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Closing the Credibility Gap: Leadership, Governance and the Realities of EDI and Wellbeing in UK Business Schools

Introduction

Business schools in the UK are at breaking point. On paper, they champion wellbeing and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) through strategies, charters, and leadership speeches. In practice, staff report something quite different: More than a third of academics report unmanageable workloads and nearly 70% cite rising work intensity (Kinman, 2023). Correspondingly, up to 73% of HE staff experience moderate to very high psychological distress and almost 30% report burnout (Rahman et al., 2024). This divergence between rhetoric and lived experience reflects a 'credibility gap' long associated with symbolic or performative strategies, where commitments to wellbeing and inclusion are made highly visible but underlying inequalities remain unresolved (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Morrish, 2020).[1]

The pressures within business schools are particularly acute. Frequently characterised as the 'cash cows' of UK higher education, they generate disproportionate income from international student enrolments and executive education, while simultaneously being judged against demanding research, accreditation, and reputational benchmarks (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Parker & Guthrie, 2010; Chartered ABS, 2017).[2] This financial centrality often leads to the celebration of revenue. However, underinvestment in staff resources intensifies the trade-offs that leaders face as financial and reputational imperatives crowd out initiatives designed to support inclusion and wellbeing.[3]

Nor are EDI commitments exempt from this paradox. Despite more than a decade of institutional policies and charter-based awards, women academics continue to earn on average 15% less than men, while minority ethnic staff remain 25% less likely to be promoted into senior positions (Advance HE, 2023). While important, sector-wide critiques argue that initiatives such as Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters can mask inequalities in workload allocation, recognition, and psychological safety (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). The shift to hybrid working has added further complexity: while providing valued flexibility, it has disrupted the informal collegial ties—corridor conversations, mentoring, and peer support—that historically buffered stress and helped sustain inclusive cultures (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Waizenegger et al., 2020).

This chapter, therefore, examines how senior leaders in UK business schools perceive and navigate the credibility gap between institutional commitments to EDI and the lived realities of staff wellbeing. Drawing on interviews with twenty leaders, it analyses how leadership practices and governance mechanisms shape

1 The term 'credibility gap', originally popularised during the Vietnam War to describe the gulf between official assurances and ground realities, provides a helpful lens for understanding the rhetoric–reality disconnects evident in contemporary organisations, including those highlighted in higher education (Bailey, 2025) and global workplace data (Gallup, 2023).
2 See HESA (2023), Migration Observatory (2023), and Ogden & Waltmann, (2024) for evidence on the scale of business and management enrolments, international student dependency, and tuition fee income contributions.
3 Since the completion of this current study, the sector context has shifted. Many UK business schools are now experiencing declining international student enrolments, alongside university-wide cost-reduction measures, staff redundancies and financial pressure (The Guardian, 2025; The PIE News, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2025). These are likely to exacerbate the workload, wellbeing, and EDI pressures identified in this chapter, further constraining leaders' capacity to sustain inclusive and psychologically safe cultures.

workload allocation, collegiality, and psychological safety. The argument advanced is that closing this gap requires more than symbolic gestures: it demands embedding fairness and wellbeing into the structures of workload systems, promotion criteria, and accountability frameworks. Specifically, it asks: *How do senior leaders in UK business schools perceive and navigate the credibility gap around EDI and staff wellbeing?*

To address this question, the chapter integrates organisational justice theory (Colquitt, 2001) and psychosocial safety climate (Dollard & Bakker, 2010) to develop an insider perspective on how rankings, resource pressures, and hybrid work reshape strategies of fairness, collegiality, and psychological safety. These frameworks explain how leadership priorities are translated into lived experience and highlight actionable levers for change: transparent workload allocation, recognition of hidden labour, role-modelling of healthy boundaries, and intentional efforts to rebuild collegiality.

The stakes are high. Business schools that fail to address this credibility gap risk eroding trust, wellbeing, and legitimacy. Those that embed fairness and inclusion not as reputational add-ons but as the foundations of governance will be better placed to sustain both staff and performance in a sector under relentless scrutiny.

Theoretical and Contextual Foundations: Framing EDI and Wellbeing in the Marketised Business School

Understanding how equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and staff wellbeing are experienced in UK business schools requires attention to both theory and context. Two frameworks are particularly useful. Organisational justice, which considers fairness in outcomes, processes, and interpersonal treatment (Colquitt, 2001), highlights how workload allocation, promotions, and recognition shape trust in institutional commitments. When inequalities persist (for example, women and minority ethnic staff shouldering disproportionate teaching and pastoral loads without recognition), the result is entrenched inequality (Acker, 2006; Bhopal, 2018). However, justice research is often critiqued for privileging perceptions over structures, leaving less space to interrogate inequalities embedded in systems of reward and accountability.

Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) captures how leaders signal commitment to psychological health and inclusion through policies and governance (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Dollard, 2019). Strong PSC integrates wellbeing into workload planning and leadership behaviour, while weak PSC risks reducing wellbeing to symbolic gestures (Kinman & Wray, 2021). PSC too can be co-opted into managerial toolkits, reducing "care" to compliance metrics rather than cultural change.

These frameworks must be located within the political economy of UK business schools. Since the expansion of tuition fees and rise of league tables, schools have been positioned as income-generating hubs, delivering disproportionate shares of fee income and executive education revenues while judged on research, accreditation, and international recruitment (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021). Leaders often describe this so-called cash-cow effect as being celebrated for revenue but under-resourced in staffing.

The consequences are visible in sector-wide data. In 2023, over half of UK academics reported unmanageable workloads, and nearly two-thirds reported stress or burnout (Kinman, 2023). Advance HE data show a persistent 15% gender pay gap, with minority ethnic staff 25% less likely to reach senior roles (Advance HE, 2023). Leaders in this study suggested these inequalities are amplified in business schools, where heavy teaching demands and international student dependency exacerbate disparities in recognition and progression. Such patterns endure even where institutions hold Athena SWAN or Race Equality Charter recognition, reinforcing critiques of EDI as performative compliance rather than structural change (Ahmed, 2012; Atewologun, 2020).

Hybrid working, accelerated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Hanna et al., 2023), adds further complexity. While offering flexibility, it has disrupted corridor conversations, mentoring, and rituals that once buffered stress and sustained belonging (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Waizenegger et al., 2020). Collegiality, once a cornerstone of academic life, is now fragile amid competition, volatile student flows, and proliferating compliance tasks.

These reflections underline that workload allocation is not merely a cultural perception issue but a governance question: the rules, metrics, and consultation processes in workload models determine whether fairness is enacted or undermined. Organisational justice and PSC together illuminate how strategy is—or is not—translated into lived reality. They stress that fairness in workload and promotion, visible prioritisation of psychological health, and intentional protection of collegiality are not 'extras' but preconditions for sustainable cultures. Nevertheless, without structural embedding, even well-designed strategies risk being experienced as rhetoric rather than reality.

Workload and Fairness

Workload allocation emerged as the most persistent concern raised by senior leaders, shaping both wellbeing and perceptions of EDI. From an organisational justice perspective, it is not only about how much individuals are asked to do, but whether responsibilities are distributed fairly, decisions are transparent and contributions are valued in promotion and recognition (Colquitt, 2001). However, in business schools, allocation models are rarely neutral. They are political artefacts that privilege research over teaching, administration, and pastoral care (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021), creating tensions between rhetoric about inclusive, student-focused cultures and systems that reward narrow forms of output. Leaders also stressed that these dynamics vary depending on whether models are locally designed or imposed through university-wide systems: the former allow some discretion to adjust weightings, and recognise hidden labour, while the latter leave business schools implementing frameworks perceived as externally imposed and less responsive to local realities.

Leaders recognised this gap between appearance and reality. One dean observed: *"The workload model looks fair on paper, but in practice, some people are doing enormous amounts of invisible labour, supporting students, picking up the slack when others step back. That is not captured in any spreadsheet" (Dean_2). The concern was also procedural. An associate dean explained: "If staff feel workload is imposed without consultation, they disengage. Even if the outcome is heavy, the process matters, people want to know decisions are consistent and not arbitrary" (AD_3). Others stressed the effort–reward imbalance. As one dean put it: "We [Business Schools] say we care about teaching and student support, but the incentives tell a different story"* (Dean_4).

These reflections echo sector-wide findings. The 2023 UCU workload survey reported that over half of academics considered their workload unmanageable, with average working hours exceeding 50 per week. Kinman (2019) demonstrates how effort–reward imbalance exacerbates stress and erodes wellbeing. As one head of school remarked: *"Wellbeing workshops are nice, but if people are working sixty-hour weeks, they don't have time to attend them. The real wellbeing policy is workload"* (HoS_6).

Workload allocation is therefore not a matter of perception but of governance: the rules, metrics, and consultation processes in workload models determine whether fairness is enacted or undermined. Transparent processes, recognition of hidden labour, and redistributive adjustments are more consequential than formal wellbeing programmes. Unless workload is addressed, initiatives risk becoming rhetorical add-ons; when it is, schools can reduce strain, rebuild collegiality, and restore leadership credibility.

Collegiality and Hybrid Work

Collegiality has traditionally been a hallmark of academic life. Shared offices, corridor encounters, and informal mentoring rituals once buffered the intensity of teaching and research. Leaders now see these ties under strain. Hybrid working, rising administrative demands, and the competitive pressures of rankings and accreditation have altered the rhythms of academic life, making collegiality less spontaneous and more fragile.

