenge prevailing wisdom through their teaching, research and other forms of engagement with the wider public.

What might this critical and engaged activity look like? A recent high profile example from the UK concerns the proposed introduction of identity cards, one of the Labour government's central policies in its 'War Against Terror'. In June 2005, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) published a report, which claimed the identity card project would cost nearly three times government estimates and would be ineffective in combating terrorism (LSE, 2005). The report incensed the government minister responsible for the project, who described it as a "fabrication" and accused its authors of being "technically incompetent". LSE's Governing Council defended the right of the authors to publish the report and director Howard Davies lambasted the government for its 'bullying approach' (Davies, 2006). Undeterred, the LSE published a second report in January 2006, which criticised the level of secrecy surrounding the ID card proposal and conflicting statements made by the government department responsible for it (LSE, 2006).

The LSE is not a business school but using this example it should be possible to contemplate management educators engaging in public forums on important issues. To explore this issue, this paper examines prospects of, and threats to, a more critical and engaged role for UK management educators, although it is hoped the study will have relevance to other countries. The outline of the paper is as follows. The first

section provides a brief overview of two aspects of the 'relevance' debate as it applies to business schools - the merits of Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al, 1984) and the positioning of critical management studies (CMS). A section on methodology is followed by the discussion of a study in which three competing articulations of the UK research-led business school are identified – the vocational/professional school, the academic department and the commercial enterprise. Each articulation has implications for the public role of business school faculty and in particular, the possibility of critical engagement with external audiences. Hegemonic within recent policy discourse is a 'commercial enterprise' articulation, which has the effect of institutionalising the public role as a 'third mission' alongside teaching and research. Business schools take a greater interest in measuring and controlling the public work of faculty, which poses a threat to their freedom to speak out on major issues of the day, especially if their comments are deemed to 'tarnish the brand' or jeopardise relationships with commercial or government sponsors. However, my analysis also contradicts a prevailing mood of pessimism about the totalising effects of hegemonic projects such as commodification. Within the articulation of the business school as a commercial enterprise, there are available a number of subject positions that are compatible with both the performance of critical public work and stakeholder demands for relevance.

A Polarised Debate About Relevance

Characteristic of discussions about the 'relevance' of business schools is the existence of rival camps that possess strongly held and divergent views of what it means to be 'relevant'. This section considers two aspects of this debate as it relates to the UK

context - the conceptualisation of Mode 2 knowledge production and the state of CMS.

Engaged, But Not Critical? The Case of Mode 2

In the UK, a focal point for the 'relevance' debate has been the theorisation of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production developed by Gibbons et al (1984), where future scientific advance is understood to be conditional upon the erosion of traditional boundaries between the spheres of academia and commerce/industry. Drawing on this, Starkey and Madan (2001) identify a 'relevance gap' in management research, arguing that while stakeholders and funding bodies want Mode 2 (concerned with practical application) management educators cling to Mode 1 and its preoccupation with theory building. Unless business schools adopt Mode 2 they 'run the risk of obsolescence, to be replaced by new providers, perhaps management consulting firms or the burgeoning corporate university 'movement'' (p.S6). While Starkey and Madan probably overstate the threat, their report has become a lightning rod for critics of what is perceived to be an increasingly commercialised and uncritical business school model (Grey, 2001; Weick, 2001). Grey for instance, argues that if understood merely as producers of commercially useable knowledge, universities will lose their distinctive qualities of independent validation, thereby undermining the need for their continued existence. Following Starkey and Madan's prescription, he believes, 'would inevitably lead to a future scenario in which the question will be: why have universities and business schools at all? And there will be absolutely no convincing answer' (p. S29).

