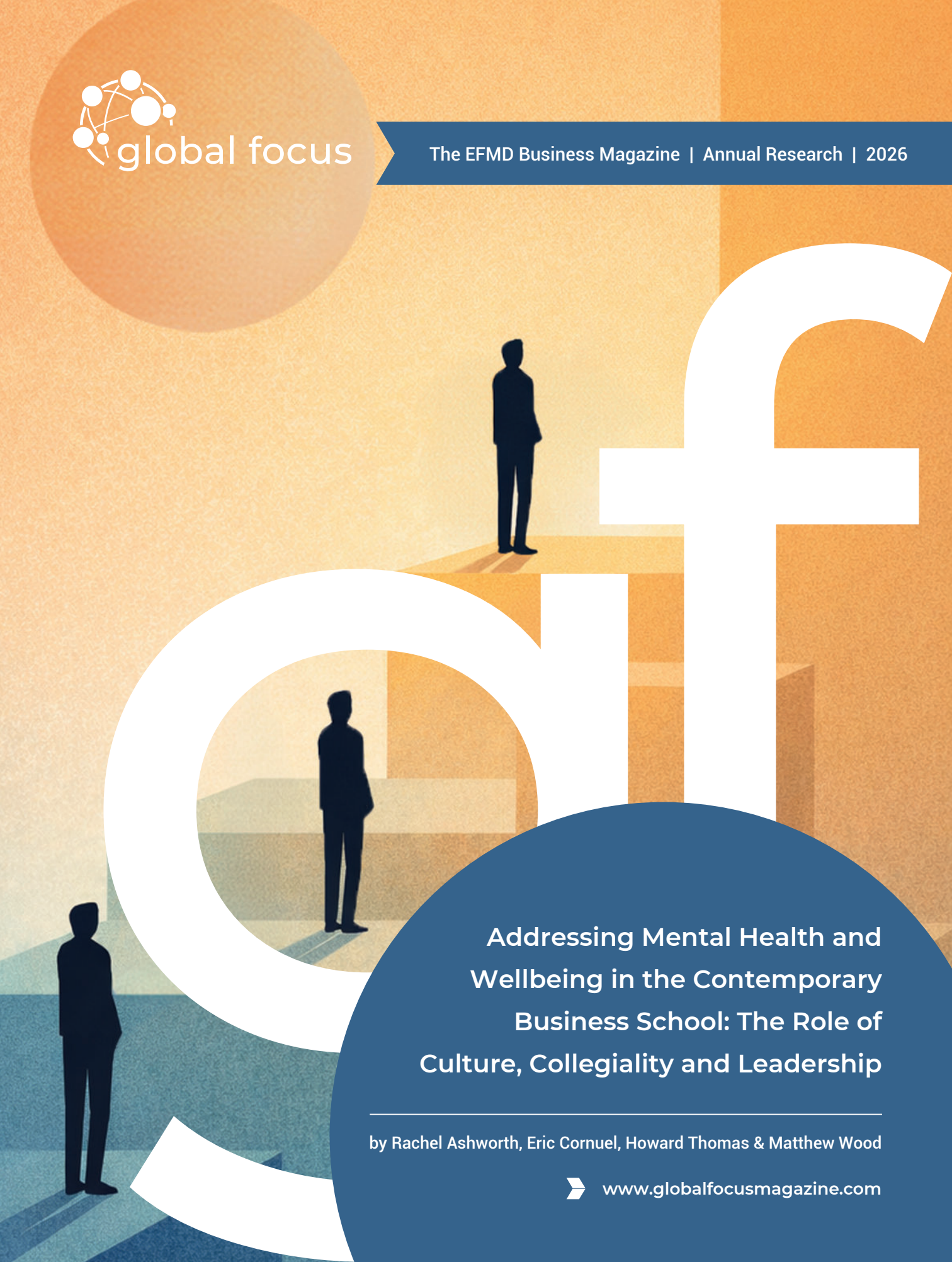
global focus

The EFMD Business Magazine | Annual Research | 2026



Addressing Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Contemporary Business School: The Role of Culture, Collegiality and Leadership

by Rachel Ashworth, Eric Cornuel, Howard Thomas & Matthew Wood

www.globalfocusmagazine.com

Rachel Ashworth is a Professor at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, where she served six years as dean and focused on embedding the School's Public Value strategy. She researches organisational and institutional change, scrutiny and accountability and equality, diversity and inclusion in public service organisations, and has published in leading journals including the British Journal of Management, Journal of Public Administration, Research and Theory, Journal of Management Studies, Public Administration and Public Administration Review, and Public Management Review. Rachel is President-Elect of the International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management (IFSAM), a member of the Council of the Learned Society of Wales, and serves on the Chartered ABS Policy Committee.

Eric Cornuel has been President of EFMD Global since 2000. An alumnus of Sciences Po Paris and HEC Paris, he earned his PhD from Paris Dauphine University. His influence extends to co-founding and governing various international organisations, such as PRME, CEIBS, GRLI, HigherEd, and ITP. Eric holds fellowships at esteemed institutes and has been honoured with Doctorate Honoris Causas from Koźmiński University and ESCP Business School.

Howard Thomas is an Emeritus Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education at Singapore Management University (SMU) and former dean at leading business schools, including SMU, Warwick Business School (UK) and the College of Business at UIUC (Illinois, USA). As a highly respected consultant, author and scholar he has been awarded fellowships by the Academy of Management (AOM, USA), the Strategic Management Society (SMS, USA), the British Academy of Management (BAM), the European Academy of Management (EURAM), the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS, UK), the Institute of Directors, (UK) and, most importantly, the Learned Society of Wales (LSW). He was also President of SMS while dean at Illinois. He has chaired leading professional educational organisations such as AACSB (USA), GMAC (USA), and CABS (UK). He has also received Lifetime Achievement Awards from BAM (UK) and the European Foundation of Management Education (EFMD), and a number of honorary doctoral degrees during his distinguished academic career. He is currently a senior advisor to the President and Managing Director of EFMD.

Matthew Wood is the editor of Global Focus, an international business magazine and the flagship publication of EFMD. Prior to his various roles at EFMD, he was a project manager with the UK-based charity Operation Raleigh (in Namibia) and he has also held management positions in advertising (with the Omnicom Group) and in the service industry.

Addressing Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Contemporary Business School: The Role of Culture, Collegiality and Leadership

Edited by Rachel Ashworth, Eric Cornuel, Howard Thomas and Matthew Wood

global focus
The EFMD Business Magazine
ANNUAL RESEARCH | 2026

Contents

Foreword: Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE: A Pioneer in the Field of Organisational Psychology and Health in Business Schools: Conversations of a Lifelong Journey | Cary Cooper, Howard Thomas & Michael J Thomas 6

Introduction: Editorial Overview to the Special Issue on Addressing Health and Wellbeing Issues in the Contemporary Business School | Howard Thomas, Eric Cornuel & Rachel Ashworth 16

1 Mental Health and Wellbeing: Conceptual Frameworks and Initiatives ◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇ 26

The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work: Reclaiming Wellbeing in Business Education | Jochen Reb & Eva Katharina Peters 28

A Crisis of Wellbeing Among Business Schools' Early Career Scholars: Reasons, Repercussions and Remedies | Lisa Thomas & Véronique Ambrosini 36

The Business School Human Capital System: Fostering a Climate of Wellbeing and Organisational Health | Richard R Smith & Richard Safeer 44

Sustaining Collegial Relations and Staff Wellbeing: Collegiality and 'Local Leadership' in Contemporary Business Schools | Rick Delbridge 56

Managerial Pathologies: Barriers to Academic Culture, Collegiality and Leadership | Roy Suddaby ..64

Seeing Things as They Are: A Reflection on Wellbeing and Not-So-Wellbeing in Business Schools | Anand Narasimhan 72

**2 Implementation of Mental Health/Wellbeing Frameworks and Initiatives Case Studies of Community Impact: Organisation Structures and Design in Global Business Schools ◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Woxen Business School's "Oven Ready" Graduates: A Distinctive Approach with an Integrated Excellence, Collaborative Culture, Socioeconomic Impact Model for India | Raul V Rodriguez ... 104

The Changing Forms of Culture and Collegiality | Ian Fenwick & Dean Outerson 116

When Purpose Drives Culture ... and Wellbeing! The IPADE Experience in Mexico | Gabriela Alvarado & Juan Romero 122

Clarity and Contradiction in Care: Cultivating Wellness in Business Schools | Gina Grandy 132

3 University Level Frameworks and Structures: Public Policy Issues ◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇ 138

Targeting Impactful Cultural Shifts at the University Level – Insights About Building the People and Cultural Agenda at the University of Exeter and its Business School | Rajani Naidoo, Howard Thomas and Michael J Thomas 140

Shifting Research Paradigms: From 'Publish or Perish' to 'Purpose and People' | Lily Kong 150

Building Wellbeing Through Culture and Collegiality | Enase Okonedo 158

Closing the Credibility Gap: Leadership, Governance and the Realities of EDI and Wellbeing in UK Business Schools | Nelarine Cornelius, Chidozie Umeh and Anne Clare Gillon 164

4 Postscript: Success and Failure of Workplace Wellbeing Initiatives | Rachel Ashworth & Howard Thomas ◇◇ 174

Editors
Rachel Ashworth | Eric Cornuel | Howard Thomas | Matthew Wood

Design
Pili Pili Pigment | www.pilipilipigment.be

Photographs & Illustrations
EFMD unless otherwise stated

www.globalfocusmagazine.com | www.efmdglobal.org

©EFMD
Rue Gachard 88 Box 3 - 1050 Brussels, Belgium

You can read **Global Focus** in print, online and on the move, in English, Chinese or Spanish. Go to: globalfocusmagazine.com for these and an online library of past issues.

Foreword

Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE: A Pioneer in the Field of Organisational Psychology and Health in Business Schools: Conversations of a Lifelong Journey

by Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Howard Thomas & Michael J Thomas

Introduction

Both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently, national wellbeing surveys from UK government agencies indicated that around **60% of all sickness absences from the workplace were for stress, anxiety and depression.**

In response to these survey findings, **Cary Cooper, acknowledged expert in wellbeing and workplace cultures, created (in 2018)** and **chairs the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work.** This is an employers' organisation of over 55 employers (e.g., BP, Fujitsu Siemens, Microsoft, Shell, GSK, the UK Civil Service and the NHS). It is now the **driving force** that **anchors his strident advocacy** of the value of addressing **mental health and wellbeing at work**, and regarding workplace wellbeing and cultural change as a key strategic management issue.

Cary's Evolution and Personal Development

What follows in this conversational essay is an insight into what motivates him and what "makes Cary tick" in his continuing passion for **improving workplace experiences** and shaping strong, responsible and cohesive management teams.

Cary began our conversation by talking about his background and birth in the United States.

He pointed out that his father and mother were both Eastern European Jews.

"My father was a Ukrainian and left Ukraine just before World War I. At that time, Ukraine as a country did not exist – it was just an area of Russia. My mother was a Romanian whose family left Romania for North America after the Germans invaded the country during World War I.

My parents eventually settled (via Canada) in east Los Angeles – a destination for many East European Jews who were essentially from working-class backgrounds."

"I was born on April 28, 1940, as a first-generation American. Subsequently, the family moved to West LA (Hollywood). I went to junior high school there and eventually moved to Fairfax High School, which was a very interesting school environment with about 95% of the pupils of Jewish origin. It was a very well-known high school with such alumni as movie stars Demi Moore, Phil Spector, Mickey Rooney and many more."

Cary then commented on his high school experience, "I was quite good at maths, and have always been statistically oriented. However, I was also really interested in politics. I've always been reasonably political. A little bit left of centre - in British terms, a "Blairite Labour" type of guy. I did really well at school, and the teachers at Fairfax suggested that I should do a maths-oriented degree at UCLA, or one of the top universities in California. So I applied to UCLA, got in, and was scared to death because nobody in my family

had gone to university. My university life was going to be 'learning by doing', I had no advice or guidance about what university would be like."

"Following my lifelong interest, I started at UCLA as a political science undergraduate major. But, as you know, American universities have a four-year undergraduate degree. The first two years of which cover a variety of foundation subjects. Therefore, during my first year, I took the opportunity to be assessed at a psychometric assessment centre at UCLA, and their result was, 'You're great at maths, do a maths degree. Don't do the social sciences, you'll be dreadful at it.' I was really upset by this, and thought that they knew what they were doing!"

"I then thought that maybe I should major in economics because it used statistics and mathematics in solving economic problems and business-related issues. So I shifted to a managerial economics specialisation in the business school at UCLA. During my undergraduate degree I took a course in psychology and met Professor Fred Massarik (an Eastern-European Jew from Austria), an expert on human behaviour and sensitivity training working throughout Europe and the UK.

"Fred saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. He stressed that I had to go on in academia and do a PhD. I confess that I didn't have a clue what a PhD was! It was clear that Fred was acting as a mentor, but to no avail at that time. This was because following graduation I had to report for military service."

The Intervention of Military Service and the Cuban Missile Crisis

"I opted to join the US Navy Air Force reserves, but did not apply for the officer route because it would require signing up for five years. I was an ordinary seaman, but showed no aptitude for aviation maintenance."

"So, they decided to put me in naval air intelligence and sent me into a photographic intelligence training course near San Francisco. I learned a great deal about working with a range of diverse people, and how to cope with a crisis-- as the Cuban missile crisis occurred during my time—which was a troubling and scary time.

"After leaving my military obligation, I decided to start an MBA at UCLA in which you did a range of business and general management courses in your first year (covering topics such as economics, marketing, operations, statistics, accounting, finance and law. I then chose to specialise in the behavioural sciences (focusing on psychology, sociology, social anthropology) in my final year."

Fred Massarik was his inspiration and mentor during that period.

Cary described him as **"He was just, just stellar."**

"I am proud to say that I funded my MBA and a lot of my undergraduate courses, through part-time work because my parents could not afford the tuition fees. One of those jobs was working for a lawyer, an ex-brother-in-law of mine, to serve subpoenas to people on behalf of his law firm and several other firms. However, perhaps the most life-changing experience for me was a summer job as a social worker for the Bureau of Public Assistance (i.e. social services) of the City of LA."

"They gave me two jobs. One was in the Watts district in the predominantly Black area of South Central LA. I was the only white social worker in the department. The rest of the social workers were black or hispanic, because the community was overwhemingly ethnic and poor. I also had responsibility of the homeless in the centre of LA. My daily routine, balancing university work and life, was not the easiest. I'd go to UCLA classes

in the morning, seeing most of my clients in the afternoon and evening. I'd then make it work by doing my homework in the late evening at the UCLA library, which was open until very late. I'd then start the next day with exactly the same schedule."

Nevertheless, that experience and period of his life was the most profound thing that had ever happened to Cary. "To witness the deprivation. I saw people not coping and homeless people who had successful careers and then everything went south for them, often because of alcohol or drugs. I concluded that I couldn't be like my Jewish friends whose parents wanted their kids to have a traditional profession (e.g. lawyer, accountant, doctor). I decided that I wanted to do something related to behavioural science and Fred, my mentor who had taught me organisational psychology in my MBA studies, thought so too."

"While I had been contemplating doing a behavioural science-type PhD at Columbia University, Fred Massarik again influenced me significantly. 'You know what? I want you to go to Europe first, and you're going to go there!' It turned out that Fred had been collaborating for some time with leading academics into an approach of group dynamics (i.e. T-groups) at Leeds University and the Tavistock Institute in the UK. And it just so happened that the head of Leeds Management School was visiting UCLA in the summer (following Cary's graduation). Fred arranged for me to meet with him. He was an expert in T-Groups and group dynamics. He then invited me to visit Leeds for a year and work with his group. I thought to myself - I'll do that."

So, "the die had been cast." The first step on his academic career pathway had been determined, namely social and organisational psychology research under Peter Smith at Leeds and the mentorship of Massarik from afar, at UCLA.

An Academic in Leeds, Yorkshire in the UK

Cary's initial understanding was that he would be working at Leeds for one year.

However, during this period Leeds offered Cary a fully-funded research grant to study for a PhD. Cary accepted the offer and Peter Smith was appointed as his PhD research supervisor.

Cary's words, "I worked with Peter for 2 years in Leeds, and then moved to the University of Sussex with him (he had been appointed as a senior lecturer of social psychology at Sussex). Peter continued to supervise me at Sussex during my final PhD research year. Following my thesis examination, I was awarded a Leeds PhD, since I had spent more research time at Leeds than Sussex. Peter turned out to be a truly, truly wonderful friend of mine and another great mentor who still keeps in touch with me, to this day. Whilst at Sussex I met Maria Jahoda a world-class social psychologist, who had lectured at Columbia and was an Eastern European Jew as well. She valued my work and recommended me to Southampton University as they were trying to recruit "good young social psychologists."

"I was subsequently appointed as a lecturer in social psychology at the Department of Psychology at Southampton University. The only drawback was that their psychology facility focused primarily on experimental psychology, i.e. analysing the behaviour patterns of animals, rodents, etc., and on parts of the human body (e.g. perception, stimulus response theory, etc.). However, there was a well-known, first-rate senior lecturer at Southampton in educational psychology who mentored me, as we were the only psychologists in the department with a research focus on human behaviour. This was good for me, as it allowed me to focus on research and publications (a key activity for any young, early-career academic)."

"While this was a productive research period, the fit between my research interests and those of the department was not what I needed. Indeed, Peter Robinson, my Southampton mentor, called me into

his office and said, "Cary, being in an experimental psychology department is not a good fit for you. Your laboratory is really about 'real life' organisations and institutions. Your laboratory is about people in the workplace. The intellectual workplace is in the public sector, the private sector or the third sector - such as charities and NGOs." Quite soon thereafter, Cary got a phone call from Professor Sir Roland Smith, who had a strong Mancunian accent, and was then head of the department of management sciences at UMIST (the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology). Soon Cary was invited to visit Manchester and consider an appointment (possibly a Chair) in the Department of Management Sciences in psychology and organisational behaviour.

Cary said, "At that point I was 32 years of age, with five to six years at Southampton and three years at Leeds and Sussex. I accepted his invitation to visit UMIST, but when I arrived, Professor Smith had organised an interview panel for a senior lectureship, conducted by a large panel of professors from the University of Manchester and UMIST. Roland was a very pro-active person who wanted me to come, so without telling me, I found myself in an interview panel! I was offered and accepted a senior lectureship in organisational psychology (in the Department of Management Sciences). I joined UMIST in 1974."

"About a year later, with the funding that Professor Smith had received from the UK Foundation for Management Education (FME). I was offered and accepted the FME chair in management education. Roughly a year later, this chair was renamed a Professorship of Organisational Psychology at UMIST. From that moment forward, Roland Smith mentored me in all my career options and became my role model and surrogate father figure.

Building a Brand New Department at UMIST

This clearly was the second substantive building block in Cary's career, namely, establishing UMIST as a leading management school in the UK. He and his other professorial colleagues were tasked with turning the Department of Management Sciences into the Manchester School of Management. At the same time, he was focusing on making the school into a significant player in the field of organisational behaviour. Faculty hiring was the priority for UMIST in this period (1974/5–1980). The strategic priority was to hire promising faculty, given both the growing trajectory in management education in the UK and Cary's specialist area of organisational psychology and health.

Cary noted that "When I arrived in 1974, I was one of only three academics in the group in organisational psychology. By 1980, we had ten lecturers and senior lecturers, as well as Ivan Robertson, a well-known professor in assessment and selection. I was also Head of the Department of Management Sciences for 3 years during that period. It was a time of fast growth, and everything was going great. It was then punctuated by a period of personal separation and divorce, and the growth of a new personal relationship and marriage in the early 1980s."

1980: A period of personal reflection

Cary reflected on this personal transformational period and its implications. He confessed that "while I'm not a 'workaholic', I believe that at the beginning of my career I worked very hard and had some workaholic tendencies. It was because I was a working-class kid who became a professor in his 30s, and I felt that I had to work very hard to meet other people's expectations."

"My work behaviour was a version of imposter syndrome, and I believe that my hard work affected my marriage, and also my family. I realised the 'second time around' that my work life would need to alter and receive more careful attention."

Cary also confessed that he loved academic life and felt that luck - and significant mentorship from Fred Massarik, Peter Smith, Peter Robinson and especially Roland Smith - had provided him with a series of springboard opportunities throughout his career.

Reflections on his UMIST career

We asked Cary to reflect on the following aspects of his career, being not only a very good academic, but also a communicator, an engaging speaker, a prolific writer, an able translator of research in behavioural science and organisational psychology, and noted as one of the leading thought leaders in Human Resource Management, according to HR Magazine.

Cary replied modestly that he thanked us for identifying the "career highlights" we had summarised. He pointed out that other highlights worth noting were his founding in 1989 of the British Academy of Management; founding the UMIST health and wellbeing consultancy (Robertson Cooper Ltd); and his Presidency of CIPD (the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development).

We agreed and added that because of his exuberance, enthusiasm and warmth - and also his personality - he had also written and hosted programmes such as "*How to Survive from 9 to 5*" for Channel 4 TV in the UK, and had served as Chair of the Business and Management Studies cluster in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) commissioned by the UK government. And to top it all, he became a British citizen in 1993.

A Career Turning Point - PVC for External Relations at UMIST

Around this time, Roy Payne, a well-known and respected organisational behaviour scholar, had persuaded the Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield, Professor Sir Gareth Roberts, to approach Cary and offer him the post of Dean (Head) of the Sheffield Business School - with the promise that he would also promote Cary to a Pro Vice-Chancellor role at Sheffield in due course. It turned out that the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield, Bob Boucher, at about the same time, had already been offered the Vice-Chancellor's (VC) job at UMIST.

Thus, at UMIST, Bob (then VC) privately contacted Cary and said, bluntly and clearly,

"You're not going to Sheffield - or anywhere else - for a PVC role. I am going to make you a Pro Vice-Chancellor at UMIST."

Cary accepted the offer, saying:

> "As External Relations PVC, I can work with the media, with business, with other business schools/ universities and things like that, which is what I like to do. And I could still be doing research and not be a career administrative type of PVC."

Cary further indicated that Gareth Roberts was initially very upset, but over time, Gareth, Bob and Cary became really close personal friends. He described Sir Gareth as a "Great Welshman, a brilliant academic and a lovely guy."

Cary mentioned that whilst his PVC role at UMIST allowed him to expand his professional and educational career, "I was asked to chair two government sponsored research assessment exercises in the field of business and management studies and chair commissions on human resource (HR) issues for government and business bodies (e.g. CBI) on HR related to bullying at work, governance and management. My public sector work also brought me closer to the UK Government Cabinet Office and other bodies."

As a result of Cary's extensive work for academia, government and businesses, Cary was awarded the

honour of CBE (Commander of the British Empire) - a rare honour for a psychologist in 2001.

By that stage, Cary was also one of the two Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs). The VC, Bob Boucher, had just announced that he would be leaving UMIST and returning to Sheffield as Vice-Chancellor. At the same time, proposals had been made to merge UMIST with the University of Manchester – a proposal that was strongly endorsed by the other DVC, who did not want to advertise the vacant VC post at UMIST because he was in favour of merging UMIST with the University of Manchester.

Cary disagreed with his DVC colleague and said clearly at the time, "'We can't merge unless we ask our staff whether they want to merge. We must at least get them involved in the process'. This did not really happen."

The departing VC couldn't get involved either. However, some of the senior leadership at UMIST were largely opposed to the idea. Following sound HR practice, they asked the union to call a vote of every union member in UMIST. A substantial majority of members voted not to merge - but the merger still happened.

A Further Career Change: PVC role at Lancaster

He recalled, "I got a phone call from Sue Cox, the Dean of Lancaster University Management School, who asked me to lunch to discuss moving to LUMS. She was an outstanding dean and colleague, so I was interested in the move. I then got a call from the VC at Lancaster, who invited me to join them and become the PVC for External Relations at Lancaster. He was an extremely kind and wonderful person who came from an English and Australian background. I decided to join Lancaster in 2004, after 30 years at UMIST during which the mentorship of Professor Roland Smith, who treated me like a son, provided me with advice on how to run a successful management school and apply all that I had learned about HRM and workforce relations to shape and enhance quality management education."

Cary reflected on his more recent involvement in important initiatives that required a much broader advisory role in policy formulation. For example, such an opportunity arose when, "I was asked by a very senior civil servant to create a think tank in what was titled the Sunningdale Institute. At that time, the Cabinet Secretary of the UK Government approached me to bring the Sunningdale Institute into the Cabinet Office (later to be in the National School of Government) with the remit to provide advice and support to Permanent Secretaries, DGs and junior Ministers to deliver better public services with greater speed and efficiency. I then set about developing a group of advisers from the leading business schools to provide this service to improve the efficiency of government departments.

He then outlined the next steps, "I persuaded the best people in the UK (including Howard, one of the authors) together with colleagues from other leading overseas schools, such as the Kennedy School at Harvard. We ran joint seminars, wrote policy reports and debated their implementation and impact in government. It was an extremely useful and successful vehicle for policy formulation and helping senior civil servants and ministers to deal with critical issues as they emerged."

Cary added that, "I also moved to build initiatives via the Academy of Social Sciences (ACSS, as Chairman) to apply the social sciences in policy." To ensure that this focus was clarified, Cary went one step further, "At the same time, I became involved in more mental health and wellbeing initiatives in society as one of the 12 ambassadors of the Samaritans. Indeed, my professorship at LUMS was in organisational psychology and health, which was broad enough to allow me to publish in management, psychology and health journals. This enabled me to explore the linkages between health, wellbeing and individuals' experiences in their work and work cultures, in attempting to build enjoyable, efficient and productive workplace environments."

In recognition of these wide-ranging and successful activities, in 2014 Cary was awarded the title of KBE

(Knight of the British Empire). This happened because, at least from our perspective, Cary still has the relentless enthusiasm and passion for his work, which continues to this day.

Therefore, we asked him to reflect not only on his more recent work but also on the key issues in this field, particularly in management education, that have occurred recently and outline what initiatives and strategies he believes will be important in the future.

Reflections on Business Schools in the Global Financial Crisis and throughout Covid

Cary started his reflections by commenting on the environment in the last two decades. He said:

"I think that there were two main turning (inflection) points in the last couple of decades. One was between 2008 and 2012, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), when so many people lost their jobs. Then the Covid pandemic. I think that the financial crisis had a profound effect, as so many people were feeling so insecure. The whole finance sector was in turmoil, and some banks were collapsing. I think that had a major impact. To some, it felt like a 1929-style depression."

"So, from my viewpoint, the GFC and the COVID-19 pandemic were two quite profound events (with Brexit in the UK also a significant issue). I think it made people think about their work lives and what it was doing to them. For me, Covid was just different. I was now working from home, and it made me wonder why, over all those past years, I had to come to the university every day."

"So, from a work point of view, it changed me, but I think it changed everybody. It made us more reflective about life, and we wondered why we tolerated 60-hour weeks in the workplace. Indeed, we now had a better balance between working at home and taking some time off during the day."

"So post-2020, I was working at home, but still working hard. It was clear that we would pivot to a hybrid model, where people could work more flexibly. Some may prefer working physically in the office full-time, others, part-time in the office, perhaps choosing to work from home, say 3 days a week. The main issue with hybrid models is that you need line managers who have good EQ and social skills."

"Indeed, I remember when the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing (a national business/employer forum anchored by Cary) first met in 2017. I asked the participants, 'If you were to do one thing to increase the health and wellbeing of people in the workplace, what would you do?' And virtually all, in different ways, answered, 'it would start with the line manager from the shop floor to the top floor, all the way up the system. I would make sure we had people with a good EQ'."

"Now I think 2020 means for me the advent of new styles of leadership. Real leadership in the workplace - all the way from a foreman on the shop floor to the CEO - has to be a different kind of person. We also have to create a different kind of climate in the workplace. If we had more socially skilled managers, maybe they'd make work a bit more fun, a bit more relaxed and enjoyable."

Cary went on to discuss the nature and importance of achieving the right kind of leadership for the workplace environment, particularly following the profound effects of the GFC, the Covid pandemic and perhaps also the Brexit vote.

Cary stated clearly again that, "I was viewing leadership primarily from an organisational point of view. I think the good news from the upheavals of the GFC, the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, is that the younger generations (such as Gen Z and the Millennials) are not prepared to tolerate bureaucratic, centralised leadership environments in organisations, often described as 'command and control' leadership structures.

From my perspective, if you want to retain the support of the upcoming generations, there's only one thing you can do, and that is to get the right people into line management roles. Create the right kind of workplace culture so that you can retain them – because you look after their welfare, value them, trust them, and work flexibly with them. The key drivers of strong cultures are both attracting talented employees and treating them well so that you can retain them."

Indeed, Cary spoke further about this, "My National Forum for Health and Wellbeing" (with 55 or so members from leading UK organisations) highlighted the need to change organisational culture and ask questions such as:

- Who are the managers we need?
- What are the people we need?
- How do we change the culture?

I suggest there is not one right answer. But every manager is a 'culture' - in a way, a subculture.

So if you get enough of them, and you get the right kind of people, you are just creating the culture from the 'bottom up', with a very 'light-touch' form of senior leadership collaboration, and wellbeing for leaders is about thinking strategically, it's about culture change."

"Also, in order to attract high potential line managers, it is important to do regular wellbeing audits (and opinion surveys) about how they are performing and their views on issues such as hybrid working. However, since every organisation is different, it must examine a range of metrics to assess important issues such as job satisfaction, labour turnover, etc. They need all these metrics - some of which are subjective, such as staff perceptions of senior management - while others, like stress-related ill-health (the leading cause of long-term sickness), are more objective. My National Forum is now reporting on the structure of performance metrics for employee wellbeing. Such a reporting structure is now a board issue for CEOs too. I am clear that the strength of membership in our National Forum will provide welcome guidelines for workplace culture change and its measurement, as well as continuing to offer long-term advice on organisational culture, wellbeing and change."

The National Forum is clearly a major element in Cary's continuing challenge to generate improvements in organisational health and wellbeing in fast-changing organisational environments.

The Value of Business Schools

Next, we asked Cary to comment specifically on management education, including such topics as curricula in business schools and how they have changed following the GFC, the Covid pandemic, and Brexit.

Cary responded by saying, "Frankly, we haven't changed very much at all - except at the margins. We teach mainly 'cognitive input', just like the rest of the university. We don't train our students on how to manage people. We teach all the basic cognitive, analytical aspects of business, such as accounting, economics, finance, law, operations, marketing, etc. When they graduate, either at the undergraduate or MBA/PhD postgraduate level, we don't really train them to manage human beings! Curriculum change over the last two decades has been beset by complacency and inertia. Until Covid hit, business schools were 'technology lite'. There was little or no adoption of online learning or modern data analytics and the study of digital models in business contexts. And solely because of this pressure, we began to adopt models of 'working from home', online lectures/tutorials and hybrid working."

Further, Cary said, "To understand how business schools operate, we have to look at our own university

institutions. Frankly, the main driver for being a successful academic is to produce strong, theory-oriented research papers. The currency of the realm is maximising the citations count in Google citations, Clarivate and ResearchGate. Research determines status.

Teaching is not considered as important in relation to academic status in universities."

"I feel we need different types of people in business schools. We need to be more innovative in our coursework, and we need to give people promotions based on their contribution to the three main areas of teaching, research, and citizenship (or service). By the way, perhaps a fourth one - which I think is really important - is entrepreneurship (creating a bit of an entrepreneurial edge). Why don't we have many more spin-off companies from business schools?"

"Believe it or not, I was the first management academic in UMIST to generate a spin-off business - Robertson Cooper. And there have been relatively few emanating from other leading UK business schools."

"The problem is that universities are very hierarchical, very well-structured organisations that plan your career path and everything else. The key point about a business school should be: What impact do they make on society?"

Cary elaborated, "I would argue that first-rate, inspirational teaching is impactful for their students. Teaching is very important, impactful research is also important. But do these theoretical research papers have a practical impact on society? It could certainly be argued that research in top applied business schools and journals (such as Harvard Business Review) may be immensely more valuable to business or public sector organisations. And, entrepreneurs can then see more clearly how their ideas can be translated into new products and services, and organisations that generate meaningful growth for society. My key point here is that business school academics need to teach and inspire students and chart new theoretical or applied research that can increase our capacity for social and much-needed economic growth."

Professor Sir **Cary Cooper**, CBE, is the 50th Anniversary Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at the ALLIANCE Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK, having been Pro Vice Chancellor at Lancaster University and Deputy Vice Chancellor at UMIST. He is the immediate Past President of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, President of Institute of Welfare and past Chair of the Academy of Social Sciences, past President of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and Founding President of the British Academy of Management. He is the author/editor of over 250 books, over 450 scholarly articles and a regular contributor to radio and TV. He was Knighted by the Queen in 2014 for his contribution to the social sciences.

Howard Thomas is an Emeritus Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education at Singapore Management University (SMU) and former dean at leading business schools, including SMU, Warwick Business School (UK) and the College of Business at UIUC (Illinois, USA). As a highly respected consultant, author and scholar he has been awarded fellowships by the Academy of Management (AOM, USA), the Strategic Management Society (SMS, USA), the British Academy of Management (BAM), the European Academy of Management (EURAM), the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS, UK), the Institute of Directors, (UK) and, most importantly, the Learned Society of Wales (LSW). He was also President of SMS while dean at Illinois. He has chaired leading professional educational organisations such as AACSB (USA), GMAC (USA), and CABS (UK). He has also received Lifetime Achievement Awards from BAM (UK) and the European Foundation of Management Education (EFMD), and a number of honorary doctoral degrees during his distinguished academic career. He is currently a senior advisor to the President and managing director of EFMD.

Michael J Thomas is the founder of DARWIN™ Works and a Cambridge University accredited leadership coach who helps founders and senior leaders gain clarity, communicate with confidence, and unlock their next stage of growth. Through his work - and through his IWON podcast, (It Wasn't Over Night), he shines a light on the mindset, story, and strategy shifts that power meaningful success for leaders in tech, business and life.

by Howard Thomas, Eric Cornuel & Rachel Ashworth

Introduction: An Editorial Overview

Editorial Overview to the Special Issue on Addressing Health and Wellbeing Issues in the Contemporary Business School

The role of context, collegiality and leadership

Workplace surveys in the UK stress that 60% of all sickness absences derive from issues of stress, anxiety and depression, while there are a growing number of accounts that reference anxiety and ongoing wellbeing challenges linked to higher education and specifically business schools (Bothello and Roulet, 2019; Korica, 2022).

Cary Cooper's foreword to this issue carefully outlines his lifelong research journey in the fields of organisational psychology and health, and highlights the importance of designing and structuring workplace settings that promote healthy and wellbeing cultures in practice. The strength of his National Forum on wellbeing in the UK attests to the recognition by many managers and leaders of the need to build healthy, strong, collaborative cultures in the workplace (whether that is in higher education or other sectors of business, government and society) but also the challenges associated with doing so.

In this collection, we build upon Cary's path-breaking work with a set of contributions written by leading global authorities in the field. They examine three main themes in their essays.

The first theme and set of contributions focus on identifying conceptual frameworks and theoretical initiatives that carefully diagnose the challenges experienced within the contemporary business school, and the wellbeing impacts that manifest. They share insights into how these challenges might be addressed, and offer suggested actions for a range of actors, including leadership teams both within and beyond the school, accreditation bodies and wider faculty.

Our second set of contributions documents a series of context-specific responses to the challenges experienced by business schools. These articles provide an insight into how circumstances are playing out in a range of global business school workplaces and the ways that leadership teams are building cultures and developing locally-driven responses in an attempt to support wellness. As the articles demonstrate, this requires responding to a combination of local and global challenges and developing approaches that are deemed appropriate to their geographical and cultural context.

Recognising that business schools do not operate in isolation, the third set of articles focuses on the institutional environment within which business schools operate. These contributions highlight the ways in which leadership teams navigate and interact with governance systems and structures, whether these are sector-specific (e.g. accreditation and rankings systems) or institutional (e.g. a parent university governance structure), to build health and wellbeing cultures that proactively address complex problems and challenges.

Across the collection, each of our contributions advocates for meaningful organisational change that can enable business schools to sustain and enhance collaborative and collegiate workplace cultures. Cognisant of the need to address the root causes of health and wellbeing issues, rather than just designing 'sticking plaster' responses that can appear somewhat tokenistic, we note that the recommendations from our contributors tend to align with a more purposeful and agentic orientation for business schools that prioritises the creation of public value and a more meaningful contribution to cultural, economic, environmental and social wellbeing.

What Is Going Wrong and Why? The Diagnosis Is That the Crisis Is Real, Structural, but Not Deterministic

An analysis of views from authors in elite Western and Asian city schools

We have chosen to start our commentary on the six papers in the first section by sharing some of the very honest personal reflections by a long-term business school insider, namely Professor Anand Narasimhan. In this auto-ethnographic essay titled 'Seeing Things as They Are: A Reflection on Wellbeing and Not-So-Wellbeing in Business Schools', we find a narrative that could be characterised as the journey of an academic from 'burnout' to personal and institutional transformation.

His statement that "he has known both wellbeing in a business school; collegiality, learning; fulfilment, growth and development," as well as "not-so-wellbeing; exhaustion; feelings of inefficacy and inadequacy, envy, shame and regret" will surely resonate with many business school academics. He confesses that he has taught while tired, led while worried, but that over time, he has learned to notice his own sense of overwhelm with a little more care.

His story begins with the advice from a counsellor coach who says, "Anand, if you continue like this, you will have a heart attack and die." This 'wake-up call' (his Darkness episode) led him to a passage of enlightenment (Discovery) via studying Buddhism and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), followed by 'Delight' in successfully presenting a case study of 'mindfulness' at a German software firm (SAP) in IMD's signature executive programme, 'Orchestrating Winning Performance'.

This then led to 'Doubt', and then came success through his MBCT initiative, implementing executive mindfulness programmes at IMD as well as elective courses in IMD's highly regarded MBA programmes.

Jochen Reb's paper on the mindfulness curriculum in SMU also shows us how a very significant change was made in SMU's undergraduate programme. This took the form of a pillar course on mindfulness designed by Jochen's mindfulness institute for SMU's highly regarded four-year liberal arts undergraduate programme, which cited clear evidence of its success from student feedback and the careful positioning of the course in the first or second year of the programme.

Anand concludes his honest essay by saying he simply does not know where responsibility for wellbeing sits in a business school. He says, "perhaps responsibility is shared, elastic and situational. And the best we can do is keep on noticing when care turns into control, when autonomy drifts into neglect, when help is needed, and it is not noted or offered." He concludes that "seeing things as they really are may be the only commitment with confidence we can make to wellbeing in practice."

As Thomas and Ambrosini, Delbridge and Suddaby identify, successive authors, including Martin Parker (2021), Peter Fleming (2021), Billsberry et al. (2023), have written about the 'neo-liberal business school' in the rankings era. Scholars have highlighted how business schools and their faculty have found themselves governed by, and trapped within, an 'iron cage' and 'publish or perish' culture where 'command and control' managers in business schools adopt citation metrics as performance indicators, and view them as judgments of academic quality (Starkey and Thomas, 2019). Critics argue that the impressive production line of research articles from business schools often does little to address and advance managerial practice or leverage societal impact, as highlighted by Fenwick in his case study of Sasin, Thailand, later in the collection. In addition, there is growing evidence of the negative impact on cultures of collegiality in business schools, and a detrimental impact on health and wellbeing, with levels of pressure experienced by faculty becoming increasingly severe.

With this context and growing levels of stress and anxiety and increasing workloads in mind, Thomas and Ambrosini deploy the term 'zombie academics' as a metaphor for 'living death in hyper managerial cultures', beset with mental health problems, concerns around research integrity and talent flight from academic jobs. While they identify that early-career academics feel overwhelmed, Thomas and Ambrosini also highlight the 'mercenary' behaviour of some senior colleagues who 'play the game' and then mentor others accordingly, encouraging them to 'follow suit'.

In his paper on Managerial Pathologies, Roy Suddaby identifies a further challenge for business schools – the growth of administrative bloat, and emphasises that, as a result, we have undergone a major transformation from collegial to managerial governance. He contends that this has contributed to a wellbeing crisis, which has been particularly felt by early-career academics seeking to develop a rounded profile and make a more meaningful contribution. Suddaby identifies that early-career academics are more likely to see themselves as 'institutional resistors' and supporters of a more progressive form of academia. This resonates with Thomas and Ambrosini, who advocate for the emerging movement Positive Academia (Sathish and Harzing, 2025) that "seeks to reimagine academic life through values of care, collegiality, and collective transformation" by "promoting a culture of psychological safety and celebrating purpose and impact beyond top-tier publications."

The papers of Suddaby, Delbridge and Smith/Safeer illustrate that structural, managerial 'command and control' governance processes can manifest in a form of 'managed collegiality' where colleagues are merely 'engaged with' or 'consulted' on any change, rather than being able to fully participate in collegial decisions. However, our contributors indicate that more meaningful models of collegiality can persist, including ones that provide strong benefits through intentional leadership initiatives and systematic relational approaches.

In particular, Delbridge argues from his ABS case study that "islands of collegiality can be created and sustained within existing university systems through empathetic, relational leadership by deans and other leaders." He contends, though, that such a 'living initiative' requires active reproduction and proactive peer relationships and support, as well as informal networks, healthy communication norms, and "collegial, participatory, and nurturing leadership". Similarly, Suddaby argues that "crafting collegiality" requires "cultivating leaders who act as custodians of moral purpose rather than as managers of metrics" and can "realign managerialist professionalism with collegial purpose." Smith and Safeer propose a human capital systems framework at the school level. This, they suggest, can offer actionable frameworks for organisational wellbeing, with particular emphasis on developing organisational cultures and a leadership structure, which stimulates talent, growth and progression within the school. Finally, Thomas and Ambrosini highlight scope for us all to engage in "subtle activism" in the form of everyday actions that "challenge toxic norms without confrontation."

In summary, this first set of papers outlines and evidences the crisis of managerial structures in universities and business schools, with a strong emphasis that collegiality must be actively crafted, not passively preserved. Deans and senior leaders are pivotal here as in-system managers, school relationship protectors, value creators, infusers, institutional resistors, and, in Anand's case, vulnerable transformers. Clearly, governance constraints are proving to be increasingly challenging in restricting the nature of local responses, for example, workload models are often institution-wide rather than school-specific. But perhaps deans and their leadership teams have much more local agency than they think. While the crisis of managerialism can be evidenced, both structurally

and culturally, it is not necessarily deterministic. Deans, senior faculty and students are increasingly aware that health and wellbeing matters, and that we have the potential to create a more humane business school workplace through collective approaches rather than by trying to cope as best we can on an individual basis. This might take the form of group mentoring, collective lobbying actions by deans, or faculty movements, such as Positive Academia.

It is useful to offer a few provocative comments here. First, business schools teach management, but it seems we do not always role model the finest management practice. We run leadership programmes, but our leadership teams often seem unable to meet the challenges associated with the contemporary workplace as well as the needs of stakeholders. Where does attention to students feature in a 'publish or perish' culture, for example? Second, and in contrast to other disciplines, why have business schools allowed themselves to become trapped in a performative journal ranking regime which distorts behaviour and harms wellbeing, but still no one wants to opt out of?

Implementation of Wellness Concepts and Initiatives: What We've Done and How Well It Has Worked

Institutional case studies and cultural practices from diverse global contexts

The six papers in this section come from leaders or directors of schools in diverse regions, in emerging markets and middle-income countries.

Our overview of the contributions to this second section begins with Gina Grandy's personal, honest reflection on her two deanships, in which she contrasts her appointments as both an 'Internal Dean' and an 'External Dean'. She frames the context as imperfect, gendered and burdensome in an environment of the managerialism crisis, well documented by Thomas and Ambrosini, Delbridge, and Suddaby in the first section. She states that, "Now more than ever, cultivating a culture of wellness in business schools is critical but likely never more difficult." She adds that, "As a woman dean navigating leadership, wellness and culture transformation in a business school, I propose that cultivating a wellness culture is grounded in people and systems, and it doesn't always feel good when trying to get there." And she continues, "here I conceptualise wellness as considering wellbeing, dignity at work, and related concepts such as care, connection, engagement and sustainability." This resonates with the holistic approach to wellbeing documented in Alvarado and Romero's study of IPADE, Mexico where the focus is on "physical, emotional, social, intellectual, financial, occupational, and spiritual dimensions."

Gina emphasises that her experiences as dean have taught her the importance of investing in building trust, which takes a lot of time and effort, as well as good health. And she argues that wellness at work also ties to the wise use of space, nourishment and health involving social interaction and a process of continuous improvement that grows a sustainable and meaningful organisational culture that works effectively. Indeed, she stresses that, "As a woman dean and scholar of women in leadership, I would be remiss not to reflect on how cultivating a culture of wellness can be intertwined with the gendered scripts of care and community …. I would like to think that colleagues describe my leadership style as a positive combination of results-driven, accountable, tenacious,

strategic, empathetic, nurturing and relationship-oriented. A balance of doing gender well and gender differently … While I recognise that my experience as a woman dean does not reflect the experience of all woman deans in business schools, my lived experience is that the rules are different for us." What is important in Grandy's comments is her humility. We believe that her list of lessons for actioning what she calls an 'ethics of care' – her enacted practice - is a useful platform for all readers.

Our summary of the global responses of the six schools in this section reveals some commonalities in their responses and initiatives responses, which are outlined below:

Business School Purpose as a Foundation for Wellbeing

- 'when purpose drives culture … and wellbeing', with an explicit Christian humanistic mission and daily spiritual moments (IPADE, Mexico)
- 'the mission directs everything' (Woxsen, India)
- Mission evolution drives wellbeing (Sasin, Thailand)
- Alignment of wellbeing initiatives with institutional purpose (ESCA, Morocco)

Creating Space for Connection, Community and Relationship Building

- Institutional events bringing units of the school together (ESCA, Morocco)
- 'Feed people well and often' (Haskayne, Canada)
- Free daily breakfast and lunch for faculty and staff (IPADE, Mexico)
- Thirty-plus student clubs, plus team building days for staff and students (MSB, Tunisia).

Comprehensive, Wrap-Around Faculty Support

- Benefits are double the legal requirements, with the school offering retirement preparation and family support packages (IPADE, Mexico)
- ACC Counselling, Summer kids' programmes and training plans are all offered (MSB, Tunisia).
- Conference subsidies, flexible work procedures and attention to gender equity (ESCA (Morocco)
- Professional development and collaborative recognition systems (Woxsen (India)

Leaders as Architects of Meaningful Cultural Change

All six leaders see themselves as custodians and enhancers of culture, and not just managers. Grandy's honest set of reflections suggests that leadership can sometimes be burdensome, but all the leaders demonstrate a

belief in their own agency to shape the local environment and build strong relationships in their schools. Adopting a Self-Determination Theory perspective with specific attention to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, Yennek and Triki focus on wellbeing for students and administrative staff, as well as faculty. Their application to a case study of MSB identifies actions related to professional development, recognition, and community that have supporting wellbeing. They consider how this perspective might extend beyond an individual lens, and elements of their holistic SDT-*Based Framework for Implementing Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Business Schools* might usefully be considered elsewhere.

The six leaders also identify commonalities across their schools. For example, in their case study of IPADE in Mexico, Alvarado and Romero discuss challenges to wellbeing, including "workload pressures, cultural cohesion across campuses, generational differences, and digital transformation" that resonate across business schools. However, they also identified challenges, for example, with experiences of accreditation systems, which as Fenwick discusses in the case of Sasin, Thailand demonstrated "the imperfect fit of the North America model to the Asian reality, and the closer—but still imperfect match—with the European model."

Context and cultural diversity are evident within these contributions and naturally have profound implications in terms of the specifics of the wellbeing challenges being experienced and the ways that schools respond. As Ghorfi and Hatimi emphasise in their case study of ESCA Ecole de Management in Morocco there are challenges, including limited resources and technological disruptions, specific to the Moroccan context, so any approach to addressing health and wellbeing must be context-driven and holistic. In their case, this has involved aligning wellbeing actions with "institutional purpose, strategy, culture, structure, and policies" so they correspond to stakeholders' expectations and personal values. Similarly, referencing Sasin in Thailand, Fenwick advocates for an integrated, collegial approach, rather than pursuing wellbeing as a separate concern. He identifies purposeful strategic alignment and opportunities for collective, syncretic participation as key to enhancing health and wellbeing: "Faculty members thrive not just because their immediate working conditions are satisfactory, but because they see themselves as involved contributors to meaningful collective endeavours."

The accounts document interventions that have generated some successful outcomes, such as those illustrated by Yennek and Triki's case study of MSB, Tunisia (see Table 1) and in Rodriguez' case study of Woxsen, India, where there is some evidence that pedagogic revisions to student programmes to prioritise wellbeing, practice and social responsibility have prompted improvements in indicators of graduate success. While these provide some inspiration and hope for other schools, somewhat understandably, responses are often made in response to wellbeing effects, rather than taking the form of interventions that address root causes, which are often sector or institution-wide. Some further attention to upstream wellbeing interventions, coupled with evaluation and tracking of outcomes and organisational impacts over time will be vital in shaping our understanding of ways we can build sustainable business school communities and systems of wellness.

Rhetoric Meets Reality? Field Level Systems and Practitioner Implementation

Our third set of papers focuses on the implementation of wellbeing initiatives and unsurprisingly they highlight a range of system and governance issues that manifest at school, university and global level. Whatever the specific context of the school, the key overall message from these contributions is that the challenges associated with wellbeing and related initiatives cannot be resolved by individuals, and that any potential solutions are likely to require collective action.

The findings from the Cornelius et al., sector-wide research study of twenty leaders at UK business schools illustrate the stark contrast between well-meaning leadership rhetoric and the reality of lived experience in business schools. The paper highlights that while UK business schools and universities are signalling their strategic intent to address EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) and wellbeing through institutional charter marks and awards, faculty are experiencing escalating workloads, fragile collegiality and a lack of progress on entrenched inequalities. For example, many universities and business schools now operate formalised workload models designed to improve equity, yet the authors identify that more than 50% of UK academics in business schools report unmanageable workloads and that 'invisible labour' (e.g. student support, emotional work, picking up slack) disproportionally affects women and minorities.