Sector-level data confirm this shift. Advance HE (2023) reported fewer opportunities for informal peer support than before the pandemic, a decline linked to rising psychological distress. HEPI's 2024 wellbeing report similarly found that business school staff, particularly early-career researchers, were among the most likely to experience professional isolation. Broader studies echo this, showing how hybrid arrangements intensified workloads while eroding bonds (Watermeyer et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2023). While hybrid work provides valued flexibility, especially for staff with caring responsibilities, it disrupts what Waizenegger et al. (2020) call the 'microrituals' of collegiality: corridor chats, peer learning, and spontaneous collaboration.

Leaders described this paradox starkly. *"People like the flexibility, but it comes at the cost of community. It is harder to build trust or spot when someone is struggling if you only see them on Teams"* (Dean_3). Another head of school noted: *"People show up for the meeting, deliver their piece, and log off. The corridor chat is gone, and with it, the sense of being in something together"* (HoS_4).

Several leaders stressed that collegiality was never universally inclusive. As one put it: *"We talk about collegiality as if it were always positive, but it also worked to the advantage of certain groups, the ones who could stay late, who were in the inner circle"* (AD_5). Hybrid working has also created new risks of invisibility. As a dean admitted: *"We say hybrid is about flexibility, but the reality is that those who are in the office get noticed, and those who aren't can slip from view. That creates another layer of inequity"* (Dean_12).

The erosion of collegiality carries major implications for wellbeing, fairness, and EDI. Without intentional efforts to rebuild community, staff face isolation, weakened psychological safety, and reluctance to voice concerns. Leaders acknowledged the need to move from assumption to design: *"We can't just leave it to chance anymore. We have to be intentional about collegiality, whether through structured mentoring, community events, or creating space for informal connection"* (HoS_7).

The lesson is clear: collegiality can no longer be left as an incidental by-product of co-presence. In hybrid, marketised environments, it must be deliberately sustained through governance mechanisms such as mentoring, cross-team collaboration, and recognition of collegial labour in promotion criteria. Business schools that invest in these mechanisms will be better able to protect both wellbeing and performance.

Psychological Safety and Leadership

If fairness and collegiality form the structural and cultural pillars of wellbeing, psychological safety is the everyday climate that determines whether staff feel able to speak openly, take risks, or admit when they are struggling. Research shows it is a precondition for learning, innovation, and inclusion (Edmondson, 1999), while psychosocial safety climate emphasises how leadership signals commitment to mental health through policies and practices (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Dollard, 2019). Together, they underline that wellbeing depends less on individual resilience than institutional design.

However, evidence suggests psychological safety is fragile in higher education. Surveys show academics reluctant to raise workload or management concerns for fear of repercussions (Morrish, 2020; Kinman, 2023). A national wellbeing survey found that over three-quarters of staff felt that psychological health was not valued as highly as productivity (Education Support, 2022). A 2024 Times Higher Education survey found that 68% of university-staff respondents globally reported self-censoring, with the rate rising to 74% among women (Times Higher Education, 2024). At the University of Cambridge, just 52% of staff said their department supported mental health and wellbeing, and only 27% were satisfied with how bullying and harassment were handled (The Guardian, 2025). Leaders acknowledged this contradiction: rhetoric about care is undermined by performance pressures and cultures of silence.

The tension was voiced clearly. As one associate dean admitted: "We say our doors are open, but people are scared to come in. They don't want to be seen as not coping, because that can affect how they're judged for promotion" (AD_4). A dean echoed this: "*We talk a lot about care and wellbeing, but in the same breath we demand more outputs, more impact, more student numbers. That contradiction is not lost on staff*" (Dean_6). Another added: "*If you are already on the margins, the cost of challenging workload or unfairness is higher. You can be labelled difficult or not a team player*" (Dean_7).

Some leaders described attempts to change norms. One associate dean recalled: *"When I said openly that I had struggled with workload myself, people came to me afterwards and said it gave them permission to admit the same. That's what leadership can do"* (AD_2).

Psychological safety is therefore not a 'soft' cultural add-on but a governance issue that shapes trust, retention, and performance. Without it, EDI initiatives falter; with it, leaders can rebuild credibility. Unless governance mechanisms protect voice—through anonymous reporting, visible action, and safeguards against retaliation—psychological safety remains fragile regardless of leaders' approachability. Deans and heads must embed such protections, model openness, and safeguard those at the margins. Only then can rhetoric and reality begin to align.

Symbolic vs. Substantive Change in EDI

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have become highly visible in business school strategy. Most schools showcase Athena SWAN awards, Race Equality Charters, and glossy EDI statements tied to reputation, rankings,

and accreditation. However, leaders acknowledged that visibility does not always translate into lived change. This reflects what Ahmed (2012) terms the 'non-performativity' of diversity work: policies that signal inclusion while leaving entrenched inequalities intact, reinforcing critiques that such awards institutionalise compliance rather than structural transformation (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021).