Critical, But Not Engaged? The Case of Critical Management Studies

Another take on the relevance debate concerns CMS. Here, it is not the lack of a critical orientation that is the problem, but the alleged failure of critical management scholars to engage with external audiences. Business schools are a fertile terrain for critical work in comparison to other professional schools given the fragmentation of management knowledge and the near collapse of the positivist consensus within social science (Grey & Willmott, 2002). Despite appearing well positioned to develop a critical public role, critical management scholars are routinely and vigorously criticised for their efforts in the public arena, often by those sympathetic to the CMS agenda. Mir and Mir (2002) argue that academic credibility has become an end in itself and that 'critical scholars in the academy write for the academy and speak to the academy' (p.119). They lay the blame largely with the academics themselves for being unable or unwilling to venture outside the academy more often. Parker (2002) also believes CMS has little influence on the world outside the academy, stating it has 'strengthened the popular diagnosis of academics as people who argue about things that nobody else understands or particularly cares about' (p.116). Grey and Willmott (2002) have placed an expansion of the public role on the CMS agenda:

> The aim of transforming management practice, although partly about B-schools, especially in terms of education, is one that can only be achieved in concert with other political movements and through non-academic media. This is a possibility that CMS has only just begun to explore but that we believe needs to be encouraged and developed. (Grey & Willmott, 2002: 417)

Critical <u>and</u> Engaged?

In highlighting the either/or character of the debate thus far, this paper seeks to explore the prospects for work, such as that undertaken by the LSE, that is critical *and* engaged. This might sound easy in theory, but what are the prospects in today's business schools? The tone of the literature is highly pessimistic about an increasingly professionalised and commodified university environment, which devalues notions such as academic freedom and the democratic function of the university. Echoing the criticism of CMS, the professionalisation of knowledge is blamed for academics abandoning their social role as critical intellectuals and becoming detached from political life (Brunner et al, 2000). Institutional factors have encouraged academics to specialise and write for other academics rather than the public; with career advancement based on publication in abstract and small readership journals, written in a language that deliberately obscures (Jacoby, 1987).

The performance of a critical public role is also perceived to be threatened by the commodification of knowledge. Universities are seen as sites of capital accumulation and the production of intellectual property, which is sold in an increasingly competitive market. As knowledge is conceived to be critical to the economy, academics are urged to become more 'customer-facing' as a condition of receiving funding. This has provoked expressions of concern that recurrent and relentless pressure to attract funding for research fetters and compromises the established role of academics. It is feared that academics hesitate to undertake research or to speak out on controversial public issues. This paper seeks to make a contribution to our understanding of these processes in the context of UK-research led business schools. The following section briefly outlines how the field study was conducted.

Methodology

The question that drove the empirical work concerns the possibilities of management educators being critical *and* engaged in ways that demonstrate relevance and affirm the university's role as an independent and democratic institution. The data set includes archival and interview data, the former consisting of key documents in the formation and development of the business school and subsequent government reports and 'white papers' on higher education. In addition, a total of 65 interviews were conducted at six research-led UK business schools, as reflected by performance on the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)[1]. Respondents were those with significant interactions with external audiences, such as practitioners, policymakers, journalists and think-tanks. In terms of political orientation, respondents included both those who identified with the Right of the political spectrum, as well as the Left. In much of the literature, 'critical' is synonymous with 'Left', but given my definition of 'critical' as a challenge to prevailing wisdom and the status quo, it seemed inappropriate to exclude those whose critique is directed from the Right.

The rationale for selecting 'research-led' business schools was a belief that in these schools I would be more likely to find faculty who have a 'significant' public role, which represented my target group. This is because many (but not all) of the interactions between faculty and external constituencies are based on research projects (such as dissemination of findings), or expertise gained from research (such as the provision of policy advice for government). The choice of schools reflects a mix of factors, including size, the proportion of resource income from external sources (industry, commerce and public corporations) and geographic location. Within each of the six schools a diversity of respondents were sought on categories of age, gender,

specialist field, faculty rank and type of public work. The type of work undertaken varied considerably, with some mainly doing media work, while others' involvement was primarily public policy oriented, or involved publishing books for a non-academic audience. All the major specialist areas of business and management were represented. Of the 65 respondents, just 12 were female, a proportion that reflects the lower representation of women in these schools generally. In terms of age and faculty rank, there was an 'over-representation' of senior faculty in the sample, since senior faculty appear more likely than their younger and/or more junior colleagues to have a significant public role[2].