The research findings prompted concerns around collegiality as well, due to changing working patterns, something Delbridge also identifies. While flexibility to work from home is clearly much valued by business school faculty, traditional forms of informal support, such as corridor chats and communal working have been much missed post-Covid. Worryingly, they observed that colleagues were not reporting wellbeing concerns, fearing they would be seen as 'not coping', which may affect their chances of progression.

On the other hand, we have a reflective ethnographic personal essay by Professor Enase Okonedo, who is a university president at Lagos. In her career at Lagos Business School, she progressed from a faculty member post to that of an Associate Dean role, and then became the provost and now the president of the parent university (Pan-Atlantic University). Her thoughtful account demonstrates how, during her journey in the business school, she sought to sustain and enhance a supportive and collegial culture rooted in the communitarian African values of Ubuntu (defined loosely as 'I am who I am through you') and solidarity (communal support). However, she identifies that the global business school system, shaped by accreditation and journal rankings, undermined her attempt to design a purposeful business school reflective of cultural context and quotes a comment from a faculty member who asked, "Do we need this accreditation? Are we chasing a Western model (a Western hegemony in management education) that will destroy the very culture that makes this school special?" Enase's response to this challenge has been to view the individual professorial contribution as one that includes but goes beyond publications; to develop wellness programmes and mental health support mechanisms in the school; and to lobby the accreditation bodies to recognise the significance of the cultural context.

The third paper from Lily Kong, the President of Singapore Management University (SMU), a new university with seven schools (including the Lee Kong Chian School of Business), provides an authoritative and comprehensive argument connecting wellbeing to what she describes as a research integrity crisis. She argues that the so-called 'publish or perish' culture can create mistreatment of researchers and academics in business schools in terms of stress, anxiety, isolation and mental health problems: misconduct in the form of breaches of academic integrity via AI-generated fake papers; data hacking and data fabrication; and finally, citation gaming activities (e.g. lobbying for coercive citation). She contends that we require alternative assessment frameworks and has been reviewing ALTmetrics to develop a more integrative framework for researchers. She also advocates for a Researchers' Oath for scholars, similar to the Hippocratic Oath taken by medical professionals.

The fourth paper is a collaborative conversation between Rajani Naidoo, Deputy VC and Vice President for People and Culture at the University of Exeter (a Russell Group University) and Howard and Michael Thomas. In contrast to the other contributions in this set, which present their problem diagnoses and approaches for building wellbeing communities and cultures, this paper focuses more on implementation and reflects on the role of senior leaders. Specifically, the focus is on the implementation of a cultural transformation programme at Exeter, overseen by a Vice-President for 'People and Culture' at the institutional level. The initiative is characterised by a

focus on the development of a collegial community, e.g. the Wellbeing Inclusion Culture Community of Practice, and prioritises in building leadership and mentoring competence throughout the university. Rajani reflects that her core guiding principles have been first, that, "we can only transform culture through collaboration," second, "by listening carefully and treating people fairly," and third, in turn, "communities must listen, learn and take action." She adds that for her, success in implementation is viewed in terms of whether the initiative positively impacts people, but that the true test of success is ultimately a cultural one.

Summary of the Collection of Papers

There is a growing literature on health and wellbeing in business schools, and this collection of articles adds further weight to the mounting body of evidence that illustrates the extent and severity of wellbeing challenges for those working within, and leading, business schools. The articles are by no means the final word, but they do shed further light on the role of culture, collegiality and leadership in the context of health and wellbeing, while our contributors have identified fruitful avenues for further research and useful ways that we can all contribute to wellness cultures in business schools.

We recall the statement of Anand's coach – "if you continue like this, you will have a heart attack and die." All too often wellbeing is perceived as an individual crisis, but, as our collection illustrates, what we are evidencing and experiencing in business schools is a systemic crisis that is apparent within and across diverse institutions, diverse contexts, diverse continents and diverse cultures.

The evidence suggests that business school academics could be operating within toxic and challenging cultures that are largely generated by the system in which we operate. In addressing this, we have both intellectual and ethical challenges to face, and we occupy an uncomfortable position in doing so. Many business schools were founded within a market context, and competition and marketisation, driven by publications, rankings and accreditation, have been actively encouraged and embraced by some of our schools and certain of our sub-disciplines. Yet ironically, as business school scholars, we have generated evidence that demonstrates the dangers that lie in such an approach. We embrace, teach and research stakeholder engagement, while not prioritising our own stakeholders. We profess responsible and sustainable management practices, while creating unsustainable workplaces and champion evidence-based practices, while ignoring the evidence on some of the perverse consequences of business school-specific systems and practices. We should confront these contradictions directly.

In conclusion, therefore, it seems sensible and profitable to reflect on the productive tensions and paradoxes that the authors surface, discuss and attempt to resolve. Attacking these may improve ways in which we build cultures of positive academia in business schools via 'islands of collegiality' and craft governance and business school cultures, which improve the conduct of management practice and do not work to the detriment of health and wellbeing.

They include the following:

Critique vs Construction

- Critiques of systemic managerialism and the tyranny of rankings and performance metrics as faculty evaluation criteria can sometimes be countered with constructive alternatives in terms of both purpose and community-driven cultures. These can be field-wide, such as the Positive Academia movement, or practice-specific, e.g. learning from initiatives such as Exeter's WICC programme, focusing on supporting collaborative health and wellbeing initiatives across the university community.

Local Agency vs Structural Constraints

- Contrast the local agency and leadership that Delbridge and Suddaby, IPADE and Exeter demonstrate with the structural systems and constraints evident in the Lagos, and UK/SMU cases. It prompts questioning about how much freedom some leaders have in practice and whether there is more agency than we might imagine. It also provokes questions about the type of leadership required. For Suddaby, the key is whether business schools can be governed in a way that "preserves and cultivates meaning" and so he urges deans to "recover leadership as a moral craft." This resonates with the 'ethics of care' approach advocated by Grandy.

Elite Resources vs Resource Constraints

- Does the degree of wellness rely purely on the level of investment an institution can make? IPADE/SMU and indeed Exeter invest substantially in wellbeing initiatives, but Lagos notes that "limited funds might hinder wellbeing programmes." Yet in the Lagos case, Ubuntu and the communitarian spirit cost relatively little, so it is likely that cultural, rather than financial advantage, may dominate in certain cultures and contexts.

Symbolic vs Substantive

- Accreditation and national charter award schemes, e.g. Athena Swan, etc., test rhetoric against reality, with evidence in some cases of 'institutional peacocking' with little longitudinal impact. A greater scope within accreditation to distinguish institutions, their challenges and responses based on their distinctive cultures and context might help to reduce the 'reality gap'.

Theory vs Practice

- Many authors know what should happen to close the gap in theory, yet almost all our contributions demonstrate how challenging this is to achieve in practice. Addressing the issues impacting poor health and wellbeing is a daunting task - as Grandy states, "it doesn't always feel good when trying to get there." This often leads organisations to focus on enhancements, which can sometimes be interpreted as tokenistic, rather than working collectively to address systemic wellbeing challenges.

Finally, the existence of a broad geographic lens in the origin of the papers and their authors is extremely important. Our contributors are writing from different academic leadership positions, but in each case a variety of geopolitical, economic and cultural features shape wellbeing impacts, levels of agency and scope for action. There is no 'one size fits all', in how business schools and universities should adapt to their country, cultural and contextual environments in ensuring the creation and enduring presence of healthy wellbeing workplaces and cultures. However, by sharing experiences, contributing to debates, and working collectively, we can provide a platform for further improvements in sustaining, enhancing and leading purposeful and collegial workplace environments across and within contemporary business schools.

References

Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V. and Thomas, L. (2023). Managerialist control in post-pandemic business schools: The tragedy of the new normal and a new hope. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 22*(3), pp. 439-458.

Bothello, J. and Roulet, T. J. (2019). The imposter syndrome, or the mis-representation of self in academic life. *Journal of Management Studies 56*(4), pp. 854-861.

Fleming, P. (2021). *Dark academia: How universities die.* London: Pluto Books.Fleming, P. and Harley, B. (2024). Collegiality as control? How uncounted work gets done in the neoliberal business school. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 23*(1), pp. 176-190.

Kitchener, M. and Delbridge, R. (2020). Lessons from creating a business school for public good: Obliquity, waysetting, and wayfinding in substantively rational change. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 19*(3), pp. 307-322.

Korica, M. (2022). A hopeful manifesto for a more humane academia. *Organization Studies, 43*(9), pp. 1523-1526.

Parker, M. (2021). The critical business school and the university: A case study of resistance and co-optation. *Critical Sociology, 47*(7-8), pp. 1111-1124.

Sathish, C. and Harzing, A-W. (2025) Let's form a positive academia collective transformation: Re-imagining our academic values and interactions. *Management Learning* https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076251351089

Starkey, K. and Thomas, H. (2019) The Future of Business Schools: Shut them down or broaden our horizons? *Global Focus 13*(2), pp. 44-49

About the authors

Howard Thomas is an Emeritus Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education at Singapore Management University (SMU) and former dean at leading business schools, including SMU, Warwick Business School (UK) and the College of Business at UIUC (Illinois, USA). As a highly respected consultant, author and scholar he has been awarded fellowships by the Academy of Management (AOM, USA), the Strategic Management Society (SMS, USA), the British Academy of Management (BAM), the European Academy of Management (EURAM), the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS, UK), the Institute of Directors, (UK) and, most importantly, the Learned Society of Wales (LSW). He was also President of SMS while dean at Illinois. He has chaired leading professional educational organisations such as AACSB (USA), GMAC (USA), and CABS (UK). He has also received Lifetime Achievement Awards from BAM (UK) and the European Foundation of Management Education (EFMD), and a number of honorary doctoral degrees during his distinguished academic career. He is currently a senior advisor to the President and Managing Director of EFMD.

Eric Cornuel has been President of EFMD Global since 2000. An alumnus of Sciences Po Paris and HEC Paris, he earned his PhD from Paris Dauphine University. His influence extends to co-founding and governing various international organisations, such as PRME, CEIBS, GRLI, HigherEd, and ITP. Celebrated with awards like the Magnolia Award and the Légion d'honneur, his publications include 'Business School Leadership and Crisis Exit Planning', released by Cambridge University Press. Eric holds fellowships at esteemed institutes and has been honoured with Doctorate Honoris Causas from Koźmiński University and ESCP Business School.

Rachel Ashworth is a Professor at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, where she served six years as dean and focused on embedding the School's Public Value strategy. She researches organisational and institutional change, scrutiny and accountability and equality, diversity and inclusion in public service organisations, and has published in leading journals including *British Journal of Management, Journal of Public Administration, Research and Theory, Journal of Management Studies, Public Administration and Public Administration Review, and Public Management Review*. Rachel is President-Elect of the International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management (IFSAM), a member of the Council of the Learned Society of Wales, and serves on the Chartered ABS Policy Committee.

1

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Conceptual Frameworks and Initiatives

by Jochen Reb & Eva Katharina Peters

The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work: Reclaiming Wellbeing in Business Education

Reimagining Wellbeing in Business Schools

Much of today's world is characterised by a sense of deep uncertainty, digital overload, and relentless performance pressure. Mental health challenges are on the rise worldwide, especially among young people. In this context, teaching and learning essential wellbeing skills can be seen as both a personal necessity for students and a strategic imperative for business schools. Yet, traditional approaches often fall short. Many universities still operate from a deficit or illness-oriented model, relying heavily on counselling centres and reactive health services to address stress and mental health challenges after they arise. Wellbeing is also frequently relegated to the co-curricular domain—offered through yoga classes, peer support groups, or resilience workshops as optional extras—rather than embedded into the academic core. In other cases, institutions implicitly equate wellbeing with career achievement, assuming it will follow naturally if students secure prestigious jobs. This, however, risks reinforcing the notion that financial or professional success is the primary pathway to a fulfilling life.

While well-intentioned, these approaches often remain fragmented, peripheral, and out of reach to many students. More intensive interventions, such as executive leadership retreats or immersive self-development courses, are typically reserved for graduate students or those identified as 'high-potential' leaders, and they lack scalability within undergraduate business education.

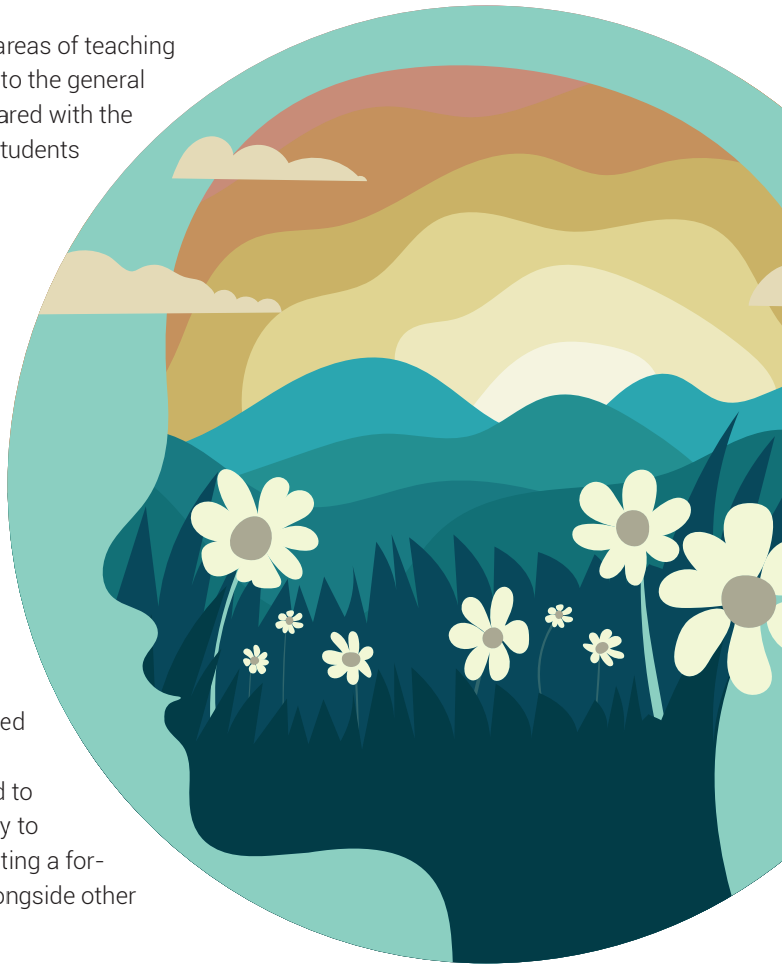
As faculty members in such environments, we witness firsthand students' struggles with anxiety, attention deficits, and burnout—realities that mirror the broader crises in higher education and the corporate world alike. In this article, we offer a reflection on one institutional intervention: the development of an undergraduate course at Singapore Management University (SMU), titled The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work. Drawing from mindfulness and positive psychology, this course aims not only to support student wellbeing but also to cultivate future leaders with the emotional and ethical capacity to navigate complexity with intention and care.

We designed and delivered this course to address not only individual student challenges but also the broader institutional and cultural dynamics of business schools. It was clear to us that there is a need to create a pedagogical model that is both scalable and deeply human, capable of reshaping classroom culture and planting the seeds for more mindful and sustainable forms of leadership and management. This article outlines the motivation, history, structure, evidence base, and future potential of this course, situated in the broader landscape of wellbeing in higher education.

History of the Course

Before going into course content, we recount the—admittedly brief—history of the course. In 2013, the Mindfulness Initiative was established at SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, with the support of the dean at the time, Howard Thomas, and directed by one of the authors (JR). The initiative's mission was, and still is, to engage in research, teaching, and outreach in the area of mindfulness, particularly as relevant to business

and organisations. For the initial years, the main areas of teaching consisted of mindfulness-based courses offered to the general public. While the courses were advertised and shared with the SMU community, no courses dedicated to SMU students were offered.



Over the years, a few faculty members have integrated some mindfulness practices into their courses. For example, one of us (JR) would offer short mindfulness practices at the beginning of class sessions in courses on decision-making and negotiations, purely on an optional basis. Another addition was co-curricular mindfulness-based offerings such as regular 'Mindful Monday' sessions of around 30-45 minutes, occasional workshops (e.g., on how mindfulness practice can help students during the stressful exam period), and courses for students struggling with stress and mental health (offered by an SMU counsellor). As we engaged in these various activities, we encountered a recurring problem: SMU students were busy, and co-curricular activities tended to be relegated to a lower priority. This suggested a path forward: try to integrate mindfulness into the curriculum by creating a for-credit course that would give it equal standing alongside other courses in the school.

The challenge: Not everyone takes mindfulness seriously as an academic subject. There is some conservatism in academia (one can debate whether for good or bad). At SMU, a series of hurdles had to be passed. An important step was obtaining approval from the committee vetting new courses. This involved multiple rounds of revisions based on helpful feedback. A key requirement was that the course be science- and evidence-based. This demand was met by including a considerable number of academic papers and basing the mindfulness practices on an established protocol. Another demand was that the course be graded rather than pass/fail. The concern—perhaps justified—was that students might sign up for the course only or partly because they perceive it as an 'easy mod', rather than because of their motivation to learn about mindfulness, conceptually and practically. The latter would be extremely problematic as the course requires regular active engagement with the mindfulness practices (including reflection and related readings).

Helpfully, a group of faculty members involved with the Mindfulness Initiative had received a Ministry of Education grant to evaluate the outcomes of a mindfulness-based higher education course. This grant not only gave further credibility to establish this new, for-credit course but also provided funding to examine its effectiveness.

Given the initial success of the course, as evidenced by the research findings, high student demand, and favourable course evaluations, we successfully applied for the course to become part of the SMU university

core curriculum. At SMU, students have to select courses from several core curriculum 'baskets'. While being part of a basket does not require students to take this specific course, it does open up the course to students from all schools at SMU, beyond the business school. During the last academic year, the course was offered for the first time as part of the curriculum. This has brought some new challenges—in particular, not all students are as motivated about mindfulness as they were during the initial, more select intakes—but it is overall a highly rewarding development.

A Dual Challenge in Business Education: Wellbeing and Attention

The motivation for this course is grounded in two intersecting challenges (see Figure 1). The first is the wellbeing challenge, with rising rates of mental health concerns documented among students worldwide. For example, one in three first-year college students globally reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosable mental health condition (Auerbach et al., 2018). Business school students face unique challenges, including intense workloads, high expectations for success, and often competitive academic cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated stress, anxiety, and disconnection in these environments.

At the same time, we are experiencing an attentional crisis. Our world is saturated by information, algorithmic feeds, and multitasking norms. This endangers the capacity to focus deeply and intentionally. As Herbert Simon famously observed, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." Research on digital distraction and media multitasking illustrates how cognitive fragmentation, or the 'scatter brain' as we like to call it, undermines learning and wellbeing. Chronic media multitaskers tend to perform worse on attention-switching tasks and have difficulty filtering irrelevant information (Ophir, Nass and Wagner, 2009). It is clear that the current conditions of information overload undermine not only cognitive performance but also emotional regulation, learning, and interpersonal presence—core competencies for effective leadership.

For business schools, the attention and wellbeing challenges present a paradox. While institutions are increasingly focused on preparing students for the demands of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, they often overlook the inner capacities—attention, self-awareness, emotional regulation—that are essential for navigating it well. Without developing these inner skills, business students may graduate technically competent but emotionally depleted, cognitively scattered, and disconnected from purpose.

A Strategic Response: The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work

We developed this course to respond to the above wellbeing and attention challenges. It is a structured, evidence-based intervention that aims to equip business students with the inner capacities they need to navigate the challenging conditions of modern university and working life (see Figure 1 for a summary). The course integrates the contemplative science of mindfulness with the empirically grounded field of positive psychology. Importantly, we don't introduce mindfulness primarily as a relaxation technique, but as a systematic method for cultivating clarity, presence, and intentional decision-making and action. The positive psychology elements contribute a strengths-based, future-oriented lens focused on flourishing, meaning, and resilience.

The curriculum is based on the first version of the Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training (MBSAT), developed by Juan Humberto Young (2016). This training is designed for improving wellbeing, strategic awareness, and decision-making skills in healthy working adults. For the SMU course, we adapted the framework to meet the needs of undergraduate students navigating the complexity of academic, career, and

relational demands. MBSAT emphasises self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence, and is structured to guide participants through the stages of recognising, understanding, and acting on their internal experience with strategic awareness.

To cultivate these skills, students engage in a broad repertoire of mindfulness practices over the 13-week semester. These include foundational practices such as mindful breathing, body scanning, and focused awareness meditation, which help train attentional stability and somatic awareness. They also explore applied mindfulness techniques, such as the STOP technique (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed), mindful walking, and mindful eating to train body awareness, emotional regulation, and a less reactive relationship with impulsive behaviours. Students learn to identify their dominant stress triggers and practice pausing and responding to them with curiosity and compassion.

Each week, students learn a new form of mindfulness practice—including traditional seated meditation, mindful walking, mindful movement (e.g., stretching with awareness and dancing), and mindful eating. This variety lets them personalise their practice and experiment with incorporating mindfulness into different areas of life. Importantly, we also include interpersonal mindfulness practices like mindful listening, loving-kindness practice, and mindful appreciation exercises for different types of relationships (to family, friends, colleagues, or strangers). These practices and exercises help develop social-emotional awareness, empathy, and the ability to build meaningful, respectful relationships.

The positive psychology component complements and expands these mindfulness-based practices. Students are guided through a sequence of reflective exercises that help them clarify their personal values and envision a positive future self. They complete a VIA Strengths Survey (Seligman et al., 2005) and engage in strength-based feedback-seeking from peers, friends, colleagues, and bosses to create their Mindful Positive Self Portrait (MPS; Young, 2016) to enhance self-efficacy and motivation.

Together, the mindfulness and positive psychology components of the course offer a dual approach: mindfulness helps students notice and disrupt unhelpful mental, emotional, and behavioural patterns, while positive psychology helps them orient toward values, goals, and strengths. Integrating these two domains fosters both inner balance and proactive flourishing, forming a dynamic foundation for leadership and wellbeing in both personal and professional life.

Course Structure: From Inner Awareness to Systemic Engagement

The course unfolds across twelve weeks and is organised into five pedagogical stages that progressively build students' self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and social mindfulness, while expanding their understanding of leadership and systemic interconnection.

The first stage, Cultivating Present-Moment Awareness, focuses on developing students' capacity to direct and sustain attention in the present moment. Students begin with practices such as mindful breathing and body scanning. These foundational exercises help them connect with bodily sensations and anchor attention, which is often scattered in our modern multitasking environments.

The second stage, Emotional and Cognitive Awareness, introduces techniques for observing thoughts and emotions without judgment. Students learn to identify and label emotions, observe patterns in their internal dialogue, and practice meta-cognitive awareness through thought-watching exercises. These practices foster emotional regulation and reduce automatic reactivity to stressors.

In the third stage, Habitual Patterns and Self-Regulation, the course focus shifts to cultivating intentional behaviour. Students explore how habits form, how beliefs develop and shape behaviours, and how mindfulness can disrupt unhelpful routines. Meditation practices to gain awareness of action impulses and beliefs, and reflection on existing triggers, help students build greater agency in their actions and develop healthier coping strategies.

The fourth stage, Relational and Organisational Mindfulness, extends mindfulness into social and organisational contexts. Students engage in mindful communication exercises, including deep listening. They reflect on how mindfulness and presence affect interpersonal relationships in general, as well as teamwork and leadership. Topics include mindful leadership and mindfulness, and cooperation.

The final stage, Systemic Flourishing and Societal Wellbeing, broadens the perspective to include ecological, societal, and global systems. Students explore the interdependence between personal wellbeing and collective sustainability. They reflect on their roles as emerging leaders in a complex world and discuss how mindfulness and values-based action can address societal challenges such as inequality and climate change.

Course Pedagogy

The course is designed not only to convey knowledge, but to transform classroom culture. It blends lecture content with experiential learning, peer dialogue, and reflective assignments. Each week includes:

- One - two new mindfulness practices (e.g., breath awareness, mindful eating, mindful walking)
- Daily at-home practice and journaling (journals are submitted once per week)
- Assigned academic readings on the science of mindfulness at work
- Pre-session quizzes to reinforce engagement with the academic readings
- Weekly group-led presentations on mindfulness research reading assignments
- Classroom discussions in peer groups and plenum
- A team-based 'Mindfulness for Others' project applying course principles to peer or community flourishing

Evidence of Impact: Research Findings

To evaluate the course's effectiveness, we conducted a research project over two terms with funding from Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE). Using a quasi-experimental design, we compared students in the mindfulness course to an active control group enrolled in a decision-making class taught by the same instructor (JR). Students in both groups completed a pre-survey one week before the course start (i.e., Time 1), a post-course survey within one week of the last class (i.e., Time 2), and a follow-up survey approximately two months after the end of the class (i.e., Time 3). Quantitative measures included validated scales assessing a range of wellbeing skills (e.g., body awareness, acceptance, resilience, self-compassion, and compassion for others) and wellbeing states (e.g., affect, gratitude, stress, worry, psychological need satisfaction, and flourishing).

The data told a clear and encouraging story. By the end of the semester (Time 2), students who had taken the mindfulness course showed meaningful gains across all measured wellbeing skills—gains that were not only statistically significant, but also consistent across different aspects of wellbeing. Compared to their peers in

the control group, these students reported greater positive emotions, lower stress and worry, higher gratitude, stronger feelings of competence and connection to others, and an overall sense of flourishing. Importantly, these differences remained even after we took into account where participants had started at the beginning of the term.

Three months later (Time 3), most of these improvements held steady. The mindfulness group continued to score higher than the control group on nearly every wellbeing indicator. The only exceptions were negative affect—which by then no longer differed significantly between groups—and gratitude, whose initial boost had evened out over time once we controlled for baseline levels. Still, the sustained improvements in most measures suggest that the course had a lasting positive impact, equipping students with skills and mindsets that extended beyond the classroom. Together, these findings indicate that the MBHE course had a strong and sustained positive impact on participants' wellbeing and offer promising initial evidence for the value and efficacy of the course.

We also collected qualitative data from student journals and post-course reflection essays. Although not yet formally analysed, recurring themes include increased self-awareness, greater emotional regulation, improved relationships, and a shift in values toward meaningful work and service-oriented leadership. Students often described the course as "transformative," "grounding," and "the most impactful class" of their university career. Here is an example (albeit admittedly a very positive one):

"I was sharing with a friend of mine on how this module is probably one of the best modules I have taken because of how much clarity and perception it gave me on life / how we can change our views by practicing mindfulness. I really wish that I took this module in year 1 because that would have affected how I viewed uni and the things I would have done, but I guess better late than never. This module has given me insights that I can practically use in my life. This module should be compulsory."

Using an active control group allowed us to draw stronger conclusions about the course's effects and to address one of the most frequent critiques of mindfulness research—that many studies compare against passive controls or waitlist groups, which can exaggerate results due to expectancy or placebo effects (Davidson and Kaszniak, 2015). In addition, by assessing not only immediate outcomes such as changes in wellbeing states, but also longer-term developmental capacities—what we call wellbeing skills—this study points to the potential for the course to create lasting benefits.

Institutional Implications: A Scalable Wellbeing Strategy

Crucially, this course offers a scalable institutional intervention to enhance student wellbeing in business schools. Unlike high-cost retreats, short-term workshops, or holistic approaches to management education that require extensive resources, the course is embedded into the regular classroom structure and has recently been incorporated into the SMU core curriculum. Its cross-faculty accessibility allows it to reach a wider and more diverse student population, extending its potential impact. This model aligns with calls from research and practice for university-wide wellbeing strategies (e.g., Bannigan et al., 2025). For business schools in particular, it marks a meaningful shift: from viewing wellbeing solely as an individual responsibility to recognising it as a collective and strategic priority.

Importantly, it is worth emphasising that instructor training is crucial to ensuring high-quality course delivery. Mindfulness cannot be effectively taught without a sustained personal practice. Facilitators must be capable of holding space for students' emotional processes and model the presence they aim to help students

cultivate. Therefore, to effectively expand the course's reach, future efforts should include faculty development programmes and peer mentoring. Where resources allow, co-teaching models offer a promising opportunity to enhance the student learning experience and balance instructor workloads.

Our hope is to interest other institutions in including this course model in their business school curricula. We welcome opportunities to collaborate and share our curriculum to support adaptation across diverse contexts. The course materials, practice guides, and research protocols are available for review and use. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to a broader shift in management education—one that centres human flourishing, ethical awareness, and systemic care (see Figure 1 for a summary).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Human Flourishing in Business Education

Teaching this course has confirmed for us that business education can do more than prepare students for the market—it can also prepare them for life. As business schools grapple with competing pressures—from 'publish or perish' mandates to employability targets—we must not lose sight of our deeper mission: to educate thoughtful, grounded, and self-aware human beings.

Mindfulness and positive psychology offer powerful tools for cultivating the inner resources necessary for leadership in an age of uncertainty. By embedding these approaches into the curriculum, and by treating wellbeing as a foundational concern rather than an afterthought, business schools can become incubators of flourishing, benefitting not only students, but also the societies they will go on to shape. Addressing wellbeing in business schools is not a luxury; it is a necessity. With intentional curricular design, supported by committed leadership and a culture of care, we hope to provide an example of how we can reclaim education as a space not only for learning but for flourishing.

References

Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., Demyttenaere, K., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hasking, P., Murray, E., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Stein, D. J., Vilagut, G., Zaslavsky, A. M., and Kessler, R. C. (2018) WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 127*(7) pp. 623–638. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362

Bannigan, G., McGrath, D., and Matthews, J. (2025) Whole-university approaches to embedding wellbeing in the curriculum: A scoping review. *Frontiers in Education, 10*, 1534244. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1534244

Davidson, R. J., and Kaszniak, A. W. (2015) Conceptual and methodological issues in research on mindfulness and meditation. *The American Psychologist, 70*(7) pp. 581–592. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039512

Ophir, E., Nass, C., and Wagner, A. D. (2009) Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*(37) pp. 15583–15587. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., and Peterson, C. (2005) Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*(5) pp. 410–421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410

Young, J. H. (2016) *Mindfulness-based strategic awareness training: A complete program for leaders and individuals.* John Wiley & Sons.

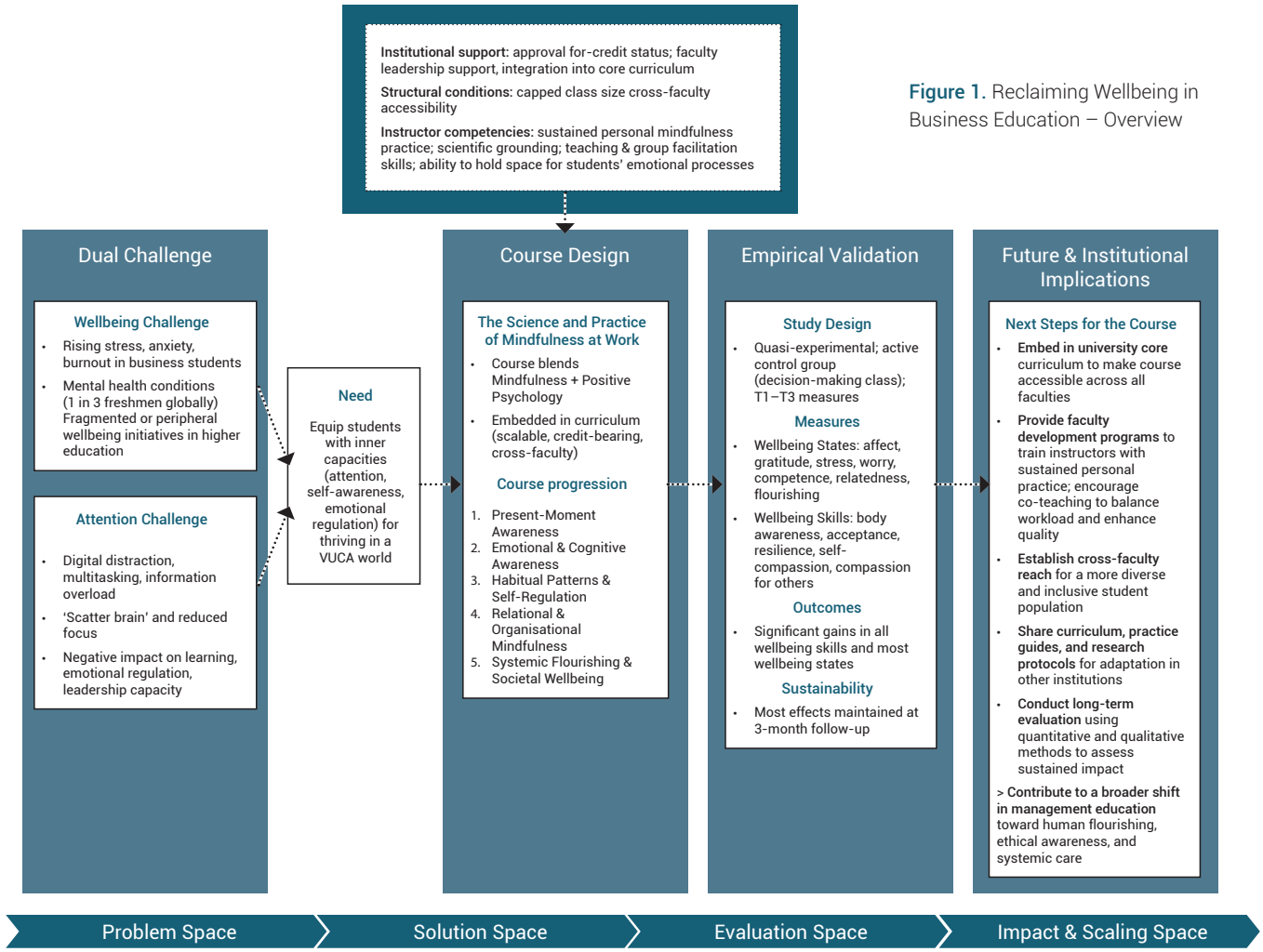


Figure 1. Reclaiming Wellbeing in Business Education – Overview

About the authors

Jochen Reb is Lee Kong Chian Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources, and Director of the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. His research and teaching focuses on how smart heuristics enable us to make effective decisions in a VUCA world, and how mindfulness applies in organisational contexts such as leadership, sustainable wellbeing, and performance.

Eva Katharina Peters, PhD, is an organisational psychologist and mindfulness educator dedicated to integrating evidence-based mindfulness training into higher education and professional development. She designs, teaches, and researches mindfulness programmes that foster attention, sustainable performance, and human flourishing.

by Lisa Thomas & Véronique Ambrosini

A Crisis of Wellbeing Among Business Schools' Early Career Scholars: Reasons, Repercussions and Remedies

(The article represents an equal contribution from both authors)

In this article, we build on the calls to dismantle the harmful neoliberal culture embraced by many business schools (Fleming, 2021) and to promote a cultural transformation where early-career academics[1] are viewed not just as future academics chasing metrics, but as current contributors deserving of support and flourishing (Sathish and Harzing, 2025). Our work is positioned within the emerging movement of Positive Academia (Sathish and Harzing, 2025), which seeks to reimagine academic life through values of care, collegiality, and collective transformation.

There is a growing crisis of wellbeing in business schools, notably in neoliberal business schools, which are our focus here. Rising levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout are driven by excessive workload, competitive environments, and a lack of institutional support and understanding (Edwards et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly and sadly, academic wellbeing is gaining attention among researchers concerned about the toll of the neoliberal university culture on scholars and scholarship (Hurd and Singh, 2021).

In neoliberal business schools, which rely on performance metrics and strive on a 'publish or perish' culture (Fleming, 2021; Wilmott, 2011), senior colleagues often advise early-career academics to place boundaries around research time and avoid the perceived lesser valued non-research activities. They also urge them to carefully frame each research project to maximise outputs. But can early-career scholars realistically follow this advice today and into the future? Given the pressure they face to build their career, many suffer from high levels of work-related stress outcomes such as mental and physical health struggles, family breakdown and workplace bullying and harassment (Taberner, 2018; Hurd and Singh, 2021).

While acknowledging the wellbeing crisis affects students and staff alike (Volk, Billsberry and Ambrosini, 2025), we draw attention to how the managerialist culture embedded in many business schools creates an environment where early-career academics' wellbeing is compromised. While the neoliberal, performance-metrics-driven culture affects all academics, our experience and that of others suggest that early-career academics face disproportionately high levels of stress and burnout, unsupportive academic cultures, and workplace stressors that significantly affect the wellbeing of early-career academics (Hollywood et al., 2020). Compared to their senior counterparts, early-career academics often experience increased anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, worsened by short-term contracts and unclear career paths (Cilli et al., 2023). For instance, they fear not passing probation (confirmation/tenure) and being out of a position within a few years because their publications are perceived as insufficient. They experience a poor work-life balance and suffer from unhappiness. Given many business schools' commitment to the PRME and the UN SDGs, particularly those related to health and decent work, it is imperative that they care for their staff as workplaces that nurture not only excellence but also wellbeing and professional fulfilment. We approach the issues with 3 Rs: reasons, repercussions and remedies.

1 Given our framing, to reflect the diversity of academic pathways and avoid privileging research at the expense of other activities, we deliberately use the term early-career academics and not early-career researchers to denote individuals who are involved in teaching, research, service, external engagement and administration, and not just research.

Reasons: From Collegiality to Control

The evolution of universities from being led by academics to being led by professional managers has been widely discussed (Billsberry et al., 2023). Many business schools have embraced a neoliberalist culture, enacted through managerialism. This has resulted in a major transformation of ethos (Fleming, 2021) over recent decades from essentially a collegial to a managerial one (McCarthy and Dragouni, 2021). Business schools' conversion from 'professional bureaucracies' to 'competitive bureaucracies' has redefined these institutions' purposes (Ghauri and Adler 2024). They transformed from loosely coupled systems based on academic values and preferences into "complete organisations" hierarchically organised, strategically managed, and with a unique identity communicated to external stakeholders. They signal one coherent and clearly bounded organisation (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). This development had repercussions for the way business schools are governed (Jernberg, Jonson and Pallas, 2025).

The `new normal` in the aftermath of COVID-19 has shown emergent signs of new and different forms of collegiality finding expression in specific situations and locations and in new and innovative forms (Cloete et al., 2023). Acknowledging that collegiality is a multifaceted concept (Fleming and Harley, 2024), here we refer to it as the continued development of what constitutes good academic practice and how this practice should shape research, education and collaboration (Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg, 2023; Cloete et al., 2023). Before the advent of managerialism, a 'vertical' approach to collegiality reflected decision-making within formal structures, with authority being held by academics, the modus operandi of universities, and core to their purpose (Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg, 2023; Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024). Managerialism has meant a shift away from this collegial model towards managerial hierarchies and performance metrics, supposedly aimed at increasing transparency (O'Neill, 2014). Professional ideology, based on shared values and beliefs, influences organisations as a form of 'group idealism', guiding what academics do (Stiles, 2011). However, academic ideology has been eroded by managerialism, leading to reduced participation in conversations about the meaningfulness of academic work, which is now a rarer occurrence under regimes of managerialist control (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). The enduring managerialist approach borne of the neoliberalist agenda, which has been around for some thirty years, overlooks that many scholars consider themselves as professionals who value peer recognition and their belonging to a professional culture contributes to their social status and self-esteem (Hewitt, 2020). Managerialism has broken down our common values and collegiality, and is threatening our autonomy and freedom of speech (Fleming et al., 2022). It has permeated the core of our activities of generation and acquisition of knowledge, as well as its transmission. This has been compounded with some senior academics being instrumental, having a 'mercenary mentality' and playing the neoliberal 'game' to their benefit (Billsberry et al., 2023; Fleming and Harley, 2024). As such, the neoliberalist 'game' becomes normalised, and senior academics are encouraging early-career researchers to follow suit, should they want to strive (Tekeste, 2025).

Managerialism has produced unintended consequences. These include, first, reduced employee commitment, trust, creativity and collegiality, which may to some extent be attributed to the adherence to rules and guidelines, which is grounded in the idea of punishment, and which is antithetical to creativity and collegiality (Gabriel and Aguinis, 2022; McCann et al., 2020). Second, the systemic neoliberal pressures, such as performance metrics and competition, have also led, as we will see next, to some questionable research practices at times, as researchers feel these practices are necessary to survive (Brooker and Allum, 2024). Managerialism came to the fore with performance evaluation systems and the 'Publish and Perish' game. This, together with the lack of collegiality (which, when present, is a mechanism for a supportive, respectful, motivating and fulfilling environment), has led to burn-out for all, but in recent years it has become particularly concerning for early-career staff. This is damaging to

their mental health and long-term career outcomes. This culture has led to stress, pressure, increased workload, widespread unhappiness and poor staff morale (Taberner, 2018).

In what follows, we explore the toll this cultural transformation takes on early-career scholars' wellbeing and potentially, their integrity.

Repercussions: From Pressure to Peril

It has become more evident over the past few years that when combined, teaching demands, an unsupportive environment, lack of leadership empathy, research and external funding productivity measures, and lack of autonomy are leading to burnout (Steyn, 2025). Taken together, these issues are creating a 'perfect storm' for wellbeing concerns (Segarra, Villanueva and Martinez, 2023). This is compounded by the anxiety caused by the precariousness of the finances of the business school sector, coupled with increasing anxiety among academics around the purpose of the business schools and what they do.

Our experience working with early-career, bright, and keen scholars is that they feel tremendous career pressure. They are worried about research productivity and the looming uncertainty associated with not getting tenure/passing probation. This leads them to work excessively long hours, which have terrible consequences for their work-life balance, and at times, their mental and physical health. They are worried not only about their immediate career but also about their future. Many are still struggling to pay the debts that mounted from doing their PhD, they face the reality that business and management academic jobs are increasingly precarious and rare; and despite the rhetoric around transferable skills, transitioning to another sector is difficult. As a consequence, the angst related to them losing their job is tremendous. This is compounded by the fact, that despite apparent available support, such as mentoring or mental health support, they may not want to speak about their struggles, thinking that this would be seen as a sign of weakness and that they cannot cope with academic pressures. It can be especially so when they perceive their mentor strived under the neoliberal system, or they perceive the mentor may help them only to survive rather than thrive (Tekeste, 2025). It is also documented that women, first-generation scholars, and underrepresented minorities are disproportionately represented among junior academics and face unique stressors that increase their risk of burnout. These groups often experience more financial strain, workplace mistreatment, and impostor syndrome, which harm wellbeing and career advancement (Muradoglu et al., 2022). Burnout among these populations threatens retention and diversity in academia, making it a vital equity issue. Much academic literature and commentaries in higher educational publications support our observations. Managerialist pressure has led to symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia, gastritis, and stress-related digestive issues. They also led to chronic stress, sleep deprivation, and emotional exhaustion (Segarra et al., 2023). They also found that the lack of collegiality stemming from the neoliberal culture left staff without much help in navigating the business school's culture.

Ryan (2012) has described the emergence of 'zombie academics' as a metaphor for the living death experienced by those trapped in hyper-managerial university cultures. These academics continue to perform tasks (publishing, teaching, applying for grants) but often without autonomy, purpose, or genuine

engagement. For early-career scholars, this zombification is not just symbolic; it reflects a survival strategy in a system that demands compliance over creativity, metrics over meaning. The pressure to perform, combined with a lack of support and collegiality, risks turning vibrant scholars into disengaged, exhausted academics, undermining both wellbeing and the integrity of academic life. It may arguably be even more so for early-academic women who often assume most of the 'academic housework' (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2025). There is also the significant risk that business schools are going to become sterile environments where publications and grant achievements are heralded at the expense of anything else meaningful or with societal impact.

Another concerning aspect we are witnessing is the credibility crisis in academia resulting from this culture. The pressure to perform has led some to cut corners as a means of coping and succeeding in the neoliberal business schools. This can indirectly cause long-term career damage and related wellbeing issues. Lamenting this credibility crisis, scholars such as Aguinis et al. (2025) document evidence of this through paid authorships and paper mill submissions, as well as a rising number of submission retractions. These retractions originate from serious misconduct such as data fabrication, analysis falsification, duplicate publication, plagiarism, as well as questionable practices like selective reporting, HARKing, and opaque methods. The danger is that such practices become more widespread and normalised, blurring boundaries between best practice and ethical compromise. This managerialist culture, particularly its pressure on early-career scholars, creates conditions conducive to misconduct. But the stakes are high: if misconduct is uncovered (as retraction trends indicate is increasingly likely), their careers may suffer irreparable harm.

The erosion of wellbeing is not just a personal issue; it has systemic consequences. Chronic stress and fear-based cultures can distort academic judgment, leading to questionable research practices. A culture that prioritises care, support, and ethical leadership is not only more humane but also more likely to uphold the integrity of scholarship. The negative consequences of unchecked managerialist culture are clear, yet business schools are not powerless and their commitment to the PRME and UN SDGS calls for them to be proactive in fostering an ethical and healthier environment. Embracing the SDGs presents a critical opportunity for business schools to assume a leadership role in addressing the wellbeing societal imperative (Ambrosini, Jack and Thomas, 2023). By developing a comprehensive wellbeing-oriented culture, business schools can help develop a culture of flourishing for early-career academics (Sathish and Harzing, 2025) and stop their wellbeing crisis (Volk, Billsberry and Ambrosini, 2025).

Remedies: From Pressure to Support

Business Schools

We have previously advocated that business school leaders must shift their mindset beyond the 'perish and publish' ethos and profit-driven goals. Accreditation bodies and business school deans need to work in tandem. They must recognise that value cannot solely be recognised via siloed metrics. Staff contribution, such as engagement and collegiality, must be recognised alongside their discipline-based publications or students' evaluation scores. Management and staff coexist, and the business school can't do one without the other. As Buller (2017) puts it, "you can't teach students, conduct research, and perform service if you can't pay the bills, and you can't attract investment if you're not viewed as intellectually distinctive."

Business schools need to stop using rigid, punitive or reward-based models that may foster short-term compliance but harm wellbeing. These include financially rewarding publications perceived as top-tier in certain quality lists or in journals with a high impact factor, or removing funding or giving an increased teaching workload to those

who published in perceived low-tier journals. Ghauri and Adler (2024) explain that credible performance evaluation systems that are perceived as fair, transparent and grounded in academic values are essential to further a sense of belonging. This matters for both high-quality research and teaching, but also critically for the staff's wellbeing. Early-career academics are more likely to align with their business school's values if they believe the evaluation systems in use are fair, rather than simply following rules out of fear.

Business schools should embrace a public good-oriented style of governance model. This includes developing clear, transparent and realistic workload expectations and performance demands. Workload models and rewards should be reviewed to promote a more supportive culture and include aspects such as collegiality and mentorship (admittedly, this may have the potential to be another performative and transactional activity…). Sathish and Harzing (2025) suggest that business schools should also embed wellbeing into performance reviews.

It also includes creating a governance model that empowers academics and promotes participation, all of which are important for wellbeing. Beyond these strictly task-related measures, business schools must offer meaningful support for stress and mental health, with easy access to health professionals and mental health awareness sessions. Moreover, business schools must integrate equality, equity, diversity and inclusion principles into their wellbeing strategies (Ambrosini et al., 2023). These issues are not a separate agenda, and addressing them will help create a safe working environment. Valuing diversity, fostering belonging, and reducing isolation would help.

Crucially, business schools must invest in the long-term development of their early-career academics and acknowledge the wellbeing crisis facing academia. Without such recognition, the matter can only get worse.

Senior Academics

Senior staff have a responsibility to act; they cannot allow the damaging culture to perpetuate even if they gained from it, and they certainly cannot expect the 'system' to transform itself passively. They are the ones who can afford or have the experience to speak out (Harley, 2019; Billsberry et al., 2023). As we and others have argued, they cannot remain complicit in this culture. Rather, they can contribute to transforming it by re-socialising junior academics to believe that being an academic is not a matter of total commitment to the system or a submissive attitude to the status quo. It is their duty to help stop perpetuating the system that continues to harm academics (Vu and Case, 2025).

They need to step up to their role as mentors and allow for the creation of 'a safe space' for dialogues with early-career staff. They need to foster collaboration and encourage dialogue without fear of judgment, retaliation or their ideas being appropriated. They also need to combat the often taken-for-granted idea that hyper-competition is positive. Finally, they must promote research integrity and set the example.

Positive Academia (2025), developed by Harzing and Sathish, provides a range of actionable recommendations on how academics can nurture a culture of psychological safety and celebrate purpose and impact beyond top-tier publications. These include developing mentoring programmes that focus on growth, not just performance, helping early-career academics to connect their work to personal value and addressing power dynamics. Hibbert (2025) also describes how reflexive leaders can build an environment where staff feel seen, heard and supported.

There is no doubt that early-career academics do bear some responsibilities in building a positive culture, for instance, by being collegial in their peer networks, supporting each other, speaking up in meetings, and celebrating each other's achievements. Nevertheless, they should also challenge toxic behaviour and question unrealistic expectations. Early-career academics have to prioritise integrity, care and inclusion, and practice what Sathish and Harzing (2025) term subtle activism by engaging in small, everyday acts that challenge toxic norms without confrontation. However, it is incumbent on senior staff to cultivate a business school's culture that fosters

compassion, integrity, and that simply said, truly values people for their individuality. Academics are not numbers; not inputs into metrics, they are human beings.

Final Words

It is time we question what seems to be taken for granted. We need to move beyond critique and offer remedies. It means we need to reflect on the current status quo and envisage a future which embraces more humane and social values (Sathish and Harzing, 2025; Starkey and Tempest, 2025). This was our aim: to acknowledge the reasons behind the wellbeing crisis and understand its repercussions, so that we might prescribe alternative remedies.