Sector data confirm this gap. In 2023, women academics in UK higher education were paid on average 15% less than men, and minority ethnic staff were 25% less likely to be promoted to senior roles (Advance HE, 2023). These inequalities are persistent: the gender pay gap has remained largely unchanged since 2015, while ethnic promotion disparities endure despite more than a decade of charter-based initiatives. Business schools face particular challenges, as workload models often channel women and minority staff into teaching and pastoral care—vital but undervalued in promotion criteria (Bhopal, 2018). As one head of school explained: *"We've got the badges, but when you ask staff if they feel it in their workload or their promotion chances, the answer is no"* (HoS_8).

This 'credibility gap' undermines both EDI and wellbeing. Leaders admitted that symbolic achievements can coexist with cultures where staff feel overburdened or unsafe about speaking up. A dean reflected: *"EDI has become part of the brand. The risk is it turns into a tick-box exercise rather than a lever of fairness"* (Dean_2). Without accountability—such as monitoring promotion outcomes or redistributing workload—EDI policies risk deepening cynicism rather than building trust.

Examples of substantive change did emerge. Transparent workload models, mandatory equality impact assessments, and mentoring schemes for underrepresented groups were cited as interventions that *'made a difference'*. Leaders noted that such changes were most likely when senior commitment was explicit, when equity was built into existing governance processes rather than appended symbolically, and when staff were genuinely consulted. Under these conditions, interventions were experienced as credible and sustained rather than symbolic. As one dean described: *"When we built equity into the workload model, not just published a statement, people noticed. They said, this is fairer, this makes a difference"* (Dean_4).

For practitioners, the lesson is clear: symbolic commitments may satisfy external audiences, but only substantive measures that redistribute opportunity, make workload transparent, and hold leaders accountable can close the gap. Another leader observed: *"It's not enough to say we value diversity. We have to show it in how we allocate work, whom we promote, and what behaviours we reward"* (HoS_6). Therefore, Governance is the decisive site of change: commitments become a reality only when workload allocation, promotion criteria, and accountability systems embody fairness.

Conclusion: Closing the Credibility Gap

This chapter asked: *How do senior leaders in UK business schools perceive and navigate the credibility gap around EDI and staff wellbeing?* The findings show that leaders consistently highlighted workload as the decisive site where wellbeing is won or lost, collegiality as increasingly fragile, psychological safety as uneven, and EDI achievements as vulnerable to symbolism (Kinman, 2023). Nevertheless, they also recognise that these gaps are not inevitable but are shaped by governance choices about how work is allocated, how contributions are valued, and how voice is protected (Ahmed, 2012; Morrish, 2020).

Looking ahead, the challenge is not just to close immediate gaps but to reshape the institutional conditions that reproduce them. For workload, this means models that acknowledge hidden labour and ensure transparency.

For collegiality, governance mechanisms such as mentoring, recognition of collegial labour, and safeguards against hybrid inequalities are needed to rebuild trust (Waizenegger et al., 2020). For psychological safety, protections for voice must be embedded in reporting and accountability systems, alongside leadership cultures that model openness (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). And for EDI, the task is to move from symbolic compliance to substantive fairness by integrating equality criteria into promotions, workload, and recognition (Advance HE, 2023; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021).

These are not prescriptive solutions, but directions grounded in leaders' reflections. They point to a future where business schools measure legitimacy not by rankings or revenues but by the equality and sustainability of their cultures (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021). Without structural embedding, wellbeing and EDI risk remaining performative. However, by treating workload, collegiality, psychological safety, and equality as governance levers, schools can begin to align promises with lived realities and rebuild credibility incrementally, even if broader market and policy pressures continue to constrain what leaders can achieve.

As business schools face tightening finances and an increasingly contested EDI landscape, these challenges become sharper. Reductions in headcount without reductions in workload risk deepening inequalities, while national scepticism toward EDI threatens to narrow the space for structural action. Navigating this context will require business schools to prioritise fairness through governance: protecting transparent workload allocation, safeguarding voice, and maintaining equality commitments even under resource pressure. While schools cannot fully control sectoral or political headwinds, they can strengthen internal infrastructures of care and accountability so that constrained resources do not become an alibi for abandoning inclusion.

Although this study is grounded in the UK's distinctive higher-education landscape, shaped by marketisation, league-table pressures, and charter-based EDI frameworks, the dynamics identified here resonate more widely. While specific mechanisms such as workload models or accreditation pressures vary across national systems, similar tensions between performance demands and inclusive cultures are evident in marketised or accountability-driven contexts globally. These findings, therefore, offer a lens through which other regions might examine the interplay between governance, wellbeing, and EDI under resource constraints. Future comparative work could explore how different funding models, regulatory systems, or cultural norms mediate these tensions beyond the UK.

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