The theoretical approach to the research drew on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and in particular, their concept of 'articulation', which refers to the organisation of social space, identity and discourse in an attempt to construct a stable system of meanings that appear as natural, or taken for granted[3]. Through this lens, the business school can be viewed as a site of contestation between articulations, each of which has sought to effect a fixation of meaning around its mission, purpose and objectives. Many respondents spoke of the tensions that surround the mission and objectives of the business school – is the first priority teaching, research, to generate revenue or something else? My task, in analysing the data, was to identify the specific discourses these various articulations of the business school were drawing on and to analyse the identities (or subject positions) that were available within each articulation. This understanding of identity does not imply that subjects are 'spoken for' by these articulations, but recognises there are a number of hegemonic articulations in play that are attempting to fix the meaning of practices, objects and

identities. While these articulations offer a partial fixation of meaning, they are penetrated by a radical contingency that prevents closure or totalisation.

Constituting the Public Role

Based on an analysis of the interview and archival data I identify three articulations that compete for hegemony in the constitution of the UK research-led business school, each of which has implications for the possibility of critical engagement with external audiences. All three are 'in play' and each provides discursive resources and contingent subject positions that faculty can identify with in constructing their identities. This, therefore, is an on-going struggle, manifest in the tensions, disagreements and debates that are characteristic of discussions involving the mission and objectives of the business school.

Two articulations that have historically competed for hegemony are those that privilege the teaching and research functions. The first constitutes the business school as a 'vocational/professional school' and business school faculty as vocationally oriented 'teachers' and 'trainers'. In this articulation, the business school is a practical, not an academic institution. Teaching takes priority over research and developing links with industry becomes a priority, with practitioners having a part to play as teachers. A competing articulation constitutes the business school as an 'academic department' and is positioned in an antagonistic relationship with the first articulation. Business school faculty are constituted as 'academics' and 'scholars', research takes priority over teaching and communication with other academics is valued above communication with audiences outside the academy.

The public role of faculty is constituted differently in each articulation. In the 'vocational/professional school', 'relevance' means the training of competent managers and the practical application of knowledge. Faculty have a public role, but it is subsumed within the teaching function and revolves around interactions with industry to generate case material for classroom discussion. Consulting and directorship activities provide a means of supplementing low academic salaries, which is essential if practitioners from industry are to be convinced to take up positions in the school, but these are generally considered 'out-of-hours' activities and schools take little interest in managing them. In the 'academic department', articulation to be relevant means breaking new ground through research and any public role is subsumed within this function. Accordingly, there is little suggestion that business school faculty have a legitimate role in engaging in public work that is not directly related to their research and/or extends beyond their narrow specialisation. Faculty can engage in this activity if they wish, but again, it is generally considered part of the academic's 'private life'.

Unsurprisingly, at the six research-led schools visited, the 'academic department' articulation appears hegemonic[4]. The RAE is generally seen as reinforcing an 'ivory tower' construction of the business school in the way that it prioritises communication with 'academics' ahead of interactions with the 'real world'. Consequently, there is little incentive for faculty to develop a significant public role, especially junior faculty who are yet to develop a research track record. Recruitment practices reinforce this, with business schools reluctant to hire applicants without a publication record because of the risk of them compromising the school's performance on the RAE. The hiring of practitioners becomes incompatible with the agenda of academic respectability and

consulting activity is viewed with suspicion, being seen as a distraction from research and a potential abuse of one's position.

The tension between teaching and research, between business schools being seen as legitimate academic departments or professional schools that are relevant to practice is nothing new. However, in addition, I identified a third articulation competing for hegemony, in which the business school is constituted as a 'commercial enterprise' within a 'knowledge economy'. In this 'myth' the business school is constituted as a driver of economic growth, not just through preparing the 'knowledge workers' of the future through programmes such as the MBA, but also through commercialising research. A distinctive feature of the third articulation is the discourse of enterprise (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992), in which higher education becomes a business. Scholarship, collegiality and consensus are antithetical to the demands of the knowledge economy, which calls for executive, dynamic and responsive leadership.