In conclusion, research and experience demonstrate a significant wellbeing crisis amongst early-career business school academic staff, which is not simply a peripheral concern. A sense of belonging and recognition is a powerful buffer against burnout. Senior academics and business school leaders can play a pivotal role by acknowledging the diverse contributions of early-career scholars not just through metrics, but also through mentorship, inclusion in decision-making, and the valuing of their voices in shaping the academic community. If business schools are to remain credible institutions committed to the public good, they must reimagine success not as a race for outputs, but as a collective journey toward purpose, integrity, and human flourishing. This vision aligns with the principles of Positive Academia, which calls for a transformation of academic values and interactions: centring care, collegiality, and meaningful impact over competition and compliance. We must also move forward in collaboration, transcending the boundary between management and academia to develop different ways of thinking, working and doing that involve restoring trust and autonomy and that are based upon constant conversation. While the macro-level solutions are complex and multifaceted, and most likely context-specific, as individual scholars, we can take positive steps in helping early-career staff. We must lay the groundwork for a healthier academic culture, one that not only supports survival but fosters flourishing.

References

Aguinis, H., Cope, A., Martin, U., and Yokoya, R. (2025). Transparency, reproducibility, and replicability in human resource management research. *Personnel Review.* forthcoming

Ahlbäck Öberg, S., and Boberg, J. (2023). The decollegialization of higher education institutions in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 9*(2) pp. 126-143.

Alvesson, M., and Spicer, A. (2012). A stupidity-based theory of organizations. *Journal of Management Studies, 49*(7) pp. 1194-1220

Ambrosini, V., Jack, G., and Thomas, L. (2023). *How to develop a sustainable business school.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Billsberry J., V. Ambrosini and L. Thomas (2023). Managerialist control in post-pandemic business schools: The tragedy of the new normal and a new hope, *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 23*(3) pp. 439-458.

Brooker, R., and Allum, N. (2024). Investigating the links between questionable research practices, scientific norms and organisational culture. *Research Integrity and Peer Review, 9*(1) pp. 12.

Buller, J. (2017) "Mercenary U", in *Academic Leader* 33.11,2 Magna Publications https://www.academicbriefing.com/administration/mercenary-u/

Cloete, N., Cote, N., Crace, L., Delbridge, R., Denis, J.-L., Drori, G., Eriksson-Zetterquist, U., Gehman, J., Gerhardt, L.-M., Goldenstein, J., Harroche, A., Jandric, J., Kosmützky, A., Krücken, G., Lee, S., Lounsbury, M., Mizrahi-Shtelman, R., Musselin, C., Östh Gustafsson, H., and Walgenbach, P. (2023). "Outroduction": A research agenda on collegiality in university settings. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations, 87*(1) pp. 181-211

Cilli, E., Ranieri, J., Guerra, F., and Di Giacomo, D. (2023). Early career researchers and mental health: Observational study of challenge and wellbeing. *Health Science Reports, 6*(11), e1649.

Edwards, M. S., Martin, A. J., and Ashkanasy, N. M. (2021). Mental health and psychological well-being among management students and educators. *Journal of Management Education, 45*(1) pp. 3–18

Fleming, P. (2021). *Dark academia: How universities die.* London: Pluto Press

Fleming, P., and Harley, B. (2024). Collegiality as control? How uncounted work gets done in the neoliberal business school. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 23*(1) pp. 176-190.

Fleming, P., Olaison, L., Plotnikof, M., Pors, J. G., and Pullen, A. (2022). Crawling from the Wreckage. *Ephemera: Theory & politics in organization, 22*(3) pp. 1-20.

Gabriel, K. P., and Aguinis, H. 2022. How to prevent and combat employee burnout and create healthier workplaces during crises and beyond. *Business Horizons, 65*(1) pp. 183–192.

Ghauri, E., and Adler, R. (2024). Performance evaluation of academics: A social influence theory perspective. *Accounting & Finance, 64*(3), 2545-2575.

Harley, B. (2019). Confronting the crisis of confidence in management studies: Why senior scholars need to stop setting a bad example. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 18: 286–297 Harzing, A.W. & Sathish. C. Positive Academia https://positiveacademia.com

Hewitt, J. P. (2020). Chapter 22. *The Social Construction of Self-Esteem.* The Oxford handbook of positive psychology, p. 309-319. In Synder, C.R, Lopez, S.J., Edwards, L. & Marques, S.C. (eds). 3rd edition, Oxford University Press.

Hibbert, P. (2025). Formative, not extractive: How critically reflexive research makes a difference. *Management Learning, 56*(1) pp. 107-114.

Hollywood, A., McCarthy, D., Spencely, C., and Winstone, N. (2020). 'Overwhelmed at first': the experience of career development in early career academics. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44*(7) pp. 998-1012.

Hurd, F., and Singh, S. (2021). 'Something has to change': A collaborative journey towards academic well-being through critical reflexive practice. *Management Learning, 52*(3) pp. 347-363.

Järvinen, M., and Mik-Meyer, N. (2025). Giving and receiving: Gendered service work in academia. *Current Sociology, 73*(3) pp. 302-320.

Jernberg, S. Jonson, M. and Pallas, J. (2025) The diminishing spaces for collegial work, *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 41*(1), 101386.

McCarthy, D., and Dragouni, M. (2021). Managerialism in UK business schools: Capturing the interactions between academic job characteristics, behaviour and the metrics culture. *Studies in Higher Education, 46*(11) pp. 2338–2354

McCann, L., Granter, E., Hyde, P., and Aroles, J. 2020. "Upon the gears and upon the wheels" terror convergence and total administration in the neoliberal university. *Management Learning*, 51: 431–451.

Muradoglu, M., Horne, Z., Hammond, M. D., Leslie, S. J., and Cimpian, A. (2022). Women—particularly underrepresented minority women—and early-career academics feel like impostors in fields that value brilliance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 114*(5) pp. 1086.

O'Neill, M. (2014) The Slow University: Work, Time and Well-Being. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 15*(3) Art. 14, September 2014. http://www.qualitative-research.net/

Ryan, S. (2012). Academic zombies: A failure of resistance or a means of survival? *Australian Universities' Review, The, 54*(2) pp. 3-11.

Sahlin, K., and Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (2016). Collegiality in modern universities—the composition of governance ideals and practices. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 2-3* pp. 33640.

Segarra, P., Villanueva, C. E., and Martinez, L. (2023). Faculty's subjective well-being: Insights from a Mexican business school. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 18*(1) pp. 46-66.

Sathish, C., and Harzing, A. W. (2025). Let's form a positive academia collective transformation: Re-imagining our academic values and interactions. *Management Learning*, 13505076251351089.

Starkey, K., and Tempest, S. (2025). The Business School and the End of History: Reimagining Management Education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 24*(1) pp. 111-125

Steyn, R. (2025). Stress and Burnout amongst Business School Staff. *International Journal of Educational Studies, 8*(2) pp. 100-119.

Stiles, D. R. (2011). Disorganization, disidentification and ideological fragmentation: Verbal and pictorial evidence from a British business school. *Culture and Organization, 17*(1) pp. 5-30

Taberner, A. M (2018). The marketisation of the English higher education sector and its impact on academic staff and the nature of their work. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 26*(1) pp. 129-152.

Tekeste, M. (2025). Under pressure: Becoming the good enough academic. *Organization*, 13505084251383285.

Thomas, L., and Ambrosini, V. (2021). The future role of the business school: A value cocreation perspective. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 20*(2) pp. 249-269.

Volk, S., J. Billsberry, and Ambrosini, V. (2025). Rise and shine: A circadian perspective on learning and wellbeing in management education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*

Vu, M. C., and Case, P. (2025). Overcoming Contemporary Academic Attachments: Developing Even-Mindedness in Neoliberal Cultures of Excellence. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 24*(2) pp. 244-264.

Willmott, H. (2011). Journal list fetishism and the perversion of scholarship: reactivity and the ABS list. *Organization, 18*(4) pp. 429-442

About the authors

Lisa Thomas is Professor of Strategy at KEDGE Business School, France. Her research focuses on strategy process and practices, value co-creation, multi-stakeholder engagement and sustainability in public and private sector organisations.

Véronique Ambrosini is a Professor of Management (strategic management) at Monash University (Australia). Her research interests include dynamic capabilities, business ecological sustainability, value creation, and the business of business schools. Véronique is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, the British Academy of Management, and the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management.

by Richard R. Smith & Richard Safeer

The Business School Human Capital System: Fostering a Climate of Wellbeing and Organisational Health

Introduction

Over the years, we have seen the growing awareness of the importance of health and wellbeing from a holistic perspective in the workplace. More than twenty years ago, employee wellness became a strong focus with employers in the US in response to the rising cost of healthcare. Some might argue that the attention on employee wellness and wellbeing is largely a financial orientation, with the additional benefit that it also happens to help the employees. In recent years, we have seen an increase in attention on employee wellbeing in many organisations as many have become attentive to employee burnout, stress, and the related health issues (Brassey et. al. 2023). There is also a growing appreciation that an effective employee health and wellbeing strategy can improve employee engagement, talent acquisition, retention and organisational effectiveness (Safeer, 2023). Given the rising attention and pressure in higher education institutions, we have also seen an increased focus on employee health and wellbeing in medical, nursing, and business schools.

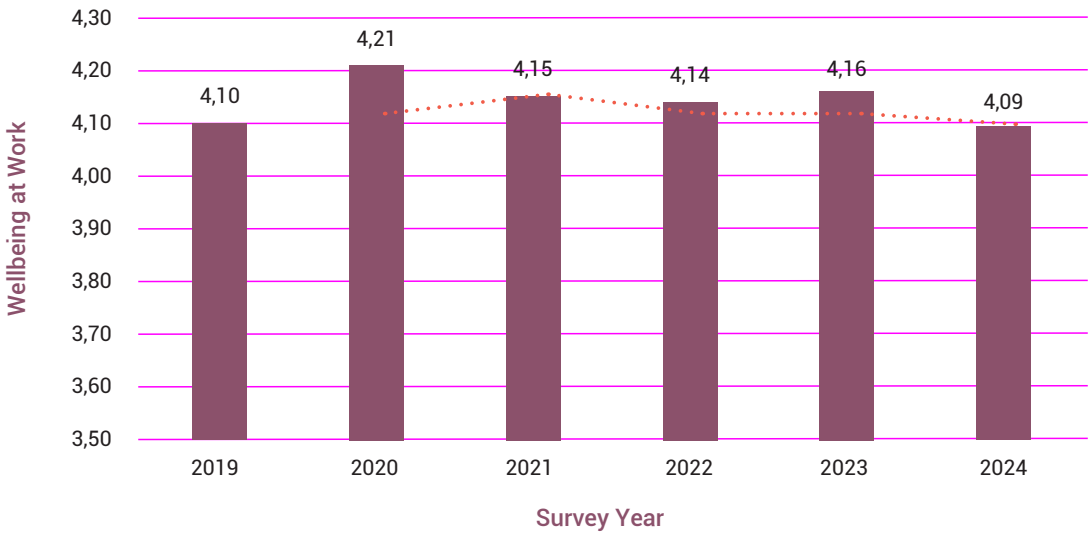
In this paper, you find an unlikely author combination of a business school professor paired with a medical doctor as we explore the critical link between the human capital system and employee wellbeing in the context of business schools. Over the years, we have each researched and consulted with many organisations on the topics related to wellbeing in our separate projects and engagements. Just recently, we began our collaboration as we linked Rich's extensive health and wellbeing experience with Rick's human capital development experiences, along with our mutual experiences in higher education.

There is no doubt that the globally competitive landscape of business schools is creating pressure on leaders, stress on employees, and burdens on faculty. The pressure for rankings, funding, and enrolment numbers, coupled with increasing societal pressure for positive impact, has taken a toll on many schools. In addition, our students also feel the pressure for performance in terms of academic, social, and career results. As a former Vice-Dean of two leading business schools, Rick has seen (and likely contributed to) this pressure for results with the staff and faculty leaders over the past decade. At the same time, we seem to believe that the higher education environment is more relaxed and has a healthy organisation culture due to its historic origins and traditions. However, this view is not consistent with the current reality in top business schools today. As such, we are pleased to contribute what we have learned about employee wellbeing in hopes that business school leaders begin to take steps to address key factors proactively.

As we consider wellbeing in the business school, we wish to echo the growing importance of this topic across all industries and modern societies. At the Johns Hopkins University Human Capital Development Lab, we developed a Wellbeing at Work Index together with Great Place To Work® based on a review of thousands of organisations around the world with over 5 million survey respondents. Over the last few years, we have seen a shift in the self-reported wellbeing measures of employees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed tremendous strain on healthcare workers and other first responders. At the same time, we saw an increase

in wellbeing across most industries as leaders took extra action to provide individual support to their people during this time of crisis. This raised attention on employee wellbeing support was certainly the case in business schools, as we attended to the needs of staff, faculty, and students while we shifted to online modes of learning, while determining how to manage during this unprecedented time. The general pattern of wellbeing is shown in Figure X-1. This data is from the US and measured on a five-point scale across all industry types. We found a very similar pattern in other countries in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific.

Figure X – 1: Wellbeing at Work Index



Our experience on employee wellbeing suggests that a holistic perspective is needed to address talent management, organisation structure, human capital leadership, and organisation culture. In addition, addressing these factors makes good business sense. A longitudinal study on workplace climate suggests that a positive work climate is linked to lower odds of depression, increased overall wellbeing, mental health, physical health, social connectedness, and financial security (Weziak-Bialowolska et. al., 2023). In addition, studies show that a positive climate can decrease distraction at work and increase productivity, potentially contributing to enhanced job satisfaction (Dollard & Bailey, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of addressing wellbeing at work, which is becoming increasingly important in business schools.

While the challenge of wellbeing may be clear, the actions may not be readily apparent for organisation leaders. In his recent book, Rich Safeer (2023) outlines the steps to build a wellbeing culture within an organisation and identifies challenges to achieving wellbeing in the workplace. In this paper, we anchor our contributions to the human capital system in organisations, which is not always viewed as holistically as warranted to address employee wellbeing in business schools.

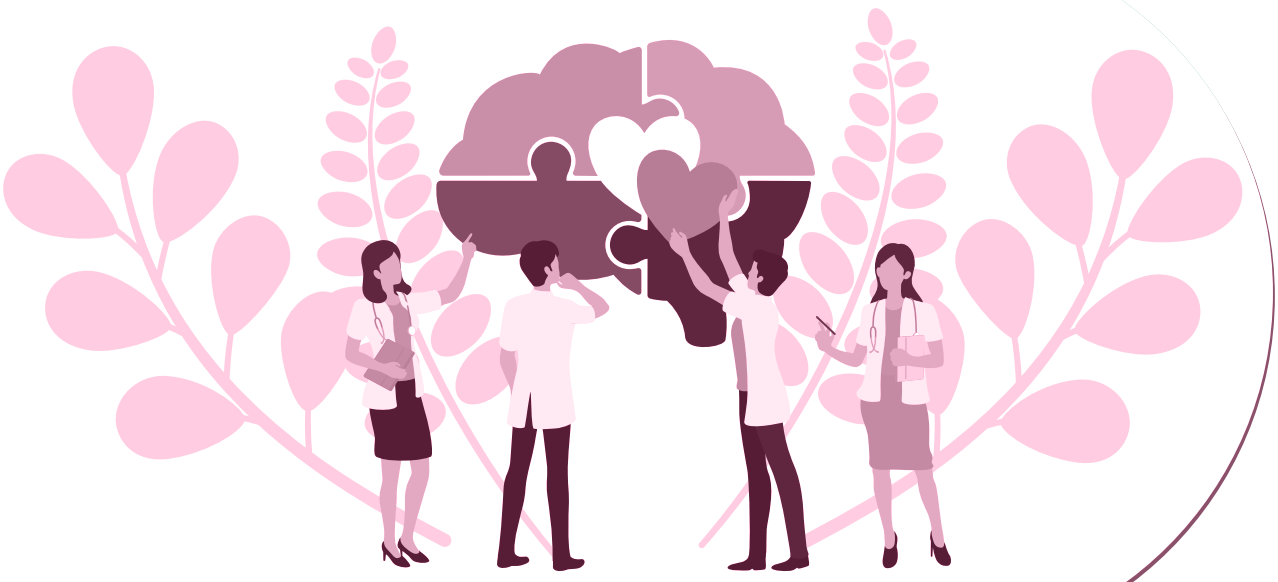
The Human Capital System

When considering the work environment and factors affecting employees, such as wellbeing, managers and deans may deflect responsibilities and instead turn to the human resource management (HRM) practices and policies set by the HR department. While HRM practices, particularly the subset generally viewed as talent management (i.e. performance management, career management, incentives, measurement, etc.), do make an important impact, these practices are only one dimension of the employee experience that shapes wellbeing.

In addition to talent management practices, the employee experience is shaped by an often-overlooked dimension of organisation structure. If you reflect on your own work experience in typical organisations, you were likely given a rather clear structure which may include such things as a job description, reporting lines, accountabilities, process requirements, and other structural elements. The design of work structures and work environments can have an important behavioural impact and is therefore a key element in the human capital system that affects wellbeing in the workforce.

One of the most critical (and variable) factors in the employee experience is human capital leadership. After all, it is often the immediate and senior management of both faculty and staff that sets the tone and priorities that likely impact communications, value of employee perspectives, and general expectations related to the work and output.

Finally, we consider organisational culture, which provides the unwritten rules that often guide behaviour, expectations, and values among employees and stakeholders. The organisation culture is generally shaped over time by events, practices, leaders, and lived experiences. Team and company culture can also be intentionally shaped by managers and organisational strategies.



These components comprise the human capital system inside organisations as illustrated in Figure X-2. Each of these four elements drives the organisational behaviours and stakeholder experiences. This is the framework for strategy execution, so alignment of these components with the school strategy, competitive advantage, mission, and vision is critical. When it comes to fostering a positive work environment for employee wellbeing, we must address each of these areas.

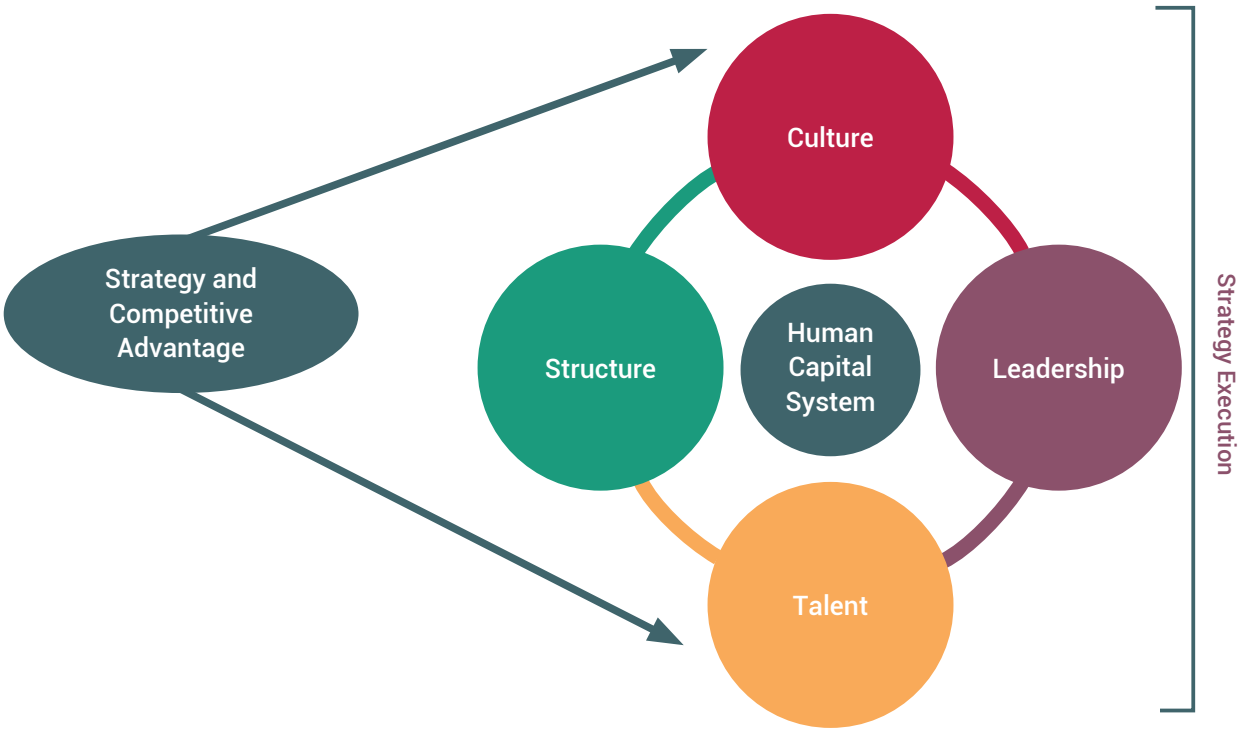


Figure X-2: The Human Capital System

(Adapted from Thomas, Smith, Diez, 2013)

Culture

The word 'culture' is used loosely by many organisations, yet most would agree that there are many factors that affect organisation culture (Schein, 1996). For clarity in our discussion, a wellbeing culture is defined as "a web of social influences that manifest itself in shared healthy behaviours and beliefs" (Safeer and Allen, 2019). Creating a culture that supports wellbeing not only helps individual health but it also helps the organisation. Similar to a river current, culture is a force that draws members of the culture in the same direction toward shared behaviours, beliefs and attitudes. Thus, a culture that supports wellbeing makes it more likely that those joining the culture (i.e. new hires) will adopt a healthier path (8). Wellbeing cultures in the workplace are also beneficial to the organisation through:

- Greater employee retention (Wright, 2010)
- Improved team performance (Edington and Pitts 2016)
- Decreased absenteeism (Edington and Pitts, 2016)
- Lower health care costs (Fabius et. al., 2018)
- Greater stock market performance (Fabius and Phares, 2021)

Creating a web of social influences that manifests itself in shared healthy behaviours and beliefs is more easily attainable when addressing wellbeing culture building blocks (Safeer, 2023):

- Peer support – Our colleagues, our co-workers, those with whom we share an even playing field (not our manager or subordinates) play a tremendous role in our choices and emotions every day. Our co-workers can support our effort to build and maintain healthy habits or work against them. This has been proved when quitting smoking, losing weight and a variety of other health goals (Christakis and Fowler, 2009). Our colleagues also influence our emotions. A simple smile can bring us joy, and the weight of stress can spread like wildfire.

  A voluntary wellness champion network is a practice in some organisations used to amplify the work of a person or team leading the employee health and wellbeing effort. The champion role can include helping their co-workers know the resources available, leading a wellbeing practice for their team and being a sounding board to take feedback to leadership. Champions can also play an important role as a conduit to implementing specific strategies as well, such as organising their team to participate in a company-wide wellbeing-focused event.

  Peer support needn't be on a grand scale. New employees can be assigned a peer to help them navigate their first few months of employment. Having a colleague to turn to with questions or even share lunch can help lower the stress that comes from a milestone life experience, such as starting a new job. We often see this with faculty roles or in departments where someone is not only in charge of social activities, but also of wellbeing. Many employees feel more comfortable speaking with a peer rather than their manager or a human resources representative.

- Healthy Norms – While peer support is a relationship of two, norms reflect a group. Norms are the accepted and expected behaviour of a group. Norms abound in every workplace and business school. Some norms promote health and wellbeing, and others do the exact opposite. Healthy or not, conforming to group norms helps us to be socially accepted, which helps fill primitive needs, such as the sense of belonging, which can bring the additional benefits of protection and security (Gelfand and Harrington, 2015).

  Unfortunately, too many members of higher education succumb to the norm of skipping lunch to work – alone and indoors. We know that the brain loses its capacity for memory, creativity and focus when not given appropriate breaks. We also know that socialising and nature have the opposite effect – enhancing all three. Imagine harvesting more of your potential if you ate lunch with a colleague outdoors. And yet, we adhere to the team norm of not taking a break regardless of the counterproductive outcome.

  Although it can be difficult to change norms, there is an intentional path. Once the team or organisation has arrived at a desired norm through a collective process (it helps to allow all members of a group

to voice their opinion), the other five wellbeing culture building blocks can be applied to shift group behaviour.

- Supportive Social Climate – When there is the general feeling or aura of support, within a team or organisation our wellbeing is enhanced. A good social climate helps build resiliency and trust, which in turn lowers our stress level.

  There are a variety of ways in which a team can build a good social climate. Just working more fun into meetings and the workday in general can be very beneficial. Other strategies include allowing everyone to be heard, communicating openly and frequently, and showing individual appreciation for contributions. Regular, consistent practice of what appear to be basic management skills is more often overlooked than we acknowledge. Institutionalising, or creating these norms, at times requires intentionality.

  While most business schools do focus on the right support for faculty, the same is not always true for the professional staff roles. Providing opportunity for faculty and staff to work together and understand their functions in the school can go a long way in creating mutual respect and a supportive social climate.

- Shared Values of Caring – These are different from core values. While a company's core values are often created by a small group of executives or the board of directors, shared values are created amongst both leadership and the workforce at large (or at least a representative portion). When organisations choose values that reflect a caring workplace, values such as teamwork, work-life balance and inclusion, support wellbeing. These companies focus on the needs of their employees, which in turn fosters engagement and loyalty, which benefits the company (Barrett, 2017).

  Business schools that create a caring environment for employees can do so by providing individual consideration for each member of the team. We find these values of caring play a key role in the retention of staff and faculty at the JHU Business School. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true – schools that choose values that place productivity, profitability and the senior leadership above the wellbeing of the workforce might find initial benefit (if at all), but ultimately are creating a disengaged workforce that will not perform at their best. Employees at these organisations are not likely to stay as long.

- Culture Connection Points – To reinforce and shape the culture, there are levers that management and the organisation can use to make it easier for employees to make healthier choices and have a happier workday. Categories of culture connection points include management communication, talent management practices, physical work environment, work practice traditions, and management policies, amongst others. We see many higher education institutions quite focused on connection points for students but often overlook the needs of doing the same for the staff and faculty.

  Benefits are another connection point with faculty and staff, which can help overcome some wellbeing barriers. For example, to bring greater mental health access to faculty and clinicians, the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine (JHU SOM), created the Office of Clinician and Faculty Care. The JHU SOM employs mental health professionals dedicated to faculty and clinicians to help circumvent the struggle of finding a mental health professional in the insurance network – a growing challenge for most universities.

- Leadership – While leadership carries its own place in the human capital system paradigm, it is worth noting specific roles leaders play in the practice of wellbeing before transitioning to the management aspect.

Foremost, leaders must care for themselves and be well to optimise their ability to support the wellbeing of those they lead. Deans and other leaders play an exaggerated role in mood contagion within the team they lead. Mood contagion is a phenomenon whereby one's emotions and behaviours influence the emotions and behaviours of those around them. Ideally, leaders are relaxed and upbeat so that they discreetly influence those they lead to also be relaxed and positive. Everyone is happier, more productive and a pleasure to be around when in a good frame of mind. Creating an upbeat work atmosphere increases engagement and improves employee retention.

Leaders can be role models by building wellbeing into their workday and making practices visible so that team members receive the implied message that they too, should care for themselves throughout the day. If the wellbeing practices can't be seen (i.e. meditation behind a closed door), sharing the practice verbally will suffice. Managers might even consider building team wellbeing activities into the calendar. When a team experiences a healthy practice together, it normalises the activity and can foster continued practice afterwards amongst some members.

Leadership

As deans and other leaders consider their impact on the priorities, initiatives, and plans for a school, they must also recognise their impact on the human capital of the organisation. Leaders play a key role in supporting the health and wellbeing of the organisation's human capital, as our research shows.

Although there are examples of how employee wellbeing sprouted from organic roots, it's unlikely for a culture of wellbeing to reach a thriving level without leadership. To optimise the success of integrating wellbeing into one's organisation, it's important to create a plan that is included amongst the priorities. Leaders need to be responsible for:

- Identifying goals for wellbeing in the school
- Allocating resources to support wellbeing for managers, faculty leaders, and employees
- Assigning human capital and holding those persons accountable to the goals

In addition to addressing wellbeing on the organisational level, it's important to address management practices that impact teams and individuals. We are pleased to have had the opportunity to work with leaders/deans who make a positive impact on the wellbeing of individuals by showing sincere appreciation for the contributions of others on the team. These positive affirmations coupled with active and empathetic listening make a significant difference to the lives of others.

There are likely institutional barriers to a healthy workforce, such as liberal use of emails outside of a traditional workday, causing some employees to work longer hours and coming to work tired and thus not fully engaged. The JHU School of Medicine has flags when writing emails outside of usual business hours to offer the sender to automatically release the email to the recipient during an appropriate working time. Regular input from the workforce and leaders across the organisation can help identify these unhealthy and unhelpful practices so that they can be addressed accordingly.

It takes human capital to support human capital. While benefits can be supportive of employee wellbeing, most employees will not use them. Instead, focus your energy on creating a supportive wellbeing culture where employees don't need to 'sign up' or 'log in' to be supported on their health and wellbeing journey.

Structure

Standards, organisation reporting lines, processes, and policies are often developed to drive efficiency and consistency in organisations. Too often, these structures create impediments to individual considerations needed to support wellbeing as a part of the human capital system (Daniels et al, 2017). In the context of the business school, the structures associated with faculty and staff roles are quite different due to the nature and expectations.

Unlike knowledge workers in industry, we find that faculty roles are relatively unstructured. In other words, faculty have a significant level of autonomy when it comes to organising their time, tasks, and schedules - other than individual teaching commitments. However, the nature of business school research can easily lead to fatigue and burnout due to the concentrated time immersed in detailed analysis, reading, and documentation – all in front of a computer screen. Often, these research activities occur in physical isolation since co-authors and collaborators may be in other locations. Since there are often no structures for faculty roles, deans and faculty chairs may wish to consider developing suggested models that integrate peer support to not only enhance productivity but also support faculty wellbeing.

At the same time, the pressure for high performance in most business schools has created challenges for the school's professional staff. Years ago, higher education careers allowed for relaxed summer periods, and a general abundance of students and funding. This has all changed in recent years as many schools struggle to achieve targets in admissions, rankings, placement, and revenues. As such, many staff find the need to do more with fewer resources, coupled with increased pressures. While there are often structures in place for business school staff in terms of reporting lines, job descriptions, and team goals, it may be time to revisit these to address employee wellbeing.

When evaluating the human capital structures, there are a variety of factors that may have an impact on employee wellbeing such as:

- Authority and Accountability – finding the balance between central control for decision-making and approvals, with the expectation of results, can help avoid wellbeing challenges (Han et al, 2025). We sometimes see this challenge when the central university has strict controls yet holds the school leaders responsible for outcomes.
- Task Identity – the extent to which an individual's contribution can be linked to the outcomes or customer satisfaction. Too often, we find staff roles mired in the detailed operations of the school without a clear sense of how they contribute to the student experience or desired outcomes of the programme/school.
- Job Design – while job design is prevalent in industrial settings, we do not often find proper analysis or consideration for the design of roles in business schools. As a result, we can find that we often stack up unrealistic expectations for key staff roles such as admissions, careers, and programmes. In some cases, we see one academic advisor responsible for a programme of 100 students, yet when that programme grows to 500 students, we still have the same expectations of that role.

Each of these can be important factors in employee engagement as well as employee wellbeing. We find that leading organisations can take a fresh look at the dynamics affecting their structure and make the needed adjustments. Additional organisational structure considerations might include processes related to the student experience, support of faculty research, links between academic research centres and institutes, and faculty department administrative support. While each school is somewhat unique, the structures and processes that define how people perform tasks are often overlooked in academic settings.

Talent Management

While many business school leaders suggest that the human resources department is responsible for talent management, most of the employees' experience is with their manager. Shaping the talent management experiences for faculty and staff is a critical part of supporting wellbeing in the school's human capital system (Baptiste, 2008). While HR professionals help guide the organisation and provide policies, faculty and staff leaders can help shape a positive experience that supports wellbeing.

Key activities in the processes of talent management that can positively influence employee wellbeing include:

- Recruitment – integrating the importance of wellbeing for your school into your job posting sends a message to the candidate pool that will resonate with like-minded job seekers, thus yielding more favourable applicants.
- Onboarding – Orientation content needs to include more than a list of benefits. Practices such as not meeting through lunch, announcing stretch breaks and encouraging standing are great ways to set the tone for integrating wellbeing into the workday. Assigning an onboarding buddy can help lower stress by giving a new hire a peer to answer questions and reassurance that they have someone to eat lunch with on the first day.
- Recognition – Celebrating successes, milestones, and personal achievements can have a great impact on how the school acknowledges individuals. While business school websites promote the achievements of faculty, students, and alumni, it is also important to recognise the people that enable these achievements.
- Annual evaluation – Including space to reflect on how the employee is fulfilling the company wellbeing value(s) or team wellbeing effort provides a regular opportunity for a conversation between employee and manager that keeps the topic in mind.
- Exit interviews – Asking questions about whether the employee feels their wellbeing was supported and what changes they recommend offers a quality improvement opportunity for both the manager and organisation.

These areas of talent management can make an impact to promote a positive work environment and a sense of wellbeing with both faculty and staff in the business school. While many of these processes may already be in place, it can be helpful to review these, considering various employee stakeholders in the school, to determine areas for improvement.

Seeding the Future

The human capital system sets the tone and guidelines for behaviour in the organisation, yet business schools have the unique opportunity to reshape and reinforce culture through curricular and extra-curricular student experiences. As stewards of future business leaders in our programmes, we share an obligation to instil human values in a way that not only acknowledges wellbeing but also demonstrates a culture of positive wellbeing. Unfortunately, most MBA programmes shun many HR-related topics to satisfy the students quests for tools, analytics and formulas. In addition, most MBA programmes striving for high rankings do not emphasise areas related to HR to steer graduates away from lower-paying professions (e.g. human resource management) as this would hurt the career outcomes portion of MBA rankings.

An initial review of top-ranking business schools in the United States makes it abundantly clear that wellbeing is generally absent from the core curriculum. While we don't expect that core curriculum for MBA programmes to suddenly shift, perhaps Associate Deans looking after the curriculum with their committees take a more holistic perspective on the needs in organisations today.

Businesses such as Accenture, Microsoft and Johnson & Johnson train their leaders in wellbeing. John Hopkins Health System has also, for the last seven years. We currently expose leaders to the importance of employee wellbeing in new manager orientation. We also give mid-level leaders a nominal amount of experiential learning. For our leaders who want to pursue more, we offer deeper opportunities through two different series of learning programmes.

Imagine the tremendous advantage business school graduates would have if they came to the workforce not only with skills to have a healthy day themselves, but also with the toolkit to support the health and wellbeing of those they lead. These new leaders would be much more likely to achieve their workplace goals and maintain their upward trajectory, as burnout is less likely in those who practice self-care. In the unfolding era of artificial intelligence, where the future of work intertwines humans and machines, we expect increasing challenges associated with burnout, stress, and wellbeing. Preparing business school graduates by incorporating wellbeing in the management curriculum has become a priority in shaping the success of future leaders.

Summary

Business schools have been shifting to meet the changing needs of the market over the recent decades, and many are starting to rethink the traditional business model of business schools (Peters et. al., 2018). Recent shifts in higher education have placed increased pressure on business schools for revenue contribution, programme rankings, research impact, and global recognition. In addition, many school leaders have a background in research with limited people management experience, which can create challenges during transition periods in many schools. We hopethat more business school leaders embrace a systems view of human capital to consider the culture, leadership, structure and talent management practices in the schools that they lead to promote employee wellbeing. Future experiences in business schools might be different once deans and leaders more fully embrace their roles as stewards of the human capital system and the wellbeing of their stakeholders, including students.

References

Baptiste, R. N. (2008) Tightening the link between employee wellbeing at work and performance: A new dimension for HRM. *Management decision, 46*(2) pp. 284-309.

Barrett, R. (2017) *The Values-Driven Organization.* Routledge: New York.

Brassey, J., Herbig, B., Jeffery, B., & Ungerman, D. (2023) Reframing employee health: Moving beyond burnout to holistic health. *McKinsey Health Institute Report.* McKinsey & Company. Accessed, January, 2024: https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/reframing-employee-health-moving-beyond-burnout-to-holistic-health

Christakis, N. and Fowler, J. (2019) Connected: *The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Daniels, K., Gedikli, C., Watson, D., Semkina, A., and Vaughn, O. (2017) Job design, employment practices and well-being: A systematic review of intervention studies. *Ergonomics, 60*(9) pp. 1177-1196.

Dollard, M. F., and Bailey, T. (2021) Building psychosocial safety climate in turbulent times: The case of COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 106*(7) pp. 951–964.

Edington, D. and Pitts, J. (2016) *Shared Values, Shared Results: Positive Organizational Health as a Win-Win Philosophy.* Ann Arbor, MI: Edington Associates.

Fabius, R., Frazee, S.G., Thayer, D., Kirshenbaum, D. and Reynolds, J. (2018) The Correlation of a Corporate Culture of Health Assessment Score and Health Care Cost Trend. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 60*(6) pp. 507-514.

Fabius, R. and Phares, S. (2021) Companies That Promote a Culture of Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Outperform in the Marketplace. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 63*(6) pp. 456-461.

Gelfand, G. and Harrington, J. (2015) The Motivational Force of Descriptive Norms: For Whom and When Are Descriptive Norms Most Predictive of Behavior? *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 46*(10) pp. 1273-1278.

Han, Y., Hwang, K., Kim, E., and Robertson, P. J. (2025) The impact of accountability systems on public employee well-being and the moderating effects of role clarity and job autonomy. *Public Management Review*, pp. 1-27.

Safeer, R. (2023) *A Cure for the Common Company: A Well-Being Prescription for a Happier, Healthier, and More Resilient Workforce.* John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey.

Safeer, R., and Allen, J. (2019) Defining a Culture of Health in the Workplace. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 61*(11)pp. 863-867.

Schein, E. H. (1996) Culture: The missing concept in organization studies. *Administrative science quarterly 41*(2) pp. 229-240.

Thomas, H., Smith, R. R., and Diez, F. (2013). *Human capital and global business strategy.* Cambridge University Press.

Weziak-Bialowolska, D., Lee, M. T., Cowden, R. G., Bialowolski, P., Chen, Y., VanderWeele, T. J., and McNeely, E. (2023) Psychological caring climate at work, mental health, well-being, and work-related outcomes: Evidence from a longitudinal study and health insurance data. *Social Science & Medicine*, 323, 115841.

Wright, T. (2010) The Role of Psychological Well-Being in Job Performance, Employee Retention and Cardiovascular Health." *Organizational Dynamics, 3*9(1) pp. 13-23.

About the authors

Richard R. Smith, PhD – Professor and Director of the Johns Hopkins Human Capital Development Lab, Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

Richard Safeer, MD – Chief Medical Director, Employee Health and Wellbeing, Johns Hopkins Medicine; Assistant Professor of Health, Behaviour & Society, JHU Bloomberg School of Public Health.

by Rick Delbridge

Sustaining Collegial Relations and Staff Wellbeing: Collegiality and 'Local Leadership' in Contemporary Business Schools

Introduction

Collegiality has long been considered the modus operandi of universities, central to academic freedom, scientific quality, and institutional wellbeing. However, collegiality faces significant challenges due to the increasing managerialism, centralisation, and bureaucratisation of neoliberal universities (Musselin, 2018; Fleming, 2019). This paper explores the concept of collegiality with particular consideration of contemporary business schools. I begin by briefly examining the nature and characteristics of collegiality, then consider the challenges to collegiality that are faced in the contemporary higher education context and how these can be ameliorated, before introducing a case study of a UK business school and discussing collegiality's significance for staff wellbeing. The discussion of collegiality's practical manifestation through this case study of a business school during and immediately post-Covid, considers both the challenges posed by managerialism and centralisation and highlights the importance of local leadership in protecting the staff from some of the negative consequences of these; actions, which thereby sustained collegial relations and contributed to institutional resilience. The paper concludes by reflecting on the future of collegiality in higher education, drawing on a critical and political perspective to advance the key issues in sustaining collegiality in ways that continue to promote staff wellbeing. Throughout this short paper, I draw on work conducted by myself and colleagues in a three-year international project studying collegiality in higher education, led by Kerstin Sahlin and Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist and involving researchers from more than 10 countries across six continents (see Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024; Cloete et al., 2024).

Collegiality in Contemporary University Contexts

Our research into contemporary collegiality revealed a multifaceted concept encompassing both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Vertical collegiality involves governance structures, decision-making processes, and faculty participation in institutional leadership. This is perhaps the more established and historically conventional understanding of collegiality as a formal system of governance and organisation (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). However, our research identified an increasingly important corollary: horizontal collegiality refers to peer relationships, interpersonal trust, and shared professional norms. These provide the foundation for community-building at the 'grass roots' of institutions and can potentially complement the vertical dimension. The paper by Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) that introduces our project (published in twin volumes of *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*) reinforces this duality, arguing that both dimensions are essential and interdependent. They define collegiality as an institution of self-governance, encompassing formal rules, normative identities, and shared practices. Collegiality is thus an institution inhabited by people doing things together, which is sustained through practices, norms, and shared meanings, not just formal structures.

The research showed how collegiality cannot be assumed and passively considered an enduring tradition; it is a 'living institution' that requires active reproduction and, in some instances, can form an aspect of resistance to, rather than maintenance of, the organisational order of a university or stand-alone business school. An element of this, which appears to be increasingly significant in the neoliberal contemporary university, is how staff must engage in political work to defend collegial governance against managerial encroachment (Denis et al., 2019). As I will elaborate below, departmental leaders can protect horizontal collegiality even when vertical structures are compromised. Collegiality requires conscious effort from individuals and institutions to sustain shared values and practices. This framing thus positions collegiality as a dynamic and contested institution, requiring ongoing commitment and vigilance. It follows that collegiality is not a 'one-size-fits-all' concept and how it manifests within specific university and/or business school settings is likely to vary across: a) disciplines – since different academic fields have different norms and expectations, b) institutions – since specific and individual organisational cultures and governance structures shape collegial practices and c) geographies – since national policies and cultural contexts influence how collegiality is understood and enacted. Consequently, collegiality is not monolithic; it is subject to contestation and may produce a variety of outcomes, both potentially positive and negative. While I will highlight the positive here, it should be acknowledged that collegiality can reinforce existing social hierarchies and gatekeeping, thereby marginalising certain groups (e.g., women, early-career academics). Further, international collaborations may shift collegial commitments away from home institutions, affecting horizontal collegiality. Understanding how and why collegial norms differ across disciplines, institutions and geographies, and how, in turn, these variations influence how staff experience and enact collegiality, is essential for designing inclusive and effective collegial practices.

There are many reasons why universities (and business schools, whether they are part of larger institutions or stand-alone) would want to sustain collegiality as central to how they operate. In principle, collegial governance supports academic freedom and scientific quality by protecting autonomy, insulating academic work from external control and instrumental agendas. Collegial environments encourage open-ended exploration and interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering the relationships where creativity can blossom. Lazega (2020) presents collegiality as a relational infrastructure that enables non-routine and innovative work through personalised relationships and collective responsibility. Further, collegiality contributes to conditions that go some way to ensuring research integrity. For example, peer review and shared norms uphold standards of scientific rigour and ethical conduct.

However, there is increasing evidence that managerialism and centralisation threaten these benefits by, amongst other things, privileging short-term metrics over long-term inquiry and imposing 'institutional goals' over professional expertise and autonomy (Parker, 2014). Indeed, Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) argue that higher education reforms based on enterprise and bureaucratic ideals have displaced collegiality, often without recognising what is lost. For instance, the increasing precarity and inequality of employment conditions that are experienced by academic staff in the neoliberal university are highly detrimental to the prospects for collegiality; temporary contracts and the marginalisation of early-career academics pose additional threats. Temporary staff are often excluded from governance structures and may struggle to access collegial networks, lacking the time, resources, or institutional support to engage in collegial practices, further eroding the fabric of academic communities. This creates an inequitable system that undermines the inclusivity and sustainability of collegiality. It would be remiss not to acknowledge that alongside wider environmental and market pressures and central university dictates, business schools are increasingly guilty of imposing some of these expectations and conditions on themselves, for example, in seeking rankings 'success'.

These challenges, which have been reported as manifesting in a variety of forms, undermine the conditions wherein collegiality can flourish, in both vertical and particularly horizontal dimensions. At the heart of this challenge is the undeniable reality that trust is foundational to collegiality. Interpersonal trust, built through everyday interactions, sustains horizontal collegiality. Deterioration in institutional trust, when eroded by centralisation and managerialism, undermines vertical collegiality. Repairing trust requires transparent communication, inclusive governance, and recognition of faculty agency. Where there have been negative consequences of the neoliberalism of contemporary universities, restoring trust is essential both in rebuilding collegial environments and supporting staff wellbeing.

Collegiality in Business Schools: A Case Example

It can be argued that business schools face unique challenges to collegiality due to their market-oriented and performance-driven nature. The dominance of metrics (e.g., journal rankings, workload models) undermines professional autonomy and collegial governance. Accreditation bodies, league table rankings, and funding mechanisms incentivise competition over collaboration, destabilising collective identity. The rise of individual performance assessment reduces the value of collective academic work, such as committee service or peer review. These pressures contribute to staff alienation, stress, and a decline in institutional trust, threatening the wellbeing of academics and the prospects for a collegial context.

These are developments with particular significance in business schools, but the trajectory of the wider university has complementary – and negative – further implications. These issues were highlighted by a number of studies in the collegiality project. There have been widespread increases in managerialism and centralised decision-making, which reduces faculty voice. This trend has been accompanied by a growing 'professionalisation' of leadership; the emergence of non-academic managers and institutional arrangements where managerial norms redefine leadership roles, weakening peer accountability and undermining academic professional identities and autonomy.

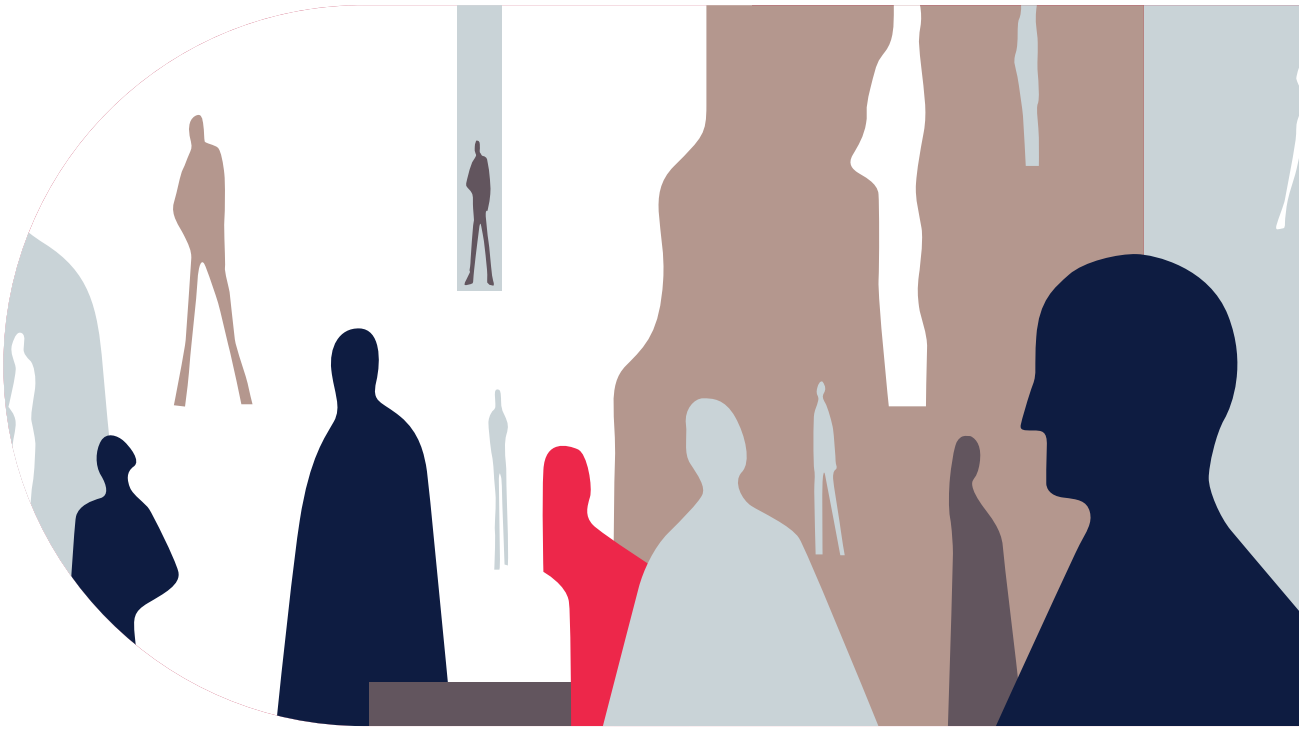
In a study undertaken as part of the larger international project, Jakov Jandríc, Paolo Quattrone and I researched an individual business school in some depth. We labelled the school ABS (Anonymous Business School). The study took place in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic and this provided the backdrop to our exploration of how collegiality was made manifest at the school. In a manner largely consistent with that experienced throughout business schools more generally, the rise of managerialism at university-level was reported to have led to the erosion of faculty authority and the centralisation of decision-making. At ABS, participants reported that decisions were increasingly made at the university level, with little input from departments. This undermined vertical collegiality and created a sense of disempowerment among staff. Moreover, the shift to remote work during the pandemic disrupted informal interactions that are crucial for horizontal collegiality. While digital tools enabled continuity in the face of crisis, they also created barriers to relationship-building and community engagement. New staff, in particular, found it difficult to integrate into the school culture. Participants at ABS described the loss of shared physical space as a major challenge. Offices and corridors, once sites of spontaneous conversation and support, were replaced by scheduled Zoom calls and email threads. This shift made collegiality more difficult to enact and sustain.

In this context, the ABS study revealed that collegiality significantly impacts staff wellbeing in several ways. Collegial relationships amongst staff within the school provided emotional and professional support during the pandemic, helping staff navigate uncertainty and isolation, particularly during periods of lockdown. Staff wellbeing was reported as deeply intertwined with collegial practices. Participants in the study variously

described collegiality as: a) acts of support and mentorship, b) informal conversations and shared experiences, c) a sense of belonging and mutual respect. These reflect in particular the significance of horizontal collegiality in staff experiences at work.

At ABS, collegiality fostered a sense of belonging, and this was reported as being particularly important by early-career academics and new starters, some of whom had moved country as well as employer. Informal interactions and shared values built trust, which was essential for maintaining morale and motivation. Participants described collegiality as actions that prioritise the collective over individual gain, such as mentoring, informal advice, and collaborative problem-solving.

Local leadership that was relational, not merely administrative, emerged as a critical factor in sustaining a collegial environment. As Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) emphasise, leadership within collegial systems is a form of academic citizenship. It involves service to the community, stewardship of shared values, and facilitation of inclusive decision-making. Leaders are expected to act as *primus inter pares*—first among equals—rather than hierarchical managers. At ABS, the local leadership, particularly the dean, was praised by colleagues for their empathetic and supportive communication during the pandemic, which contrasted sharply with the formal and impersonal tone from central university management. For example, the dean's weekly emails were praised for their caring tone, and were contrasted sharply with impersonal communications from central management. Departmental leaders exercised agency to 'carve out' spaces for collegiality, adapting central directives to local contexts. Performance reviews were redesigned to prioritise wellbeing and care, offering staff flexibility and emotional support during the pandemic and in its aftermath. These leadership practices helped maintain a sense of community and mitigated the negative effects of centralisation and bureaucratisation.



In some senses, the Covid pandemic served as a stress test for collegiality. Remote work disrupted informal interactions, making it harder to build relationships and integrate new staff, while online platforms lacked the richness of in-person engagement, weakening community ties. In response, staff self-organised to support each other, demonstrating the resilience of horizontal collegiality, and ABS leadership responded by fostering informal communication channels (e.g., WhatsApp groups, virtual coffee mornings) and maintaining regular, empathetic updates.

To summarise, the Anonymous Business School provides a valuable example of how local practices and actions can nurture a collegiality that supports staff wellbeing in the face of institutional pressures (and a pandemic). Three factors stood out from our research:

a. Horizontal collegiality: Informal networks and peer support helped staff navigate the pandemic. This was often orchestrated or facilitated by academics with 'middle managerial' roles, but was also initiated and sustained by the actions of individual academics and professional services staff. It is worth noting that these informal networks spanned junior colleagues through to experienced professors, whether they held formal leadership roles or not.

b. Empathetic leadership: The senior leaders in the school took responsibility for how institutional processes were implemented within the school. The dean and Senior Management Team prioritised care and consideration over centralised control and top-down communication. This was manifest, for example, in the flexibility applied in performance reviews. It was also clear in how central dictates were revised and moderated to be supportive and inclusive before further distribution.

c. Community integration: These first two components complemented proactive and reflexive efforts to sustain a common sense of identity and purpose. This was actively extended to include new staff to foster this sense of belonging. Here, senior staff played a significant support and mentoring role alongside the more formal leadership responsibilities of their position.

These practices show that leadership can be collegial and care-oriented, enhancing staff morale and cohesion. ABS emerged as an 'island of collegiality' (Jandríc et al., 2024) within a centralised university, demonstrating the importance of proactive and protective local leadership in shielding horizontal collegiality from bureaucratic pressures and thereby sustaining the centrality of collegiality to staff wellbeing.

Conclusion

The study of collegiality in business schools offers insights for broader organisational theory. Universities exhibit hybrid forms of governance, blending collegial and managerial elements. Decision-making is often messy and emergent, requiring flexible and participatory structures. Universities are unique organisations where professional norms coexist with bureaucratic systems. These dynamics challenge traditional models and call for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to leadership and governance. Collegiality and local leadership are essential to the wellbeing of staff in contemporary business schools. They provide emotional, professional, and institutional support in the face of growing pressures. Our research on how the worst impacts of Covid were ameliorated amply demonstrates the centrality of collegiality. Currently, the higher education institutions of many countries are facing extremely challenging financial conditions. Reaffirming collegiality—as both a governance model and a cultural practice—is crucial for the future of higher education, and how these financial challenges are navigated will have considerable long-term consequences for individual institutions. A loss of the underpinning foundation of trust may prove fatal to collegial cultures. And meanwhile, the nature and practices of collegiality must evolve to remain relevant in digital and hybrid environments. Digital platforms pose new challenges, especially in politicised environments. Universities must manage these dynamics to preserve collegial relations. Local leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating between centralised university structures and the lived experiences of staff. Leadership is not inherently managerial; it can and should be collegial, participatory, and nurturing.

There are a number of implications for practice and policy in order to enhance staff wellbeing that may be at least provisionally derived from the ABS case example, while noting the specificities of each individual business school. Our findings suggest that business schools should look to ensure that they have empowered local leadership in order that decisions are taken with a commitment to care and an attention and understanding of the circumstances of each individual member of staff. Where necessary, this may require a certain rebalancing of formal vertical governance structures both within the school and the wider university. In extremis, such 'rebalancing' may be necessary to protect academic freedom and preserve the professional autonomy of academics. Such steps are needed to foster trust and community *within* the school. As I have noted above, trust is foundational to collegiality. Its erosion undermines both good governance and employee wellbeing. This sense of identity and community will be further enhanced by the active and visible recognition of collegial contributions made by individuals. In this regard, both peer-to-peer support and the mentoring of colleagues by senior staff are crucial. I have noted above the danger that collegiality can reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities; senior staff bear responsibility to be reflective of this and to act in open and supportive ways, including as role models, whether or not they have formal leadership roles.

Overall, the findings from the collegiality project emphasise that collegiality is not just a governance model but a cultural and relational practice. It requires time, effort, and intentionality. Staff – both academic and professional services – must invest in building relationships, participating in governance, and affirming shared values. In short, collegiality is not an automatic feature of academic life; it is an outcome of choice and effort. Indeed, in our 'outroduction' to the collection of papers produced by the collegiality project (Cloete et al., 2024), we frame collegiality as political work, requiring faculty to engage actively in shaping institutional norms and practices. We highlight the importance of collegial resistance, activation, and maintenance, suggesting that collegiality must

be continuously negotiated and renewed. Conversely, where they are present, faculty can use collegial structures to advocate for inclusive governance, challenge managerialist policies and actively and collectively reaffirm academic values.

Universities must choose to support collegial values through policies, structures, and leadership practices. These need to be underpinned by institutional systems that signal expectations through formal processes such as probation, promotions and rewards. As Peter Fleming's 'Dark Academia' (2019) warns, the erosion of collegiality threatens the soul of the university. Revitalising collegial practices is essential for sustaining a vibrant, inclusive, and humane academic environment. We each have our own responsibility as individuals within this. Academic and professional services staff members will need to invest in relationships, community-building and seek to play a role in shared governance. In parallel, local leaders and senior academics must play a pivotal role in shaping the tone, culture, and practices that sustain collegiality. In the face of managerialism and crisis, collegiality remains a vital resource for staff wellbeing, institutional resilience, and ultimately the very integrity of academic work.

References

Cloete, N., Côté, N., Crace, L., Delbridge, R., Denis, J.-L., Drori, G. S., Eriksson-Zetterquist, U., Gehman, J., Gerhardt, L.-M., Goldenstein, J., Harroche, A., Jandrić, J., Kosmützky, A., Krücken, G., Lee, S. S., Lounsbury, M., Mizrahi-Shtelman, R., Musselin, C., Östh Gustafsson, H., Pineda, P., Quattrone, P., Ramirez, F. O., Sahlin, K., van Schalkwyk, F., and Walgenbach, P. (2024). "Outroduction": A research agenda on collegiality in university settings. In Revitalizing Collegiality: Restoring Faculty Authority in Universities. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations, 87*(1), pp. 181–211.

Denis, J.-L., Veronesi, G., Régis, C., and Germain, S. (2019). Collegiality as political work: Professions in today's world of organizations. *Journal of Professions and Organization, 6*(3), pp. 323–341.

Eriksson-Zetterquist, U., and Sahlin, K. (2023). Introduction. In University Collegiality and the Erosion of Faculty Authority. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations, 86*, pp. 1–27.

Fleming, P. (2019). Dark academia: Despair in the neoliberal business school. *Journal of Management Studies, 57*(6), pp. 1305–1311.

Jandrić, J., Delbridge, R., and Quattrone, P. (2023). Sustaining a collegiate environment: Colleagueship, community and choice at an anonymous business school. In Revitalizing Collegiality: Restoring Faculty Authority in Universities, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations, 87*, pp. 51–73).

Lazega, E. (2020). Bureaucracy, Collegiality and Social Change: Redefining Organizations with Multilevel Relational Infrastructures. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Musselin, C. (2018). New forms of competition in higher education. *Socio-Economic Review, 16*(3), pp. 657–683.

Parker, M. (2014). University, Ltd: Changing a business school. *Organization, 21*(2), pp. 281–292.

Sahlin, K., and Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (2016). Collegiality in modern universities – The composition of governance ideals and practices. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2–3.

About the author

Rick Delbridge is Professor of Organizational Analysis at Cardiff Business School and co-convenor of the Centre for Innovation Policy Research, Cardiff University. He is currently Editor-in-Chief of Research in the Sociology of Work, Associate Editor of Academy of Management Collections, and incoming Editor-in-Chief of Organization Theory. He is an elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, the British Academy of Management, and the Learned Society of Wales.

by Roy Suddaby

Managerial Pathologies: Barriers to Academic Culture, Collegiality and Leadership

The growth of administration in universities is well-documented. Yale University, for example, employs 5,460 administrators for fewer than five thousand students (Dinino, 2024). Many US private colleges report spending almost twice as much on administration as on academics (ACTA, 2017). Other surveys show that the ratio of administrators to faculty in these colleges increased from one for every 3.5 faculty members in 1990 to 2.2 in 2012 (ACTA, 2017). The UK experience is similar. Data shows approximately 60% growth in managers and non-academic professionals from 2005/6 to 2017/18 across 117 generalist universities (Bolton, 2020), with growth concentrated in marketing and the 'student experience'. In Canada, institutional reports from the University of British Columbia (UBC) show periods where staff growth significantly outpaced faculty growth and faculty/student growth (UBC Planning and Institutional Research, 2019). Collectively, these studies support a growing argument that as universities have grown, administrative professionals have grown more rapidly than both students and faculty.

Critics observe that the growth in administrative professionals is the causal source of the erosion of collegial governance in universities. In *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the Administrative University and Why it Matters*, Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) describes a gradual but inevitable erosion in faculty voice and power in universities as decision-making shifts from faculty committees to centralised governance structures like the Senate and, perhaps more insidiously, to administrative professionals.

In some cases, the shift in governance structures is overt and justified by the growth in size of the university. However, other shifts in power are often more subtle. Hiring and promotion of faculty, for example, remains exclusively with the faculty, but is often overseen by human resources or legal professionals whose organisational rules often subordinate collegial decision-making to a managerial or bureaucratic logic. Ginsberg goes on to point out that faculties rarely have but a ceremonial voice in business or investment decisions, changes to the physical structure of the university, or fund-raising and alumni issues. Ginsberg (2011: 4) notes that, increasingly, student issues, such as the size of the student body, tuition, financial aid, and admissions policies, are controlled by administrators. Ultimately, traditional modes of collegial governance fall victim to centralised bureaucratic structures dominated by an administrative logic and bureaucratic rules.

As the authority of administration grows, much of the deliberative decision-making of collegial governance devolves to the formal structure of bureaucratic decision-making. Drawing on several decades of archival data from Stanford University's administrative records, March, Schulz and Zhou (2000) show how written organisational codes—rules, procedures, and policies—emerge, proliferate, and decay. They show how rules respond to crises, changes in leadership, bureaucratic expansion, and shifts in organisational priorities. Their findings reveal that rules are not inert but adaptively proliferate. Rules beget more rules that evolve through feedback loops of compliance, exception handling, and organisational learning. The administrative rules at Stanford tended to accumulate through reactive problem-solving, generating what the authors call a 'rule ecology' in which new regulations coexist, compete, and sometimes cannibalise older ones. More critically, March et al. (2000) show that new rules tend to solve problems in the past rather than prevent problems in the future.

Business schools play a unique role in this process. Unlike other disciplines drawn reluctantly into the market and its managerial logic, business schools were founded within it and actively encourage the professionalisation of management. Many of the managerial professionals exported to other units on campus hold undergraduate or graduate degrees from the business school. Because business schools are highly dependent on very high tuition fees, large endowments, and corporate partnerships, business schools have not only internalised the logic of administration earlier and more deeply than other faculties, but they have also become the institutional carrier of managerial logics to those other faculties.

Collectively, this research demonstrates how the growth of universities in size and complexity has encouraged administrative bloat, which, in turn, has encouraged the erosion of collegial university governance and replaced it with a new form of managerial governance. To better understand the implications of this for university governance, we turn to a brief history of collegial governance.

Collegial vs Managerial Professionalism

Collegiality – from the Latin ***collegium*** – refers to governance by peers united in a common vocation. Historically, universities operated as self-regulating communities of scholars where authority was exercised through deliberation, trust, and mutual recognition of expertise (Sahlin and Eriksson-Utterquist, 2016; Gustaaffson, 2011). Legitimacy in decision-making was derived from collective judgment, rather than hierarchical authority. This is a form of governance typified in professional partnerships which embodies a 'third logic' (Freidson, 2001) distinct from the managerial logic of a bureaucracy or the more expedient logic of a market-based organisation; one in which the quality of decision-making is paramount and is achieved through internalised norms and peer evaluation. Collegiality, thus, represents both a governance mechanism and a moral ideal that institutionalises trust, integrity and shared responsibility.

Collegiality works best in small communities where scholars know one another personally and can rely on shared norms of reciprocity and reputation. As universities expanded, these mechanisms were harder to sustain. In their historical study of Stanford University, March et al. (2000) observed that as the institution grew, its written rules multiplied, and authority drifted upward. The informal standards of collegiality that once guided academic life were replaced by formal administrative codes. Growth and complexity privilege speed and dispassionate efficiency in decision-making, neither of which is supported by collegiality.

Size creates coordination problems that invite bureaucratic solutions. Others observe the same pattern. Clark (1983) described how the 'triangle of coordination' in higher education tilts from collegial to managerial control as systems scale. Musselin (2009) traced how decision-making authority migrates from faculty units to central senates and executive offices. Deem (1998) identified this shift as the emergence of 'new managerialism' in the university. In each account, scale erodes the moral and interpersonal foundations of collegiality, replacing them with procedural forms of purely rational control.

Managed Professionalism Creates Managed Collegiality

A growing chorus of academic and popular press writers joins Ginsberg's (2011) fear of the danger administrative bloat holds for collegiality in our universities (Clinton, 2014; Dinno, 2024; Thompson, 2024; Weinstein, 2023). Not only is authentic collegial governance diminishing, it has increasingly been appropriated by administrators as an extension of managerial professionalism and now functions as a tool for managers rather than as an authentic, deliberative form of governance. Increasingly, committees of academics are tasked with aligning their decisions and programmes to strategic plans designed by administrators rather than faculty. Peer review of academic performance, originally intended as a form of shaping the intellectual foundation of the university, has become a tool of performance monitoring where, for example, performance is measured by counting publications in ranked journals.

Collegial language persists in this regime – faculty are 'consulted' and 'engaged' – but, as Thompson (2024:1) notes, bureaucratic bloat has siphoned true power away from instructors and researchers. The result is a form of managed collegiality in which academics participate in collegial governance, but only performatively so, without autonomy or agency. They provide background and dialogue but without the power to make decisions. Governance remains, but its purpose is to demonstrate legitimacy, not leadership.

What is missing in managed collegiality is the moral purpose of research and education in academia that once informed collegiality as a social institution. A cornerstone of institutional theory is that institutions fail to endure unless they fully integrate technical and moral objectives. To institutionalise, American sociologist Philip Selznick (1949: xx) observed in his influential book ***Leadership in Administration***, is to infuse an organisation "with meaning beyond the technical value of the task at hand."

Selznick was following the logic of German sociologist Max Weber, who recognised the powerful efficiency of bureaucracy but lamented the loss of meaning and value that came with it. In his 1919 lecture, Weber (2015) noted that the word Beruf (vocation) gave everyday labour a religious significance. While the assembly line and the modern factory may be remarkably efficient, Marx observed, they tend to dehumanise workers in a way that traditional vocational work did not. Later, Weber (2015) would describe bureaucracy as a mixed blessing – so effective in organising work that we would become dependent on it, but so equally effective in dehumanising work that we would become enslaved to it.

Managed collegiality, thus, offers a paradoxical form of freedom – autonomy for the organisation but not for the academic professional. Academic professionalism is redefined as compliance with bureaucratic performance systems. In this new version of collegiality, the professional academic becomes a manager of metrics, not moral purpose. Professionalism is thus emptied of its collegial content such that self-regulation gives way to self-monitoring and moral identity yields to performative accountability.

Managed collegiality gives universities the ability to celebrate their independence from the state while centralising internally so that faculties lose their independence to the university (Musselin, 2009). As Khurana (2007) observed, in the modern business school, academic freedom becomes redefined not as freedom of thought but rather as freedom to manage. What remains is thin proceduralism – meetings, committees, and performance reviews – all of which are divorced from the moral substance of academic life – the pursuit and diffusion of knowledge devoted to a higher purpose. The business school, thus, becomes a purely technical instrument, a managed profession governed by its own administrative apparatus's quest for growth and efficiency rather than a higher societal calling.

Managerial Pathologies

Scholars of bureaucracy understand well how the efficiency of bureaucracy can generate unintended consequences. Ginsberg (2011) provocatively refers to these unintended consequences as ***managerial pathologies***. The proliferation of rules, identified by March et al. (2000) is one such pathology. Not only do rules beget more rules, a change in one rule reverberates throughout the ecology of rules and, in the process, requires a new cadre of managerial professionals whose role is to manage rules. An associated pathology is that the capacity to understand and navigate the ecology of rules creates a new form of expertise, separate from and increasingly superior to the expertise of traditional academic expertise. A third form of managerial pathology is that, as administration grows in power, there is a tendency to subvert the original goals of the organisation and substitute new goals that serve the purpose of the new expertise. Selznick (1949) termed this process of goal displacement 'co-optation'. The capacity to resist co-optation in a world dominated by a neo-liberal market logic is very difficult. In his article ***The Critical Business School and the University: A Case Study of Resistance and Co optation***, Martin Parker (2021) argues that even a business school founded with a disruptive, 'critical management studies' mission can become absorbed into the very market logic it seeks to challenge. He observes that his school's resistance to commodification and managerialism gradually gave way to institutional pressures (performance ratings, accreditation, revenue targets) that effectively co-opted its critical ambitions into the dominant university/business-school model.

Crafting Collegiality

If administrative bloat represents the loss of moral purpose in universities, then crafting collegiality is the effort to recover it. Any viable solution must begin by recognising that bureaucracy and managerialism are not merely technical systems of coordination but moral orders that privilege control, efficiency, and accountability over reflection, deliberation, and shared vocation. To counter this drift, universities—and particularly business schools—must cultivate forms of governance that are neither nostalgic nor naïvely oppositional but consciously crafted around moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values. The solution, according to Weber, is to re-enchant the world [*die Entzauberung der Welt*], by which he meant the need to restore meaning, spirituality, or moral depth within a rationalised and instrumental modern world (Suddaby et al., 2017).

Martin Parker (2021) observes that critical resistance to managerialism cannot be sustained through discourse alone. His case study of a 'critical business school' – i.e. one that actively resisted administrative control - illustrates how even institutions founded on radical critique are quickly co-opted by the performative demands of accreditation, rankings, and financial performance. To avoid such co-optation, Parker argues, critique must be embodied in institutional design. This entails creating organisational spaces that encourage pluralism of thought, resist homogenising metrics, and nurture dissent as a collegial virtue rather than a managerial threat. Crafting collegiality, in this sense, requires restoring universities as communities of difference—where intellectual diversity, critical reflection, and the slow, dialogical work of thought are valued over procedural conformity.

Selznick (1949) offers a complementary insight in his book *Leadership in Administration*. For Selznick, leadership is not the exercise of authority but the infusion of organisations with value and purpose. A leader's task is to ensure that administrative systems serve, rather than subvert, the institution's moral commitments. In the university context, this means aligning bureaucratic routines with the moral ends of education and research rather than allowing them to become ends in themselves. Leadership, as Selznick conceived it, is a moral craft: it requires attentiveness to the character of the institution, care for its founding ideals, and the courage to defend its integrity against instrumental pressures. Crafting collegiality thus entails cultivating leaders who act as custodians of moral purpose rather than as managers of metrics.

Finally, the language of craft provides both a metaphor and a method for restoring collegiality. Craft work embodies a moral and spiritual relation to labour: it values skill, patience, and material engagement over abstraction and speed. In my work on craft, I have argued that re-enchantment lies in reintroducing meaning into practice—where work becomes a vocation rather than an occupation, and where the doing itself carries moral weight (Suddaby and Sharma, 2025). Collegiality, viewed as a craft, depends on similar sensibilities. It demands care in deliberation, respect for materials (ideas, people, institutions), and a shared commitment to producing something of enduring value. Like the craftsperson who resists the alienation of industrial production, the collegial scholar resists the depersonalisation of managerial rule by re-embedding moral and aesthetic judgment into the governance of academic life.

Taken together, Parker, Selznick, and the craft tradition point toward a common project: to craft collegiality as a moral vocation. This involves designing institutional spaces that reward reflection and dialogue, selecting leaders who embody moral stewardship, and embracing academic work as a craft through which meaning, not metrics, becomes the measure of value. In doing so, universities might begin to reverse the drift of administrative bloat—not through further managerial reform, but through the slow and deliberate re-cultivation of the moral imagination that once animated the collegium.

Conclusion: Re-enchanting Management Education Through Public Value

The challenge, then, is not whether universities—and business schools in particular—can be managed more efficiently, but whether they can be governed in ways that preserve and cultivate meaning. Deans of business schools operate at a pivotal fault line. On the one hand, they are held accountable by rankings, accreditation regimes, and increasingly rigid performance metrics. On the other hand, they remain custodians of institutions whose legitimacy ultimately rests on claims of societal contribution, intellectual stewardship, and moral purpose. The risk is that, when value is defined too narrowly, leadership itself collapses into administration.

One way forward lies in revisiting an older and more expansive conception of value—what Mark Moore (1995) famously termed public value. In contrast to private value (profit) or procedural value (efficiency, compliance, metrics), public value directs attention to the collective goods institutions exist to serve. For business schools, this includes—but is not limited to—educating responsible leaders, producing knowledge that improves organisational and societal life, and sustaining spaces for critical reflection on capitalism itself. Importantly, public value does not reject managerial reasoning; it reorients it. It asks leaders to judge success not only by outputs and indicators, but by whether institutional actions advance shared social purposes.

Framed in these terms, re-enchanting management education is not a romantic return to a pre-bureaucratic past, nor a rejection of accreditation or accountability. Rather, it is an invitation for deans to recover leadership as a moral craft. This entails resisting the drift toward goal displacement, protecting collegial deliberation as a source of wisdom rather than interference, and ensuring that administrative systems remain means rather than ends. It also requires courage: the willingness to defend pluralism, dissent, and intellectual risk in environments increasingly governed by standardisation.

Business schools are uniquely positioned to lead this transformation. Having been early adopters—and exporters—of managerial logic across the university, they can now model its reform. By broadening the definition of value that underpins strategy, governance, and evaluation, deans can begin to realign managerial professionalism with collegial purpose. In doing so, they may help restore universities not simply as efficient organisations, but as institutions worthy of vocation—places where education and research are once again animated by meaning, responsibility, and public value.

References

Clark, B. R. (1983). The higher education system. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clinton, D. 2024. What's behind the explosive growth in Canadian University costs? MLI. Accessed on line on 2025-11-07 at https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/whats-behind-the-explosive-growth-in-canadian-university-costs-david-clinton-for-inside-policy/

Deem, R. (1998). 'New managerialism' and higher education: The management of performances and cultures in universities in the United Kingdom. *International studies in sociology of education, 8*(1) pp. 47-70.

Dinino, L. 2024. Death by a Thousand Emails: How Administrative Bloat is Killing American Higher Education. The Bowdoin Review. Accessed online on 2024 on 2025-11-07 at https://students.bowdoin.edu/bowdoin-review/features/death-by-a-thousand-emails-how-administrative-bloat-is-killing-american-higher-education/

Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism, the third logic: On the practice of knowledge*. University of Chicago Press.

Ginsberg, B. 2011. The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All Administrative University and Why it Matters. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gustafsson, H. Ö. (2023). A slow form of governance? Collegial organization and temporal synchronization in the context of Swedish university reforms. In *University collegiality and the erosion of faculty authority* (pp. 105-126). Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Khurana, R. (2010). From higher aims to hired hands: The social transformation of American business schools and the unfulfilled promise of management as a profession. In *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

March, J. G., Schulz, M., and Zhou, X. (2000). *The dynamics of rules: Change in written organizational codes*. Stanford University Press.

Moore, M. (1995). Creating Public Value. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Musselin, C. (2009). Profession, market and organisation: How is Academia regulated? In *The changing face of academic life: Analytical and comparative perspectives* (pp. 117-133). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Parker, M. (2021). The critical business school and the university: A case study of resistance and co-optation. *Critical Sociology, 47*(7-8) pp. 1111-1124.

Sahlin, K., and Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (2016). Collegiality in modern universities—the composition of governance ideals and practices. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 2016*(2-3) pp. 33640.

Selznick, P. (2011). *Leadership in administration: A sociological interpretation.* Quid Pro Books.

Selznick, P. (1953). TVA and the grass roots: *A study in the sociology of formal organization* (Vol. 3). Univ of California Press.

Suddaby, R., Ganzin, M., and Minkus, A. (2017). Craft, magic and the re-enchantment of the world. In *Management research* (pp. 41-72). Routledge.

Suddaby, R. and Sharma, A. 2025. Authentic Craft: A historical perspective.

Thompson, D. 2024. No One Knows Whats Happening: Bureaucratic bloat has siphoned power away from instructors and researchers. The Atlantic. Accessed online on 2025-11-07 at https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/05/bureaucratic-bloat-eating-american-universities-inside/678324/

Weber, M. (2015). Science as a Vocation. Pp. 3-31 In *Max Weber's Science as a Vocation*, Lasserman, P., Veoldy, I., and Martins, H., (Eds.). London: Taylor & Francis.

Weinstein Jr., P. 2023. Administrative Bloat at US Colleges is Skyrocketing. Forbes. Accessed online on 2025-11-07 at https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulweinstein/2023/08/28/administrative-bloat-at-us-colleges-is-skyrocketing/

About the author

Roy Suddaby is the Winspear Chair of Management at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria, Canada.

by Anand Narasimhan

Seeing Things as They Are: A Reflection on Wellbeing and Not-So-Wellbeing in Business Schools

When the call for a chapter in a volume titled "Addressing Wellbeing in the Contemporary Business School" arrived, it felt less like an invitation and more like a summons. The questions it posed landed close to home.

I have known wellbeing in a business school: collegiality, learning, fulfilment, growth, and development. I have also known not-so-wellbeing: exhaustion, feelings of inefficacy and inadequacy, envy, shame, and regret. I know well the slow slide into rumination, the thrashing about in a negative spiral of self-doubt, and the quiet relief of finding language and practices that help.

I have also seen how institutional settings and practices amplify or soften those ebbs and flows, how calendars, incentives, classroom interactions, and collegial conversations can tilt a mind toward clarity or confusion. The call for this volume asks what schools owe their people with respect to wellbeing. I found myself returning to moments that have shaped my own answer, and you will find it incomplete and unsettled.

This chapter is neither a utopian manifesto nor a set of fixes that could comprise "Business School Wellbeing for Dummies." What you will find here are fragments from the reflections of a long-term business school insider. This chapter has been written by someone who has taught while tired, led while worried, and learned to notice his own sense of overwhelm with a little more care. The aim is simple: to describe what I have seen and tried, to acknowledge where things helped and where they did not, and to hold open the question of responsibility. If there is a promise in what follows, it is only this. I will try to see things as they are, and to speak plainly about these things.

DARKNESS

It is 5 May 2018.

Final day of a two-module course, Gestalt in Organisational Development. I am waiting in a study room at the Gestalt Centre London for a final one-on-one coaching session with Tony Fraser, the kindly, affable co-director of the course.

Why am I here? As an IMD executive committee member, part of my role, in addition to being the Dean of Faculty and Research, is to oversee the development of coaching activities. As part of my professional development for the role, I decided to sample different coaching methodologies to see how we could broaden IMD's offer.

Tony walks in, and we smile at each other. He sits in the chair opposite me, looks me in the eye, and says calmly, "Anand, if you continue like this, you will have a heart attack and die!"

Back in my office at IMD, I am weighing things up. I left the meeting with Tony deep in the denial and anger phases of Kübler-Ross's model. Who even begins a coaching conversation like that? On the flight back to Geneva, my mind kept returning to a feeling of dismay and disappointment about Tony's unprofessional coaching demeanour.

The first sign of acceptance came when I opened an email from my general practitioner. I had turned fifty the previous year and, with great reluctance and plenty of delay, I finally reported for a check-up. The blood tests were not good news. There were follow-up appointments to make with a cardiologist, a urologist, and a haematologist.

The cardiologist puts me on a treadmill. He keeps increasing the incline. I am out of breath. "We have caught this in good time," he said. "With a few good habits, things should be under control." The urologist sends me into the MRI cigar tube after a painful biopsy reveals some nodules. We need to check if they are troublesome. Luckily, all benign. The haematologist finds that I have hereditary thalassaemia. "Not from my side of the family," my mother asserts confidently when I tell her. It turns out my body produces smaller than normal red blood cells, and more of them, to provide enough oxygen-carrying capacity. There is a chance I might have inherited the cancerous variant. A few weeks later, DNA analysis from a lab in Los Angeles reveals that the version I have is not the dangerous kind. Whew. Clearly, I should not be continuing as I am.

I silently mouthed my thanks to Tony. For a Gestalt coach, that is terrific somatic awareness indeed. It dawns on me that more than physical wellbeing, what Tony was referring to was mental wellbeing. And here he was spot on.

By then, I had been part of IMD's leadership team for close to eight years. A new president had taken over the previous year. We were a small team pivoting the institution toward a faster growth trajectory. My responsibilities had increased significantly. I was Dean of Research and Faculty, and I also ran the coaching and accreditation teams. Oversight of faculty and coaching affairs was particularly challenging. I realised I had the power to alter the careers and lives of colleagues through decisions the leadership team had to make. The weight of those decisions was piling up. I could now name the sense of overwhelm I had long denied. Then I had to admit to myself that it was something deeper. A sense of panic overtook me. Could I be heading toward depression?

As a graduate student in the United States in the mid-1990s, I spent a good part of a year clinically depressed. Two close friends in the department alerted me to the possibility. There were many days when I could hardly get out of bed. I was struggling to put my doctoral dissertation together. Life seemed listless, and my outlook was bleak. I had just taught an undergraduate class and was sure the evaluations would show that the students hated me.

I walked into the student health centre and was asked to complete the Beck Depression Inventory. Verdict: clear signs of the onset of depression. The therapist asked, "Any suicidal ideation?" Plenty, as it turned out. I fantasised about jumping from tall buildings in Nashville and drowning in the Cumberland River. I was prescribed Prozac.

Prozac turned my life around. Within six months, I wrote and defended my dissertation proposal, and I could see light at the end of the tunnel. The experience alerted me to the thin boundary between being mentally well and unwell. I began to engage with the literature on depression. Around that time, a new wave of books spoke boldly about destigmatising the condition.

Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* caught the zeitgeist. Peter Kramer's *Listening to Prozac* explored how the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor innovation was reshaping the treatment landscape for depression. I was particularly drawn to William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, which spoke to me, yet I also recognised that its crisis-then-cure arc can be unrepresentative of many people who live with chronic depression. The sociological treatment that David Karp provides in Speaking of Sadness helped me make sense of how identity and meaning shift across different phases of depression.

I emerged from this episode with a new attitude and a statistic. The attitude was one of kindness and curiosity toward mental wellbeing. I realised that being mentally well is a gift we can lose at any time. I resolved to care for those who need mental wellbeing support as best I could, without being judgmental. I also became acutely aware of organisational conditions that stifle mental wellbeing. As the years passed, my concern waned, and the topic of depression became less salient.

One statistic stayed with me: after a major depressive episode, there is a 50% chance of relapse. As I sat in my office at IMD, I wondered: was it "hello darkness, my old friend?"

DISCOVERY

It is 10 February 2023.

It was the evening after a four-day silent meditation retreat at Sharpham House in Devon, England. Each day's schedule comprised an alternation of sitting and walking meditation. The retreat was part of the Master's in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy that I had enrolled in. It had been led by our tutor in Buddhist psychology. I was now back home and sat down, intending to do a long practice.

As the sitting progressed, for a brief moment, I lost any sense of my somatic self. I felt myself hurtling through space and time. A voice announced itself: "This is the junction of all the crossroads that there are!" This was followed by a non-verbal flash as an insight arrived: "Everything will be all right." I opened my eyes. My gaze fell upon a Māori tiki statue on the windowsill next to me. We had bought the statue on a trip to New Zealand to visit my sister's family. "This is your tutor," the statue seemed to say, "you are safe with me here." I felt enveloped in a deep, compassionate embrace, much as I had been throughout the retreat at Sharpham. Startled by what had just happened, I quickly wrote down what I remembered of the extraordinary incident in my journal.

How did I get here? I was discussing my experience on the Gestalt course with my colleague Ginka Toegel, who had a career as a clinical psychotherapist before her reincarnation as a professor of organisational behaviour. "Well, you

should check out MBCT," she said. I nodded, without quite daring to ask what the acronym meant.

I went back to my office and googled those four letters. The search took me to the website of the Oxford Mindfulness Foundation. MBCT turned out to be Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and the website listed several versions of the course. One was scheduled for five consecutive Saturdays in Oxford, which I could attend. It felt like embarking on yet another adventure in learning about different coaching methodologies, this one akin to Gestalt, based on what Ginka had said.

The course was conducted by a genial British-Caribbean teacher named Conroy Harris. There were about a dozen participants, and Harris led us through group exercises and guided meditation practices. We were given a workbook to track our home practice and report on it in later classes. I found the experience enjoyable, although I could not see much that could be leveraged into any kind of coaching practice.

A couple of months after completing the course, I noticed that my mental state had changed. I was no longer the hamster on the ever-turning wheel that Tony had seen so clearly. It did not occur to me at first that the MBCT course had anything to do with it.

Around this time, my colleague John Weeks, with whom I occasionally exchange Audible recommendations, suggested Robert Wright's book *Why Buddhism is True*. I downloaded it immediately and started listening. Although certain parts annoyed me (such as the forced hitching to evolutionary theory), I appreciated the clear account of mental suffering that Buddhism offers. Soon after, I stumbled upon Dan Harris's book 10% Happier and fell headlong into the rabbit hole of his podcasts. I became fascinated by Buddhism, especially the concept of enlightenment.

This new knowledge of Buddhism rekindled my interest in MBCT. I discovered that the three psychotherapists who devised MBCT did so by combining insights from modern cognitive therapy with the older wisdom of Buddhism. Intrigued, I decided to go deeper. The Oxford Mindfulness Centre offered teacher-training courses, and I enrolled. Soon the world was engulfed by the COVID-19 crisis, but I was able to pursue MBCT teacher training throughout the pandemic. As the world recovered, I went further and joined the University of Oxford's Master's course in MBCT.

I emerged from the four years of training as an informed mental health professional. With self-compassion, I reconnected with the depressed self I had left behind thirty years previously. The psychological science component of the course gave me a working theory of depression as driven by reactivity and rumination, with meta-awareness as a pathway out of mental suffering. The Buddhist psychology component trained us in practices that sharpen metacognitive awareness.

For my thesis, I drew on an old hobby horse, the production-of-culture perspective in sociology, to explore how Buddhist practices of cultivating non-self have been transposed into modern depression therapy. An unexpected bonus of these courses, especially the training in meditation practices, was the noticeable improvement in my own mental health. As my brief flash-of-insight experience suggests, however, this is a powerful yet potentially dangerous method.

From this new vantage point, I realised that being a faculty member at IMD is mostly a confidence trick. Our job, as my colleague Jean-Francois Manzoni puts it memorably, is to show up in front of a room full of strangers and start talking. On good days, the trick works just fine. But there are days when our confidence is dented. A poor evaluation

for a session with the stinging comment, "What a waste of time. Wish we had another session with Professor X instead." Assertive, almost dismissive challenge from a client team in a pitch for a new programme. A rejection letter from a handling editor. And the additional slings and arrows that come with being a leadership team member.

With my newly acquired mindfulness skills, I could see my reactivity to events as they happened: attachment to good feelings when things went well, and aversion to bad feelings when the going got tough. The daily practice of mindfulness meditation I had cultivated helped me contain these highly variable and transitory feelings. In some sessions of gratitude meditation, I thanked Tony Fraser for his wake-up call.

DELIGHT

It is 28 June 2024.

We are in a session at IMD's signature programme, Orchestrating Winning Performance, our annual extravaganza that brings participants the cutting edge of organisational practice. My co-authors, Heather Cairns-Lee and Nancy Lane, are with me as we debut our case study, 'Mindfulness at SAP'.

In the classroom with me, and about twenty participants keen to learn how to scale mindfulness in organisations, is Peter Bostelmann, Chief Mindfulness Officer at SAP, the German software giant. Joining us by Zoom is Susanne Andersson, a Programme Manager at SAP.

Peter and Susanne recount the moment she struggled during the two-day Search Inside Yourself course at SAP. On day two, Peter guided a compassion practice and invited participants to generate attitudes of befriending and kindness toward oneself and others. Susanne tells the class that this felt like a step too far. "I thought, I am not closing my eyes here and wishing well for everyone. No, there are so many wars in this world; I cannot do that." There was a break immediately after the practice, and Susanne went up to Peter to voice her scepticism about the course.

Peter turns to the room and asks, "If you were me, how would you respond to Susanne at that point?"

Having experienced the benefits as a working professional, I began to look for companies that had successfully implemented mindfulness in the workplace. My first port of call was David Gelles's book *Mindful Work*. A lapsed meditator, Gelles had written about mindful workplaces in the *Financial Times* as early as 2012. In that article, he highlighted the work of Janet Marturano, then a deputy general counsel who implemented a mindfulness programme. Like me, Marturano came to mindfulness during a period of overwhelm in her work life. She was pointed to a retreat by Jon Kabat-Zinn and quickly embraced the practice.

Workplace mindfulness took off around 2014 with the publication of Chade-Meng Tan's book *Search Inside Yourself*. Meng described the launch of a mindfulness course at Google, cleverly titled Search Inside Yourself (SIY), devised with the help of leading mindfulness and neuroscience experts. The design was practical: a two-day learning experience followed by micro-practices people could weave into meetings, transitions, and daily decision points. The course proved so successful that Google spun it off into a separate foundation so other organisations could implement it. SAP was among the early adopters.

SAP's implementation did not arrive as a top-down wellness campaign. It began with Peter Bostelmann's private practice as a self-confessed closet meditator. Based in Palo Alto, he had watched his wife benefit from the practice and, though sceptical at first, quickly found it personally helpful. Rather than talk about it at work, he kept it to himself until he began discovering other meditators inside SAP. It felt like time to lift the lid.

Peter arranged a meeting at SAP's Bay Area office with leading figures from the workplace meditation movement: Chade-Meng Tan from Google, along with Rich Fernandez, Meg Levy, and Marc Lesser from the SIY foundation. The packed room signalled visible demand. He quickly set up two pilot courses, both received with enthusiasm.

The turning point came as Peter and his team mobilised sponsorship from senior health and HR leaders and engaged the works council in Germany to create and build the Global Mindfulness Practice (GMP). Crucially, they put an internal teacher pipeline in place to reduce dependence on external instructors. That decision produced an unintended but powerful effect: local multipliers in the form of trained SIY teachers.

By 2023, SAP reported that more than 16,000 employees had been trained. A global network of around seventy internal teachers and more than eighty ambassadors supported an internal mindfulness community numbering in the five figures, delivering dozens of sessions each week across formats. Waiting lists in the thousands were treated as a signal to expand capacity, not to ration access.

From the outset, SAP emphasised measurement. Short-interval pulse surveys, typically four to six weeks, tracked changes in stress, focus, and collaboration. Other internal indices linked participation in SIY to employee engagement and financial outcomes. Although these numbers remain private, it is clear that mindfulness is not a nice-to-have, costing about €1,000 per participant, but a deliberate investment in a flourishing workforce.

Susanne Andersson's reflection, shared with our class after her sceptical experience of day two's compassion practice, is telling. She described a longer pause between stimulus and response, easier refocusing after brief breathing, and a shift toward assertive, respectful communication that improved her ability to collaborate. Her testimony is not clinical evidence, but it is precisely what organisations need to scale: behaviours colleagues can feel in everyday work.

Our discussion of the SAP case that June morning produced three insights others can use. First, positioning mindfulness as attention training and emotional intelligence for work broadens appeal and lowers resistance to what can be seen as a spiritual or new-age offering. Second, the internal teacher training model, with rigorous selection, supervised practice, and ongoing community, created momentum beyond any single champion. Finally, tracking individual course outcomes, for example, stress reduction and increased focus, is not enough. Connecting results to enterprise indices and cost levers such as engagement and sick leave turns wellbeing into a strategic investment in employee wellbeing rather than an executive perk.

By the end of the discussion, I found myself asking a simple question: could we replicate the SAP experience at IMD? Was this case a good reference for how we should think about managing wellbeing in the modern business school?

DOUBT

It is a Sunday in November.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gabriel (not his real name) walk out of a course I was teaching. It was a weekend mindfulness retreat for MBA students. The course comprised the first two sessions of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Life (MBCT-L) on Saturday, followed by a day of silent practice on Sunday.

Gabriel, well-built and fit, struggled with the mindful movement practice after lunch on Sunday. We had completed a body scan and were starting mindful movement. I reiterated the message of testing hard and soft edges and doing only as much as the body allowed at that time. We moved into sitting meditation, and I announced that it would last half an hour. As everyone settled with eyes closed, I noticed Gabriel leave the room. What should I do? I was the sole teacher in the middle of a practice.

I followed him into the hallway. He was trembling. "The earth is parting under my feet, Professor, save me," he implored. I stabilised him as best I could and asked what might help him feel safe right then and there. "Going to my flat and sleeping," he said. I walked him out of the building.

I wrote Gabriel an email at the end of the class and met him a couple of days later. It turned out he had served in the special forces of his country as part of mandatory military service. His service involved a rigorous physical training regime, and he felt embarrassed not to manage simple mindful movement exercises that Sunday. "My arms felt like they weighed two tons each," he said. He had also been deployed on special missions that clearly involved extreme violence. I asked whether his commanders had given any advice on dealing with the aftermath of those missions. "We were always advised to dissociate the mind from the body: focus on what you have to do physically and quickly forget you saw any of it," he replied.

There I was, offering mindfulness training with the best of intentions, and now coming face to face with the dark side of the practice. In a subsequent supervision session, where I recounted the incident, my supervisor advised me to be alert to safeguarding issues through pre-screening of participants and to train in trauma-sensitive mindfulness facilitation.

The case of how mindfulness spread at SAP inspired me to join the fledgling movement at IMD. Erick Rinner, a venture capitalist and mindfulness adept, was already offering Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses, a day of silent retreat, and occasional lunchtime practices. I served as his apprentice in an MBSR course for IMD staff.

As I became a credentialed teacher, I began offering MBCT-L courses for staff and alumni. I also introduced abbreviated versions of MBCT in executive programmes. The plan, if it could be called one, was to inspire enough grassroots interest to create a self-sustaining mindfulness community at IMD.

When the MBA office invited proposals for two-day electives, I proposed a mindfulness weekend retreat. And there I was, trying to make sense of a situation in which mindfulness practice had opened up repressed trauma in an MBA student. As many scholars and monks have asserted, mindfulness practices are essentially part of a pathway that leads to the extinguishing of the narrative of self.

This difficult encounter raised questions and doubts. Who was responsible for Gabriel's mental wellbeing? Gabriel himself? The MBA programme? IMD? Me, as the teacher of a mindfulness elective? Did my intervention abide by the "do no harm" ethos of mindfulness instruction? There were no unequivocal answers.

CONCLUSION: WHO IS IN CHARGE?

Having shared these experiences and commentaries, I simply do not know where responsibility for mental wellbeing in a business school truly sits. Some days it feels personal: a short sitting practice, scheduling some more sleep, and saying "no" forcefully to additional demands. Other days it is plainly institutional: workload rules, schedules, the way we run meetings and govern ourselves. Then there is the in-between, where culture lives. A kind look from a colleague, a board member who asks a different question, a class that allows a pause. None of these is sufficient on its own.

The SAP story suggests that institutions can manage and support wellbeing practices. The classroom moment with Gabriel hints darkly at where such management could also go wrong. A structured wellbeing implementation might help, but so might small acts of human kindness made in real time.

So, who is in charge? I end without a neat answer. Perhaps responsibility is shared, elastic, and situational. Perhaps the best we can do is keep noticing: when care turns into control, when autonomy drifts into neglect, when help is needed and when it is not wanted. The Buddha often spoke of *yathā-bhūta* , seeing things as they really are. Perhaps that may be the only commitment we can make on wellbeing with any confidence.

About the author

N Anand (Anand Narasimhan) is Shell Professor of Leadership and Governance at IMD. He served on the top team of IMD from 2010 until 2024 was responsible for faculty, research, accreditation and coaching activity. He has served on the faculty of London Business School and Imperial Business School and has had visiting positions at the Indian School of Business and Vanderbilt University (Owen Graduate School of Management). He is a graduate of XLRI, Jamshedpur and holds a Masters in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy from the University of Oxford.

2

Implementation of Mental Health/ Wellbeing Frameworks and Initiatives Case Studies of Community Impact: Organisation Structures and Design in Global Business Schools

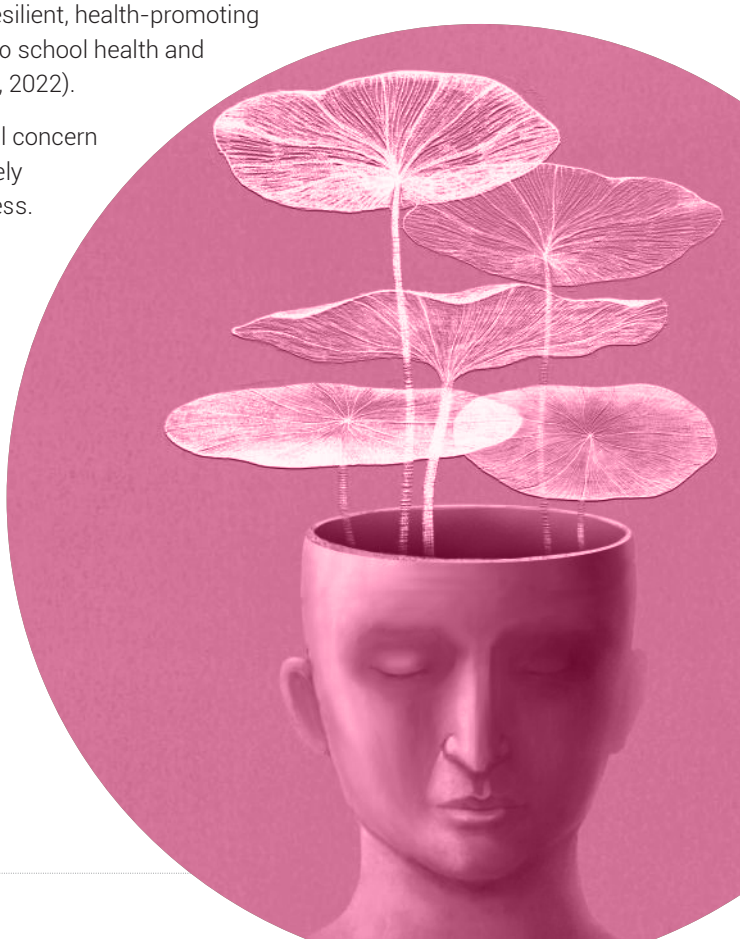
by Nora Yennek & Leila Triki

Wellbeing in Business Schools Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory: Application to the Case of the Mediterranean School of Business (MSB)

I. Wellbeing in Higher Education and Business Schools

Contemporary wellbeing issues now extend beyond the social sphere alone, emerging as a major political concern at the crossroads of economic, health, and environmental imperatives. They reflect a shift in public priorities toward a more integrated conception of human development, coherently linking the economic, social, cultural, and sustainable dimensions of wellbeing. This evolution is reflected in the OECD and UNESCO guidelines, both of which promote individual and collective wellbeing.

Through its Better Life Initiative, launched in 2011, and its annual report *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, the OECD advocates a multidimensional approach to wellbeing based on both objective and subjective indicators, including health, knowledge and skills, social connections, work-life balance, job quality, and subjective wellbeing (OECD, 2025). UNESCO, for its part, has taken this reflection a step further through its Strategy on Education for Health and Well-being, which aims to envision resilient, health-promoting education systems that integrate a comprehensive approach to school health and wellbeing as an essential part of their daily missions (UNESCO, 2022).



In the field of higher education, wellbeing has become a central concern in university policies and a research topic in its own right, closely linked to growing attention to mental health and student success. Long driven by logics of performance and competitiveness, universities are now compelled to integrate quality of life and institutional climate into their strategic priorities. Business schools, in particular, face a tension between the pursuit of excellence and the pressures of academic intensity, which generate stress for both students and faculty members (Emerson et al., 2023). This situation raises questions about how these institutions can reconcile their managerial training requirements with environments that foster engagement, autonomy, and wellbeing among their members.

There is no unified conceptual definition of wellbeing in the literature, as the term can encompass related notions such as happiness, quality of life, or optimal functioning (Fenouillet et al., 2017). While research on wellbeing initially developed

from a hedonic perspective, focusing on satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative emotions, a eudaimonic approach has gradually gained prominence, viewing wellbeing as a process of personal growth and the realisation of human potential (Creusier, 2013).

These perspectives are increasingly reflected in the scientific literature, which highlights the role of educational environments in fostering wellbeing. From this standpoint, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2002; Ryan and Deci, 2017) appears particularly relevant as a eudaimonic theory of wellbeing. SDT is both a conceptual theory and an empirical framework, robustly supported by several decades of experimental and applied research. By placing the fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the core of optimal functioning and wellbeing, it provides a particularly relevant analytical framework for higher education, where the recognition, development, and mobilization of skills are essential levers for wellbeing and motivation.