This third articulation is distinctive for the way in which the public role is constituted. In the articulations in which teaching and research are privileged, the public role is conceived narrowly and is largely confined to the 'out-of-hours' sphere. In the 'commercial enterprise' it becomes a core activity alongside teaching and research that can be legitimately controlled by university and business school management. This institutionalisation of the public role is reflected in government initiatives to create a permanent 'third stream' of funding, in moves by business school to take a greater interest in measuring, rewarding and ultimately controlling the public work performed by faculty and in closer relationships between policymakers and business

school faculty. Each will be considered in turn, drawing on the interview data to highlight key themes[5].

Institutionalisation of the Public Role

In UK higher education policy discourse, the public role is associated with the concept of the 'third stream', with its own funding stream via the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). Distinct from funding for teaching and research, 'third stream' funding aims to promote the transfer of knowledge from universities to business and the wider community through supporting work that promotes enterprise. Of the three funding streams (teaching, research and the 'third stream'), it is the latter which is receiving the largest percentage increases in government support. Government's narrow conceptualisation of the 'third stream' as commercialisation has been contested by the Russell Group of Universities[6] (Molas-Gallart et al, 2002), which argues 'there is much more to the relationship between universities and the rest of society than merely commercial activities' (p.iv).

Following its designation as a 'core' activity, there are now moves to develop a mechanism for allocating funding for 'third stream' activities to complement the RAE (which determines levels of core research funding) and student numbers (which determines core funding for teaching). The Russell Group report notes that universities are gathering information on 'third stream' activities undertaken by faculty in an attempt to better manage them and to improve their prospects for securing funding. The report puts forward a set of performance indicators for monitoring and measuring these activities, which could also be used by government to allocate funding.

The 'commercial enterprise' articulation is becoming hegemonic within official discourses that inform higher education policy in the UK. Although a measurement system for third stream activities is yet to be implemented, evidence from the field study suggests that business schools are thinking more strategically about this public role activity. Previously, this work has proceeded in a haphazard fashion, being co-ordinated at the individual rather than school level. Now however, business schools are under pressure to generate additional revenue and to demonstrate their relevance and have become more proactive about encouraging and managing the public role, although it still considered secondary to the teaching and research functions.

For instance, at one business school, 'enterprise' has become a fourth promotion criterion alongside teaching, research and administration. 'Enterprise' resonates with the commercial articulation of the business school, which hegemonically fixes faculty as 'entrepreneurs'. Another school had introduced a criterion of 'impact', as one respondent explains:

> We've changed the model at the school over the last few years. We certainly were narrowly measured. I'm on the sub-committee that assesses every member of staff each year and we used to just look at their publications and we'd score them on a one to five scale. It's only in the last year or two where we've said that's not good enough. In the past teaching had an influence, so if you're bad on research but a great teacher we would go easy on you. It would be a mitigating factor. But now we're looking for four things: publications, teaching, inputs (which is funding). There's also a measure now, less well defined, which we call impact. What impact is your research having and

that's really pushing the public end. We're saying 'it's not good enough just doing research, you need to have some impact'.

A theme, which emerged from the interviews, was the extent to which schools are becoming conscious of their public profile. It is now common for business schools to employ public relations consultants, who send out press releases, respond to media enquiries and refer journalists on to academics with expertise in a relevant area. One respondent described how his school had become more proactive in managing the relationship that faculty have with the media:

> The school has its own marketing and communications strategy and we employ professionals to help implement that. And we draw upon academics to provide the source materials, so to speak, for that. So, it's not left to individuals off their own bat to improve the School's media presence, we have a strategy to do that. We then draw upon academics for the material that we need.

Media publicity becomes another one of the outputs that is measured. A respondent noted that at his school, the press office records the number of press mentions.

> The more publicity the better. You get ticks in boxes for being mentioned and we actually count the number of times the school is mentioned in the *Financial Times* and we compare that with all the other schools.

In the articulations of the business school as a 'vocational/professional school' and as an 'academic department', the public role is generally considered part of the employee's 'private life', largely existing outside the institution's sphere of control.

In the 'commercial enterprise' articulation, public work takes on new meaning and its institutionalisation as a 'third stream' activity alters these dynamics.

Threats to Critical Engagement

Internal

Consistent with the pessimistic tone of the literature on the future of academic freedom in an increasingly commercialised university, respondents provided evidence of threats to their ability to speak out on issues of the day. This section considers threats emerging both from within the institution, and from external sources.

With schools becoming more proactive in managing their 'brand', faculty whose public work is not consistent with the brand run the risk of censure by school management. Business schools are particularly sensitive when faculty are critical of their institution in public. One respondent, who is part of the management of one school, argues that in these instances business schools are justified in seeking to control their faculty's public work, because of the potential damage to the school's reputation.

> The last thing you ever want is anybody standing on a public platform saying 'I think this school is crap'. You don't mind if it's justified, sensible, modest criticism because we all have to be self-critical, but we've had people in this place who in public forums have stood up and criticised in a very adverse way what we do. Now we know the principle of the university is academic freedom, but you cannot have that. We're a business as well.

Overall, while a few anecdotes of censorship did emerge, there was no evidence of widespread censorship in the six business schools visited. However, a more subtle and perhaps more significant finding is the self-censorship that faculty engage in when performing their public role. In an environment where the trend towards fixed-term contracts has undermined job security, there is awareness amongst some faculty that critical public work has the potential to damage their career prospects, if such work is likely to be considered inappropriate for a business school that increasingly seeks to foster partnerships with industry and government. In this environment, faculty are more likely to consider the potential reaction from university and school management before speaking out. One respondent described it as an 'implied sanction'.

> There was more job security in the past for academics, it meant they could be like a bishop, and they could be guaranteed to have the freedom of speech to say what they like...some people have got tenure I suppose, but most institutions can put faculty under some pressure, if you like, to inhibit their careers or whatever if their views don't seem appropriate... There's sort of an implied sanction to people now that there once wasn't.

External

As 'knowledge' is perceived to be more critical to the economy, greater value is placed on academic work that has some realisable commercial value and faculty are urged to become more 'customer facing' to attract funding from external sources. The danger is that business schools, by entering into 'partnership' with industry and government sponsors, lose their independence and their capacity for critique if faculty are silent on controversial issues because of a fear that speaking out might damage the

chances of securing external funding. The head of one school acknowledged there were potential conflicts of interest involved with external funding:

> I wouldn't say we're in the business of selling our soul. We are keen to get money but for worthwhile things and we're not interested solely in money. Then again, if the amounts were big enough we would be, if one is honest about it.

It is not just money from industry that carries potential conflicts of interest. There has been an explosion of government-sponsored contract research under recent Labour governments because of their commitment to 'evidence based policy', as this respondent explains:

> Prior to 1997 there was very little money for the type of work that I do. The Labour government's concern with evidence-based policy-making has been a bonanza, for us in particular here and I think for the UK academic community in general.

In externally sponsored policy work, it is expected that faculty will not have complete freedom over the research topic. However, a more contentious issue is what constitutes appropriate intervention by the sponsor concerning how the research should be conducted. In one incident, pressure had been applied on a team of researchers by the government department sponsoring the study to change the sample in order that the results would cast government's policy in a more favourable light. A junior member of faculty involved was disappointed that a senior colleague had not taken a firmer stand.

It's the junior staff who say 'we shouldn't be doing this' and it's the professors who are least reluctant because the head of our unit, he is entirely funded by the project. Will he go in and say 'I'm not happy' when it's his salary at stake?