Several empirical studies confirm this approach, including that of King et al. (2024), which shows, based on data collected in 70 countries (over 500,000 students), that supportive learning environments systematically promote emotional, eudaimonic, and academic wellbeing, although the strength of this effect varies across cultural, economic, and political contexts. These findings, grounded in SDT, suggest that fostering a need-supportive learning environment is an effective strategy for enhancing student wellbeing and motivation in all types of institutions, including business schools, while remaining sensitive to local specificities.

In line with this body of research, we propose to examine how SDT can provide a relevant analytical framework for understanding the pedagogical and organisational practices that promote wellbeing in business schools, among both students and teaching and administrative staff. We first present the theoretical foundations of SDT, followed by concrete initiatives implemented at the Mediterranean School of Business (MSB) in Tunisia, before discussing the contributions of this theory to understanding wellbeing in business schools and outlining directions for future research.

II. Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Conceptual Framework

According to Tessier (2024), SDT, first formalised in the 1980s, has grown considerably: the number of scientific publications rose from 55 between 1980 and 1990 to more than 54,000 between 2012 and 2021. This growth can be explained by its many applications in education, sports, work, family, and health, as well as by its integrative approach that bridges different branches of psychology, such as social psychology, neuroscience, and behavioural economics. The strength of this motivational theory lies in its empirical foundations and its theoretical perspective, which explains human motivation as a dialectic between individual characteristics and environmental factors. SDT thus recognises individuals' potential for self-actualisation, while acknowledging the influence of the environment on its development (Lafreniere et al., 2009). SDT is an integrative framework composed of six mini-theories of human motivation.

In this contribution, we draw on two of these mini-theories, the Theory of Organismic Integration and the Theory of Basic Psychological Needs, to illustrate, through case studies, practical applications that are particularly relevant for understanding the development of wellbeing in business schools. These two theories have been selected not to exclude the others but because they provide a useful starting point for understanding the analytical scope of SDT in the context of higher education.

The Theory of Organismic Integration

This theory conceptualises human motivation as a continuum based on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and on the process of internalisation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the interest and enjoyment individuals derive from activities performed freely and autonomously. Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, refers to behaviours driven by external factors that are not inherently satisfying. Internalisation is defined as the process through which individuals assimilate values, beliefs, or behavioural norms originating from external sources and transform them into personally endorsed values (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Human motivation is therefore conceived as a continuum of self-determination, ranging from amotivation (the absence of motivation) to intrinsic motivation, distinguishing between controlled forms of regulation (external and introjected) and autonomous forms (identified, integrated, or intrinsic). These latter forms may still be extrinsic but remain congruent with the individual's own values. According to SDT, the more autonomous the regulation of behaviour, that is, the closer it is to self-determined regulation, the more beneficial its effects on wellbeing, performance, and persistence.

The Theory of Basic Psychological Needs

Deci and Ryan (2002) identify three basic psychological needs that underlie human motivation: the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. When the environment supports the satisfaction of these needs, individuals experience optimal functioning in terms of behavior, personal growth, and quality of experience.

The need for competence corresponds to what individuals feel when they interact effectively with their environment and when that environment offers opportunities to use and develop their abilities. The need for relatedness refers to the feeling of being connected to others, caring for others, and experiencing a sense of belonging to individuals and communities, without expecting any particular benefit beyond the sense of connection itself. Finally, the need for autonomy refers to being the origin of one's own behaviour. As described in organismic theory, self-determined behaviours are those motivated by interest or enjoyment in the activity or by personally endorsed values.

SDT provides a framework for understanding learning and work environments as contexts that foster motivation and cooperation, placing the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the centre of educational and organisational systems. When these needs are satisfied, individuals develop what is known as self-determined motivation, that is, engagement based on interest, personal value, and the meaning attached to the activity rather than on external pressures or rewards. Conversely, contexts that frustrate these needs tend to elicit controlled motivation or disengagement.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the following section examines the initiatives implemented at the Mediterranean School of Business (MSB). Rather than reporting an empirical study, this section uses SDT as an analytical framework to identify a set of motivational indicators from field observations, which serve to formulate theoretically grounded hypotheses interpreted as manifestations of more self-determined forms of motivation.

III. Case Study: Applying the SDT Framework at the Mediterranean School of Business

Presentation of MSB and its context

Founded in 2002, the Mediterranean School of Business (MSB) is one of Tunisia's first private universities, born

out of an initiative by Tunisian-born academics trained in North America and local economic actors. The first to offer English-language education based on active learning, it aims to make Tunisia a leading educational destination. In a highly competitive public environment, MSB has built its legitimacy on visionary leadership and an organisational culture that values trust, commitment, and wellbeing, integrating performance, motivation, and recognition at the heart of its institutional strategy. Its development takes place in an environment dominated by a strong public academic tradition, imposing a double challenge on private institutions to attract students and teachers. To stand out, MSB has focused on innovative teaching methods and international openness, while placing wellbeing at the heart of its institutional strategy.

The expansion of its training offerings and activities has made it necessary to formalise a workplace wellbeing policy that incorporates both objective (performance, retention, absenteeism) and subjective (motivation, commitment, trust) indicators in order to reconcile academic excellence with professional fulfilment. MSB is currently the only business school in Tunisia and French-speaking Africa to have obtained triple international accreditation: AACSB, AMBA, and EFMD.

Conducted as a case study at the Mediterranean School of Business (MSB), this analysis examines two types of actions aimed at fostering wellbeing: those concerning students and those involving teaching and administrative teams. Because motivational dynamics are interconnected, environments that support autonomy and cooperation benefit the entire educational community.

Actions to promote student wellbeing: autonomy, competence, belonging

Two programmes established at MSB to promote student wellbeing reflect the principles of SDT: the Advising and Counselling Centre (ACC) and the Student Life Department (SLD).

The ACC aims to strengthen students' autonomy and competence through individualised support. Each student is assigned an academic advisor who helps them define their personal and academic goals, identify obstacles, and mobilise appropriate resources, such as tutoring, academic support, or mentor guidance. This latter programme plays a key role: it not only strengthens the perception of competence among the students receiving support, but also their sense of belonging.

The Student Life Department acts more directly on the need for social relationships and belonging. By supervising more than 30 cultural, artistic, entrepreneurial, and humanitarian clubs, it promotes cooperation, diversity, and a sense of inclusion. These collective projects allow students to experience supervised autonomy, in which initiative is combined with a supportive institutional framework. This configuration creates a need-supportive environment conducive to self-determined motivation and experiential learning.

Actions to promote team wellbeing: autonomy, recognition, cooperation

MSB applies similar principles to its administrative and academic staff. The initiatives carried out aim to strengthen cohesion, recognition, and professional development, all of which are levers that respond to the psychological needs identified by SDT.

The annual team-building day brings all employees together for fun activities and moments of sharing. These gatherings promote cooperation and mutual recognition while strengthening the sense of belonging to a working community. The Summer Kids Club, intended for employees' children, extends this dynamic to the family sphere and reflects a more comprehensive approach to wellbeing, integrating the personal dimensions of employees' lives.

The ACC and the partnership with the Ahkili association are also open to teams, offering a space for listening and support that is accessible at all times. This openness to the entire community reflects an inclusive approach to organisational wellbeing, where trust and institutional availability play a central role. Finally, differentiated skills development plans for administrative and academic staff respond to the need for professional autonomy and recognition, supporting the development of careers aligned with transformations in higher education.

Analysis of actions in light of the SDT

The effects presented in Table 1 are assumed to be associated with the actions described, based on the conceptual framework of SDT. These are not direct empirical findings but theoretical interpretations of existing institutional data, analysed through the SDT framework to explore potential links between the support of basic psychological needs and observed manifestations of motivation and wellbeing. This approach provides an explanatory lens that helps make sense of data, which taken alone, would not reveal the underlying dynamics of motivation and wellbeing within the institution. This analysis highlights how the SDT framework can serve as a practical tool for understanding and enhancing institutional wellbeing. By framing existing actions in terms of need satisfaction, it allows for a more coherent vision of how professional development, recognition, and community support contribute to motivation and engagement at the MSB.

Domain	Supported p sychological needs (SDT)	Motivational indicators	Assumed effects associated with actions since
Student wellbeing programmes (Advising and Counseling Centre, peer mentoring, Student Life Department)	Autonomy: individualised support promoting choice and self-initiation Competence: development of perceived competence and sense of effectiveness Relatedness: supportive and mutually beneficial peer relationships	• Voluntary participation in support programmes • Ability to set personal and academic goals • Proactive mobilisation of available resources • Improved perception of competence and mastery	• Improved academic results (more than 70% of mentored students improved their grades in the subject matter) • Increase in the three-year graduation rate for the Licence degree programme (from 66% to more than 77% between 2020 and 2022) • Sustainable wellbeing and increased engagement in community life
Actions to promote team wellbeing (team-building activities, professional development, and support systems)	Autonomy: personalised professional development fostering choice and initiative Competence: recognition of contributions and career support Relatedness: cohesion, mutual support, and a caring institutional culture	• Participation in group activities (meetings, teambuilding) • Voluntary use of support systems (Ahkili, ACC support) • Expression of satisfaction during annual employees' reviews • Involvement in skills development plans	• High staff retention (3 top performer departures in 5 years despite a 60% increase in staff numbers) • Strong organisational commitment (increase of average participation rates of 10% in meetings and teambuilding activities) • Staff satisfaction with the institution's wellbeing initiatives (over 95% satisfaction rate) • Strengthened sense of belonging and organisational trust

Table 1: Typology of motivational indicators and associated effects within the SDT framework

IV. The Contribution of SDT to Developing a Culture of Wellbeing in Business Schools

We have seen how SDT, and in particular the Basic Psychological Needs Theory and the Organismic Integration Theory, can be applied to analyse, in the field of higher education, the social-contextual conditions that support the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and how such satisfaction fosters internalisation and self-determined motivation. The international study by King et al. (2024) shows that when learning environments support these needs, students experience greater subjective and educational wellbeing, as well as more sustained engagement.

However, other mini-theories within SDT also deserve further exploration to complement this understanding (Tessier, 2024): Cognitive Evaluation Theory, which explains the effects of control and feedback on intrinsic motivation; Causality Orientations Theory, which examines individual differences in motivational orientation; Goal Contents Theory, which focuses on the nature of the goals pursued (intrinsic versus extrinsic); and Relationships Motivation Theory, which highlights the quality of interpersonal relationships. It would therefore be relevant to develop an empirical research programme integrating these six perspectives in order to jointly examine their contributions to wellbeing, achievement, and vitality in higher education. In this sense, SDT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human development within academic institutions.

Nevertheless, it is already possible to outline a structured approach aimed at helping business schools orient their educational practices in ways that support the development of self-determined motivation and eudaimonic wellbeing, as conceptualised by SDT. This reflection can be organised across three analytical levels — the micro level, the meso level, and the macro level — which provide a coherent framework for examining educational practices from multiple vantage points (Carré, 2020). These three levels enable us to consider jointly the dynamics involved in SDT-aligned educational innovation.

The micro level focuses on the learner's individual experience, the meso level on the organisational and collective structures that shape it, and the macro level on the broader institutional and cultural contexts that influence the whole system. At each analytical level, one should consider to what extent the initiatives undertaken foster the satisfaction and development of the three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — as defined by SDT.

It is important to note that while SDT is fundamentally a micro-level theory centred on the psychological functioning of individuals, the macro level remains highly relevant insofar as it shapes the broader institutional and cultural environment that can either support or constrain need-supportive practices at the micro and meso levels. In this sense, the macro level does not directly assess the satisfaction of psychological needs, but rather examines the structural, policy, and cultural conditions that enable—or hinder—the implementation of actions that effectively support autonomy, competence, and relatedness within educational institutions.

Building on this perspective, we propose a SDT-Based Framework for Implementing Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Business Schools, which invites institutions to systematically question whether the actions undertaken at each level — micro, meso, and macro — effectively support the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs and, consequently, the development of self-determined motivation and eudaimonic wellbeing (see Table 2).

Level of Observation	Sub-dimension	What is Observed
MICRO (Concrete practices of the individual in a learning situation)	Individual relationship to learning	Motivations, expectations, perceived meaning of the programme, sense of personal control over one's learning.
	Immediate pedagogical interactions	Quality of relationships with teachers and peers, feedback, recognition, classroom climate.
	Study practices and learning strategies	Self-organisation, engagement, use of digital tools, teamwork, time management.
MESO (Organisational and collective systems structuring practices)	Pedagogical design and curriculum engineering	Programme structure, teaching methods, flexibility of learning paths, assessment systems.
	Support and mentoring systems	Tutoring, mentoring, follow-up mechanisms, accessibility of support, culture of care.
	Organisational culture and community life	Shared values, associative life, cooperation, institutional recognition.
MACRO (Institutional and cultural frameworks influencing the whole)	Public policies and regulatory frameworks	Degree of institutional autonomy, regulatory constraints, funding, access to education.
	Socio-economic and professional developments	Labour market expectations, employability, global competition, value of degrees.
	Cultural representations of learning and success	Collective values associated with achievement, cooperation, or performance.

Table 2 : SDT-Based Framework for Implementing Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Business Schools

In the following sections, we apply this framework to the MSB case by examining the initiatives presented earlier and evaluating their contribution to autonomy, competence, and relatedness across the three levels of analysis. To make this application more concrete, we assigned indicative values to each sub-dimension. These values reflect a hypothetical 1–3 scale, where students would be surveyed for the micro-level assessment, while institutions would evaluate themselves at the meso and macro levels.

At the meso level, organisational culture, community life, and the support and mentoring system at MSB would reasonably fall on the higher end of the scale. At the macro level, and given the broader Tunisian context in which the school operates — characterised by a relatively centralised higher education system — autonomy would likely

receive a lower score, whereas cultural representations of learning and success would be positioned toward the higher end (see Figure 1).

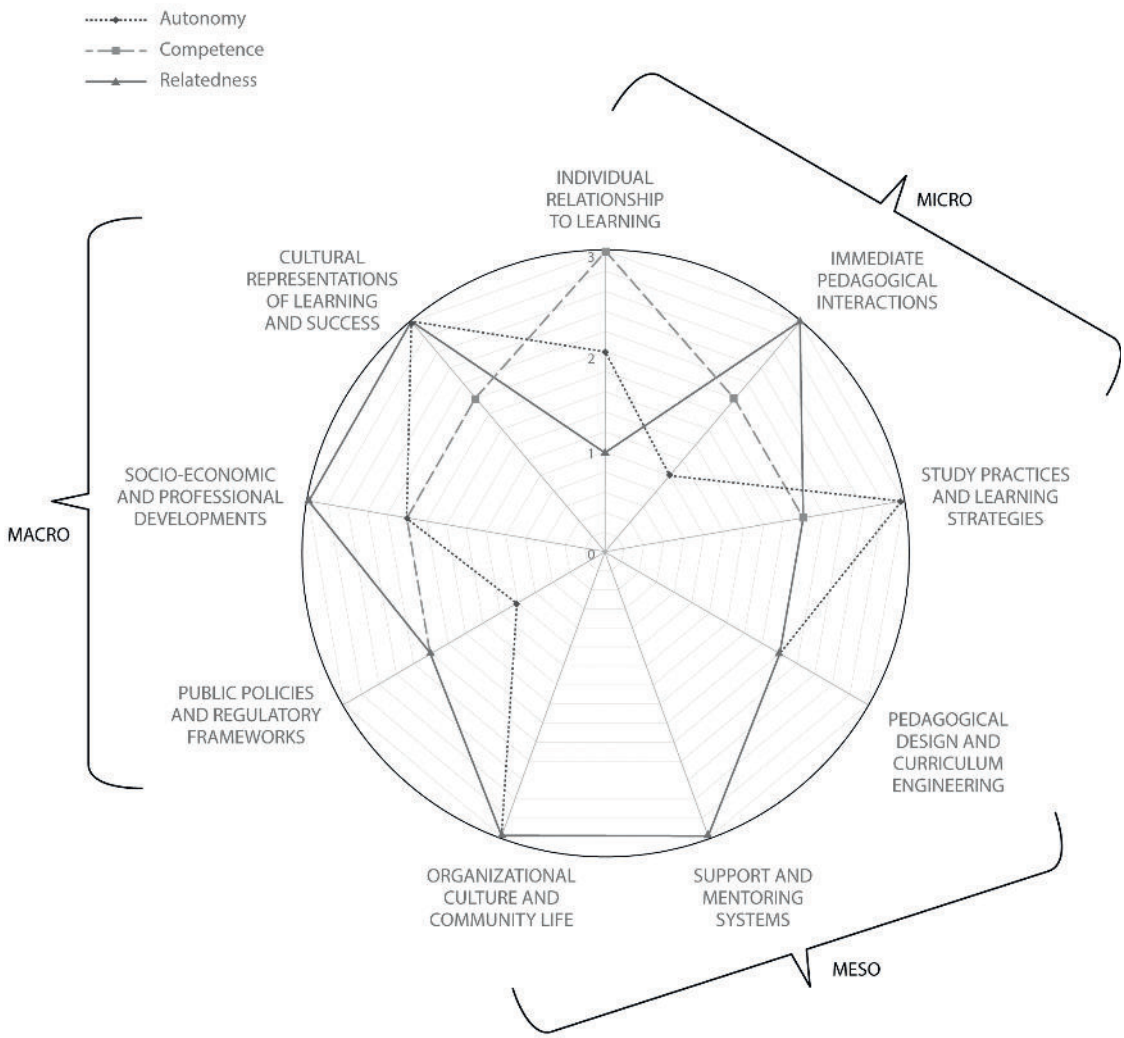


Figure 1 : SDT-Based Framework for Implementing Eudaimonic Wellbeing Applied to MSB

This proposition should be regarded as an initial attempt to operationalise the SDT framework for conceptualising individual development — whether for students, administrative staff, or faculty, that is, for the educational community as a whole — while remaining attentive to the macro-level constraints and specificities within which these actors are embedded. We hope, however, that this approach will provide a meaningful foundation for integrating wellbeing as a genuinely structuring dimension in the development of business schools, and, more broadly, for contributing to a wider societal conversation on the role of higher education in fostering human flourishing.

References

Carré, P. (2020). Pourquoi et comment les adultes apprennent : *De la formation à l'apprenance* (3e éd.). Paris : Dunod.

Creusier, J. (2013). Clarification Conceptuelle du Bien-être au Travail. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2319810

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Deci, E. L., and Ryan, R. M. (2002). Self-determination research : Reflections and future directions. In *Handbook of self-determination research* (p. 431-441). University of Rochester Press.

Emerson, D. J., Hair, J. J., and Smith, K. (2023). Psychological Distress, Burnout, and Business Student Turnover : The Role of Resilience as a Coping Mechanism. *Research in Higher Education, 64*(2). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09704-9

Fenouillet, F., Chainon, D., Yennek, N., Lemasson, J., and Heutte, J. (2017). Relation entre l'intérêt et le bien-être au collège et au lycée. *Enfance, 1*(1), 81-103. https://doi.org/10.3917/enf1.171.0081

King, R. B., Haw, J. Y., and Wang, Y. (2024). Need-support facilitates well-being across cultural, economic, and political contexts : A self-determination theory perspective. *Learning and Instruction, 93*(8) pp. 101978. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2024.101978

Lafreniere, M.-A. K., Vallerand, R. J., and Carbonneau, N. (2009). La théorie de l'autodétermination et le modèle hiérarchique de la motivation intrinsèque et extrinsèque : Perspectives intégratives. In *Traité de psychologie de la motivation* (p. 47-66). Dunod; Cairn.info. https://doi.org/10.3917/dunod.carre.2009.01.0047

OECD. (2025, octobre 2). *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being (2025 Update)*. OECD. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being-2025-update_9203632a-en/full-report.html

Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory* : *Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.* New York: Guilford Press.

Tessier, D. (2024). Chapitre 4. La théorie de l'autodétermination. In *Grand manuel de psychologie de la motivation: Vol. 2e ed.* (p. 113-138). Dunod; Cairn.info. https://shs.cairn.info/grand-manuel-de-psychologie-de-la-motivation--9782100856602-page-113?lang=fr

UNESCO. (2022). *UNESCO strategy on education for health and well-being.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381728

About the authors

Nora Yennek is an Associate Researcher in the Interdisciplinary Laboratory in Neuroscience, Physiology, and Psychology (LINP2) – Paris Nanterre University. She holds a PhD in Education Sciences, has a bachelor's background in mathematics, and specialises in theories of interest and motivation, and in training evaluation. She has worked across various industrial sectors and leads a research structure in the humanities and social sciences (Conseil & Recherche). Nora is committed to contributing to strengthening the connections between academic research and organisational practice.

Leila Triki is Dean of the Mediterranean School of Business at South Mediterranean University, a fast-growing business school in the MEA region. Leila has over 18 years of experience in higher education administration, including academic leadership, strategic development and planning. She serves today on the International Advisory Boards of several European Business Schools, as well as in India, and is also involved in several international accreditation panels and advisory committees. Leila holds a PhD in Economic Theory as well as an EMBA, and is passionate about achieving social and economic development through education.

by Thami Ghorfi & Imad-eddine Hatimi

Addressing Wellbeing in the African Context: Culture and Leadership in ESCA, Morocco

Wellbeing in the workplace usually refers to employees' feelings about their jobs and depends on the working conditions that organisations implement to ensure their mental, emotional, and physical health needs. De Neve et al. (2023) state that employee wellbeing at work is determined by three main dimensions, namely: 1) Job satisfaction (*evaluative wellbeing*) that is generally shaped by rational variables such as compensation (salary, benefits), job security, working hours, career development opportunities, etc. 2) The emotions we have in the workplace (*affective wellbeing*), based on the personal interactions employees have with others (supervision, support), the sense of belonging to their organisation, the inclusion and equity policies, and the stress related to their jobs (workload, risk, conflicts). 3) The purpose and meaning that we associate with our job (*eudaimonic wellbeing*), determined by the alignment employees perceive between their values and aspirations on the one hand and the company's mission and culture on the other, looking for self-accomplishment and societal contribution.

Two main perspectives have determined the business response to such a dimension. The first one highlights the rights that employees should enjoy in their working environment as a response to regulative or normative pressures. This approach has focused on financial security and physical safety and emphasised the role that regulatory agencies and groups of interests play in shaping labour laws and rules to ensure job security for employees and in advocating for retirement plans and healthy workplaces. Ethical considerations have also encouraged organisations to meet social expectations and adopt responsible policies to avoid any negative consequences (talent loss, reputation, etc.). The second one, more proactive, emphasises the role of staff wellbeing in improving employees' productivity and generating business performance. In this sense, organisations have been building working environments that ensure staff wellbeing at work, according to the happy-productive worker hypothesis.

According to Krekel et al. (2019), job satisfaction is strongly correlated with higher employee productivity, customer satisfaction, and business profitability. Organisations investing in wellbeing are noticing an increased productivity (up to 20%), according to the World Health Organisation (2022). They are also reporting a reduction in healthcare costs, as shown by the 2024 Society for Human Resource Management survey[1]. A survey conducted in 2024 by SAP[2] among its employees demonstrates the correlation between its wellbeing initiatives and employee engagement and operating profits. Wellbeing at work also increases talent retention. In fact, 61% of employees surveyed by Gallup[3] in 2023 said that wellbeing benefits were a major reason behind staying with their current employers. In addition, Ward (2022) argues that businesses with highly perceived workplace happiness are more able to attract job seekers. They are also more capable of building business relationships with their markets. 78% of consumers said that they have more trust in organisations that ensure wellbeing for their employees and are more likely to purchase their products and services, according to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer[4]. In the following, we focus on how business schools in Africa can leverage the concept of

1 https://www.shrm.org/about/press-room/2024-shrm-employee-benefits-survey--health-and-flexible-work-ben0
2 https://www.sap.com/integrated-reports/2024/en.html
3 https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx
4 https://www.edelman.com/trust/2024/trust-barometer

wellbeing to foster employees' productivity, staff retention, and talent attraction, and successfully deal with the contextual challenges they face.

Why is Wellbeing in the Workplace Important for Business Schools?

Understanding wellbeing in business schools seems to be more important than in other sectors. Shen and Slater (2021) argue that working in higher education is one of the most challenging jobs. Universities and schools are characterised by high levels of stress and burnout (Jayman et al., 2022). The COVID-19 crisis has amplified this situation. Douglas et al. (2021) noticed that half of staff in HE have experienced poor mental health during the pandemic. Faculty and staff in business schools are experiencing significant and rapid changes in the nature of their work. They are dealing with: 1) a highly demanding and heterogeneous student body, 2) more technology-enabled learning experiences, 3) increasing corporate needs for up-to-date and best-fit business knowledge and practices. When unprepared, all these challenges expand faculty and staff workload and provoke further stress that leads to their fatigue and burnout in some cases.

First, faculty are teaching more challenging classes with academic disparities and learning losses that have been exacerbated by the Covid crisis due to unequal learning recovery. New generations of students are struggling with more stress and anxiety. They are also dealing with financial constraints and working longer hours to fund their studies. These challenges significantly impact student concentration, motivation, and participation in learning activities, and as a consequence, affect student academic progression and retention. Today's students are also facing a digital overload that affects their focus time and leads to academic integrity issues related to AI plagiarism. Thus, faculty must be able to adapt their teaching content and methods. They need to leverage differentiated pedagogies with more engagement with students and to play additional roles as counsellors to effectively support students. In addition, faculty are delivering their courses to more global classes with students from various origins with different beliefs and academic backgrounds. They should be aware of cultural specificities and be able to facilitate intercultural integration between different nationalities. In some cases, they are also dealing with ethnic and religious tensions.

Secondly, educational technologies have brought novelties to the student learning experience by enabling hybrid and more engaging teaching methods through digital platforms, remote learning environments, gamification, simulations, etc. When these shifts are not well prepared and managed, they can be a source of uncertainty given the changes they bring to the faculty role. Knowledge is now instantly available in a more interactive and current format through digital platforms, especially with the arrival of artificial intelligence use. Thus, faculty are increasingly expected to play a facilitator role and act as a catalyst to ensure student engagement in the learning experience. They must align their pedagogical methods to the new student generations that are digital natives and more socially connected. They need to promote more experiential and active learning environments, keep updating their knowledge, and master digital tools as well. All these changes lead to uncertainties and doubts in faculty and staff mindsets and potential tensions between them and the incoming generations.

Finally, management practices are rapidly changing, and new roles are created within businesses, requiring new skills and techniques that leverage new realities such as digital transformation (data and AI, robotics, cybersecurity, etc.) and sustainability (ESG, diversity and inclusion, etc.). Employers, especially in emerging countries, are looking for high performing profiles and cutting-edge knowledge and techniques to solve complex problems and improve their global competitiveness. Accordingly, curricula are being reviewed, requiring a

continuous professional and academic engagement from faculty. In this regard, applied research activities and corporate engagement are essential to faculty knowledge currency. To do so, activities such as writing business cases, conducting empirical studies on business-related issues, and contributing to continuous education are essential. In contexts such as Africa, this situation is difficult to deal with for faculty who should overcome the skills gap, teaching overload, and a lack of research recognition policies.

The need for wellbeing programmes is also becoming essential, given the new generation of staff and faculty who are joining business schools. The latter have a different perception of work and the workplace. According to Smith and Nicholas (2024), Gen Z workers prioritise mental health, diversity, and inclusion as well as work-life balance. The survey conducted on 1,234 individuals across four generations concluded that the Gen Z workers also experience higher levels of anxiety and burnout, especially due to the stress and insecurity generated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political tensions, economic crises, etc. This is confirmed by LIMRA's 2024 BEAT study[5], which found that 91% of Gen Z workers face mental health issues from time to time. Also, new generations of workers are more driven by purpose and sustainability values, looking for more meaningful jobs and socially responsible organisations. The same study noticed that Gen Z workers are more sensitive to issues such as climate change and gender, and prioritise employers that foster diversity and inclusion.

In Africa, the situation is even worse, given the vulnerable economic and social conditions employees are living in, namely the lack of bureaucracy, unemployment, low income, lack of social protection programmes, gender inequality, poverty, unsafe working environments, and political instability, etc. Gen Z represents 70% of the population, among whom 71% are unable to pay their monthly bills, compared to 55% at the global level[6]. They prioritise fair pay, fulfillment, and a flexible and collaborative workplace. In Kenya, the Ministry of Health[7] reported symptoms of mental health conditions among over 25% of individuals seeking outpatient services. According to the 2025 State of Global Workplace[8], employee wellbeing in Africa appears as highly problematic since:

- Around 50% of employees experience stress on a daily basis.
- 72% are seeking a new job.
- 72% are struggling in their life
- 62% are not engaged at work

In African higher education institutions, faculty and staff are at high risk due to the heavy workloads and limited resources they need on the one hand and the lack of mental health programmes to support them on the other hand. The massification that African universities are facing makes working conditions for faculty and staff more difficult. The number of students in Africa has more than doubled between 2000 and 2021, and according to UNESCO[9] is expected to significantly increase in the future. In addition to this, they are working in contexts where students are facing more mental health issues. A survey conducted among 17 universities in South Africa with a sample of 28,268 students reported a 30-day prevalence of 11 mental disorders among them, such as social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and eating disorders (Bantjes, 2023).

African higher education institutions and business schools are also dealing with more complex realities, namely:

1. Highly demanding students looking for engaging learning experiences and for internationally recognised

5 https://www.limra.com/en/research/research-abstracts-public/2024/2024-beat-study-benefits-and-employee-attitude-tracker/
6 https://www.pwc.co.za/en/publications/global-workforce-hopes-and-fears-survey.html
7 https://mental.health.go.ke/download/kenya-mental-health-action-plan-2021-2025/
8 https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx
9 https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/what-you-need-know-about-higher-education-africa

degrees, as well as a strong desire for study abroad and immigration opportunities. To attract and retain them, African business schools need to offer a high-quality education respecting international standards, which brings more complexity to the workplace by putting more pressure on faculty and staff. They are required to upgrade their competencies (teaching, research, services, administration, etc.) by leveraging more innovation, productivity, and engagement with students and peers.

2. Parents with a limited purchasing power but looking for a guaranteed return on investments and a social advancement for their children through high-quality education. To meet their expectations and budget, African business schools need to build internationally recognised HE quality while keeping the fees affordable. To reach academic excellence, they cannot import and imitate practices of Western universities, given the financial constraints and regulatory frameworks they have in their local environment. African business schools should implement context-related, effective and efficient operating models. They are requested to optimise their operations and reduce expenses with local qualified faculty and staff and best-fit processes.

3. A weak job marketplace unable to meet the incoming graduates in terms of number and quality of job offerings due to economic and political fragility. This puts a lot of pressure on African business schools, which are expected to ensure the employability of their graduates. They should prepare profiles with highly in demand competencies to align with their professional community needs, and promote entrepreneurship education. In this perspective, faculty and staff should actively engage with businesses to maintain the currency/accuracy of their knowledge and, as a consequence, the operational readiness of their students for the business world. They should also contribute in a relevant way (applied research, consulting) to the development of their managerial practices to help businesses create more jobs and improve their competitiveness.

4. A lack of effective government agencies to support the local HE institutions' educational offerings and control the quality of their programmes. On the one hand, African business schools are dealing with limited funding from their governments. For instance, research funding and scholarships in Morocco are still very low and not accessible to private institutions. To reach international standards, African business schools are required to do more with less, which leads them to ask their faculty and staff to be more productive and efficient than in other contexts. Additionally, business schools in Africa are often facing unpredictable regulatory conditions (changing norms, bureaucratic processes, etc.) that increase complexity in the workplace. Faculty and staff should show adaptability and flexibility to handle disruptive changes.

As a response, African business schools need to pay more attention to faculty and staff wellbeing needs to attract, engage, and retain the best talents.

- Wellbeing mechanisms are critical for business schools to ***acquire qualified faculty and staff***, especially in a sector where job roles are specific and qualified profiles are rare. In the job marketplace, they are not only competing with other local HE institutions but also with international players, as well as commercial and industrial businesses, where compensation and benefits are more attractive. They need to fill positions that require specific competencies (pedagogical, research, etc.) with key and rare resources such as faculty.

- To sustain their competitiveness, business schools also need to put in place working conditions that help *retain their best employees*, especially for sector-related jobs that require a long-term collaboration relationship from faculty and staff to ensure a deep expertise and mastery of specific and complex tasks (enrolment, student and faculty management, research, etc.) as well as effective relationships with other stakeholders. Performing in business schools takes a longer learning curve from employees, and their outcomes need more time to be perceived. For example, a hired faculty member may need a few years to be highly productive in teaching and research activities.
- On the other hand, business schools should foster their employee's wellbeing to ensure their *motivation and engagement* in their strategies. In this regard, establishing internal wellbeing mechanisms and programmes is key for staff and faculty productivity and business schools' performance. These efforts are more critical given the emerging job-related challenges faculty and administrative staff should handle in African contexts.

Wellbeing Practices at ESCA Ecole de Management

ESCA Ecole de Management has experienced an impressive transformation journey since its creation, through multiple strategic projects and continuous innovation. Since its creation in 1992, the school has adopted an ambition to become a leading business school in Morocco and an internationally recognised African business school. One of the key drivers that the school opted for to succeed in achieving its vision is pursuing international accreditations (AACSB[10], EFMD, AMBA[11]). This pioneering strategic choice aimed to guarantee academic excellence for its stakeholders according to international standards by leveraging innovative pedagogies (experiential learning, gamification, etc.), research activities, internationalization strategies, cutting-edge technologies, modern facilities, etc.

Such a journey required key strategic transformations and effective change management practices as well as continuous capability building to guarantee business alignment, workforce productivity, process optimisation, and financial sustainability. Its human capital is one of the key determinants of the successful journey the school has. From this perspective, ESCA Ecole de Management has implemented various wellbeing mechanisms to not only attract new talented profiles but to essentially empower its existing workforce and align their performance to the newly established standards. More precisely, the school has built a configuration of dimensions that made its workplace attractive and supportive while being highly demanding in terms of standards to meet and objectives to achieve. In the following, we share key practices that the school has mobilized in a systemic way, such as culture, leadership, and collegiality, to build a positive workplace.

First, ESCA Ecole de Management has deployed a sustainable effort to develop a positive culture. According to Musaiger and Mosa (2022), a positive organisational culture is very important for individuals' wellbeing at work by reducing uncertainty. It sets the values and beliefs that determine what is accepted and expected, and shapes employees' behaviour within the organisation. A positive culture also fosters employees' wellbeing in the workplace by reinforcing the sense of belonging and setting an inclusive working environment that promotes respect and collaboration, recognising individual efforts, and celebrating collective success (Musaiger and Mosa, 2022). In this regard, ESCA Ecole de Management has adopted, from the outset, a culture that promotes clarity and transparency about its purpose and requirements with the objective to reduce the uncertainty that could be related to decision-making and actions and guarantee psychological safety for its members.

10 ESCA as first AACSB accredited school in Morocco and French Speaking Africa
11 ESCA Grande Ecole Master Program is AMBA accredited.

On the one hand, by consulting its key stakeholders, ESCA Ecole de Management has defined and communicated a well-defined and relevant mission as well as an articulated strategy that sets clear expectations at the organisational and individual level. Clear guidance was also provided through detailed policies and procedures to share standards governing each process. An objective-based performance management system has been implemented to clarify the standards and outputs that each role in the school needs to reach. These efforts have allowed ESCA employees not only to associate their decisions and roles with the 'raison d'être' of the school but also to see meaning, consistency, and convergence in their actions; feel stability and security in their job roles; and make decisions and behave with confidence and trust.

In business schools, conflict situations generally occur due to a lack of understanding of responsibilities and communication between different units (IT, academic, student enrolment, etc.). At ESCA Ecole de Management, organising institutional events (strategic meetings, annual conventions, workshops, sports activities, etc.) and encouraging cross-functional committees for transformational projects helped reduce information asymmetry and divergence in strategy execution and promoted more collegial decision-making that ensures key stakeholders' adherence and alignment. These initiatives promote wellbeing by minimising stress and conflict situations at work, which leads to employees' psychological safety (Musaiger and Mosa, 2022).

On the other hand, when dealing with transformational projects, ESCA Ecole de Management has ensured an effective change management plan through active communication channels as well as effective coordination mechanisms (committees, minutes, etc.). By doing so, the school aimed at promoting the benefits of each strategic change and accompanying faculty and staff in delivering their tasks and achieving their individual objectives, in accordance with the shared mission and goals at the institutional level. For instance, to achieve its international accreditations, ESCA Ecole de Management has created a dedicated committee and associated documentation (handbooks, newsletters, etc.) to communicate the benefits of such a long transformational journey. It has also multiplied supportive mechanisms to equip faculty and staff with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively achieve their activities in alignment with international standards. Job-related training and coaching through live workshops and tutorials were offered to help faculty develop specific competencies related to pedagogy (digital learning, case method, business games, etc.) or research (PRJs, case writing, etc.).

In this perspective, ESCA Ecole de Management has reinforced its rewarding policies and professional development opportunities to recognise its faculty and staff achievements. Awards for activities such as pedagogical innovation, case writing, scientific publications, etc. Career progress opportunities and scholarships have been offered for faculty and staff looking to advance their careers and/or develop their skills. Exchange opportunities

at the school's level are also available to faculty and staff willing to live an international teaching and/or research experience. These efforts helped not only to motivate the school's teams but also to strengthen ESCA employees' sense of belonging to a community and being valued. For newly recruited members, onboarding processes have been offered to help them understand the school's environment (values, programmes, policies, etc.) and meet with key stakeholders to guarantee a successful start within their new workplace. Well-documented communication and transparent information are key to building a culture that supports collegiality.

Having a gender equity policy and empowering women's leadership at ESCA Ecole de Management has also been essential in establishing an inclusive workplace. Half of the school's executives are women, which is not common in African contexts. Moreover, the school has succeeded in building a culture that encourages respect and support between individuals and allows them to positively interact and collaborate and manage working situations together with engagement and motivation. In this regard, the school adopted a code of ethics within ESCA Ecole de Management through a dedicated committee and specific activities (conferences, webinars, etc.) to help promote principles that ensure respect, solidarity, equity, and diversity and, by consequence, ensuring positive relationships between employees. This is very important in HE, where the outcome is the result of multiple human-human interactions (student-student, student-faculty, faculty-faculty, faculty-staff, etc.) as opposed to other sectors (commercial and industrial).

ESCA Ecole de Management has also deployed many efforts to reduce stress that could be related to its working environment. Implementing digital platforms played a key role in reducing time-consuming and stressful administrative activities by automating repetitive and standardised tasks and freeing up time for more valuable activities such as student support services and academic coordination. A student counselling centre was created to help students suffering from mental health issues and learning difficulties. This unit is also helping faculty deal with students having psychological and mental issues, as well as their parents. Parents in African contexts are actively involved in monitoring their children's academic progress. In this perspective, staff in African business schools are handling not only relations with students but also with their parents, who ask for continuous interaction with the school throughout the different steps (admission, progression, grades, finance, graduation, etc.). These relationships are not always easy to manage given the parents' expectations towards the school and the complex relationships they have with their children looking for more autonomy. Thus, a series of seminars and workshops is organised to share the best learning methodologies and techniques to help staff deal with stressful and conflictual situations.

Recently, ESCA Ecole de Management has built a modern urban campus in the heart of Casablanca Finance City, the most important financial hub in Africa. Thanks to the new campus, faculty and staff are enjoying very accessible facilities (public transportation, parking, elevators, etc.) with a dedicated lounge, meeting rooms, and coworking spaces. The campus is also surrounded by gardens, restaurants, entertainment places, and a shopping centre with sports facilities, a food court, cinemas, etc. Thus, the new campus has provided the school's faculty and staff with not only a stimulating working environment but also an enjoyable life experience.

Finally, the school promoted work-life balance through flexible working conditions (remote, hybrid) for faculty and some

administrative positions and allowed a flexible mode of collaboration through part-time contracts for some roles. Also, the school has improved social benefits for its employees, like private healthcare insurance and pension programmes, donations, access to sports facilities, scholarships, etc. This is very helpful in African contexts where social protection programmes and retirement plans are still weak.

The positive culture that ESCA Ecole de Management has promoted is reinforced by the leadership style of its top management. According to Hazzouri (2024), by fostering transparency, empathy, and communication, leaders can lower stress at work. Ayfer et al. (2022) emphasise that inclusive leaders promote wellbeing in the workplace by fostering employees' uniqueness, sense of belonging, and recognition. Below are some examples of practices that the ESCA leadership team has leveraged to foster wellbeing at work.

- First, the Executive Committee of the school has promoted employee's wellbeing by adopting a participative management approach to handle the multi-stakeholder reality they are dealing with. Involvement of various stakeholders and consensus-building is important for the school's executives. The school's leadership encourages bottom-up management and key stakeholders' consultations. By participating in all key governance bodies (strategic council, academic committee, etc.), faculty and staff are actively shaping the school's strategy and operations in terms of programme design, development and delivery, students' services, etc. By doing so, the school aims to ensure stakeholder adherence and reduce divergences and tensions between stakeholders despite their different roles and expectations.
- Secondly, the ESCA leadership team has addressed diversity and inclusion as a positive attribute of the organisation by embracing employees' differences (backgrounds, gender, etc.) and accommodating their uniqueness while building cohesive teams and strengthening the sense of community. To do so, the ESCA leadership team has been maintaining close relationships with the different teams and ensuring equitable and fair representation and reward systems. For instance, they have been promoting gender equity across different levels of the school. This dimension is very important in the African context and in Morocco in particular. Based on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index Report 2024[12] Morocco ranked 137th out of 146 countries in terms of gender parity. The ESCA Leadership team has also been attracting Moroccans with international backgrounds, which has brought a rich diversity to work. Finally, the school's leadership team has adopted responsible management principles by promoting sustainability and ethical behaviours, in accordance with the values of the new generation of employees. They have been actively developing a culture of merit within the school to recognise individual contributions to the collective performance.
- Third, by being inspirational, the ESCA leadership team has been able to attract and gather diverse stakeholders (students, employers, staff, faculty, etc.) around the same ambition, being a leading business school in Africa, and helps them understand the importance of their respective roles in fulfilling it. In this perspective, the leadership team is actively communicating the school's vision, advocating for a continuous improvement culture, and motivating the various key players. The entrepreneurial spirit of the school's leadership team has been shared by most of the teams. The school's

12 https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/

leadership team has been promoting a culture where innovation and risk-taking with a Test-Learn and Improve approach are valued. For many members of the school, such an environment has been very stimulating, given the opportunities they enjoy creating value for themselves and for their community through various activities (teaching, counselling, research, consulting, etc.). They found in the school a context where their ambitions can be fulfilled, especially for those who studied and/or worked in Western countries and are used to more innovative, flexible, results-oriented, and supportive working environments.

Finally, the ESCA leadership team has continuously been supportive of the school's members when they need guidance or emotional support and empowering them through professional development opportunities. So, they can deal with new realities impacting the learning methods, the students' expectations, and business requirements. The school's leadership team is continuously working with operational teams to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of the school's strategic projects. They have encouraged continuous learning and improvement within the school.

Finally, collegiality in business schools plays a key role in supporting individuals to achieve their personal and institutional goals. It reduces the feeling of isolation that individuals can experience, especially when they are newly recruited or struggling with complex tasks. For instance, dedicating a space where faculty and staff meet with peers and multiplying events where they are gathered play a key role in developing collegial relationships at ESCA Ecole de Management. Also, offering knowledge-sharing opportunities through workshops and regular meetings helped its faculty and staff address their challenges and identify solutions to their problems. Processes that encourage peer mentoring and co-working were very effective in leveraging collegiality to ensure wellbeing in business schools. Initiatives such as assigning a mentor to a newly recruited colleague or encouraging joint research projects between senior and junior faculty also appeared very helpful.

To achieve research productivity according to international standards, ESCA Ecole de Management has made the choice to upgrade its existing faculty capabilities instead of only recruiting new faculty used to publishing in top-ranking PRJs. This process has required a strong transformational effort from faculty to meet the school's requirements. In this case, collegiality has played a key role. In fact, the school has adopted a progressive approach, allowing its faculty to develop their skills through joint projects with research-oriented colleagues. This has helped to reduce the stress and resistance and empowered most of the school's faculty, who have gone on to being highly productive by publishing in prestigious PRJs and impacting local businesses through their context-related research findings.

Conclusion

Building employee wellbeing in the workplace plays an important role in the performance of organisations, including business schools, by increasing employees' productivity and adaptability. Dimensions such as culture, leadership, and collegiality determine the feeling of employees in the workplace by fostering psychological safety as well as the sense of belonging. This being said, the notion of wellbeing is context related, and as a consequence, it is determined by the conditions that faculty and staff currently experience outside their institutions as well as their perception of wellbeing in their environments. In African contexts, employees may pay more attention to some basic dimensions such as compensation and social benefits (job security, retirement plan), compared to mental health programmes or the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies of their employers or their CSR strategies.. HE institutions such as ESCA Ecole de Management that emphasise gender equity and sustainability as important values in the workplace still represent a minority in the African context. More efforts are needed to promote wellbeing in African HE institutions at both organisational and national levels.

On the other hand, building wellbeing in African business schools should not only consider the specificities of their context but also follow a systemic approach that leverages the different internal dimensions coherently. It should be shaped around the school's purpose, strategy organisation, and culture. At ESCA Ecole de Management, the concept of wellbeing is addressed as a configuration of a vision, mission, values, strategic initiatives, structure, and policies that a group of people consider as appropriate for their work and perceive as positive for their personal feelings. Also, an organisation can certainly put in place the various mechanisms that are considered as basics for wellbeing such as salary, social benefits, etc., but not match all its employees' wellbeing needs. The perception of wellbeing could be relative to each individual. ESCA Ecole de Management has succeeded in gathering a community of employees who enjoy entrepreneurial, international, dynamic, agile, risk-taking, and collaborative working environments. Those looking for public servant roles where changes and accountability are limited may not find their wellbeing in such an environment. In this perspective, talent acquisition strategies play an important role in ensuring the appropriate matching of individuals' preferences with organisational identity, by attracting profiles that will appreciate the wellbeing configuration that the schools put in place, according to their context and strategies.

References

Ayfer, T., Yildiz, C. and Demir, A. (2022) Inclusive leadership and employee well-being: The mediating roles of belonging and recognition. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 13.

Bantjes, J., Kessler, M., Lochner, C., Breet, E., Bawa, A., Roos, J., Davids, C., Muturiki, M., Kessler, R. C. and Stein, J. D. (2023) The mental health of university students in South Africa: Results of the national student survey. *Journal of Affective Disorders 321*, pp. 217-226.

De Neve, J-E., Kaats, M. and Ward, G. (2023) Workplace Wellbeing and Firm Performance. University of Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre Working Paper 2304.

Douglas, V., Pattison, N., Warren, K. and Karanika-Murray, M. (2024) Well-being in the higher education sector: A qualitative study of staff perceptions in UK universities. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health, 40*(2) pp. 135–158.

Hazzouri, M. (2024) Leadership transparency, empathy, and communication as predictors of employee well-being. *Journal of Organizational Behavior and Management, 45*(1) pp. 56–72.

Jayman, M., Bligh, S. and Elphinstone, B. (2022) Stress and burnout in higher education: The role of workload, collegiality, and institutional support. *Frontiers in Education, 7*.

Krekel, C., Ward, G., and De Neve, J.-E. (2019) *Employee well-being, productivity, and firm performance* (CEP Discussion Paper No. 1605). Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Musaiger, A. O., and Mosa, A. M. (2022) The impact of positive organizational culture on employee well-being and uncertainty reduction. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 22*(3) pp. 45–56.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023) *Mental health in U.S. schools: Findings from the School Pulse Panel 2023*. U.S. Department of Education.

Shen P. and Slater P. (2021) The effect of occupational stress and coping strategies on mental health and emotional well-being among university academic staff during the COVID-19 outbreak. *International Education Studies 14*(3) pp. 82–95.

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). (2024) *2024 employee benefits survey: Health and flexible work benefits*. SHRM.

Thomas, L., Bligh, S. and Jayman, M. (2024) Student belonging, social connectedness, and well-being in higher education: Evidence from post-pandemic learning environments. *Frontiers in Education, 9*.

Ward, G. (2022) *Happiness at work: Essays on subjective well-being in the workplace and labor market* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

World Health Organization & International Labour Organization. (2022) *Mental health at work: Policy brief.* Geneva: WHO & ILO.

About the authors

Thami Ghorfi is the Dean of ESCA Ecole de Management, a prominent African business school in Casablanca, Morocco, where he teaches communication strategy and change management. He has been a member of Morocco's constitutional Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE) since 2011 and joined the Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research in 2022. As Vice President of the AL AMANA Foundation, a leading microfinance organisation in the MENA region, Thami is deeply involved in fighting financial exclusion. He has been active in the EFMD EDAF committee, supporting the development of business education in emerging countries. Thami is also part of the GBSN Academic Leadership Council. He joined the AACSB Board of Directors in July 2024. His publications include works on entrepreneurship, family business in Africa, and the MENA region. Thami's distinctions include France's Order of Academic Palms, Chevalier (2017), and the Africa Economy Builders Prize (2016). He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Grenoble Ecole de Management.

Imad-eddine Hatimi started his career as a researcher and lecturer at HEC Montreal and as Strategy and Management Consultant for various firms in Canada. In 2008, he joined Mundiapolis University (Morocco) as Dean of the Faculty of Management. Between 2012 and 2019, he served as Associate Dean of Accreditations at ESCA Ecole de Management and succeeded in achieving its AACSB Accreditation as the 1st business school in French-speaking Africa. From 2019 to 2022, Dr. Hatimi worked as SVP, Chief Strategy and Advisory Officer at Innovation Consulting Group (Saudi Arabia), a company specialising in building digital transformation capabilities. He also acted as Associate Dean of Business at Yorkville University (Canada). Dr. Hatimi continues to work as a Senior Advisor for ESCA Ecole de Management in key transformational areas (strategic management, assurance of learning, international accreditations, digital transformation, etc.). Imad-eddine Hatimi holds a PhD in business administration (Strategy & Innovation) and a master's in management from HEC Montreal, as well as a master's in civil engineering from Université de Sherbrooke (Canada). He is the author of more than fifteen academic publications in peer-reviewed journals and books on topics such as strategy, innovation, and education management. In 2004, jointly with Taïeb HAFSI, he was awarded the Best Article Prize by the Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences.

by Raul V Rodriguez

Woxsen Business School's "Oven Ready" Graduates: A Distinctive Approach with an Integrated Excellence, Collaborative Culture, Socioeconomic Impact Model for India

Woxsen's Strategic Positioning in India's Management Landscape

India's management education ecosystem presents a clearly defined hierarchy that has remained relatively stable for decades. At the apex sit the twenty (plus) Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), government-funded institutions that maintain their prestige through extreme selectivity (often less than 1% acceptance rates) and academic rigour focused on theoretical excellence. These institutions produce what industry often calls 'academic superstars' - graduates with exceptional analytical capabilities but sometimes limited practical application skills.

The second tier includes established private institutions like the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad and the SP Jain Institute of Management and Research in Mumbai. These schools attempt to compete directly with the IIMs by replicating their academic intensity while adding international partnerships and modern infrastructure. They typically charge premium fees (25-35 lakhs for MBA programmes) and target similar student profiles as the IIMs.

The third tier encompasses newer private institutions that have emerged to meet explosive demand, often competing primarily on placement rates, infrastructure quality, or specific industry connections. Many of these schools struggle to differentiate themselves beyond location convenience or fee structures.

Woxsen Business School has deliberately positioned itself outside this traditional competitive framework by identifying and targeting a fundamental gap in the market: the need for "oven-ready" graduates who combine theoretical knowledge with practical application, social responsibility, and cross-cultural competence. Rather than attempting to out-IIM the IIMs or compete solely on traditional prestige metrics, Woxsen has created what we term the 'Integrated Excellence Model', designed to integrate wellbeing, collegiality, and sustainability across all stakeholders as basic principles of institutional culture.

This positioning strategy addresses a critical industry complaint identified in our stakeholder research: "India doesn't have enough skilled labour. The candidates lack the critical thinking and experience necessary to put theory into practice ... for every 100 candidates that are seen, only one is capable of filling the position" (Chepuri and Weichert, 2023). By designing our entire educational model around producing graduates who can immediately contribute to organisations while bringing ethical leadership and social awareness, Woxsen has carved out a distinctive competitive space.

The success of this positioning appears in concrete outcomes: our 17% acceptance rate demonstrates selectivity comparable to top-tier institutions, while our 100% MBA placement rate and 97% undergraduate business placement rate significantly exceed national averages of 65-80%. More importantly, our graduates achieve starting salary increases of 23% over three years, with 42% reaching leadership positions within five years - metrics suggesting strong market recognition of our distinctive value proposition.

Business School Leadership Structure and Decision-Making

Understanding how Woxsen Business School operates requires examining our deliberately designed leadership structure that distributes authority while maintaining accountability and strategic coherence.

Collaborative Leadership Model

The business school operates under Dean Dr David Meyer and Vice Deans, Dr Hemachandran K (Undergraduate School) and Dr Syed Hasan (Graduate School), who lead through what we call 'Collaborative Academic Leadership' rather than traditional hierarchical management. They work with five department heads (Finance, Marketing, Operations, Analytics and Strategy and Entrepreneurship) who have substantial autonomy within their domains while participating in integrated school-wide decision-making. Additionally, a set of Associate and Assistant Deans are in roles such as research, international expansion, etc.

Weekly Council meetings bring together these department heads with the Associate Deans for Student Affairs and Corporate Alignment. This council addresses all major business school decisions through structured consultation processes that ensure multiple perspectives inform outcomes. Unlike advisory arrangements where the Dean retains final authority, our council operates through consensus-building on major issues while maintaining clear accountability for implementation.

ERS Committee Integration

The Ethics, Responsibility, and Sustainability (ERS) committee plays a crucial role in business school governance by ensuring sustainability principles permeate all programmes and decisions. Professor Pavana Kiranmai Chepuri, who serves as both VP's Chief of Staff (university administration) and ERS committee leader, provides the critical bridge between university-wide initiatives and business school implementation.

This dual role creates strategic alignment while maintaining business school autonomy. Professor Chepuri participates in the School's Council meetings as sustainability advisor while leading the ERS committee's quarterly curriculum review sessions, where faculty from all business departments examine course content for sustainability integration opportunities using a Start-Stop-Continue framework.

Corporate Boards of Studies: Industry Co-Governance

Perhaps our most innovative governance feature involves Corporate Boards of Studies for each business department. These boards represent genuine co-governance arrangements where industry leaders share curriculum development authority with academic faculty rather than serving in purely advisory capacities.

Each board includes three senior industry professionals alongside department faculty, meeting quarterly to review and modify programme content. For example, the Finance Board includes the CFO of Hyderabad-based pharmaceutical company Dr Reddy's Laboratories, the Regional Finance Director of Infosys, and a senior investment banker from ICICI Bank. This board recently redesigned our Financial Analysis course to include real-

time case studies from member companies, creating learning experiences that bridge theoretical frameworks with current industry challenges.

The Marketing Board, which includes digital marketing leaders from Flipkart and traditional retail executives from Future Group, has introduced specialised modules on rural marketing strategies - reflecting India's unique consumer landscape where 65% of purchasing power still resides in smaller cities and villages. These industry professionals don't merely suggest content; they co-teach selected sessions and evaluate student projects alongside academic faculty.

Faculty Excellence Framework: Integration and Evaluation

The business school's faculty evaluation model represents a fundamental departure from traditional academic assessment that often creates tension between teaching, research, and service responsibilities. Our 'Integrated Impact Assessment' measures faculty performance across four interconnected dimensions: Academic Excellence, Student Development Impact, Industry Engagement, and Community Contribution.

Academic Excellence includes traditional measures like research publications and teaching effectiveness, but weights them equally with practical application. Faculty receive recognition for publishing in practitioner journals and developing teaching cases from their consulting experiences alongside traditional academic publications. Dr Anindo Bhattacharjee, for instance, receives evaluation credit for his Harvard Business Review articles on rural entrepreneurship while his community-based research contributes to his academic portfolio.

Student Development Impact measures faculty contribution to holistic student growth beyond classroom instruction. This includes mentoring student ventures, supervising Social Internship Projects, and participating in student-led initiatives. Faculty members track student outcomes through structured feedback mechanisms and demonstrate their developmental impact through specific student success stories and measurable skills progression.

Collaboration Recognition and Measurement

The business school explicitly rewards collaborative work through our 'Collaborative Excellence Recognition' system. Faculty receive substantial evaluation credit for co-teaching arrangements with industry professionals, joint research projects with colleagues from other departments, and cross-disciplinary course development.

We measure collaboration through specific metrics, including a number of team-taught courses, joint publications with industry partners, and participation in cross-departmental initiatives. For example, our recent Sustainable Supply Chain course combined expertise from Operations, Marketing, and Strategy faculty with industry practitioners from logistics companies. Faculty participating in such collaborations receive enhanced evaluation scores while contributing to curriculum innovation.

The evaluation system also recognises what we term 'Community Knowledge Creation' - faculty participation in weekly sustainability curriculum development sessions and monthly 'best practices sharing' meetings where departments exchange successful teaching innovations. These collaborative knowledge-building activities receive formal recognition in annual performance reviews.

Stakeholder Engagement Rewards

Industry and community engagement receives substantial weight in faculty evaluation through our 'Applied Impact Portfolio' requirement. Each faculty member maintains documentation of their external engagement activities, including consulting projects, community partnerships, and industry collaboration initiatives.

Professor Bhattacharjee's Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative, for instance, counts toward his service requirement while generating applied research opportunities and creating community impact. His work with village entrepreneurs provides real-world case material for his courses while addressing genuine social needs - representing the kind of integrated engagement our evaluation system explicitly rewards.

Faculty consulting engagements with regional SMEs receive institutional support and evaluation recognition, activities that enhance teaching relevance while contributing to local economic development. We track the impact of these engagements through client success metrics and student learning outcomes, ensuring external activities contribute to rather than detract from academic mission.

Current Curriculum Architecture and Evolution Process

The business school's curriculum reflects our integrated approach through a carefully designed architecture that weaves together traditional business disciplines with sustainability, social responsibility, and practical application. The MBA programme operates on a modular system with five core clusters: Foundational Business Skills, Industry Application, Leadership Development, Global Perspective, and Sustainable Impact.

The Foundational Business Skills cluster includes traditional courses like Financial Management, Marketing Strategy, and Operations Management, but each course integrates sustainability and social impact considerations rather than treating them as separate subjects. For example, our Financial Management course includes modules on ESG investing, impact measurement, and stakeholder capitalism alongside traditional financial analysis and capital budgeting.

Industry Application represents our most distinctive curricular innovation, requiring all MBA students to complete three industry-embedded learning experiences: a consulting project with a regional SME, a corporate internship with a sustainability focus, and the capstone Social Internship Project (SIP). These experiences ensure students graduate with substantial practical experience while building the cross-cultural competence increasingly valued by employers.

Corporate Board Curriculum Co-Creation Process

The Corporate Boards of Studies represent genuine curriculum co-creation partnerships that extend far beyond traditional industry advisory arrangements. Each board follows a structured quarterly process for curriculum review and modification that ensures programmes remain current with industry needs while maintaining academic rigour.

The process begins with industry board members identifying emerging skill gaps and knowledge requirements from their organisations' current hiring and development challenges. Academic faculty then propose curriculum modifications that address these needs while maintaining learning objective integrity. During quarterly board meetings, industry and academic members work together to design specific course modules, case studies, and assessment methods.

For example, the Operations Board identified supply chain resilience as a critical capability following COVID-19 disruptions. Academic faculty proposed integrating risk management frameworks with sustainability principles, while industry members contributed real cases from their companies' resilience strategies. The resulting 'Resilient and Sustainable Operations' course combines theoretical frameworks with current industry challenges, co-taught by academic faculty and industry professionals.

This co-creation process extends to assessment design, where industry board members help develop evaluation criteria that reflect real-world performance expectations. Students in our Supply Chain Management course, for instance, are evaluated partly by industry board members who assess their solutions to actual company challenges alongside academic faculty who evaluate theoretical understanding.

Curriculum Evolution Mechanism

The business school's curriculum evolves through a systematic annual process that integrates input from multiple stakeholders while maintaining educational coherence. Each spring, our Curriculum Evolution Committee - comprising the Dean, department heads, and Corporate Board representatives - conducts a comprehensive programme review based on industry feedback, student outcomes, and emerging global trends.

This process recently led to significant innovations, including our new Sustainable Finance track, developed in response to growing demand for ESG expertise, and our Rural Markets Specialisation, reflecting India's economic geography where tier-2 and tier-3 cities represent major growth opportunities. The committee also eliminated outdated content, such as traditional international business modules that failed to address emerging market realities, replacing them with courses on South-South trade and digital economy strategies.

Global Exposure Strategy and Implementation

Structured International Experience

The business school provides global exposure through carefully structured programmes that balance international perspective with local application relevance. Currently, 23% of MBA students and 18% of undergraduate business students participate in international exchange experiences through our 170 partnerships across 47 countries.

However, our approach to global exposure extends beyond traditional study abroad programmes. Every business student participates in our 'Global Classroom Initiative', which brings international experts directly into regular courses through video conferencing technology. Our #FutureYou Talks series, for example, connected students with 13 international sustainability experts from institutions including Fordham University, LUISS Business School, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, during a single semester.

We also operate 'Virtual International Consulting Projects' where student teams work with companies in other countries to solve real business challenges while developing cross-cultural competence. These projects, facilitated through our international partnerships, provide global exposure to students who cannot participate in physical exchange programmes while creating value for international partner organisations.

Balancing Global Perspective with Indian Context

Rather than treating global exposure as separate from local relevance, our business school deliberately integrates international perspectives with Indian application. Our International Business Strategy course, for

instance, analyses global market entry strategies while examining successful Indian companies' international expansion experiences, creating learning that serves students whether they pursue domestic or international careers.

This integration appears throughout our curriculum. The Supply Chain Management course combines global best practices with the particular challenges of Indian logistics and infrastructure, preparing students to work effectively in multinational corporations while understanding local market realities. Similarly, our Marketing Strategy course examines global brand management principles through detailed analysis of how international companies adapt their strategies for Indian consumers.

Cultural Onboarding: Building and Sustaining Institutional Identity

Cultural onboarding at Woxsen Business School encompasses far more than traditional orientation programmes or infrastructure tours. We define it as a comprehensive immersion process that introduces new community members to our institutional values through structured experiences, mentorship relationships, and gradual integration into our collaborative culture.

For new faculty, cultural onboarding begins before arrival through our 'Pre-Arrival Community Building' process. Incoming faculty receive mentorship assignments with experienced colleagues who provide practical guidance about relocating to Hyderabad while introducing Woxsen's educational philosophy through informal conversations and resource sharing. This early relationship-building creates support networks that ease transition stress while beginning cultural transmission.

Experiential Cultural Transmission

Upon arrival, new faculty participate in our 'Community Integration Experience', a month-long process that introduces institutional values through direct participation rather than abstract explanation. New business school faculty, for example, immediately join ongoing community engagement projects alongside experienced colleagues, learning our approach to stakeholder collaboration through hands-on experience.

This might involve accompanying Professor Bhattacharjee to village entrepreneurship meetings, participating in Corporate Board of Studies sessions as observers, or joining student teams working on Social Internship Projects. These experiences demonstrate how Woxsen integrates community engagement with academic excellence while building collegial relationships that support long-term success.

Sustained Cultural Reinforcement

Cultural onboarding continues throughout faculty careers through what we call 'Cultural Reinforcement Practices' embedded in regular institutional rhythms. Monthly 'Culture Spotlight' events featuring regional cuisines, arts, and traditions create ongoing opportunities for cultural sharing and community building. Weekly 'Taste of India' rotating regional cuisine days in campus dining facilities maintain awareness of our diverse community while fostering informal relationship-building.

More substantively, our weekly sustainability curriculum development sessions and monthly best practices sharing meetings provide structured opportunities for collaborative knowledge creation that reinforces our collegial values. These sessions demonstrate how individual expertise contributes to collective institutional advancement while maintaining the collaborative spirit that distinguishes our community.

Faculty Retention Through Cultural and Professional Integration

Non-Financial Retention Strategies

While competitive compensation remains important, the business school's retention strategy emphasises creating professional and personal environments where faculty can thrive holistically. Our approach recognises that retention in India's competitive academic market requires addressing both career development and quality of life factors that affect long-term satisfaction.

Our 'Integrated Professional Development' approach provides faculty with multiple pathways for growth and impact beyond traditional academic advancement. Faculty can develop expertise in industry consulting, community engagement, international collaboration, or curriculum innovation - all of which receive institutional recognition and support. This diversity of development pathways allows faculty to craft careers that align with their interests and strengths while contributing to the institutional mission.

The 'Meaningful Impact Recognition' system acknowledges faculty contributions to student development, community benefit, and industry advancement alongside traditional academic metrics. Faculty members regularly receive detailed feedback about their impact on student career outcomes, community project success, and industry partner satisfaction. This recognition of diverse contributions creates professional satisfaction that extends beyond salary considerations.

Geographic Challenge Solutions

Our location outside Hyderabad's main metropolitan area requires creative approaches to faculty retention that acknowledge the practical challenges of geographic displacement. The Regional Holiday Exchange Programme and Hometown Connection Leave directly address cultural and family connection needs that significantly impact faculty satisfaction.

Beyond these formal programmes, we've created what we term 'Hyderabad Professional Integration' initiatives that help faculty build professional networks and career opportunities within the broader metropolitan area. This includes facilitating consulting relationships with Hyderabad-based companies, creating connections with other academic institutions in the region, and supporting faculty participation in professional organisations and industry associations.

We also provide 'Dual-City Professional Support' for faculty who maintain professional activities in other Indian cities, recognising that many faculty benefit from continued engagement with professional networks in Mumbai, Delhi, or Bangalore. This support includes travel allowances for professional development activities and flexible scheduling that accommodates external professional commitments.

Building the Business School's Distinctive Brand and Reputation

National Recognition Strategy

The business school's reputation-building strategy focuses on demonstrating distinctive value rather than competing on traditional prestige metrics. Our participation in the Positive Impact Rating (PIR) has positioned Woxsen 'on the same level as more established Indian institutions and well above universities from developed countries' in sustainability leadership - creating recognition based on innovation rather than institutional age or government affiliation.

Our engagement with PRME (Principles for Responsible Management Education) similarly builds international recognition for our approach to responsible management education. By achieving top ratings in these frameworks, the business school gains credibility with prospective students, faculty, and industry partners who increasingly value social responsibility alongside academic excellence.

The business school actively shares our innovations through academic conferences, industry forums, and international partnerships. Faculty members regularly present papers on our integrated excellence model at management education conferences, while Dean Dr Babu participates in national discussions about

management education reform. This thought leadership builds reputation while contributing to broader conversations about educational innovation.

Industry Brand Building

Our industry reputation builds through sustained engagement that demonstrates tangible value to partner organisations. The Corporate Boards of Studies create deep relationships with major employers, while our consulting engagements with 78 regional SMEs showcase faculty expertise and student capabilities. These SME partnerships have achieved average revenue growth of 34% within two years, creating powerful testimonials for our practical impact.

The business school's 47 student-led ventures through the Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative have created over 380 jobs with a 72% three-year survival rate, substantially exceeding the 40% national average for rural startups. These outcomes demonstrate our students' entrepreneurial capabilities while building brand recognition for innovation and social impact.

Our employment partnership agreements with major corporations create preferential hiring pathways while showcasing graduate quality. As these partnerships mature and our alumni advance in their careers, they become advocates for Woxsen's distinctive approach, creating the network effects that sustain long-term brand building.

International Recognition Development

The business school builds international recognition through our 170 partnerships across 47 countries, strategic relationships that expose our approach to global audiences while importing best practices. Our collaboration with institutions like Monmouth University (USA) and HHL Graduate School of Management (Germany) creates research opportunities and curriculum innovations that enhance our international profile.

Faculty exchanges through these partnerships provide opportunities for Woxsen faculty to share our integrated excellence model internationally while learning from global colleagues. Currently, 25% of our full-time business school faculty come from international backgrounds, including the USA, Canada, EU countries, and Africa, bringing global perspectives while adapting to our distinctive institutional culture.

Measuring Success: Outcomes and Impact Assessment

Student Success Metrics

The business school tracks comprehensive success metrics that reflect our integrated approach to excellence. Beyond placement rates and salary progression, we measure graduate social impact, leadership development, and long-term career satisfaction. Our longitudinal alumni assessment shows 74% of graduates report making business decisions with explicit consideration of social and environmental impacts, compared to 32% who entered with this mindset.

Graduate career progression demonstrates the market value of our approach. Within five years, 42% of our MBA alumni reach senior management positions, while 78% report high job satisfaction - metrics suggesting our emphasis on wellbeing and ethical leadership translates into professional success. Alumni in leadership positions increasingly seek Woxsen graduates for their organisations, creating positive reinforcement cycles that strengthen our market position.

Community and Regional Impact

The business school's community engagement generates measurable regional economic impact that enhances our reputation while fulfilling social responsibility commitments. Our Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative has directly created 380 jobs across 23 villages, with women filling 68% of these positions. The financial literacy programmes, building on traditional practices like gullak while introducing formal banking concepts, have helped village residents increase savings rates by an average of 34% over two years.

Student Social Internship Projects have implemented 137 community development initiatives since 2018, benefiting over 12,000 residents. These projects range from educational support for local schools to healthcare awareness campaigns, creating tangible community benefit while developing student capabilities. The projects' success rate - with 89% achieving their stated objectives within the internship period - demonstrates both student competence and community partnership effectiveness.

Future Trajectory: Scaling Innovation While Preserving Excellence

Sustainable Growth Challenges

The business school's continued growth requires careful balance between expansion and cultural preservation. We currently invest 18% of operating budget in wellbeing initiatives and community engagement, significantly exceeding the 5-7% typical of comparable institutions. This investment yields transformative outcomes but creates financial pressures as we scale.

Our faculty-to-student ratio of 1:18 supports our educational philosophy but presents economic challenges when market norms approach 1:25 or higher. Maintaining this ratio while expanding requires innovative resource allocation and revenue diversification through executive education, corporate training, and international partnerships.

Innovation Pipeline

Current business school innovations include a new Sustainable Leadership certificate programme, sustainable finance and accounting courses, and expanded engagement with the Humanistic Leadership Academy and MIT's u-lab programmes. These developments reflect our commitment to staying ahead of industry needs while maintaining our integrated approach to excellence and wellbeing.

We're also developing 'Distributed Campus' initiatives that extend our educational model to corporate offices and government buildings throughout Hyderabad, creating new revenue streams while increasing accessibility. These distributed learning nodes maintain our wellbeing-focused pedagogy while reaching working professionals who cannot attend traditional campus programmes.

Conclusion: Woxsen Business School's Distinctive Market Position

Woxsen Business School's success demonstrates that India's management education market rewards innovation and differentiation rather than mere replication of established models. By creating an integrated approach that produces "oven-ready" graduates with strong technical skills, ethical leadership capabilities, and social awareness, we have established a distinctive competitive position that serves both student success and national development needs.

Our experience suggests that the future of management education in India lies in developing new models that address the unique challenges and opportunities of India's economic transformation. Rather than competing directly with IIMs on their traditional strengths or attempting to replicate international business school models, institutions like Woxsen can create distinctive value by addressing gaps in the current ecosystem.

The business school's integrated excellence model - combining academic rigour with a wellbeing focus, industry engagement with community service, and global perspective with local application - represents a replicable approach for other institutions seeking to differentiate themselves in India's competitive education market. Our outcomes demonstrate that prioritising wellbeing and social responsibility enhances rather than compromises traditional measures of business school success.

As India continues its trajectory toward becoming the world's third-largest economy, business schools like Woxsen play a crucial role in developing leaders capable of navigating complexity while contributing to sustainable prosperity. Our experience demonstrates that this mission requires fundamental innovation in educational approach rather than incremental improvements to existing models. The business school's continued growth and impact suggest that this innovative positioning will remain relevant and valuable as India's economy and society continue their remarkable transformation.

References

Chepuri P. and Weichert, J. (2023). Woxsen University as a model for sustainable business school transformation. Milton Park:Taylor and Francis

Pula, P. K. (2023). Chancellor's message. Woxsen University. Retrieved from https://woxsen.edu.in/about-us/chancellor-message/

Scharmer, O. (2023). Humanistic leadership fall webinar series. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/6nAagnY_Hq0?si=S5i_xA2RgpQ99CvH

Stoner, J. A. F. (2024). "Winning time" for Woxsen University... and for all of us. Journal of Management for Global Sustainability, 11(1), forthcoming.

About the author

Raul V. Rodriguez, Vice President at Woxsen University, is a cognitive scientist and technology leader whose work focuses on augmenting human intelligence in an era of rising algorithmic dependence. His research blends social systems, automation, and network dynamics, resulting in several patented frameworks.

by Ian Fenwick & Dean Outerson

The Changing Forms of Culture and Collegiality

The Past Informs the Present

Sasin School of Management has always had a strong concern for *wellbeing*: the nature of that wellbeing has adapted and changed over time. To understand the evolution of 'wellbeing' at Sasin School of Management (formerly the Graduate Institute of Business Administration of Chulalongkorn University), one must understand its origins.

Sasin sprang from an unlikely menage à trois: the 102-year-old Wharton School, the 74-year-old Kellogg School of Management, and the 65-year-old Chulalongkorn University. The idea sprang up in the early 70s from a group of Thai business leaders and academics, spearheaded by Professor Toemsakdi Krishnamra, the tremendously far-sighted and internationally oriented founder of Sasin. This group realised that Thailand—at that time one of the fastest-growing economies in the world—would soon need a business school teaching in English to global educational standards. Before the foundation of Sasin, potential business leaders were sent to the world's finest business schools (mainly in the US). Many never returned. This brain drain needed to be addressed. Interestingly enough, this was almost the exact thinking behind the emergence of management schools in China in the 80s.

The team realised that there was insufficient time to build from scratch. They also saw that the bureaucratic nature of Thai higher education at that time all but prohibited organic growth from the business school already operating at Chulalongkorn University. They went in search of an 'instant business school', and (of course) at that time they went to the then font of business schools: the US of A.

Checking leading schools off their visit list, rejected at each by the risk-averse guardians at the country's finest institutions, the team eventually found themselves at the Kellogg School of Management.

Dean Don Jacobs had taken the Kellogg helm in the mid-70s, and his entrepreneurial innovations had propelled the school to a top-tier status. A career academic, economist, and finance professor—with a strong entrepreneurial streak—Don Jacobs transitioned the school from the individually competitive traditions of most business schools at the time, to the much more collaborative, teamwork culture that characterises many business schools today.

Instant Business School: Just Add (Visiting) Faculty

In 1982, when Sasin taught its first class, creating a business school based totally on visiting faculty was unknown. But that is precisely what Sasin did.

The model was to teach the same number of classes in five weeks as are usually taught in a US quarter. In fact, each module was numbered 1.1, 1.2, etc., to indicate Quarter 1 Part 1, etc. Each course would meet four times a week for a 90-minute class. Friday evenings and Saturdays were devoted to the Executive MBA. Supposedly, the remuneration for teaching one course to MBA and to EMBA for a five-week module was about the same as one third of the annual salary of a Wharton School Associate Professor: truly, a princely sum at that time.

When I first encountered Sasin, the school was already some 10 years old. I came as a visiting professor for a 5-week teaching stint from Toronto to Bangkok. I found a school with excellent visiting faculty, still mainly sourced from the US, but including talented teachers from around the world. At that time, Sasin was a school that was very much focused on teaching rather than research.

Sasin was a school that placed massive emphasis, in all it did, on the US founders of the school. For every problem, the first question was 'What do they do at Kellogg? How does Wharton handle this?' The orthodoxy of the US business schools was unquestioned. The Fourth of July was celebrated as a national festival at Sasin!

Sasin's partnership with Kellogg was more than a collaboration—it was a blueprint. The EMBA model we developed together proved so successful that Kellogg adopted it as its framework for global partnerships, rolling it out to institutions like HKUST and Schulich. In essence, Sasin served as the prototype for what became Kellogg's worldwide network of EMBA programmes.

The resident faculty at Sasin at that time numbered in single digits. All were Thai nationals who had completed their PhDs at leading US universities. As a good Canadian—if a transplanted Brit—with some US teaching experience, it seemed clear that there was more to be added, more to be said. Yet, when given their choice of exchange programmes, the students flocked to US schools. The established capitals of Europe were ok, definitely also-rans, but for sure no one wanted an exchange to Asian schools (*been there, done that*). Meanwhile, some of the more reflective executives saw the programme's deficiencies and hungered for Asian examples, Asian cases, and recognition that Asia had lessons from which the world could learn.

The tension between West and East was buried beneath a veneer of US-centricity. This was very apparent in faculty remuneration. While the visiting professors were handsomely rewarded and feted by the students—quite literally with elaborate dinners—the resident Thai faculty were less well paid, and their teaching much less appreciated by the students. A feeling that was, in some ways, reciprocated, as the resident faculty taught pretty much directly from textbooks, which only reinforced their lack of appreciation. Global education was excellent, regional expertise notable mainly by its absence.

Every attempt was made to improve the teaching skills of the resident faculty. New Thai faculty were apprenticed for a few months at a US partner school to improve their pedagogical and student engagement skills. But in the classroom, they remained very much second-class citizens. From time to time, there were efforts to enhance regional content: at one point, faculty were asked to 'adopt' a country in the region, but without follow-up, little came of it.

At this point, 'wellbeing' was very much defined as being as similar as possible to leading US business schools! The 'culture' was very much top-down leadership; the intent was emulation.

International Accreditation

After serving as a visiting professor for some seven years, I spent a sabbatical year in Thailand and, in 1999—right after the dotcom crash—set up an e-commerce company, neither an auspicious nor a sensible undertaking. After the inevitable failure of this venture, unwilling to return unsuccessful to Canada, I asked to join Sasin full-time, agreeing to teach four courses each year—the usual load in North America at that time. This request was granted.

Seeking to justify my existence and having really not much to do, I suggested pursuing AACSB accreditation. At times, the procedure was so US-centric and took so long that at several points I felt certain the accreditation attempt would fail, and I should look for another job! Partway through the AACSB accreditation process, we started EQUIS accreditation, and we pursued it after that as well.

Eventually, Sasin obtained *both* accreditations in the same year and, in 2010, became the first school in Thailand to be AACSB-accredited and the first to be EQUIS-accredited. Setting an aspirational goal for Thai business schools for the next 10 to 15 years.

In many ways, accreditation was a turning point for Sasin, and perhaps for me. It showed the imperfect fit of the North America model to the Asian reality, and the closer—but still imperfect match—with the European model. It also brought Sasin much more into the mainstream of business schools. However, 90% of the resident faculty (by now around 15 strong) were still Thai nationals, and the student body, particularly the MBA, was almost totally Thai. Nonetheless, Sasin was awakening and starting to be aware of competitive schools.

As a result of the accreditation process, 'wellbeing' became much more defined as pursuing research publications in academic journals. At the same time, 'culture' started a long path to becoming more creative, entrepreneurial and bottom-up.

...ch-ch-ch-changes

By 2014, Professor Toemsakdi Krishnamra, the founding director of Sasin, had retired and Professor Dipak Jain, previously Sasin's point of contact with Kellogg, and subsequently Dean of Kellogg and then Dean of INSEAD, had assumed the directorship. Unfortunately, Dipak was already in poor health and by 2017 had stepped down, to be replaced by an Acting Director, Paron Israsena Na Ayudhya. I was invited to become one of the Deputy Directors, responsible for External Relations, which was primarily marketing.

As someone whose teaching and research focus was digital marketing, the first task was to improve Sasin's digital marketing. This was relatively straightforward, as at that point Sasin's entire marketing budget was in print and PR. We immediately reallocated the budget almost entirely to digital channels and were rewarded with a noticeable increase in applications and admissions.

At the end of his two-year Acting Director term (a term that was mandated as non-renewable), I took over as Director. An early task was to make faculty evaluations more objective, more collegial, and better attuned to the university's workload system. We developed an approach in which faculty members participated in *Performance Evaluation & Development assessments*.

Each faculty member was asked to outline their achievements over the past academic year and their intentions for the next. After discussions with an assessment group composed of the management team (Director and Deputy Directors) and representatives from the Human Resources Committee, a 'focus' was agreed for each faculty member, outlining the faculty member's expected focus on teaching, research, and administrative support activities. Over time, in part as a response to various appeals by faculty members, this procedure became more objective and well-defined.

Global Representation: Natural Evolution, Not a Target

When we set out six years ago to rebuild our faculty, we embraced a simple principle: hire the best person for

each faculty position, regardless of nationality. This seemingly straightforward commitment has reshaped not just our faculty composition, but the very character of intellectual life at Sasin as we build a *global reputation for regional expertise.*

The results speak to the power of merit-based selection pursued with genuine conviction. As of July 2025, our core faculty of 29 includes 17 colleagues (59%) from beyond Thailand, collectively representing 14 countries. This is not a statistic that was deliberately engineered. It is the natural byproduct of choosing excellence, wherever it is found. Sasin now includes faculty (as well as students and staff) from diverse backgrounds, providing a range of intellectual and cultural perspectives. Our school has become reflective of the international workplaces typical of multinational organisations worldwide.

Sasin's planned evolution is the result of careful deliberation and consensus. Hiring comes after consulting with appropriate stakeholders and approval by our Human Resources Committee, because we know that every hire shapes our collective future. And as in most schools, faculty hiring errors tend to haunt us for many years afterwards.

Our expectations remain uncompromising: every faculty member must excel across teaching, research, and administration to create meaningful impact. For most, this translates into rigorous scholarship yielding quality publications alongside exceptional teaching.

It's clear that faculty wellbeing is enhanced by this ongoing pursuit of diversity. Faculty members are inspired by the intellectually diverse ideas around them. They are more open to international collaboration and show our students what it means to think globally, but be in tune with the Asian business environment.

This is the Sasin we have become: a place where the best minds from around the world choose to build their careers, not because we targeted geographic diversity, but because we created an environment where exceptional scholars naturally want to be. The global representation we now enjoy was not achieved by rigid KPIs. It is living evidence that when you pursue excellence relentlessly, the world takes notice and talent gravitates accordingly.

By now, 'wellbeing' has become multi-dimensional. Although still with a strong publication emphasis, it is much more wrapped up with innovation and creativity, a spirit of experimentation, and multicultural participation. As Sasin's mission statement puts it: inspire.connnect.transform for a better smarter sustainable world.

Strategic Priorities

Reflecting on the foundations of faculty wellbeing at Sasin, it becomes clear that sustaining a thriving academic community requires more than attention to immediate working conditions and collegial relationships. Faculty wellbeing must ultimately be anchored in—and driven by—a widely accepted strategic vision. One in which an overwhelming majority of the community has a stake and a belief.

The vitality of any faculty depends fundamentally on its ability to see itself as a central actor, *independently* pursuing meaningful goals that in fact extend beyond individual achievement to encompass a collective purpose and institutional distinction. This emphasis on the communal purpose and institutional distinction helps faculty feel part of a larger, meaningful endeavour. Of course, there will always be dissenters; in fact, they help define that communal purpose.

Most recently, Sasin's efforts have been recognised by our EMBA, entering the Financial Times Top 100. This

puts Sasin as #1 in Thailand (the only Thai school ever to have been in an FT Top 100), top 3 in Southeast Asia (the only one outside the Singapore enclave), and in the top 20 in Asia.

Of course, questions remain to be answered in the future. Three in particular will shape the school's future wellbeing: family enterprises, regionally oriented impact, and succession at Sasin.

Family Enterprise Imperative

Perhaps the most distinctive strategic opportunity—both for Sasin and for this region—lies in family enterprise teaching and research. This represents a fundamental alignment among our institutional identity, our student composition, and the regional economic landscape we serve.

Two-thirds of our students and alumni are connected to family enterprises, reflecting the reality that family businesses constitute the backbone of Asian economic life. These enterprises possess distinctive characteristics shaped by regional heritage, cultural values, and governance patterns that differ from their Western counterparts.

How can we best pursue excellence in this area, while energising and focusing faculty research, advancing knowledge in the field, and yet delivering on students' highly practical needs?

Regionally Oriented Impact

Within the broad mainstream of management education, there is a growing tension between the demand for peer-review journal (PRJ) publications—currently the basis for most faculty recruiting and promotion, and the mainstay of most business school rankings—and the increasing realisation that most PRJ publications have little *impact* on the world outside of the narrow ranks of academia.

This tension is especially strong in Asia. To teach and learn effectively about Asian management, a much greater quantity and variety of high-quality materials are required. Several schools are producing Asian oriented teaching materials, but as information spreads so quickly online, most traditional cases are 'blown' after a couple of classroom uses, with high-grade earning 'solutions' widely accessible. There is an insatiable demand for up-to-the-minute teaching materials. The same can be said for applied management thought leadership.

Who will be brave enough to lead the change in 'quality' assessment from a narrow academic research perspective to broader impact measurement? This change is inevitable, but it is hard to see from where it will spring. Established schools built their position on academic research; less-established schools, by definition, carry less weight and will find it hard to shift the assessment of quality.

Succession at Sasin

As Sasin looks toward future leadership transitions, the question is not merely who will occupy particular positions, but how those characters will balance the *global reputation* and the *regional expertise*.

Sasin is widely described as *the* most international unit within its university. A description earned, as outlined above, but our inclusivity, our openness to new ideas, and our widerange of faculty, and staff, backgrounds. It would surely be disappointing to see the school abandon its multi-cultural heritage.

As a globally ranked school, with an increasingly diverse clientele and outlook, Sasin demands a globally

respected leadership team that will extend the current wide participation in decision-making and strategy formulation. Such leadership demands a global search and careful assessment. At the same time, business school leaders are in short supply.

Effective succession planning for Sasin must involve stakeholders at all levels. It will require careful identification—and quite possibly development—of leadership talent. While we should take care to preserve institutional values and brand reputation, management education is changing faster than ever before. Sasin leadership must continue to embrace and shape that change. This will surely have many dimensions, a prominent one will be the use of digital media, distance education methods, and a blending of in-person and online teaching modalities. The future of Sasin will lie in its leadership in this area.

The Strategic Foundation of Faculty Wellbeing

These three challenges—advancing our distinctive focus on family enterprise research and teaching, ensuring regionally oriented impact, and preparing for leadership succession—may seem disparate, but they share a common thread. Each speaks to the necessity of *connecting* faculty wellbeing to institutional strategy. Faculty members thrive not just because their immediate working conditions are satisfactory, but because they see themselves as involved contributors to meaningful collective endeavours.

Faculty flourish when institutional strategy provides clarity of purpose, when resources are aligned with stated priorities, and when they can observe their institution positioning itself for distinction rather than merely managing operations. This strategic clarity and resource alignment instils confidence in the faculty about the institutional direction.

When faculty members understand where their institution is heading—and feel an active involvement in shaping that direction—their work tends to contribute to common goals, they tend to trust that leadership will provide the resources and support necessary to achieve excellence, and the foundation for sustained faculty vitality is established.

As Sasin moves forward, the wellbeing of our faculty will depend less on specific policies or programmes—important as these are—than on our ability as an institution to maintain strategic clarity, to pursue distinctive goals with focus and resources, and to create conditions where faculty members can see their individual contributions amplified through collective achievement. This is the ultimate responsibility of institutional leadership: not to manage faculty wellbeing as a separate concern, but to drive strategy in ways that make meaningful faculty work possible and institutional distinction achievable.

About the authors

Professor **Ian Fenwick** is Director of Sasin School of Management in Bangkok, Thailand. He is also co-author of the pioneering book, Digimarketing: The Essential Guide to New Media & Digital Marketing.

Dean Outerson is Ambassador & Writer-in-Residence and Head of the Asian Case Creation Center at Sasin School of Management. He is also President of the Thai-Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok.

by Gabriela Alvarado & Juan Romero

When Purpose Drives Culture... and Wellbeing! The IPADE Experience in Mexico

1. Introduction

IPADE is a niche graduate business school primarily focused on executive education, well-known for its close engagement with senior management in the Mexican business community and widely recognised for its strong humanistic approach, ethics, and values.

While wellbeing in organisations is often framed in terms of productivity, retention, and performance, at IPADE, it is primarily understood as a moral and ethical responsibility grounded in its humanistic and Christian ethos. This perspective makes IPADE a distinctive case in the global conversation on wellbeing in business schools: wellbeing here is not a strategic add-on but a core expression of institutional identity.

Given that there are many approaches to the concept of wellbeing, for the purpose of this chapter, we will follow the holistic view of experts from the Mexican Association of Human Resources Management (AMEDIRH). According to this perspective, wellbeing practices in the workplace may include physical, emotional, social, financial, occupational, spiritual, and intellectual aspects.

After outlining the context in which the school operates, this chapter provides a brief overview of IPADE Business School and its history, the impact of its mission, vision and values on its daily operations, and how it has managed to develop a strong and shared culture among its members. It describes main practices promoting wellbeing in the school, placing special emphasis on those aimed at its core faculty as they represent the key means through which the school carries out its mission and a living example of its focus, tradition, and values.

As a multidimensional concern, IPADE has strived to address as many wellbeing dimensions as possible. As such, the chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of its actual wellbeing practices relying on the 5 Cs of a high-performance culture framework. It also discusses current challenges and implications for global business schools.

2. The Mexican Context

Mexico, the tenth most populous country in the world and the second largest in Latin America, with a population exceeding 130 million, is characterised by both a young demographic profile and persistent inequality. The median age is 31 years, and roughly 40% of the population falls within the 25–54 age range—the prime target for graduate and executive education. Yet, despite a GDP of US$2.883 trillion in 2024, almost 36% of Mexicans live below the poverty line, and income distribution remains highly unequal.

This socioeconomic duality creates both challenges and opportunities for institutions such as IPADE: on the one hand, a growing middle and upper managerial class seeks

advanced business education, while on the other, inequality shapes organisational responsibilities toward social impact.

Over the past decade, Mexico's geopolitical landscape has been marked by economic volatility, regional disparities, and increasing social polarisation, all of which exert a significant influence on the country's business environment and educational institutions. Issues such as the uneven integration into global trade networks, complex nearshoring dynamics with North America, and persistent governance challenges have underscored the need for leadership grounded in ethical discernment and social responsibility. Within this context, IPADE's humanistic principles—centred on the dignity of the person, solidarity, and the common good—acquire renewed relevance. They call for preparing leaders capable of reconciling business efficiency with social inclusion, and of navigating complexity without compromising integrity. Far from being abstract ideals, these values serve as pragmatic anchors for decision-making, guiding the school's community to engage constructively with the broader socioeconomic and political transformations shaping Mexico and Latin America today. In this sense, IPADE's humanistic outlook becomes not only an ethical compass but also a practical framework for action in a national context defined by volatility and rapid transformation.

From a cultural standpoint, Mexico is considered a collectivist society according to Hofstede's model of national culture, meaning that individuals value belonging to cohesive groups that offer protection in exchange for loyalty. This contrasts with individualistic cultures such as the United States or the United Kingdom, where personal autonomy is prioritised. For business schools, this cultural trait has significant implications for wellbeing: practices that foster community, solidarity, and mutual support resonate strongly in Mexico and can be leveraged to sustain collegiality and psychological safety within academic and professional environments.

3. IPADE's Organisational Culture

Since its founding in 1967 by a group of prominent business leaders, IPADE has been guided by a distinctive mission: *to educate leaders with a global vision, a sense of social responsibility, and Christian values who are capable of transforming organisations and society*. This mission is embodied in five core values—unity, excellence, work, spirit of service, and self-transcendence—that shape the school's culture and daily operations. Together, they reflect IPADE's aspiration to be recognised as the leading school in business humanism, actively promoting sustainable business models and a fair distribution of wealth in Mexico.

Over the years, IPADE has expanded from its initial executive education programmes to offer a wide portfolio of degree and non-degree programmes across three permanent campuses in the major cities in Mexico (Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey), and multiple temporary venues nationwide to meet the needs of business communities in smaller cities. Despite this growth, the school has remained faithful to its founding ethos: close engagement with senior management, a strong emphasis on the human dimension in decision-making, and the integration of ethical and societal concerns into managerial practice. This coherence between purpose and action has allowed IPADE to consolidate a shared organisational culture that fosters both professional excellence and personal wellbeing, earning it international recognition as a Level 5 – Pioneering School in the 2025 *Positive Impact Rating*.

4. Practices Supporting and Promoting Wellbeing

IPADE has established multiple mechanisms to ensure that all members of the school not only know its purpose and culture but also live them in their daily work. These mechanisms generate a sense of self-transcendence and belonging that directly supports individual and collective wellbeing. Among such mechanisms, we can cite:

Internal communication and alignment. The mission, vision, and values of IPADE are conveyed throughout the recruitment and onboarding stages, emphasising their relevance for everyday responsibilities. They are then reinforced through monthly faculty and staff meetings and annual three-day seminars. These gatherings serve not only as organisational alignment tools but also as spaces that nurture social, occupational, spiritual, and intellectual wellbeing.

Daily community spaces. Every day, the school provides free breakfast and lunch to all faculty and staff, complemented by beverages and snacks available in lounges across campuses. These shared meals and informal spaces are designed to strengthen collegiality, foster friendships, and promote social and physical wellbeing. They illustrate how even simple daily rituals can sustain a culture of community in a high-performance environment.

Engagement of retired professors. Faculty members who reach retirement age may remain active as emeritus professors, gradually reducing their teaching load while maintaining an office, administrative support, and a visible presence in the community. Retired professors frequently join meals and academic activities, serving as role models who embody the school's values. This practice enriches the intellectual, social, and spiritual life of the school and creates intergenerational continuity that contributes to overall wellbeing.

Community outreach activities. Aligned with its mission, IPADE strongly promotes initiatives that contribute constructively to society, encouraging faculty, staff, participants, and alumni to engage actively in them, fostering a sense of purpose and personal fulfillment that, in turn, enhances occupational and social wellbeing. Some exemplars are:

- Fundación El Peñón and Colegio Montefalco. These rural schools, supported by IPADE, aim to promote human development and improve the quality of life among low-income families in surrounding communities. Fundación El Peñón also created the *Peñón–Montefalco University Students Program*, which provides scholarships for outstanding graduates to pursue higher education. Members of the IPADE community contribute to these schools through financial oversight, administrative and educational support, and fundraising efforts. With IPADE's backing, both schools have positively transformed the lives of more than 8,000 graduates—academically, personally, economically, and professionally—and have inspired leading companies such as Deloitte, Google, IBM, and Visa to replicate similar initiatives.
- Inclusive Growth. Since 2015, IPADE has collaborated with the World Economic Forum and the Vatican on the theme of *Inclusive Growth*, particularly within Mexico and Latin America. This initiative seeks to raise awareness among researchers, faculty, executives, and business students about the importance of placing the human person at the center of economic and organisational development.
- Impact Lab. To identify and promote projects with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) impact, the Research Center on Social Responsibility established the *IPADE Impact Lab*. This platform brings together organiszations, connects practitioners, and showcases best practices in ESG activities. Its main goals are to increase awareness of impactful initiatives in Mexico, facilitate experiential learning, and

foster collaboration within the business community. In doing so, the Impact Lab has become a vibrant space for sharing knowledge and experiences that strengthen the ecosystem of responsible business in the region.

- Inspire Leaders, Bet on Mexico. Consistent with IPADE's commitment to transform individuals so they can, in turn, transform organisations and society, this fundraising initiative was launched in 2023 to strengthen the managerial capabilities of young Mexicans with high potential. Since its inception, the programme has awarded 56 full scholarships to talented yet economically disadvantaged candidates who demonstrate strong entrepreneurial promise by enrolling in IPADE's full-time MBA programme.

Additional examples of community engagement include faculty involvement in the MBA Social Innovation Club and pro bono consulting for organisations dedicated to social and environmental impact.

Training and development. To strengthen intellectual, occupational, social, and spiritual wellbeing, IPADE has established a comprehensive Training and Development Plan structured around three dimensions: professional practice, institutional identity, and personal development. These initiatives are summarised in Table 1, which outlines the three key dimensions of IPADE's Training and Development Plan. For the faculty, this includes peer class observation and feedback, attendance at international programmes such as the Harvard Global Colloquium on Participant-Centered Learning, research workshops and academic reflection sessions, as well as courses, conferences and seminars in their academic field. Concerning the institutional identity dimension, new faculty are required to complete courses in Philosophical Anthropology, Business Ethics, and Catholic Social Teaching, participating each year in a one-week seminar with quarterly one-day follow-up sessions. For the staff, the "Vanguardia IPADE" platform provides training in technical skills and organisational culture. Finally, in line with IPADE's humanistic ethos, the school offers its faculty and staff personal development programmes encompassing family, social, and spiritual aspects, and workshops on virtues, work-life balance, and the meaning of work.

Table 1. IPADE Training and Development Plan.

Dimension	Faculty	Staff
Professional practice	Teaching	Training
	Research	Career track
	Academic field	
	Management	
Institutional identity	Humanism	
	Christian sense	
	Social responsibility	
	Values	

Personal development	Wellbeing
	Family
	Social
	Spiritual

Safe and respectful environment. IPADE maintains a protocol to ensure a safe, harassment-free, and respectful work environment, reinforcing psychological safety as a critical aspect of social and emotional wellbeing. This policy not only establishes clear rules and the sanctions associated with behaviours that violate these principles, but also signals leadership's active commitment to protecting dignity and reducing stress among employees.

Health and sports. IPADE recognises that physical wellbeing is a prerequisite for sustained professional performance. To this end, the school promotes healthy lifestyles through both structural initiatives and cultural practices. Healthy food options are consistently offered across campuses, complementing the free daily meals provided to all faculty and staff. In addition, gym facilities are available on two campuses, and the school regularly organises sports tournaments, marathons, and recreational activities designed not only to encourage physical activity but also to reinforce teamwork, unity, and social bonds across departments and hierarchies. These initiatives demonstrate how IPADE integrates physical health into its broader culture of wellbeing, framing it as a collective endeavour rather than an individual responsibility.

Retirement preparation. Financial and occupational wellbeing are also central concerns, particularly for faculty and staff approaching the later stages of their careers. The Talent Management Department has designed a specialised programme for employees who are 10 to 15 years away from retirement. This programme helps participants analyse spending habits, project future expenses, and plan strategically for long-term goals. Beyond financial aspects, the programme also addresses occupational and health-related transitions, encouraging participants to develop sustainable routines and consider new avenues for personal and professional fulfilment after leaving full-time roles. By treating retirement as a stage of growth rather than decline, IPADE reinforces its commitment to lifelong wellbeing and to accompanying its people throughout their entire professional journey.

These last sets of practices—focused respectively on physical vitality and lifelong purpose—embody the school's belief that wellbeing is integral to human flourishing at every stage of life.

Institutional Benefits and Support Systems.

Beyond the previous mechanisms, IPADE has developed an extensive system of benefits that goes well beyond legal requirements and standard practices in Mexican higher education. These benefits are not conceived merely as incentives, but as integral components of the school's humanistic ethos, aimed at fostering long-term stability, health, collegiality, and personal growth. Organised across financial, physical, social, family, emotional, and academic dimensions, this benefits ecosystem provides tangible evidence of how IPADE translates its mission and values into everyday practices that directly enhance the quality of life and overall wellbeing of its faculty and staff.

In the *financial dimension*, IPADE provides benefits significantly above those mandated by Mexican labour law. All employees receive an annual bonus equivalent to 30 days of salary—double the legal requirement in Mexico, a savings fund with institutional matching contributions of 13% of base salary, and food vouchers worth 12% of salary plus an additional month in December. Long-term stability is further reinforced through a pension plan in which the school contributes 70% over the employee's own contributions, alongside life insurance equivalent to 39 months of salary and educational scholarships for employees' children in schools of the Universidad Panamericana network.