Opportunities in the New Environment

While these threats to academic freedom are worrying, the outlook for academic freedom and the prospects for critical and engaged public work are not uniformly negative. In the 'academic department' articulation, the public role is largely regarded as an 'out-of-hours' activity and therefore few institutional rewards accrue to faculty who develop a significant public role. In the 'commercial enterprise' articulation, management seeks not only to measure and manage this activity, but also to reward it, because of the value it creates in terms of profile for the school and the potential to attract external sponsors. While practices such as the RAE have encouraged faculty to neglect their public role, there is now the possibility that this competing articulation might stimulate critical public work by offering faculty the chance to develop their careers as 'experts' who communicate with a wider audience, rather than 'scholars' who prioritise communication with other 'academics'.

One respondent chooses not to write articles for publication in academic journals, preferring instead to write for a non-specialist audience. She is the author of a best-selling book, which is highly critical of political and corporate elites, appears regularly in the mainstream press and speaks frequently to activists, trade unions, government bodies and business executives. She does not identify with the subject position of 'scholar' associated with the 'academic department' articulation, seeing

her self as an 'activist' who has been able to develop a career within a business school on the basis of her critical public work. Prestigious institutions value her work because it gives them publicity and provides a clear demonstration of their distinctive quality as locales of academic freedom and uninhibited research.

> I think the academic institution just wants to see their name in the papers. They want all the press quotes they're getting, they want the fact that the Department and the University is flagged within the article that I wrote. And it's within the tradition of academia to have dissent and dissenters...There have been times when I have thought 'gosh, what if they...how is the business school going to feel about this?' But I've really only had support from the top, so I think they can afford to have a few Chomskys and a few dissidents and it does show they are a more well-rounded institution.

She acknowledges that turning her back on a 'traditional' academic career was a risky decision. Of interest is the way she constructs her identity by reference to the discourse of enterprise.

> I trade off the security, which is hard, because I'm not going with the traditional academic route...Traditional academia, once you've got your tenured position, you're there. You never really need to worry how you're going to earn money. It's much more entrepreneurial what I'm doing.

The position of the 'entrepreneurial critic' is not privileged in official discourses that represent the commercial enterprise articulation. However, the experience of this respondent suggests that it can be accommodated. Admittedly, her situation is unusual, since few respondents are able to resist the pressures for publication within

research-led business schools. However, my intention is not to suggest this subject position is widely held, but that it can be accommodated within an articulation of the business school that is generally regarded as marginalising a critical and engaged role for faculty.

The subject position of 'campaigner' can also be accommodated within the 'commercial enterprise' articulation because it demonstrates the relevance of the business school. One respondent identifies with the subject position 'expert' but acknowledges her research has a political agenda and is comfortable with adopting an advocacy role in her public work. In comparing her research with a US-based organisation that performs similar work, she said:

> They are highly critical of researchers who, they say, sort of take advocacy roles. And I understand. In America what they've said is that they are seen as the key experts of data and statistics and research on corporate women in America and it's very important not to go further and adopt advocacy roles, because companies wouldn't use them, because they feel they would be biased. And I've told them that we take a completely different view. I mean we are campaigners for change as well.

The key insight is that the institutionalisation of the public role makes available new subject positions for faculty to occupy. In official reports that represent this articulation, such as the Lambert Review (2003), 'relevance' means engaging in partnership with firms and government agencies to exploit knowledge and stimulate economic growth. However, evidence from the field suggests it is possible to transform this hegemonic meaning of relevance to incorporate a critical and engaged role for faculty.

Conclusion: Re-constituting Relevance

In the 'commercial enterprise' articulation of the business school, which has begun to dominate official policy discourses on higher education, there are both threats to, and opportunities for, critical engagement with external audiences. The threats come from attempts by business school management to measure and control public work, in order to attract funding from 'third stream' activities, and from an increased sensitivity regarding the public profile of the school, which can lead to censorship of controversial faculty and self-censorship by faculty concerned about potential repercussions. There is also the potential for greater interference from external sponsors.