Regarding *health and physical wellbeing*, the school subsidises 50% of a major medical insurance policy that extends to spouses and children, provides complementary minor medical insurance, and offers preventive health check-ups. Employees also have access to on-site medical services at no cost, while faculty benefit from specific agreements with healthcare providers, clinical laboratories, gyms, and psychological counselling services.

From a *social and community perspective*, IPADE grants additional vacation days beyond those established by law (including Easter, extended December breaks, and commemorative holidays), subsidised transportation, and Christmas food baskets. As described above, daily free meals and shared coffee breaks contribute to a strong sense of belonging and collegiality.

In terms of *family-work harmony and emotional wellbeing*, faculty members enjoy specific benefits that reflect sensitivity to different life stages. These include extended maternity leave with gradual reintegration, parental leave for fathers, allowances to support adoption, nursing rooms, and special leave for perinatal loss. They may also request up to four weeks per academic year of remote work to better balance family and professional commitments. Further, professors may request temporary reductions in responsibilities during personal or family crises, while retaining their health and life insurance coverage. Importantly, early-career faculty may apply for a "pause the clock" mechanism that temporarily halts tenure-track evaluations in times of exceptional personal or family challenges.

For *academic and professional growth* –linked to intellectual wellbeing–, IPADE invests heavily in faculty development. Internal and external programmes are available, including international research stays, and opportunities for doctoral or postdoctoral study. Faculty enrolled in doctoral programmes receive workload adjustments, dedicated research periods, and reduced travel requirements. In addition, a structured mentoring service supports professors in navigating professional and personal challenges across their academic trajectory.

Taken together, these institutional mechanisms and benefits form an ecosystem that not only fosters retention and productivity, but also reflects a deep conviction: that the flourishing of the person—physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, financially, occupationally, and spiritually—is at the heart of IPADE's mission. This illustrates how the school's humanistic ethos is embedded not only in its discourse, but also in tangible organisational practices that promote dignity, security, and a strong sense of community.

To better understand how these practices reinforce a culture of accountability and wellbeing, IPADE's experience can be analysed through Praeger's (2019) Five Cs framework for high-performance culture, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The 5 Cs of a High-Performance Culture.

Element	Implication	Illustrative practices
Common purpose	A shared belief system (mission, vision and values) provides meaning and direction, reinforcing cohesion and self-transcendence.	Mission and values embedded in recruitment and onboarding; annual meetings dedicated to each core value; integration of humanistic identity into teaching, research, and staff training.
Clear expectations	Roles, responsibilities, and success criteria are explicit, reducing ambiguity and stress. Faculty and staff know what is expected and how their performance contributes to the mission.	Annual performance evaluations for both faculty and administrative staff; tenure-track faculty know research, teaching, and service expectations; administrative staff have measurable goals.
Communication and alignment	Continuous alignment across campuses and departments ensures cohesion despite geographic dispersion. Communication reinforces trust and reduces silos.	Monthly and annual faculty and staff meetings; three-day off-site retreats; daily shared meals fostering informal dialogue; transparent updates from leadership; protocols against harassment and misconduct to ensure safe and respectful communication.
Coaching and collaboration	Leaders and senior faculty act as mentors, encouraging cross-generational learning and support. Collaboration reduces isolation and enhances intellectual wellbeing.	Mentoring for junior faculty; peer class observations and feedback; internal research seminars and workshops; emeritus professors mentoring younger colleagues; staff training through "Vanguardia IPADE."
Consequences	Results and behaviours are visible and linked to both recognition and accountability. Positive consequences strengthen engagement; challenges such as workload and burnout are also acknowledged.	International recognition of IPADE as "Level 5 – Pioneering School" in the 2025 Positive Impact Rating; low faculty turnover and strong retention of emeritus professors; evidence of burnout due to demanding academic and administrative workloads addressed through workload reviews and support programmes.

Adapted from Praeger (2019).

5. Current Challenges and Learnings

Despite its strong culture and extensive wellbeing practices, IPADE continues to face several challenges that are common to business schools worldwide. One enduring challenge involves workload and work-life balance. Faculty often combine teaching with significant administrative responsibilities and research expectations, creating pressure that can lead to fatigue and, in some circumstances, burnout. In the case of IPADE, this challenge is heightened by the fact that, in order to provide the same learning experience across all venues, faculty members travel extensively throughout Mexico, a country nearly equivalent in size to the combined territory of France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and Poland. This level of mobility places additional pressure on them and underscores the need for thoughtful workload management. Internal climate surveys have revealed concerns about excessive demands, particularly among early-career professors who are still consolidating their academic trajectory. Addressing this challenge requires ongoing adjustments in workload distribution, clearer prioritisation, and continued investment in support systems such as mentoring and remote work arrangements.

A second challenge is maintaining cultural cohesion across multiple campuses and itinerant programmes. Operating across both permanent and temporary venues makes it challenging to ensure a consistent experience of IPADE's mission and values. Although retreats and regular communication efforts play a crucial role in fostering alignment, the risk of fragmentation remains an inherent feature of multi-site institutions. To address this, IPADE continues to strengthen cross-campus collaboration and reinforce symbolic rituals that sustain a shared sense of identity and belonging.

In this regard, central governing bodies—such as the Board of Directors, the Executive Committee, the Dean's Committee, the Academic Committee, and the Innovation and Learning Committee—play a pivotal role in defining the school's strategic direction and institutional policies. Furthermore, all administrative and support areas, including Human Talent, Finance and Administration, Information Technology, and Marketing and Communications, as well as academic departments, operate under a centralised structure with standardised processes across campuses. At the same time, each campus is led by a director who reports directly to the dean and is responsible for local operations, staff management, and coordination with the central support units at headquarters.

Generational dynamics also pose a challenge. The presence of emeritus professors ensures continuity and transmission of values, fostering intellectual, social and spiritual wellbeing, but also highlights differences in expectations between senior and junior faculty. Younger members often seek more flexibility, digital tools, and international exposure, while senior professors emphasise tradition and humanistic reflection. This tension, however, can be constructive if managed as a source of dialogue and mutual enrichment.

A further challenge lies in supporting retirement transitions. Although the school has established programmes to help employees prepare financially and personally for retirement, sustaining engagement and wellbeing in later stages of professional life remains complex. IPADE is experimenting with policies that allow retired professors to remain intellectually active while progressively reducing responsibilities, thus framing retirement as a stage of growth rather than withdrawal.

Finally, IPADE must continue to navigate the digital transformation of business education. The pandemic accelerated expectations for hybrid and online delivery, which has implications not only for pedagogy but also for wellbeing: virtual work can increase flexibility, but it may also erode social interaction and collegiality if not carefully managed. The challenge ahead is to preserve IPADE's hallmark sense of community and dialogue while fully embracing technological innovation.

Ultimately, these challenges remind IPADE that wellbeing, like leadership, requires constant reflection and renewal. Its experience demonstrates that purpose and culture are not static assets but living systems that must be cultivated with intention and care.

6. Implications for Global Business Schools

The IPADE experience offers several key lessons:

Purpose-driven cultures enhance wellbeing. IPADE demonstrates that when an institution's mission and values are clearly defined, communicated, and embedded into daily practices, they provide meaning that buffers against stress and burnout. In contexts where academic demands are high, a strong sense of purpose can serve as a protective factor, motivating faculty and staff to see their work as part of a broader societal contribution rather than as isolated tasks.

Leadership must actively curate culture. Values do not sustain themselves automatically. At IPADE, leadership invests intentionally in rituals such as annual retreats, faculty mentoring, and transparent communication strategies. For other business schools, this highlights the importance of leaders taking an active role in shaping culture, ensuring alignment, and recognising contributions—rather than assuming that mission statements alone will create engagement.

Context matters: leverage cultural traits. Mexico's collectivist culture has enabled IPADE to build a strong sense of collegiality and belonging through practices like daily communal meals and intergenerational integration. Business schools in other parts of the world should similarly examine their cultural context: in individualistic settings, for instance, different mechanisms may be needed to foster psychological safety and collaboration. There is no "one-size-fits-all" model for wellbeing.

Sustainable careers require long-term vision. IPADE's programmes for retirement preparation and its policies for emeritus faculty reflect a commitment to accompanying academics throughout their professional lifecycle. Many institutions tend to focus on early- and mid-career development but neglect the later stages. Global business schools can learn from IPADE that career sustainability must address not only hiring and promotion but also transitions, longevity, and post-retirement engagement.

Wellbeing must be multidimensional. By approaching wellbeing across physical, emotional, social, financial, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual aspects, IPADE avoids reducing the concept to health programmes or perks. For other institutions, this suggests the importance of adopting a holistic framework that considers the full complexity of human needs within academic environments.

The IPADE case shows that fostering wellbeing in business schools demands more than policy design—it requires moral coherence, cultural awareness, and consistent leadership. By aligning purpose, community, and performance, IPADE demonstrates how humanistic principles can serve as strategic assets in navigating the complex challenges facing management education today.

References

Amaya, E. (2023) Wellness, Bienestar Integral. In *20 Expertos Hablan de Wellness*. Mexico City: Asociación Mexicana en Dirección de Recursos Humanos (AMEDIRH).

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2025) *The World Factbook*. Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mexico/. Accessed on August 1, 2025.

Estefan, A. (2023) Más Allá de las Tendencias: Un Compromiso con el Bienestar Integral de la Gente. In *20 Expertos Hablan de Wellness*. Mexico City: Asociación Mexicana en Dirección de Recursos Humanos (AMEDIRH).

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., and Minkov, M. (2010) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Madero G. S. (2023) Bienestar Integral en el Tecnológico de Monterrey Buscando la Plenitud de los Estudiantes y Colaboradores. In *20 Expertos Hablan de Wellness*. Mexico City: Asociación Mexicana en Dirección de Recursos Humanos (AMEDIRH).

Praeger, C. (2019) *Overcoming the Hurdles of Growth. The Role of the CEO in Building a High-Performance Organization and Aligning Teams.* Rhythm Systems, Inc

About the authors

Gabriela Alvarado, DBA, is a Professor of Marketing at IPADE Business School, where she also serves as Associate Director of Research and Academic Processes.

Juan Romero, PhD, is a Professor of Managerial Information and Control at IPADE Business School, where he also serves as Senior Associate Dean for Research and Academic Processes and Member of the Board of Directors.

by Gina Grandy

Clarity and Contradiction in Care: Cultivating Wellness in Business Schools

Business schools, and the deans who lead them, have been critiqued as dark places with people bowing to capitalism and the principles of efficiency, outputs and career-readiness at all costs. Some academics working in business schools have even called for the 'bulldozing' of business schools (Parker, 2018) to put an end to these neoliberal entities (Fleming, 2019). Is it naïve as a dean to think wellness at work is even a possibility in a place where those who work there feel compelled to cry out in such despair about its existence?

I have always believed that an academic's working life, and especially working in a business school, was one of great privilege. I still believe that, but I also recognise the context has changed. In an era of post-COVID exhaustion, heightened pressures for student growth in the face of reduced government funding, growing public criticism of universities around the value of a degree, and neoliberal tendencies to view students (and employers) as consumers for whom we must continually re-invent ourselves to serve their desires, there is no wonder that faculty and professional staff engagement is low and there is growing discontent. Now more than ever, cultivating a culture of wellness at business schools is critical, but likely never more difficult.

Wellbeing at work, as "the overall quality of employee's experience and function at work" (Van De Voorde et al., 2012, p. 393), is often linked to happiness and associated with physical, social, spiritual, emotional and intellectual wellbeing (Samad et al., 2022). More broadly, wellness at work considers the individual and collective, and recognises there are psychological, physical and systemic dimensions (Danna and Griffin, 1999). As a dean navigating leadership, wellness, and culture transformation in a business school, I propose that cultivating a wellness culture is grounded in people *and* systems, and it doesn't always feel good in trying to get there.

The Wellness of the School: People, Systems, Culture

Wellbeing at work is often described as the extent to which employees *feel good* and *fulfilled* in their job roles, characterised by positive affect, job satisfaction, purpose and functioning well in work life (Guest, 2017). Following this, a wellbeing-supportive organisational culture then fosters the conditions (e.g., resources, support, meaningful work, psychological safety) that promote wellbeing at work. While flawed as a construct, here I conceptualise wellness as considering wellbeing and dignity at work, and related concepts, such as care, connection, engagement, and sustainability.

If we start at the individual level, dignity at work is part of wellbeing. Dignity at work in business schools is built on trust. In an era where those who take on leadership roles in academia are often viewed as 'moving to the dark side', rarely is it assumed that the dean is trustworthy. The underlying assumption is that we have or will develop the "Dean's Disease" (Bedeian, 2002, p.164), thereby making the dean suspect[1]. That means we are starting from a place of deficit in building trust and dignity at work.

1 Bedeian (2002) coined the term Dean's Disease to describe how academic leaders lose touch with their colleagues and the values of collegiality as they become insulated from those who are willing to share differing views, they develop an inflated sense of self-importance and lose their tolerance to hear and take on board critical feedback.

I served as Dean in one institution where I was an internal hire, promoted from an associate dean role into the dean role. I now serve as dean at another institution, as an external hire. There are differences in what building trust looks like and how long it takes in these two situations. As an internal hire, I knew the culture and the people. It doesn't mean it was easy to build trust, or that trust was a given, but I was a 'known quantity', and it was generally easier to have conversations with colleagues about difficult topics without it eroding trust. For the most part, even when we disagreed about a decision I made, most people knew I was leading with the best interests of the school, and the people there at heart. In my current role, as a newcomer, my experience has been that building trust takes a long time and requires a lot of invested time by the dean and others holding leadership positions alongside the dean.

Wellness at work also ties to space, nourishment and health. Dunbar (2017) concluded that social or communal eating results in higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, trust and engagement. While that research was conducted outside of the workplace setting, the same applies to business schools in building a culture of wellness. Indeed, food alone is not enough, but food does give people a reason to come together and engage in conversation. Through the informal exchange, we learn about each other and build relationships. In addition, being able to do so in spaces which are comfortable, fresh and built for purpose, supports this. When opportunities arise to engage in renovations, creating spaces where people can take pride in their place of work and come together in conversation and in health supports building a culture of wellness. On my initial listening tour in my current role, I heard from professional staff that the faculty-staff lounge was no longer a place where they wanted to go for a break or lunch (for a variety of reasons). Those comments triggered a closer look at our spaces and where we come together. Over time, we have invested in a new faculty-staff lounge with treadmills and stationary bikes, two new wellness rooms, a puzzle room and a games room. We are also exploring meditation training and virtual meditation practice available weekly for staff and faculty.

As a cautionary note, I have learned the hard way that even when making a space change intended to be for the better (e.g., better use of space, new furniture, better natural light), there can be a sense of loss for those affected. Engaging in *many* conversations with those affected will make the transition easier and ultimately lead to greater pride in place. As dean, and for others leading these initiatives, it can feel like those multiple conversations are unnecessary when your attention is being called for elsewhere. For those leading those conversations, there needs to be heightened transparency around the aspects which are information sharing and the aspects where there is an opportunity for consultation and input into the process. Those conversations can be arduous and draining. There will be push-back and even disappointment for some, but it offers a clarity that earns respect and trust over time.

A culture of wellness is also marked by continuous improvement as a learning organisation. This is often the hardest part of building a culture of wellness, because it triggers change, and can feel like it sits at odds with investing in people and job security. For me, continuous improvement can serve as a means through which to improve job security by building sustainable programmes, people planning and systems. That is part of the care associated with a culture of wellness.

De Vita and Case (2014, p. 359) argue that "organisational culture can be 'smelt' in any corner of the organisation, but it starts at the top of the hierarchy, where leadership sits." Sitting from a place of privilege as dean of a business school in a research-intensive university, I suggest that if we are to cultivate a culture of wellness at work and specifically in business schools, it needs to be grounded in the complex context that

we face, and thus building practices and systems to ensure business schools are sustainable. Such a stance on wellbeing is suspicious for many. As I reflexively think about what informs my perspective on this, it is at least in part informed by the seduction and embedded neoliberal tendencies that inform my leadership ways of knowing and being. From where I sit, however, with government funding to universities decreasing, costs increasing across the board, and tuition fees reaching a breaking point, to sustain the future of business schools, continuous improvement must be part of it. In that clear expectations around a learning mindset, accountability and shared responsibility can foster cultural wellness. Leading for wellbeing is the practice of juggling people care and systems care… a balance that is undoubtedly difficult to navigate, and we do not always get it right.

Being Well: The Self as a Site of Leadership

The resilience needed to balance people care and systems care means that as deans we also need to care for the self. Leading for wellbeing starts with the leader and self-care - as cliched as it seems, and perhaps even a bit narcissistic. That practice is ongoing work.

We all know that leader care is important, it's obvious. Yet, I have often neglected my own physical and emotional needs in service to others in the practice of my leader identity. I continue to struggle with the nagging feeling of never being enough. At the same time, as an optimist, I have good reframing skills, and I am learning to accept the discomfort of recognising there will always be someone you disappoint as there are only so many hours in a day. This is indeed informed by gender expectations – those I place on myself and those projected by others. Alongside that, my 'pacesetter' (Goleman, 2000), and what some might view as neoliberal tendencies to lead with a focus on outcomes, creates an internal tension when trying to practice leading with wellbeing in mind. It also amplifies the felt imperative to find ways to simultaneously move the organisation forward and enact compassionate leadership, while risking depletion.

I was recently forced to literally pause for health reasons. During that pause, I reflected on my leadership practice and was reminded of the toll it can take on the leader as dean, and in one's efforts to cultivate a culture of wellbeing and wellness. As the deadline for this piece loomed, I had to make space to deal with a health challenge. Fortunately, my health challenge is resolvable, but it has made caring for the self who leads particularly salient. Being and feeling healthy makes it easier to be our 'best selves'. When we are our 'best selves', it is easier to lead and support a practice of leadership that is committed to the wellbeing of the individual, the collective and the system.

"Mothering" the Organisation: The Burden of Care in Wellness

As a woman dean and a scholar of women in leadership, it would be remiss of me not to reflect on how cultivating a culture of wellness can be intertwined with the gendered scripts of care and community. I would like to think colleagues describe my leadership style as a positive combination of: results-driven, accountable, tenacious, strategic, empathic, nurturing, and relational. A balance of doing gender well and doing gender differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2013). Depending on the interaction and decision at hand, I suspect most days, however, I am described as one extreme or the other in those terms. I have heard my leadership described as "there isn't much warmth in the dean's office" to "the caring mother" of the school. Neither of which I am particularly proud of, nor do they reflect the ideal to which I aspire as a woman leader in a business school. On more than one occasion, colleagues have even asked me for a hug following difficult conversations with them.

Should such an expectation be placed on a dean? Can we, as women deans, cultivate cultures of wellbeing while not embodying those gendered expectations of care?

There is a tension between being viewed as a leader versus a nurturer, and that does play into how women deans can build a culture of wellness at business schools. My experience as a woman dean does not reflect the experience of all women deans in business schools. My lived experience is that the rules are different for us. While the gendered script of care isn't uncomfortable or completely offensive to me, that expectation carries a burden. There are invisible costs to personal wellbeing and professional legitimacy for women deans in business schools as we cultivate cultures of wellness. All deans, women or otherwise, need to be aware of the potential costs of focusing on the wellness of others or the system, at the expense of self.

Concluding Reflections from an Imperfect Dean

As I reflect on nearly eight years of serving as a dean, I recognise that we have not yet fully cultivated a culture of wellness within my current institution—yet I remain (cautiously) optimistic that we can. I also appreciate that, in this work, both the process and the outcomes will not always feel good.

As we continue learning how to enact an "ethics of care" (Gilligan, 1982) in cultivating a culture of wellness in business schools, I offer the following reflections, shaped by my own imperfect practice. This is work that can feel uncomfortable and unresolved, but—as Cassell (2025) reminds us—it is leadership work that is both worthy and essential.

- Talk about wellness, and invest in it, as a function of people, systems *and* space.
- Be patient because building trust takes time. Be upfront with colleagues that you know it will take time to build that trust.
- Remind colleagues that trust is reciprocal. The responsibility of building trustworthy relationships is a two-way street. Colleagues need to trust the dean, *and* the dean needs to be able to trust colleagues.
- Be honest – there is care in clarity, even if it doesn't feel good for you or others in the moment. It builds respect over time.
- Use your strategic plan to guide your decision-making – do it consistently and transparently.
- Share the responsibility across the leadership team so that trust doesn't rest only with the dean – associate deans and other senior leaders also need to be communicative, consultative, transparent, listening, and responding.
- Respect the collegial process and remind academic colleagues that THEY decide the future and they need to take that responsibility seriously.
- Business schools are identity workspaces where professional staff, full-time academics and academic leaders, including deans, all expect and deserve dignity at work.
- Challenge colleagues to assume (your) positive intent, as they would expect you to do of them.

- Learn to be comfortable with discomfort in having difficult conversations - those where you explain that decision-making has to entail balancing the individual, collective and the system. Most people will ultimately respect you for doing so, and the ones who do not, you likely were never going to get on-side.
- Remind people that self-care, including your own, is important to building wellbeing in the system. In other words, as they say when you travel, "put your own oxygen mask on first."
- Pause and ask yourself, are the expectations of care directed at the dean reasonable (whether gendered or not)? If they aren't, have the courage to engage in those crucial conversations to realign expectations.
- Make your spaces welcoming and natural places to congregate.
- Use food as a way to bring people together. Feed people well and often!
- Invest in people (e.g., professional development; coaching).
- Invest time, A LOT of time to be visible and to get to know people (e.g., townhalls, drop by hours with the dean, celebrate EVERYTHING, acknowledge birthdays, illness, deaths).

Ultimately, building a culture of wellness is about more than policies or practices—it is about who we choose to be together with. It asks us to lead with courage, to listen generously, and to show up for one another even when the work feels difficult. My hope is that by embracing these commitments collectively, we continue moving toward business schools where wellness becomes a defining strength of how we lead and learn.

References

Bedeian, A. G. (2002) The dean's disease: How the darker side of power manifests itself in the office of dean. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 1*(2) pp. 164–173.

Cassell, C. (2025) Who would be a dean? Demonizing deans and the question of role modelling leadership in our business schools. *Journal of Management Studies, 62*(2) pp. 1014-1019.

Danna, K., and Griffin, R. W. (1999) Health and well-being in the workplace: A review and synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Management, 25*(3), 357–384.

De Vita, G. and Case, P. (2014) 'The smell of the place': Managerialist culture in contemporary UK business schools. *Culture and Organization, 22*(4) pp. 348-364.

Dunbar, R. (2017) Breaking bread: The functions of social eating. *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology 3*, pp. 198–211.

Fleming, P. (2020) Dark academia: Despair in the neoliberal business school. *Journal of Management Studies, 57*(6), pp. 1305-1311.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Goleman, D. (2000) Leadership That Gets Results. *Harvard Business Review, 78*(2) pp. 78–90.

Guest, D. E. (2017) Human resource management and employee well-being: Towards a new analytic framework. *Human Resource Management Journal, 27*(1) pp. 22–38.

Mavin, S. and Grandy, G. (2013) Doing gender well and differently in dirty work. *Gender, Work & Organization, 20*(3) pp. 232-251.

Mavin, S. and Grandy, G. (2012) Doing gender well and differently in management. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 27*(4) pp. 218-231.

Parker, M., (2018) Why we should bulldoze the business school, *The Guardian*, April 27, Accessed November 5, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/27/bulldoze-the-business-school.

Samad, A., Muchiri, M., and Shahid, S. (2022) Investigating leadership and employee well-being in higher education. *Personnel Review, 51*(1) pp. 57-76.

Van De Voorde, K., Paauwe, J., and Van Veldhoven, M. (2012) Employee well being and the HRM–organizational performance relationship: A review of quantitative studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 14*(4) pp. 391–407.

About the author

Gina Grandy serves as Dean and Professor at the Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary, located in Alberta, Canada. Her most recent research focuses on women leaders and entrepreneurs, gender at work, leadership development, and dirty work. Her work has been published widely in such journals as *Human Relations, Journal of Business Ethics, British Journal of Management*, and *Gender, Work and Organization*.

3

gf

University Level Frameworks and Structures: Public Policy Issues

by Rajani Naidoo, Howard Thomas & Michael J Thomas

Targeting Impactful Cultural Shifts at the University Level – Insights About Building the People and Cultural Agenda at the University of Exeter and its Business School

In a series of focused conversations, Professor Howard Thomas, senior advisor to the EFMD, former dean of the business school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, LKCSB at the Singapore Management University and the Warwick Business School, examines Professor Rajani Naidoo's approach to institutional cultural change in her role as Vice President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People and Culture at the University of Exeter. Rajani outlines her leadership vision, strategic priorities, and the challenges of implementing cultural transformation in higher education.

These conversations follow Howard's previous interview with Rajani in *Finding Purpose in Higher Education: Insights from the Distinctive Career of Professor Rajani Naidoo* (Thomas, 2025), where she described her remit as fostering high performance, reducing structural barriers, and enabling interdisciplinary collaboration within a research-intensive, Russell Group university. She acknowledges the support of President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Lisa Roberts and the expertise of her colleagues working in the people and culture arena.

She emphasised the complexity of academic leadership amid global, national, and institutional pressures, noting the difficulty of translating scholarly insights into practice. Rajani set out her ambition to achieve substantive, collaborative cultural change over five years, with impact extending beyond Exeter.

The next phase of conversations between Howard and Rajani span institutional, faculty, departmental, and student perspectives, offering case illustrations of cultural change and highlighting Rajani's commitment to creating positive academic cultures—not only in the Business School (Jeanes and Naidoo, 2025) but also across a leading, Russell Group University.

Howard Thomas: Rajani, we spoke in the previous interview about what attracted you to the University of Exeter, and what were your main motivations for accepting the job of Vice-President for People and Culture? Two years into the role, have these changed?

Rajani Naidoo: The original motivations have become stronger. I remember a meeting this year with university leaders who had chosen to remain with their colleagues and students in conditions of unbearable humanitarian crisis. When we asked them what we could do to support them since their libraries and laboratories had already been reduced to rubble, they answered *"The buildings are not the University. The people are the University, and we are still here."*

This brought home to me that when we are chasing targets or trapped within processes and structures, we may sometimes forget about people and the power of people. Exeter attracted because the support and wellbeing

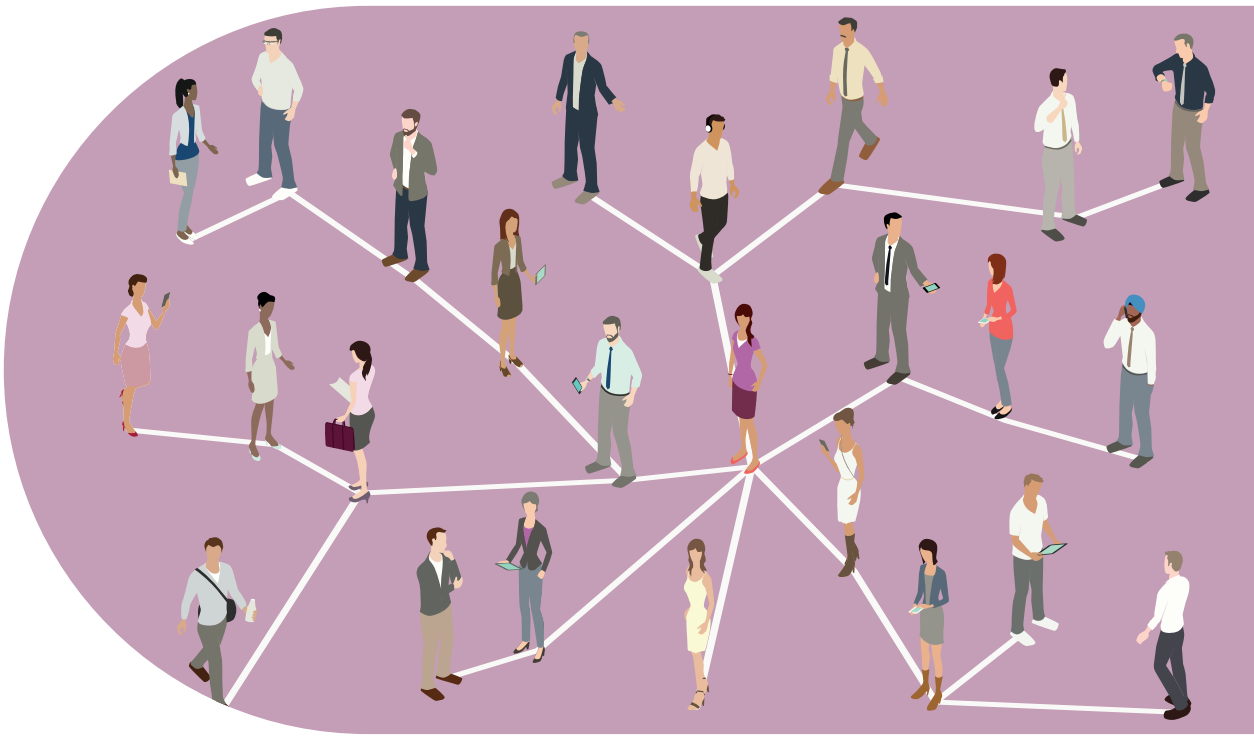
of people was seen as crucial to the University's collective success. It was also the first time such a role had been created in the sector, so that was very exciting! In a sense, it was a role I had been dreaming of because it touched on how we give everyone a fair opportunity to join us, how we provide conditions for everyone to excel, and how we facilitate collaboration in interdisciplinary education and research to create positive impact in the world.

Howard Thomas: To what extent has your vision of the job changed as you gained more experience in the role? How would you describe your overarching vision now?

Rajani Naidoo: I believe that in a world of rising inequality, political polarisation, climate emergency and financial challenges, universities have a responsibility to contribute to creating a better world. This is encapsulated in our greener, healthier and fairer vision, and in our University Strategy 2030. My focus is to attract the best talent, give everyone a fair opportunity, and create a sense of belonging, sharing and trust to facilitate the right conditions to innovate and contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

Leaders do not exist in a vacuum but are part of the complex ecosystem of the University. My vision is now linked closely to our collective People and Culture vision, which has been forged by discussion and debate. This falls under 3 pillars:

1. Facilitating a healthy, inclusive and high-achieving student and colleague community
2. Enhancing our skills and expertise as a community and developing pipelines for progression and leadership
3. Enabling good campus relations, freedom of speech and a values-driven speak out culture



A vast body of work sits under each of these pillars, led by cross-functional teams and steered by the Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee (WICC) jointly chaired by me and the Deputy Registrar and Executive Divisional Director of Human Resources, Culture and Assurance. Membership includes the Deputy Vice Chancellors, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellors from across the Faculties, Heads of Professional Services, and student representatives. As well as being a member of WICC, a significant segment of this work is expertly co-ordinated by the Assistant Director (Culture and Inclusion), the managers and strategic partners responsible for Inclusion, Wellbeing and Charter and the incredible members within these teams.

Howard Thomas: Could you describe in more detail your approach to leadership?

Rajani Naidoo: It is very challenging to be a university leader in contemporary times. We are faced with conflicting regulatory demands, financial pressures and declining levels of trust from parts of government and from some groups in society.

My own research has evaluated university policies and practice in a critical manner, and as a university leader, I continue to defend the importance of research and teaching to develop critiques of education, politics, economics and society, and to call truth to power. However, being in a leadership position has made me understand how difficult it is to find solutions to such critiques and how challenging it is to navigate across different communities with conflicting opinions while holding responsibility for the University as a whole.

It is also difficult to implement change when faced with a challenging external environment and with the stubborn reality of unequal resources, differential power and conflicting regulatory demands. My approach is to engage all parts of our university community, explaining the factors at play, defining the benefits and trade-offs and revealing the unintended consequences of choosing certain actions over others.

I truly believe that we cannot create the best conditions for innovation if we lead through fear, coercion or dysfunctional hyper-competition or what I have referred to as the *competition fetish* in higher education. By developing shared ownership, trust and belonging we unleash intrinsic motivation and passion. The University also consists of sub-cultures, and I seek to understand the microcultures at play within different disciplines and professional services divisions so that I can learn and connect.

My style has never been command-and-control but collaborative and empathetic. I am genuinely interested in people, and I want to hear what their fears and aspirations are. When members of our community are angry or distressed, I face them, including as a whole group, with the full understanding that I will be the target of their anger or their pain, that I will need to absorb this, and listen. Then I need to talk through options with the group to find the path of least harm. When different groups are in conflict, I take a neutral stance and listen closely to everyone before supporting groups to come to a mediated solution.

Howard Thomas: I would like to go into more detail about your principles and long-term vision. Can you outline key strategic principles in the translation of the vision?

My research has drawn on the insights of the French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu who conceptualised universities as existing in social fields that are relatively independent from other fields, such as the field of politics or the field of economics (Bourdieu,1986). The university field has its own belief systems, values, rewards and sanctions (Naidoo, 2004). Individuals and institutions are located in the field with more or less power, dependent on the field-specific resources they possess. Bourdieu referred to these resources as cultural capital, which, although less visible than economic capital, commands vast power. The cultural capital that universities reward is aligned with the culture of the dominant group in society, giving members of this group a major advantage in entering and succeeding in university.

So, for some people, engaging in university life is like being a fish in the water, they understand the culture and the unspoken rules and they can succeed, while for others, it is very alien. These insights enable me to understand how inequalities in society are replicated in universities. So I see my role as evaluating the dynamics of how cultural capital works to reproduce patterns of exclusion, and to develop strategies to distribute opportunities for success, distributed fairly across our University.

The second strategic principle lies in my belief that we can only transform culture through collaboration across the University and that the solution does not lie in top-down or bottom-up leadership but in the magic in the middle. Our Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture (WIC) work has defined organisational structures for accountability and for implementation. I have created a 3-step WIC Community of Practice forum for engagement, grounded in my understanding that engaging with and energising our people is central to transforming culture.

The first forum brings colleagues from right across the University who hold people and culture roles into a *WIC Community of Practice* gathering. There is no formal agenda, which is liberating! In the first half, we share local innovations, and in the second half, we surface common challenges.

The second stage consists of a *WIC Innovates seminar* series where the most impactful local innovation or common challenge from the WIC Community of Practice is presented in more detail. In this forum, solutions are co-constructed, and innovations are cascaded across the Institution.

The third stage is a *WIC Solutions* meeting, where a common challenge is brought to a senior leader by a group of colleagues, and together they co-construct solutions for change.

Through these mechanisms, we have instituted bottom-up change, including making the ways in which students can report harassment and gain support more accessible, highlighting media attacks on our researchers, understanding the equality, diversity and inclusion impacts of changes in regulation, and the interaction of global partnerships on our university community. There has been excellent attendance, constructive participation and good outcomes. By creating channels for authentic engagement and impact across the University, a greater sense of belonging and agency has been curated with potential for small, authentic steps in genuine cultural transformation, which together can create important tipping points for the institution.

Howard Thomas: Can you give us some examples of initiatives in this area that perhaps exemplify the principles and your leadership approach?

Excellent work has already been completed by colleagues at Exeter to apply the principle of distributing opportunities for progression more fairly. The *Exeter Academic Framework* was developed by a Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor and sponsored by the provost to support academic colleagues to achieve their goals in research, education and impact. What is important about this policy and guidance is that it makes the criteria and process transparent, rather than visible only to those with a cultural understanding of the implicit rules of the system. The criteria also include the breadth of what we value, which includes the ability to educate with rigour and in ways inspired by our research, to advance knowledge and discovery, to translate research into impact, and to be collegiate and collaborative.

In addition, excellent work has been completed by a Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor on the colleague appraisal process, which we call the Performance Development Review, which sets out the aims, the process and the outcomes for both the appraiser and the appraisee. Together, we are now exploring innovative ways using videos of actors in scenarios to support senior academic leads in conducting the appraisal in a way that genuinely supports academic colleagues in progression. I have also set out to ensure that cohorts on programmes for supporting potential such as the *100 Black Woman Professors Now* understand how the Exeter Academic

criteria work and how to prepare for appraisal and progression.

In addition, following cross-university engagement, and working with colleagues in People Development and a pilot led by a Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor in one faculty, I led on a responsive and flexible university-wide mentoring scheme (including post-doctoral researchers, professional services colleagues and all faculty levels) which enables mentors and mentees to connect across the university based on expertise and needs, rather than role or department, thus encouraging the breaking down of institutional silos. Following an extensive search process, a mentoring platform was purchased, which gives the mentee considerable flexibility to select their mentor following a matching process based on knowledge, skills and expertise. The platform also holds an extensive database of built-in resources, including training and integrated forms to support mentorship, such as goal setting and a mentee journey log. Since its university-wide launch of the platform to mentors in May 2025, around 700 colleagues have signed up to be mentors and mentees, with momentum and awareness continuing.

Our University Strategy 2030 also prioritises health and wellbeing, and this is an area in which I provide strategic leadership, together with the Deputy Registrar and Executive Divisional Director of Human Resources, Culture and Assurance, working with incredible teams led by the WIC Business Manager. We successfully achieved the University Mental Health Charter (UMHC) Award by Student Minds which recognised our commitment to a whole-university approach to mental health and our dedication to mental health and wellbeing as a core priority. The award process helped us to reflect on our progress and successes as well as identify areas that we want to develop further. We have a wide range of initiatives to support our work, including training for managers to support the Mental Wellbeing of their Teams, as well as nature-linked and other therapeutic strategies to support wellbeing.

Howard Thomas: Could you say a little about how you handle critical issues and challenges?

Rajani Naidoo: I try to face challenges with fairness and a willingness to listen. My tenure has coincided with some of the most challenging periods in higher education, marked by tensions around freedom of speech, gender identity, and global conflict. Rather than retreat from difficult conversations, I faced them head-on.

For example, the UK Government Office for Students ruling on the University of Sussex in relation to Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom and the Supreme Court ruling on the legal definition of sex, particularly as it applies to the Equality Act 2010, were challenging for most institutions. I held open-door meetings with members of our community directly impacted, which were emotional and fraught, but which ultimately built trust. Our policies were reviewed carefully and thoughtfully. I am continuing to engage with members of our community to ensure that fairness is at the core of it all.

I also set up and chair a working group to assess our policies and provisions in light of these developments. We are seeking to identify areas for policy enhancement as well as recommend changes and actions to advance the University's core values of freedom of speech and academic freedom, as well as protection from harassment and good campus relations. Colleagues across different roles have been brought together to work in workstreams.

In a period marked by heightened tensions around protest, freedom of speech, and academic freedom, I contributed to stabilising leadership. At a time when emotions ran high across multiple constituencies, I worked with colleagues to ensure that institutional responses were calm, proportionate, balanced and values-driven. I, and members of my team engaged directly and empathetically with diverse groups, including students who

were protesting and members of our community who felt unsafe as a result of such protests, while also clearly articulating institutional boundaries and legal obligations.

In addition, I commissioned and oversaw the delivery of highly-evaluated training for Senior Responsible Officers who are responsible for ensuring that meetings and gatherings on campus enabled free speech, did not lead to harassment and ensured the safety of all. Guild and Student Union officers, and relevant colleagues also attended. This training - delivered in part by actors and by a Senior QC - focused on mediation skills, legal frameworks, and strategies for maintaining institutional balance amidst polarisation.

Outcomes from my and my colleagues' work has been demonstrable. We avoided the need for a police presence during protests, experienced no major conflicts between campus groups, and were not cited by the Office for Students for breach of free speech duties. Our approach was further recognised through inclusion in a Universities UK good practice publication and invitations to present at conferences. Individual comments from members of impacted communities have affirmed the credibility of these initiatives.

Howard Thomas: The broad and interesting nature of the examples, show how your principles have been applied thoroughly and carefully in empowering culture and people at Exeter. Could you talk about an external issue that you faced, which might demonstrate external issues universities are facing more widely, and where you can share good practice?

Rajani Naidoo: Freedom of speech in the UK and elsewhere has become a highly contested issue. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act places a legal duty on universities to actively secure lawful free speech and academic freedom. The Office for Students has the power to investigate and sanction institutions that fall short. We also have obligations under the Equality Act—to prevent harassment and discrimination—and we have a duty of care for the wellbeing of our community. So, universities now operate within multiple, sometimes conflicting, legal and moral frameworks. University leaders are being asked to reconcile laws, values, and expectations that sometimes pull in opposite directions.

The University of Exeter is one of the most exciting and politically plural institutions I have ever worked in. It is a community of vibrant debate and strong conviction. But that vitality brings its own challenges.

Over the past year, colleagues and I have been at the centre of some of the most complex and sensitive issues in university life. We have navigated student demonstrations, controversial speakers, and intense social media scrutiny.

We have managed these moments by affirming our relationships as human beings and our duty of care to everyone. We have not resorted to calling in the police, and - most importantly – tensions have not escalated to create deep fractures in our campus community.

Exeter's approach has evolved through both policy and practice, and - importantly, through learning from missteps and disagreement. I would like to share what has helped us achieve this balance and the ongoing work still ahead.

The primary step was for the senior leadership team to articulate a set of guiding principles that speak to the heart of who we aspire to be.

First, we affirmed that freedom of speech and academic freedom are not optional luxuries; they are fundamental

to university education and research. These are the conditions under which knowledge can grow, as elaborated by Annick Castiaux , President of the University of Namur, Belgium, in *our panel* in the British Council Going Global 2025 conference in London.

Second, we recognised that rights often collide. Freedom of expression is protected by law. So are protections against harassment and discrimination. Both are vital. But sometimes they pull in opposite directions.

The law speaks of *proportionality*. But proportionality is not a mechanical process; it is a moral and cultural practice. At Exeter, we draw inspiration from Professor André Keets notion of holding tensions productively, not erasing conflict, but living with it as part of an open, plural academic community. Our role is to hold the space where disagreement can happen safely and fairly, and hopefully constructively.

A third principle emerged from reflection: In theory, every member of our community has the same right to speak. In practice, not everyone enters a debate with equal power. A professor's controversial comment might be viewed as 'academic freedom', while a student's emotional response may be framed as aggressive. There are very real imbalances of power, confidence, and cultural capital, which shape how 'free' speech really is. True freedom of speech is not only about removing restrictions, it is about creating fair conditions for participation.

The second step for us was to turn these principles, through careful design into practice.

First, through policy. Our Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom policies were co-created with our staff and student unions. Our Speakers and Events Policy emphasises transparency, risk assessment, and fairness. Our Community Protest Guidance offers clear, accessible information about what lawful protest looks like, what conduct crosses a line, and how students can seek support if they feel unsafe. We communicate openly ahead of contentious events—providing forums for dialogue, guidance on conduct, and opportunities for Q&A.

Second, we work together in a small, cross-functional group for scenario planning and crisis response. This group brings together expertise in communications, equality, welfare, legal affairs, and security. I would like to pay particular tribute to: the Registrar and Senior Vice-President; the General Counsel and Director of Legal and Student Cases; the Assistant Director (Culture and Inclusion) in Human Resources, Culture and Assurance; the Director of Campus, Residential and Commercial Services; the Assistant Director (Communications, External Engagement and Global), the Head of Security, the Chief Executive and the Community Empowerment Manager of the Students' Guild. We prepare in advance for flashpoints: international crises, protests, or moments of heightened emotion, so that we can respond proportionately and with empathy rather than panic.

Third, through culture. We have learnt as a leadership team not to take protest personally. We try to see legal, peaceful protest not as threats to order, but as members of our community motivated by strong feelings. Equally, we recognise that those who feel unsafe by protest require protection and support.

Crucially, we have made it a priority to build relationships - both with those leading protests and with those impacted by them. By maintaining open lines of communication with organisers and with affected groups, we can anticipate flashpoints and attempt to mediate differences early.

Training has also been central to this cultural shift—training Student Union officers in using skills of mediation when facing groups in opposition to each other, security staff in de-escalation and engagement rather than crowd control, and colleagues in facilitating difficult conversations. Training has involved live simulations with actors that build confidence and trust, rather than tick boxing exercises

All this work is brought together through what I call our Living Laboratory for Learning—the Freedom of Speech,

Academic Freedom and Good Campus Relations Group, which I chair.

It is not a bureaucratic committee but a learning community—bringing together students, academics, legal experts, welfare staff, and security colleagues to horizon-scan to identify gaps and test policies. This group helps us reconcile policies, anticipate tensions, and learn from experience before crises erupt. It is a proactive approach—one that treats free speech as education in action. There are important pockets of innovation already flourishing—within our Students' Guild, in our academic departments and across our professional services, that show great potential. My aim working together with colleagues is to surface these innovations, design co-learning across the institution, and create a university-wide approach embedded both in our curriculum and in the fabric of our institutional culture.

The years ahead are not going to get any easier. It's going to get more and more difficult. And I think we as universities have to be really clear what it means for us, and we have to take hold of that and really make it our own.

Howard Thomas: One final question - How do you know you are doing a good job? What would you say are signs of a positive institutional culture?

In a constantly evolving institutional, national, and global context, there is no point at which one can say the work is 'done'. Universities are living systems, shaped by social change, policy shifts, and the lived experiences of the people within them. While an enormous amount of work has been undertaken by myself and by colleagues across the institution in relation to people and culture, I remain acutely aware that this work is necessarily ongoing. This awareness is an important indicator of integrity and responsibility in my role.

I recognise progress in what I would describe as meaningful indicators rather than isolated achievements. For example, I see glimmers of hope in small shifts in the data: increased representation of diverse colleagues and students at entry points, improved progression and retention rates. But equally important are relational and cultural signals that are harder to quantify. I know I am doing something right when members of our community trust me enough to share experiences of vulnerability, uncertainty, or injustice—often quietly and without expectation of immediate solutions. Trust of that kind reflects a belief that one will be listened to, taken seriously, and treated with care. I also see positive culture when colleagues I work with feel psychologically safe enough to challenge my views, disagree openly, or ask for support without fear of judgment or repercussion. A culture that allows for respectful dissent is, in my view, a sign of institutional maturity.

A further indicator aligns with intersectional theory and collective models of social justice. At Exeter, I have observed that groups who experience specific structural disadvantages frequently act in solidarity with other minoritised groups facing different barriers. For instance, initiatives led by one equality network often explicitly acknowledge and support the concerns of others, recognising that systems of inequality are interconnected rather than discrete. This form of cross-group advocacy reflects a shift from individualised understandings of disadvantage to a more systemic and relational conception of justice—one that is essential for sustainable cultural change.

Further evidence comes from the colleague experience survey, which highlights two significant strengths: the quality of relationships within teams and the value placed on flexible working. Strong team relationships suggest environments where people feel respected, supported, and able to collaborate effectively. The appreciation of flexible working indicates an institutional recognition that people bring whole lives to work and that productivity

and wellbeing are not in opposition but mutually reinforcing.

I would like to conclude with a personal experience that, for me, powerfully illustrates what a positive institutional culture looks like in practice. Recently, my husband became suddenly and seriously ill. The response of the Vice-Chancellor and President was immediate and unequivocal: "*Forget about us. Focus on him. Tell us what you need.*" This was not a performative gesture but a sustained, authentic, and profoundly human response that continued throughout that period. It demonstrated leadership grounded in care, empathy, and trust.

Alongside this, I received extraordinary support from my Executive Assistant and Business Manager, and colleagues across multiple teams. Their actions—practical, compassionate, and quietly consistent—reinforced for me that institutional culture is also defined by 'embedded care'; where empathy, responsibility, and mutual support are part of the institution's normative fabric.

Postscript

Rajani's presentation at the British Council Going Global Conference 2025 on this topic was recently published in The Times Higher Education supplement under the title *'University leaders should not take student protests personally and should focus on creating a campus atmosphere where disagreements can happen safely and fairly'.*

References

Bourdieu, P. (1986) "The Forms of Capital" in the *Handbook of Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press

Jeanes, E. and Naidoo, R. (2025) "Addressing Gender Equity and Economics as a Discipline in a UK Business School"

Thomas, H. (2025) "Finding Purpose in Higher Education: Insights from the Distinctive Career of Professor Rajani Naidoo." (pp. 28-34; 106 - 114) in *Women in, and Around, Business Schools* (eds, Eric Corneil, Nicola Kleyn, Howard Thomas and Matthew Wood). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

About the authors

Rajani Naidoo is Vice-President and Deputy Vice Chancellor for People and Culture at the University of Exeter. She is also Professor of Higher Education and Social Change and holds a UNESCO Chair and has been featured in the Stanford/Elsevier top 2% most highly cited in her field. She is also Visiting Professor at the School of Management, University of Bath and at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa, and a former faculty member of an innovative institution that aimed to transform higher education to act as a model for post-apartheid South Africa. She has a research, education and doctoral supervision background in higher education and the global good and competition and collaboration. She has been elected as a Fellow of the Society for Research in Higher Education and is the Chair of the British Council Education Advisory Group. She has keynoted conferences, led executive development programmes, and published extensively in these fields.

Howard Thomas is an Emeritus Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education at Singapore Management University (SMU) and former dean at leading business schools, including SMU, Warwick Business School (UK) and the College of Business at UIUC (Illinois, USA). As a highly respected consultant, author and scholar he has been awarded fellowships by the Academy of Management (AOM, USA), the Strategic Management Society (SMS, USA), the British Academy of Management (BAM), the European Academy of Management (EURAM), the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS, UK), the Institute of Directors, (UK) and, most importantly, the Learned Society of Wales (LSW). He was also President of SMS while dean at Illinois. He has chaired leading professional educational organisations such as AACSB (USA), GMAC (USA), and CABS (UK). He has also received Lifetime Achievement Awards from BAM (UK) and the European Foundation of Management Education (EFMD), and a number of honorary doctoral degrees during his distinguished academic career. He is currently a senior advisor to the President and Managing Director of EFMD.