As the case of LSE's engagement with the identity card issue shows, individual faculty and their institutions can come under high levels of scrutiny and public pressure when they make forays into sensitive political debates. It would be naïve to assume that these activities don't carry considerable risks, both for individuals and their institutions. In the LSE case, following the publication of both reports, the government singled out for attack Simon Davies, a visiting fellow at LSE who is also a long-time campaigner for civil liberties and privacy issues. The Prime Minister used Davies' background as a way of questioning the objectivity of the LSE reports and Davies claimed that as a result of the criticism he had lost valuable consultancy work and also suffered emotionally from the personal attacks (Hackett, 2006). Despite the difficulties, he takes satisfaction from the way in which the report has furthered debate on the identity card issue and affirmed academic freedom and the role of the university as critic and conscience of society.

This is exactly the kind of policy-relevant work that public institutions should be doing. When the contract between the academic staff and the university holds good – with academics publishing objective, evidence-based research and the institution backing its staff – the ideal of academic freedom becomes a reality. (*The Guardian*, July 5, 2005).

While not wanting to generalise from either the LSE case or the empirical study to all business schools, there do appear to be some opportunities for the critical and engaged position within increasingly commercially-aware institutions. This finding was unexpected and stands in contrast to the pessimism of the literature on the commodification of higher education regarding the possibilities for critical public work. This does not mean we should ignore the threats to academic freedom, which are significant. Clearly, many business schools will not be comfortable with faculty taking public stances on controversial issues or will necessarily be proactive in rewarding faculty who are critical of the status quo. It should also be noted that certain issues, such as the diversity agenda, are likely to be more acceptable than others, such as criticism of one's own institution in public.

Nevertheless, the possibilities for critical engagement with external constituencies adds a new dimension to discussions about the 'relevance' of business schools, which have become polarised around nodal points of 'critical' and 'engaged', with the implication that business schools can be engaged, or critical, but not both. Business schools must demonstrate their 'relevance' in order to secure their futures, but 'relevance' does not have to mean the pursuit of a narrow commercialisation agenda where the business school becomes the 'servant' of industry, propagating a strictly

managerialist view of the world. In the current discursive terrain, 'relevance' does require having some form of engagement with audiences outside the academy. This engagement can be critical of management practice, but it must engage with practice through some form of public work.

The success of critical management scholars in gaining a foothold in UK business schools demonstrates there is a legitimate role for scholarship that asks difficult questions about organisation and management. As Grey and Willmott (2002) acknowledge, the next challenge for critical management educators is to be more proactive in engaging that critique with audiences outside the university, such as policymakers, NGOs, think tanks, unions and political parties. There is also the popular media and the Internet, which offer a range of opportunities for faculty to reach a wider public.

This study was limited to the UK context and would be usefully supplemented by an investigation of other jurisdictions, in particular the US. There might be similarities in the issues that constrain and facilitate the public role, especially concerning the pressures associated with professionalisation and commodification. There might also be differences, since US business schools have developed within an environment of philanthropy that has never existed in the UK. It has also been suggested that US universities are more likely to celebrate their 'intellectuals' and to encourage and reward them for engaging in public work (Furedi, 2001).

Within the UK context, there are more avenues to explore than has been possible in this study. The focus was research-led business schools, but perhaps the issues are

different for schools that are teaching-led. The RAE was cited as a significant deterrent on public work by respondents, however, in teaching-led institutions, which do not prioritise performance on the RAE, its restraining significance should be less. Another avenue would be to interview faculty who do not have a significant public role, to investigate if, and how, their motivations and attitudes towards the public role differ from those who were the focus of this study.

The sceptic might justifiably point out that for someone interested in engagement with groups outside the academy, making this argument in an academic journal is an unusual step. I readily admit that I am not immune to the pressures of research assessment and as I settle into my first academic post, I can now better appreciate the difficulties of developing a critical and engaged public role. The idealism that motivated the research has been tempered somewhat, but the belief in the value of the role has not been diminished.

Notes

---

[1] The RAE provides ratings of research quality and is used to inform funding decisions.

[2] This 'sampling' of business schools is not 'scientific', however, it is not intended to be. A range of business schools were included to enrich the data, but I am do not claim that this adds to the 'validity' or 'generalisability' of the 'findings'.

[3] Space constraints prevent a fuller overview of the use of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, but Willmott (2005) provides a useful discussion of the relevance of their work to organisation studies.

[4] This is not to say it remains uncontested. Some respondents preferred to see themselves as 'teachers' rather than 'academics'.

[5] The use of quotes is intended to illuminate key themes to emerge from the interviews and is necessarily selective, given space constraints.

[6] The Russell Group is an association of 19 major research-led UK universities.

References

Brunner, K-M., J. Hofbauer., Prabitz, G (2000) "Intellectual Discourse in the Academy and Society: Interpretation, Legitimation and the Rise of Management Talk." In Brown, R and Schubert, Y. (eds.): *Knowledge and Power in Higher Education: A reader*, pp. 70-87. New York: Teachers College Press.

Davies, H. (2006) 'LSE Report on ID Cards Cost', *The Times*, 2 July, 2006. Available at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,59-1677135,00.html. Accessed 20 February, 2006.

Du Gay, P. and Salaman, G. (1992) 'The Cult[ure] of the Customer', *Journal of Management Studies* 29(5): 615-633.

Furedi, F. (2001) An Intellectual Vacuum. *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*. 5 October 2001.

Ghoshal, S. (2005) 'Bad Management Theories Are Destroying Good Management Practices', *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4(1): 75-91.

Gibbons, M., Limoges, L., Nowotny, H., Schwartman, S., Scott, P. and Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge. The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.

Grey, C. (2001) 'Re-imagining Relevance: A Response to Starkey and Madan', *British Journal of Management* 12(Special Issue): 27-32.

Grey, C. and Willmott, H. (2002) 'Contexts of CMS', *Organization* 9(3): 411-418.

Hackett, G (2006) 'I'm the New Kelly, says ID Card Critic', *The Sunday Times*, 12 February, 2006. Available at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2036535,00.html. Accessed 20 February, 2006.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Jacoby, R. (1987) *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: Basic Books.

Lambert, R. (2003) *Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration*. London: HM Treasury.

London School of Economics and Political Science. (2005) *The Identity Project: An Assessment of the UK Identity Cards Bill and its Implications*. Available at http://is2.lse.ac.uk/IDcard/identityreport.pdf. Accessed 20 February, 2006.

London School of Economics and Political Science. (2006) *The Identity Project: Research Status Report*. Available at http://is2.lse.ac.uk/idcard/statusreport.pdf. Accessed 20 February, 2006.

Mintzberg, H. (2004) *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development.* London: FT Prentice Hall.

Mir, R. and Mir, A. (2002) 'The Organizational Imagination: From Paradigm Wars to Praxis', *Organizational Research Methods* 5(1): 105-125.

Molas-Gallart, J., Salter, A., Patel, P., Scott, A. and Duran, X. (2002) *Measuring Third Stream Activities: Final Report to the Russell Group of Universities.* Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Sussex.

Parker, M. (2002) *Against Management.* Cambridge: Polity.

Pfeffer, J. and Fong, C. (2002) 'The End of Business Schools? Less Success Than Meets the Eye', *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 1(1): 78-95.

Starkey, K. and Madan, P. (2001) 'Bridging the Relevance Gap: Aligning Stakeholders in the Future of Management Research', *British Journal of Management* 12(Special Issue): S3-S26.

Tasker, M. and Packham, D (1990) 'Freedom, Funding and the Future of the Universities', *Studies in Higher Education* 15(2): 181-195.

The Guardian. (2006) 'Simon Davies: In a Spin', 5 July, 2005. Available at

http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/profile/story/0,11109,1521127,00.html.

Accessed 20 February, 2006.

Weick, K. (2001) 'Gapping the Relevance Bridge: Fashions Meet Fundamentals in

Management Research', *British Journal of Management* 12(Special Issue): S71-S75.

Willmott, H. (2005) 'Theorizing Contemporary Control: Some Post-structuralist

Responses to Some Critical Realist Questions. *Organization* 12(5): 747-780.