Michael J Thomas is the founder of DARWIN™ Works and a Cambridge University accredited leadership coach who helps founders and senior leaders gain clarity, communicate with confidence, and unlock their next stage of growth. Through his work - and through his IWON podcast, (It Wasn't Over Night), he shines a light on the mindset, story, and strategy shifts that power meaningful success for leaders in tech, business and life.

by Lily Kong

Shifting Research Paradigms: From 'Publish or Perish' to 'Purpose and People'[1]

Introduction

Organisations, of necessity, are concerned about clarity and coherence of mission, organisational structure, availability and allocation of resources, talent attraction and retention, and appropriateness of success measures. With the climate crisis, purpose and mission have informed the emphasis on triple bottom lines for many organisations, so that missions, structures and resources have been directed in support. With the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations have also come to pay more attention to the wellbeing of employees.

Universities are no different in this regard. While universities do hold a unique and privileged position in society, with a mission focused on shaping the next generation through their educational mission, and serving as the brain trusts of society, creating knowledge and stimulating innovation that drive the betterment of society, universities are also organisations. And as organisations, they need to focus on structure, resource, performance indicators, success measures, talent attraction/retention, and organisational health.

The focus on wellbeing in this volume is vital. The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) has included 'research culture' as a component in evaluating the performance of universities, initially as part of the 'Environment' component of the assessment, and moving ahead, in more explicit terms. It is not yet entirely clear how previous measures will morph in the upcoming round of assessments, and whether selected metrics really tell a useful story. Some argue that the metrics themselves are part of a negative research culture. Be that as it may, examples of metrics that have been or could be tracked include gender pay-gap, the composition of research staff (including gender and ethnicity profiles, and contractual status – fixed-term or permanent), research ethics and integrity, a focus on quantity over quality in research outputs, lack of job security, exploitation, equality, diversity, inclusion, and mental health.

A Crisis of Direction?

How are universities responding to the need to create positive research environments and cultures, thereby supporting and enabling the wellbeing of faculty, researchers and research students? For a start, I pose the question of what universities are pursuing as their mission and goals, as this fundamentally shapes the environment. Some will believe the ensuing views to be provocative, while others may see them as clear-eyed: that academia has come to chase misplaced goals, which in turn creates a crisis of culture that impacts negatively on wellbeing.

1 Parts of this chapter draw on ideas previously developed in my S R Nathan Fellowship Lecture Three (Institute of Policy Studies, 2024), which has been published in Kong, L (2025) *Universities Reinvented: Shaping Legacy and Impact for a New World*.

At the heart of the problem are two phenomena in academia that have emerged over the latter half of the 20th century. The first is the 'publish or perish' culture, a concept attributed to Logan Wilson in his 1942 book analysing the sociology of the academic profession. It refers to the pressure to publish in order to progress in academic careers, failing which one has no choice but to leave the profession when the tenure clock is up. Publications in top-tier journals, defined as high-impact factor journals, with university presses, garnering high citations, better if they are 'home-run' publications, that is, with outsized citations, finetuned in analysis to h-indices and field weighted citation indices, and more – this is the dominant language of evaluation.

The reality for academics is that individual career progression is heavily influenced by these metrics, impacting tenure decisions, promotions, and funding opportunities. In a recent study surveying over 30,000 faculty members from ten top universities worldwide, most respondents admitted to using citation counts as a primary criterion for evaluating research candidates[2] (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This is used as a proxy for academic quality and impact. Journal impact factors are used as proxies for how good an article is. A paper published in a high-impact factor journal is assumed to be better than an article published in a lower-impact factor journal. Yet, this logic is clearly flawed. At its most meaningful, academic impact comes when research shifts understanding by advancing theory and method or when it changes received wisdom about something. Where we publish and how many cite us are, at best, imperfect proxy indicators.

The second phenomenon is the rise of university rankings, with arguably the most widely cited ones, such as Times Higher Education (THE) and QS, privileging research and, particularly, standardised metrics of research, such as citations. THE allocates more than 60% of its score to research (including research reputation), where publications and citations play a crucial role. QS allocates 55% to research and reputation. In the race for rankings, institutions have been willing to justify the imbalance in attention to teaching and research, thus:

"for students, the value of their credential is, in large part, a function of the prestige of the institution, which is driven by research as reflected in rankings and prizes. Every marginal bit of effort the university puts into research may be at the expense of a student's education, but ultimately benefits them in the long run"[3] (Bagshaw, 2023: 23).

The cultures of 'publish or perish' and the fixation with rankings have led to a range of malpractices and misdirections, to varying degrees of severity, all of which impact on institutional culture and faculty wellbeing. I will elaborate on three: mistreatment, misconduct, and manipulation.

Mistreatment: "Prestige does not prevent poverty"

The Stanford University Postdoctoral Association, in commenting on the conditions that confront graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, used the phrase "prestige does not prevent poverty"[4] (Benderly and Salzman, 2024). The reference was to the long reliance in American academia on "the cheap, skilled labor of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers" who struggle to make ends meet, even those in the elite institutions, working long hours "in the pressured atmosphere of competitive research" (Benderly and

2 Ibrahim H., Liu F., Zaki Y., & Rahwan T., (7 February 2024). Google Scholar is manipulatable. *https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2402.04607*
3 Bagshaw, A. (2023). Higher imagination: How universities can collaborate and compete to solve the world's most pressing challenges.
4 Benderly, B. L., & Salzman, H. (2024). Scientific research needs a radical restructuring. The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Salzman, 2024:45). To "make academic science a good career again", it is said that "[r]esearch needs a radical restructuring" (Benderly and Salzman, 2024:45).

Setting aside the assumption that academic positions confer prestige, the discussion about poor work conditions and unhealthy research environments in the American context is certainly apparent elsewhere, too. For example, research from the University of Bristol has found researchers demoralised by a culture that disincentivises sharing and collaboration, encourages questionable research practices such as data manipulation, and increases the risk of bias. Researchers worried about their ideas being 'scooped', younger or less-experienced researchers not receiving proportional credit for their work, and fear discrimination in research assessment based on personal characteristics of the researcher, such as gender. The focus on traditional peer-reviewed papers is thought to be a major contributory factor to this malaise[5] (Hsing et al., 2023). A report commissioned by the Wellcome Trust (2020) further highlighted that the focus on "the quantity of outputs, and narrow concepts of 'impact', rather than on real quality" was causing "intense pressure(s) to publish, with too little value placed on how results are achieved and the human costs." Their study, based on literature reviews, qualitative interviews, workshops and a survey of over 4,000 researchers showed that competition was accepted to be a part of working in research, but that it had become "aggressive and harmful." The report reinforced the Bristol study regarding discrimination, and went further to highlight exploitation, harassment and bullying. These have dire consequences:

> "For researchers, poor research culture is leading to stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of isolation and loneliness at work. For research, the perceived impacts include a loss of quality, with corners being cut and outputs becoming increasingly superficial, problems with reproducibility, and the cherry-picking of results and data massaging. For society, the dangers are seen as loss of talent from the sector and a reduction of real innovation and impact resulting from a narrow set of priorities, as well as a loss of trust from the public"[6] (Wellcome Trust, 2020:3).

Misconduct: Breach of Academic Integrity

As universities are increasingly drawn into quantitative standards of success, with metrics-driven incentives in competitive environments, ethical compromises have emerged. Breaches of academic integrity take various forms, from questionable practices at the margins to full-scale misconduct.

In the race to publish, researchers may use questionable research practices to yield publishable outcomes, which undermine the credibility of results. One prominent tactic is p-hacking (data snooping or data dredging). Researchers perform many statistical tests on data, but only report those that are statistically significant, resulting in an increased likelihood of false positives. P-hacking is generally viewed as a process whereby researchers pursue publishable results through trial and error, often neglecting the theoretical foundations of their work[7] (Lewis-Kraus, 2023).

More troubling than p-hacking is outright data fabrication, which can derail entire fields of study. A high-profile case in Alzheimer's research, where falsified data was used, led to wasted years of effort and substantial financial losses, setting back critical medical advances. A neuroscientist came under scrutiny for allegedly tampering with data, with hundreds of images showing unwarranted interference. Some were described as

5 Hsing, P.-Y., Tukanova, M., Freeman, A., Munafò, M., & Thompson, J. (2023). A snapshot of the academic research culture in 2023 and how it might be improved. Octopus. *https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8165704*
6 Wellcome Trust. (2020). *What researchers think about the culture they work in.*
7 Lewis-Kraus, G. (2023). They studied dishonesty—was their work a lie? The New Yorker. October 9. *https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/10/09/they-studied-dishonesty-was-their-work-a-lie*
8 Piller, C. (2022). *Blots on a field? Science, 377*(6604).
9 Tran, N. (2024). The publish or perish mentality is fuelling research paper retractions at an alarming rate. The Conversation. *https://theconversation.com*
10 Ibrahim et al., 2024

"shockingly blatant", combining images from different experiments, potentially altering results to better fit the hypothesis[8] (Piller, 2022). This is not an isolated incident. In 2023, more than 10,000 research papers were retracted globally[9] (The Conversation, 2024). This marked a new record.

As we move further into the age of generative AI, the issues will only exacerbate. Already, AI tools are capable of generating seemingly credible abstracts that can fool even experienced scientists or even produce full papers. Using this technology, a scientist can easily generate a 'scientific' paper, and plant citations as they see fit in the bibliography, for example, to themselves to boost their own reputations or to another scientist in return for a fee[10] (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The consequences of such breaches reach far beyond academic reputations; they can result in misguided policies and actions, for example, flawed public health policies, ineffective treatments, and even life-threatening outcomes.

What all these point to is the intense pressure to publish, leading to temptations to take shortcuts, sometimes to preserve jobs at risk.

Manipulation: The Dark Incentives of Metrics-Driven Research

A third area of concern is citation manipulation. While not amounting to data or textual fabrication, this is a troubling form of academic dishonesty that borders on fabrication. It is the practice of dishonestly citing sources to boost a paper's or journal's citation count. This often occurs when researchers or journals artificially inflate their citation metrics, in a bid to improve their standing within the academic community[11] (Mehregan 2022).

Citation manipulation may be done via coercive citation, that is, when editors pressure authors to add citations from the editor's journal on very thin academic grounds. In one study, 20% of respondents reported experiencing coercive citation, while over 50% admitted they would add unnecessary citations to improve their chances of publication[12](Fong & Wilhite, 2017).

In extreme cases, entire journals have been found to engage in citation cartels, where authors and editors collude to disproportionately cite each other's work to inflate their citation counts and impact factors. This exploitation of the citation system not only undermines the credibility of the journal but also warps the academic ecosystem by privileging researchers who play the metrics game, often at the expense of real innovation[13](Mehregan, 2022).

Such practices pose moral dilemmas for researchers even editors, and inasmuch as they impact on a larger sense of ethical wellbeing, they also point to a diseased ecosystem.

The Urgency to Rethink Research Impact

To address the challenges posed, universities urgently need to reflect and act. Tackling unhealthy work culture, and disincentivising malpractice, exploitation and inequalities are critical and to do so, universities need to reward ethical practices, or at least, not reward unethical practices inadvertently. Pairing that with open science practices will help. Initiatives like the Open Science Framework (OSF) advocate for openly sharing data, methodologies, and protocols, making research more accessible and verifiable. This commitment to openness allows scrutiny, ensures greater public accountability, and thus strengthens research integrity.

But more fundamentally, addressing work culture and disincentivising malpractices requires that we think differently about what research is for and how we evaluate it. A more holistic approach to research evaluation

11 Mehregan, M. (2022). Scientific journals must be alert to potential manipulation in citations and referencing. Research Ethics, 18(2). *https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161211068745*
12 Fong, E. A., & Wilhite, A. W. (2017). Authorship and citation manipulation in academic research. PLOS ONE, 12(12). *https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0187394*
13 Mehregan, 2022

could offer a path forward. Were we to consider research impact not only in academic terms, but also in societal terms, then the outputs, outcomes and impact measures broaden. If citations and their associated metrics, such as journal impact factors, mattered only, at most, as much as the qualitative impact of scholarship, such as improvement in the lives of those living with Alzheimer's, or the assurance of retirement adequacy for seniors, then citation fraud becomes disincentivised.

Various efforts around the world have sought to take a position to counter the 'metricisation' of research performance. I cite three examples. First, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (May 2013) is a statement that "denounces the practice of correlating the journal impact factor to the merits of a specific scientist's contributions," given how it "creates biases and inaccuracies when appraising scientific research." It decries the use of the impact factor as a substitute for "measur[ing] ... the quality of individual research articles, or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions." The Declaration seeks to raise awareness of the responsible use of metrics, to facilitate development of new policies and practices for hiring, promotion and funding decisions, to catalyse research assessment reform, and improve equity in research assessment.

Second, the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics (2015) similarly arose from a worry about "impact factor obsession," and advocates that research be evaluated based on broader contributions. This shift would allow institutions to emphasise the real-world implications of their work, aligning academic priorities with societal needs and mitigating incentives for unethical practices. Among the principles that underpin the manifesto is one around open, transparent and simple processes of evaluation, and ensuring that those evaluated can verify data and analysis. This builds trust in the system and contributes to wellbeing.

Third, the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) community encourages responsible research and invites scholars and others to imagine a world in which research is used to improve lives. Founded by Anne Tsui (the President of the Association of Management (AOM)) in 2015, the Fellows of AOM have evaluated responsible management research, using UNSDG as a framework, and have conferred RRBM awards to encourage and recognise such work.

As calls grow louder for universities to demonstrate clear societal benefits, a 2023 survey conducted by Elsevier highlighted a critical concern: while 68% of academic leaders, researchers, and funders anticipate an increasing public demand for government-funded research to yield tangible societal benefits, only half believe that existing evaluation systems sufficiently incentivise impactful work. At the same time, 72% of funders are advocating for a broader, holistic evaluation approach. Despite these calls for change, several obstacles remain, chief among which are a lack of standardised frameworks, institutional inertia, and limited resources.

Consequential Research: Assessing Impact Beyond Academic Metrics

Declarations and manifestos are a start. But what systemic effects do they have on reshaping the motivations and behaviours of researchers? And how exactly do they translate into different everyday practices in the workplace that are less cut-throat, more meaningful, and rely on collaboration more than competition? And how then do universities as organisations approach research assessment and evaluation, adopting what markers of excellence and impact? How might new ways of assessment mitigate or reduce problematic practices and positively impact the wellbeing of researchers?

Questions about alternative ways of assessing research, beyond the standard academic metrics, have occupied my colleagues and me for months now as we have sought to develop an integrated research impact framework

that recognises and celebrates both the academic and societal impact of research. Different databases have been considered as alternatives to the standard citation counts in Scopus or even Google Scholar. They may well become more useful over time to diversify the focus on citation counts in academic publications, though, no doubt, each will have its own need for cautious interpretation. Nevertheless, they broaden the possibilities and include, for example, Altmetrics, Overton and Lens.org.

Altmetrics tracks published research in social media, news outlets, policy and other appearances, thus recognising the broader influence of research, as it gets picked up in different discussions and fora, influencing policy, public opinion, and industry. However, Altmetric data needs to be interpreted with caution, given that they are drawn from a large number of sources, with inconsistencies between providers. It is also unclear how they are calculated, and they too, are susceptible to manipulation.

Overton is more targeted and claims to be the world's largest searchable index of policy documents, guidelines, think tank publications and working papers, collecting data from 188 countries. It tracks academic papers that are cited in such government consultation documents and reports, so that researchers can see where their ideas and publications are cited and how they are used, thus discovering how one's work may be "influencing or changing practice in the real world." Lens.org, on the other hand, tracks citations of academic works in patents, which shows how research enables problem solving.

A most recent effort reported in 2024 was helpful in our discussions. Undertaken by the Financial Times to assess Business Schools for the 'rigour, resonance and relevance' of their research, the rankings attempt to systematically measure each of these dimensions. First, it seeks to acknowledge the importance of rigorous high-quality research, assessed by established metrics such as field-weighted citation index and publications in journals highly regarded by academics. Second, it seeks to take into account 'resonance', defined as the way in which research engages with practice, where scholars' works are disseminated to policymakers and decision-makers in the public, private and non-profit sectors, and is "read and acted upon by those beyond universities." It does so by monitoring downloads by users identified as working in governments or companies; tracking citations of academic work in patents, government consultation documents and think-tank reports; tracking utilisation of textbooks and journal articles assigned by professors in other institutions; and tracking the most popular teaching cases. Third, it also seeks to measure 'relevance' by looking at how the content of publications aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The architects of this new ranking recognise that not everyone will agree with the metrics and the weightages assigned to different measures, but offer them as a "starting point for a wider debate." They publish rankings using an aggregated measure, but also by each different criteria, thus paving the way, perhaps unintentionally, for a 'heterarchical' as opposed to a hierarchical approach[14](Lamont, 2012:211-12) to assessing research standing. What that means is that, when "multiple matrices of evaluation" are used, it offers an opportunity for more to "shine under different lights."

Even with these different approaches, challenges remain in accurately capturing societal impact. Determining causality and identifying a specific research output's contribution is challenging. A key distinction in evaluating impact lies between 'attribution' and 'contribution'[15] (Fong and Wilhite, 2017). Whereas attribution seeks a causal link between specific research outputs and societal outcomes, contribution considers how research practices support broader societal goals. This perspective is particularly important given the complex and often

14 Lamont, M. (2009). How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
15 Fong, E. A., & Wilhite, A. W. (2017). Authorship and citation manipulation in academic research. PLoS ONE, 12(12), e0187394. *https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0187394*
16 Spaapen, J., & van Drooge, L. (2011). Introducing 'productive interactions' in social impact assessment. Research Evaluation, 20(3), 211–218. *https://doi.org/10.3152/095820211X12941371876742*

indirect pathways through which research influences change, and the different time spans between research and impact[16](Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011:211).

Conclusions

In the face of significant questions about how to evidence, document, and assess research with societal impact, at my own university, we have carefully studied the UK approach of adopting impact case studies and recognise the value of such qualitative assessments, while also being cognisant of the challenges of evidence-building in execution. At the same time, we acknowledge the value of different research outputs (such as white papers, consultancy reports, patents) and outcomes (such as citations in Overton and Lens.org), and we are developing guidance for colleagues on how they could channel their energies and what the university will recognise and reward. After rounds of engagement, a new integrated research impact framework will be rolled out for implementation as the university marks its 25th year of existence, a milestone that prompts self-reflection.

One may justifiably argue that, whether it is traditional academic metrics or new ways of assessment that take into account societal impact, the pressures on academics remain, if not intensify, with a danger of worsening impact on wellbeing as expectations grow. Thus, we recognise that any framework we devise must not simply multiply the number of ways by which expectations are made of researchers through still more assessment tools and metrics. This will simply fly in the face of efforts to create and maintain an environment that supports wellbeing so that researchers can perform at their best. Open and transparent engagement and communication are critical, a point which I will return to below. So, too, is making room for different pathways that researchers may take to reflect their strengths and convictions. For a university, a portfolio approach makes good sense: some colleagues are best at the known and established path of high-quality academic work with academic impact, evidenced through the standard metrics, and should be supported to pursue their best, in ethical, high-quality ways; others care about how their work gets taken up in the world of practice, whether through translational or direct-to-impact routes, and have the networks and talent to do so, and should similarly be encouraged, enabled, and recognised.

With the possibility of different pathways to impact, the pressures on achieving top-tier publications with high citation counts for everyone, in a one-size-fits-all approach, may be mitigated. The temptation to falsify data, engage in data dredging, publish rapidly, manipulate citations, exploit early-career researchers and so forth should lessen if we open up different ways of valorising research. This has the potential to make a difference to research environments and cultures.

Whichever path to excellence and impact, cultivating an open, collaborative culture is critical in supporting high-quality work and individual and community wellbeing, particularly in the face of ambitious visions and determined plans. Setting the tone from the top is crucial, but this needs to be coupled with unit-level leadership similarly engaged in open communication, and importantly, sharing the vision, values and directions.

At the end of the day, there is no getting away from acknowledging that systemic changes are necessary. But structure is not everything. There is agency. Just as the Hippocratic Oath sets out the values that guide medical professionals, and the Socratic Oath does the same for educators, perhaps a code of ethics and a commitment to a set of values would not be out of place for researchers. Might it be contemplated that an Aristotelian Oath might be worthwhile for researchers, in acknowledgement of the polymath philosopher scientist? Might we

contemplate an oath that commits individuals to ethical practices and institutions to creating and maintaining healthy research environments in support of the wellbeing of researchers? Concrete policy changes, systematic structural adjustments, individual commitment to a set of values – these are the bases on which paradigm shifts occur.

About the author

Lily Kong is President of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences.

by Enase Okonedo

Building Wellbeing Through Culture and Collegiality

Prologue

I recall a faculty meeting at Lagos Business School during the early years of my deanship, where we discussed the need to increase research output and publish in higher-quality scholarly journals to improve our chances of obtaining a global accreditation. During this meeting, a faculty member who had joined the School a few years earlier from a different industry spoke up. Prior to this occasion, he often remarked on how refreshing it was to work in an environment where care and support for individuals were evident, and teamwork was encouraged, especially compared to the pressure and sometimes cutthroat competition in his previous sector. This time, he offered a note of caution, advising that the leadership of the School should give careful thought to pursuing global accreditations, as the increased expectations of faculty — which he termed "pressure", coupled with higher teaching loads due to high growth, risked not only diluting the School's organisational culture but also leading to faculty burnout. He concluded that this would "*not be good for the health of both the faculty as well as the school.*"

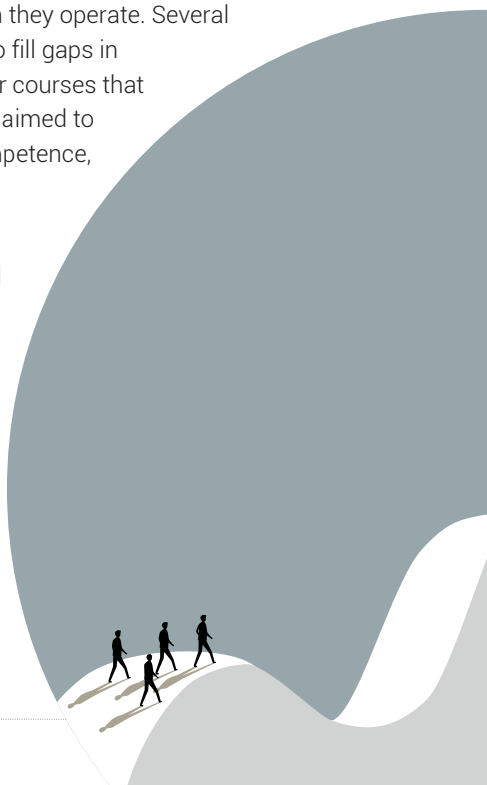
These words form the core of my reflection on the relationship between workplace culture, collegiality, and wellbeing in business schools, as I have often wondered whether pursuing lofty ambitions and fostering a high-performing culture conflicts with establishing an organisational culture that is supportive, collaborative, and collegial.

Influence of Culture in Business Schools in Africa

The curriculum in business schools is influenced by the needs of the societies in which they operate. Several business schools in Africa were founded in response to environmental opportunities, to fill gaps in managerial skills, or due to the absence of existing business schools, as well as to offer courses that improve the skills of managers and executives in their regions. Many of these schools aimed to ensure that managers developed the necessary skills to enhance their managerial competence, following the example set by other business schools, both locally and internationally.

For some of these institutions, their organisational culture and practices may have originated from specific values—cultural, Western, or indigenous. For others, traditional African values such as solidarity, communalism, collegiality, and care for others might have shaped their policies and practices.

The principle of solidarity, culturally ingrained and widely recognised in many African societies, fosters a sense of unity demonstrated through mutual support and care. Where solidarity exists in a business school, the purpose of the institution and those of the individuals who work there are aligned. This is also reflected in the organisational culture, where staff and students come together during challenging times and celebrate achievements.

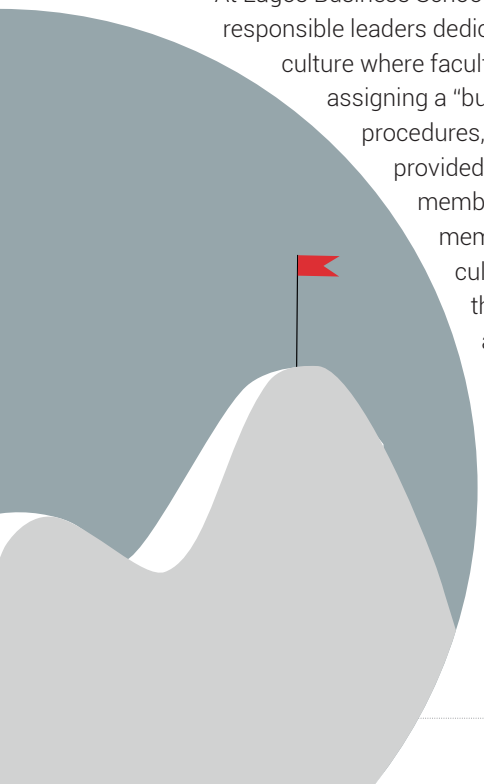


There is cooperation and support for one another in both good and challenging times, stemming from African tradition, where neighbours, friends, and associates celebrate joys together and rally around each other in adverse situations. This extends to the workplace as colleagues are supported to thrive. There is a shared sense of inclusion, belonging, and concern for others as we collaborate to promote growth and success.

In a similar vein, the concept of Ubuntu, familiar to many and loosely translating to "*I am who I am through you,*" highlights the mutual dependence of individuals and, to some extent, communal responsibility. It suggests that a person thrives only with the support of others. As a result, there is a sense that everyone works together for the collective good, rather than adopting an individualistic outlook. From an African perspective, where decisions are often made collectively, collegiality can easily be embraced as a fundamental element of a business school's governance and practices.

When practised, these concepts of solidarity, living through others and collegiality foster positive relationships, build trust, provide a sense of psychological safety, and promote the social wellbeing of not only individuals but also the institution.

Several studies on wellbeing support the idea that workplace culture significantly influences the wellbeing of faculty and staff. Daniels, Watson, and Gedikli (2017) found that structured activities, supportive colleagues, collegiality, and a generally positive social environment create a sense of safety and belonging, thereby boosting the wellbeing of academics. In such settings, where university conditions ensure individuals feel supported, both individuals and their institutions benefit. Tuch and Ngcobi (2018) in their study on how organisational culture affects workplace wellbeing in South African universities, concluded that culture has a notable impact on wellbeing. They observed that teamwork and collegiality offered staff support and a sense of psychological safety, even under pressure. Moreover, factors such as open communication, trust, mutual respect, and the alignment of employees' values with those of the organisation all contributed to an increased sense of wellbeing.



At Lagos Business School, established in the early 1990s with a focus on nurturing competent and socially responsible leaders dedicated to transforming society, the School recognised the importance of fostering a culture where faculty members support each other throughout their academic careers. Practices such as assigning a "buddy" to newly appointed faculty members to help them understand School policies and procedures, show them the ropes, and assist them in settling in quickly. Additionally, mentoring is provided to new joiners for a period of one year. Typically, the mentor is an experienced faculty member who takes on a more formal role in helping the mentee develop as a young faculty member and guiding them on how to embody the School's core values, understand the culture, and grasp the objectives of service in the community, as well as how to achieve these objectives. These initiatives, along with the practice of collegiality—a fundamental aspect of governance at Lagos Business School—help give faculty members a sense of belonging and encourage honest conversations and participation in decision-making.

Although these policies and practices of the School derive from the School's values and beliefs, they mirror the values that guide behaviour in most African communities, which promote a sense of harmony and wellbeing among community members.

The Challenges of Growth and the Paradox

However, in the early 2000s, as the school began to expand and aimed to meet international standards through global accreditation, it faced a paradox as two seemingly conflicting objectives emerged. At the same time that it pursued international recognition to enhance its reputation as a leading business school by obtaining global accreditation, it also sought to strengthen its culture by emphasising its core values: Community, Respect, Integrity, a Spirit of Service, and Professionalism.

Its pursuit of global accreditation and desire to feature in top business school rankings required specific metrics and indicators, which exerted considerable pressure on faculty in various ways, including publishing more in highly ranked journals. While the objectives are not mutually exclusive, meeting these new expectations often demands significant individual effort from faculty, with high stakes. They had to succeed or face the risk of not being promoted, or worse, losing their positions as faculty members.

Unsurprisingly, as the promotion criteria evolved to include extra expectations, some faculty members reported feeling stressed, exhausted, and overwhelmed by the increased workload, all of which impacted their wellbeing. The result was that teamwork, collaboration, and supporting colleagues through mentoring or the buddy system were often overlooked, as the urgent need to 'publish or perish' and secure promotion took precedence.

The Toll of Success on Individual and Institutional Wellbeing

Although the pursuit of growth and recognition by the school was a strategic priority outlined in the School's Strategic Plan with input from key stakeholders, it began to seem that achieving this key objective could alter staff behaviour and lead them to act in ways that contradicted the culture.

Achieving success in obtaining global accreditations led to increased demand for its programmes. Faculty, facing a heavier workload as demand outpaced the supply of qualified staff, often found themselves under significant pressure to meet these evolving demands. In the face of these pressures, it became clear that there was indeed a risk of losing some of the School's core values as competition among faculty appeared to intensify.

To retain their positions at the School and achieve promotion, faculty members face pressure to publish, which may cause them to devote excessive time to research. This, in turn, affects their work-life balance, raises stress levels, and can be detrimental to their mental health. The institution itself could also be impacted, as these same factors influencing faculty may begin to weaken the organisational culture. It is therefore essential that the institution recognises these factors and implements support mechanisms and wellness programmes to help faculty manage these pressures.

For the School itself, the conflict I mentioned earlier may arise between striving for the institution's success and its influence on the current organisational culture. It is clear that when individual faculty members' goals and the reward system are misaligned with the School's direction, the culture begins to decline.

In many schools across the developed world, recognising these realities, there is a deliberate effort to prioritise the wellbeing of staff and faculty. However, in less developed regions, the pressure to progress in an increasingly competitive sector—where schools must distinguish themselves to remain relevant and viable, compounded by financial pressures—sometimes reduces the focus on wellbeing. The African culture of "being your brother's keeper," which involves looking out for others in your community and helping one another by imbibing a "spirit of service," diminishes under these pressures. Without intentional leadership, the culture could shift from being rooted in core values to one where only the most capable individuals succeed, regardless of the institution's principles.

Leadership Practices that Enhance Wellbeing

Increasingly, business schools worldwide are deliberately emphasising the wellbeing of staff and students. The challenge, however, for business school leadership in some contexts is balancing the institution's objectives without compromising the wellbeing of its faculty and staff. Addressing these challenges requires rethinking how the productivity of faculty members is evaluated, creating initiatives, and providing better support for overall wellbeing—mental, social, and physical. This includes ensuring the work environment is conducive and supportive, as well as implementing policies that help staff maintain a healthy work-life balance.

At Lagos Business School, staff and faculty are reminded of the core values through monthly talks in each department, with recognition given to individuals or departments that exemplify specific core values. Collegiality as a form of governance is enshrined and emphasised in the university's constitution, and practised at every level from the topmost governing body to any department with more than four professionals.

However, following the realisation of how the organisational culture was being affected by the pressures of meeting the institution's goals, deliberate steps were taken to promote the wellbeing of faculty. These included the following:

For individual faculty members:

- Intentional scheduling of teaching responsibilities to give faculty a 2-3-month period each year without teaching, providing time for research.
- Providing each faculty member with a research assistant as requested.
- Allowing flexible work hours so that faculty were not obliged to keep the same office hours as others, provided they held office hours at least twice a week.
- Holding faculty retreats and get-togethers at regular intervals to socialise and celebrate achievements.

Institutionally, the following were put in place:

- Holding leaders at every level responsible for ensuring decisions are made collegially, involving seeking input from stakeholders who would be affected by the decision.
- Clear communication of the school's short-term and long-term goals and objectives to ensure clarity of purpose and alignment among all.
- Charge leaders with the responsibility to lead by example and embody the core values of Community, Respect, Integrity, a Spirit of Service, and Professionalism.
- Hosting regular talks and programmes on managing stress and other areas of wellbeing.

All of these were deliberately undertaken to shape the organisational culture.

Conclusion

There is increasing awareness of how workplace culture and faculty wellbeing foster greater collegiality among staff in business schools. However, the relationship between these three elements may seem complex and difficult to manage simultaneously due to various competing factors.

Creating an institutional culture in business schools where staff are mentored and feel supported, where there is more collaboration than competition, and where policies and practices are designed to promote staff wellbeing might seem idealistic, raising doubts about whether these can be realised.

The following could be considered as business school leaders work to promote the wellbeing of faculty and staff through culture and collegiality:

Individual

The perceived value of a business school professor should extend beyond publications in top journals to include other measures that recognise contributions in service, community engagement, mentoring young faculty and students, and recognising teaching excellence. This would help to reduce stress levels and enhance physical wellbeing.

Institutional

At the institutional level, implementing wellness programmes and providing enhanced mental health support — as many business schools do — helps foster a more supportive and conducive workplace. In some cases, limited funds and resources, especially in less developed countries, might prevent institutions from establishing comprehensive wellness programmes. However, such constraints should not lead to neglecting the wellbeing of faculty and staff, as their health is vital in helping the institution achieve its goals. There must be a purposeful and coordinated effort by business school leaders to foster a culture that incorporates elements of wellbeing, such as promoting inclusion, collaboration, and mentorship. Furthermore, when collegiality exists in governance, it helps create a positive work environment by encouraging employee participation in decision-making, making staff feel valued, and boosting their enthusiasm for working towards the common good.

Broader eco-system

On a broader level, recognising the importance of faculty and staff wellbeing and its contribution to the overall health of schools, stakeholders in the management and business education sector - including accreditation bodies, regulators, and ranking agencies - should consider incorporating aspects of wellbeing, collegiality, collaboration, and inclusion into their review and assessment of schools.

Achieving these goals, therefore, will depend on business school leaders gaining a better understanding of the relationship between these elements and deliberately institutionalising policies and structures that promote wellbeing.

A supportive and inclusive culture increases trust and confidence in the system. When staff feel that their wellbeing is prioritised and considered in decisions, they are more likely to collaborate and work towards the institution's success rather than just their own individual success.

In several business schools across Africa, the culture is influenced by shared values, community building, collaboration, collective decision-making, and cooperation. Familiarity with these concepts from a practical perspective can help leaders guide the institution toward achieving greater staff satisfaction and engagement, as well as improve overall staff and faculty wellbeing.

References

Daniels, K., Watson, D. and Gedikli, C. (2017) Wellbeing and the academic workplace. *Higher Education, 74*(3) pp. 441–455. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0069-4

Tuch and Ngcobo (2018) Workplace wellbeing and organisational culture in South African universities. *Journal of Psychology in Africa, 28*(3) pp. 232–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2018.1475502

About the author

Enase Okonedo is the Vice-Chancellor of Pan-Atlantic University, Nigeria. Prior to this, she served as Dean of Lagos Business School (LBS), leading the institution to international acclaim with accreditations from AACSB and AMBA, as well as securing top global rankings for its executive education programmes. Strongly committed to management education, she has served on the boards of Global Business School Network (GBSN), AACSB International, GMAC, PRME and sits on the advisory boards of several business schools.

by Nelarine Cornelius, Chidozie Umeh & Anne Clare Gillon

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, 2021).[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 et al, 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 et al, 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.

References

Acker, J. (2006). 'Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations', *Gender & Society, 20*(4), pp. 441–464.

Advance HE (2023). *Equality in higher education: Staff statistical report 2023.* York: Advance HE. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-reports-2023?utm_source

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Atewologun, D. (2020). Intersectionality theory and practice. In R.J. Aldag (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Business and Management,* Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://oxfordre.com/business/business/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.001.0001/acrefore-9780190224851-e-48

Bailey, C. (2025). How diversity rhetoric obscures structural inequities in higher education. *Academe, 111*(2). American Association of University Professors. https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/106/how-diversity-rhetoric-obscures-structural-inequities-higher-education

Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bhopal, K., & Henderson, H. (2021). Competing inequalities: Gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK. *Educational Review, 73*(2), pp. 153-169.

Brown, R. and Carasso, H. (2013) *Everything for sale? The marketisation of UK higher education*. London: Routledge.

Chartered Association of Business Schools. (2021). *Business schools and the public good.* London: Chartered ABS. https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2531767-business-schools-and-the-public-good-report-published?utm_source

Colquitt, J.A. (2001) 'On the dimensionality of organizational justice: A construct validation of a measure', *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(3), pp. 386–400. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.386

Dollard, M.F., Dormann, C. and Idris, M.A. (eds.) (2019) *Psychosocial safety climate: A new work stress theory and intervention.* Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20319-1

Dollard, M.F. and Bakker, A.B. (2010) 'Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to conducive work environments, psychological health problems, and employee engagement', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 83*(3), pp. 579–599. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317909X470690

Edmondson, A. (1999) 'Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams', *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(2), pp. 350–383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Education Support (2022) *Supporting staff wellbeing in higher education.* London: Education Support. Available at: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/x4jdvxpl/es-supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-he-report.pdf?utm_source

Gallup. (2023). *State of the global workplace 2023 report.* Washington, DC: Gallup. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx?utm_source

Hanna, P., Erickson, M., & Walker, C. (2023). UK Higher Education staff experiences of moral injury during the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education, *86*(5), pp. 985-1002.

Hazelkorn, E., & Mihut, G. (Eds.). (2021). Research handbook on university rankings: Theory, methodology, influence and impact. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) & The British Academy. (2024). The lives of early career researchers (HEPI Report 169). Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/29/the-lived-experiences-of-early-career-researchers-new-report-by-hepi-and-the-british-academy/?utm_source

HESA. (2023). *What do HE students study?* Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2022/23 – Subjects studied. Cheltenham: Higher Education Statistics Agency. Retrieved from: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/08-08-2024/sb269-higher-education-student-statistics/subjects

Kelliher, C. and Anderson, D. (2010) 'Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work', *Human Relations, 63*(1), pp. 83–106.

Kinman, G. (2019). Effort-reward imbalance in academic employees: Examining different reward systems. *International Journal of Stress Management, 26*(2), pp. 184.

Kinman, G. (2023). Workload survey 2021/22: Higher education. University and College Union. Retrieved from https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14644/UCU-workload-survey-2021-HE-report/pdf/UCU_Workload_Survey_HE_May24.pdf

Kinman, G. and Wray, S. (2021) Wellbeing in academic employees: A benchmarking approach. In Burke, R.J. and Pignata, S. (eds.) *Handbook of Research on Stress and Wellbeing in the Public Sector* (pp. 152-166). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788970358.00019

Migration Observatory. (2023). *Student migration to the UK.* Oxford: University of Oxford. Retrieved from: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/student-migration-to-the-uk/

Morrish, L. (2020) *Pressure vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff.* London: Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HEPI-Pressure-Vessels-Occasional-Paper-20.pdf?utm_source

Ogden, K., & Waltmann, B. (2024). Higher education finances: How have they fared, and what options will an incoming government have? Institute for Fiscal Studies: Retrieved from: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/higher-education-finances-how-have-they-fared-and-what-options-will-incoming

Parker, L. D., & Guthrie, J. (2010). Business schools in an age of globalization. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 23*(1), pp. 5–13.

Rahman, M. A., Das, P., Lam, L., Alif, S. M., Sultana, F., Salehin, M., ... & Polman, R. (2024). Health and wellbeing of staff working at higher education institutions globally during the post-COVID-19 pandemic period: evidence from a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health, 24*(1), p. 1848.

Steinþórsdóttir, F. S., Carmichael, F., & Taylor, S. (2021). Gendered workload allocation in universities: A feminist analysis of practices and possibilities in a European University. Gender, Work & Organization, *28*(5), pp. 1859-1875.

The Guardian (2025) 'Cambridge University accused of bullying cover-up as staff survey reveals concerns'. The Guardian, 12 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/apr/12/cambridge-university-accused-of-bullying-cover-up-as-internal-survey-revealed

The Guardian. (2025). *Quarter of leading UK universities cutting staff due to budget shortfalls.* Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/feb/01/quarter-of-leading-uk-universities-cutting-staff-due-to-budget-shortfalls?utm_source

The PIE News. (2025, January 15). *International enrolments at UK business schools on the mend – but deeper structural pressures remain*. Retrieved from: https://thepienews.com/international-enrolments-at-uk-business-schools-on-the-mend/?utm_source

Times Higher Education (2024) *The Times Higher Education Academic Freedom Survey 2024.* Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/digital-editions/5-december-2024-digital-edition

Times Higher Education. (2025, January 25). *UK universities could cut 10,000 jobs every year amid deepening financial crisis.* Retrieved from: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-universities-could-cut-10000-jobs-every-year?utm_source

Waizenegger, L., McKenna, B., Cai, W., and Bendz, T. (2020) 'An affordance perspective of team collaboration and enforced working from home during COVID-19', *European Journal of Information Systems, 29*(4), pp. 429–442.

Watermeyer, R., Crick, T., Knight, C. and Goodall, J. (2021) 'COVID-19 and digital disruption in UK universities: Afflictions and affordances of emergency online migration', *Higher*

Education, 81(3), pp. 623–641.

About the Authors

Nelarine Cornelius is Professor of Organisation Studies and member of the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity at Queen Mary, University of London. Her research includes equality, fairness and social justice, and the historical antecedence of structural inequalities. Her work has been published in international journals, including the British Journal of Management, Human Resource Management Journal, Journal of Business Ethics, and Work, Employment and Society. She has undertaken projects funded by the CIPD, British Academy, EPSRC, ESRC, British Academy of Management and public and private sector organisations. She is Associate Editor for the Journal of Business Ethics. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and the British Academy of Management.

Chidozie Umeh is an Assistant Professor of Human Resource Management and Programme Leader in the School for Business and Society, University of York. His research includes management practices in socially diverse contexts and impact on social inequalities and sustainable development. His research has been funded by the Money and Pensions Service, the British Academy of Management, and Business in the Community, among others. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Associate Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and the Special Issues Editor of the Personnel Review journal. He previously worked for over a decade in the banking sector.

Dr. **Anne Clare Gillon** was previously Senior Lecturer and former Deputy Director of HR at the University of the West of Scotland. She was also previously Council Member and Vice-Chair (Special Interest Groups) at the British Academy of Management. She is a recipient of the BAM Medal for Leadership, awarded in 2022.

4

Postscript: Success and Failure of Workplace Wellbeing Initiatives – Rachel Ashworth and Howard Thomas

by Rachel Ashworth & Howard Thomas

Postscript: Success and Failure of Workplace Wellbeing Initiatives

Introduction

The papers in this volume represent the continued emergence of an international learning community centred on health and wellbeing in the contemporary business school. The authors provide thoughtful critiques, diagnoses and reflections on the impact of culture, collegiality and leadership, along with insightful and impactful sector-wide research insights drawn from lived experience, and lessons from wellbeing interventions in global school and university case studies. Together these contributions demonstrate a sizeable gap between health and wellbeing rhetoric and reality in business schools. Wellbeing interventions are commonplace, but without accompanying system-wide change, they can often be limited to addressing emerging issues rather than root causes. This makes them challenging to implement, requiring sustained commitment and pragmatic expectations of success. Our contributors favour an integrated approach, with health and wellbeing culturally embedded rather than as an 'add-on', but to achieve this, we need to address wider system pressures and, in doing so, reflect on our own evidence base, not least the collective insights we have developed into the dark side of managerial cultures.

Our contributions show that while progressive actions can be taken on the ground, there is evidence of a credibility gap between our aspirations and potential achievements, in a context where institutionalised performance systems and field-level norms run counter to health and wellbeing. This situation not only serves to undermine our efforts to cultivate a collegial and flourishing environment in our schools but also presents a major risk to the legitimacy of business and management scholarship in the longer term.

Key insights and implementation challenges

A constraining institutional environment

As we have identified, wellbeing interventions tend to take the form of progressive, localised responses introduced in the face of wider institutional pressures. Our authors discuss how these institutional pressures impede our sense of purpose, run counter to cultural values and prompt doubt about the impact of our activities, especially our research. Many reference the 'publish or perish' system, which encourages scholars to adopt competitive, one-dimensional, and less collegial approaches to their work, while simultaneously prompting imposter syndrome, anxiety and burnout (Bothello and Roulet, 2019). They also reference the academic integrity challenges, 'malpractices and misdirections' the system has prompted, which Kong neatly elaborates in her analysis of "mistreatment, misconduct, and manipulation" in the field.

There is a keen awareness of global pressures and especially our focus on rankings and citations, and how competitive cultures have served to reduce collaboration and collegiality on the ground. As Suddaby and King emphasise, when citation rankings become a substitute for purpose and contribution, guiding principles are lost, and wellbeing erodes. For Yennek and Triki, this situation raises doubts about whether institutions can reconcile a managerialist approach with cultures that foster engagement, autonomy, and wellbeing among their members.

Several of our contributors reference the role of professional accreditation bodies, noting that their processes tend to drive conformity (e.g. in Lagos and Sasin) that diminishes distinctive aspects of culture, community and collegiality that support wellness, with a number recommending our accreditation agencies act to integrate and embed wellbeing within their evaluations.

Others highlighted the challenges for business schools operating within parent universities. Cornelius et al. detail the fragility of psychological safety across the higher education sector. Suddaby identifies how moral purpose and meaning have been diminished due to the phenomenon of 'administrative bloat' in universities, and especially business schools, producing situations of 'managed collegiality' and 'thin proceduralism'. In contrast, Delbridge highlights scope for agency, documenting the pivotal mediation role that local leadership can play between university structures and the lived experiences of staff. Naidoo describes the current context as "one of the most challenging periods in higher education - marked by tensions around freedom of speech, gender identity, and global conflict" – certainly not an easy time to be a university leader for people and culture. She recalls learning from "emotionally charged and often painful" discussions, which helped her develop "calm, fair and values-driven" responses.

Leadership, Collegiality, Community

Delbridge, Thomas and Ambrosini, and Suddaby discuss professional collegiality, governance autonomy, peer review, and human capital, emphasising the role of scholarly identity, humanity and community. The Delbridge study shows that "actions that prioritise the collective" are able to positively impact health and wellbeing through the provision of emotional and professional support, and collective problem-solving while collegial practices such as mentorship, support, sharing experiences and informal conversations also serve as wellbeing boosts.

Similarly, Thomas and Ambrosini call for greater mentorship, inclusion in decision-making, and a diverse range of voices to reshape the academic community. Our authors also identify different drivers for collegiality, which tend to rely on autonomy and agency. In Lagos, collegiality in the form of communitarian solidarity is enshrined in the constitution, at Woxsen, community contribution is a key expectation, whereas in Sasin, the ambition is "not to manage faculty wellbeing as a separate concern," but to ensure strategic integration makes "meaningful faculty work possible." "Collegial, participatory, and nurturing leadership" was a factor in the Delbridge study, while Naidoo describes in some detail the three-dimensional approach she takes to encourage collegial discussions on wellbeing involving: a pan-university community of practice; innovation

seminars where challenges are worked through collectively; and a solutions meeting where colleagues work on 'stubborn challenges' with senior leaders.

Uneven impacts

Our collection demonstrates that wellbeing impacts are not evenly distributed and describes how a series of vulnerable constituencies are overlooked and disadvantaged and, as a consequence, experience uneven treatment and endure unsustainable workloads. This includes, for example, professional staff (Smith and Safeer); women minorities (Cornelius/Grandy/Kong); 'Zombie Academics' (Thomas and Ambrosini); and students (especially graduate students). With respect to faculty, workload allocation provides a specific illustration of inequitable treatment, as Cornelius' UK study demonstrates, and especially for women and minority staff, 'channelling' colleagues towards activities that are not always rewarded. Reb and Peters argue that students have also been overlooked, with attention to their health and wellbeing typically taking the form of reactive crisis support or being relegated to extra-curricular activity.

For Cornelius et al., this inequity "is not a matter of perception but of governance practices (rules, metrics, consultation processes, for example, about 'invisible labour)" that determine whether fairness is enacted or undermined. In acting on this, leaders should resist 'managing metrics' (Suddaby) or satisfying external audiences via charter marks, as "only substantive measures that redistribute opportunity, make workload transparent, and hold leaders accountable can close the gap" (Cornelius et al.). As a senior university leader, Naidoo reports a sense of responsibility to evaluate the way "cultural capital works to replicate patterns of exclusion" so we can develop agentic strategies and ensure opportunities for success are more evenly distributed. We also need to consider whether there are uneven impacts on leaders. Grandy's reflections on the ways that health and wellbeing intersect with gender are important here. Having heard herself referred to as "the caring mother" of her School, she recalls being asked for a hug after a difficult conversation, and wonders whether other women deans experience particular pressure to embody these kinds of stereotypical behaviours.

Capturing success

Our contributions show that while change is possible, inevitably there have been implementation challenges, not least due to the wider institutional environment, as Naidoo's 'lived experience' reminds us. Nevertheless, our papers provide evidence of progressive wellbeing initiatives, especially in the form of capacity-building and pedagogic innovations. As Reb and Peters describe, mindfulness is now core to the curriculum for SMU's liberal management undergraduate programme and helps students to "notice and disrupt unhelpful mental, emotional, and behavioural patterns…and orient toward values, goals, and strengths." Yennek and Triki also provide a detailed account of student-centred innovations, reporting some impressive early outcomes, as does Rodriguez, while Naidoo relays examples from her three-step approach that demonstrate an improved university response to issues of student harassment and staff EDI concerns.

Anand Narasimhan's Mindfulness and Behavioural Cognitive Lab is part of the institutional fabric at SMU, although in his reflexive account, he reports mixed reflections on the impact of structured wellbeing interventions. On the one hand, he identifies a series of positive benefits reported by participants and, on the other, he recounts a pivotal incident where mindfulness sessions proved triggering. Helpfully, he weighs up these pros and cons of wellbeing interventions, while also identifying the significance of "small acts of human kindness made in real time."

Understandably, we are at an early stage in evaluating the longitudinal impact of these initiatives. A Ministry of Education grant helped to support a rigorous evaluation at SMU, while MBS in Tunisia and Exeter in the UK have identified measures to capture the impact of their interventions. Smith and Safeer's five million survey responses also attest to the impact of wellbeing initiatives in workplace contexts.

Our contributions offer data that evidences good participation in interventions and activity. The example of 700 staff and students joining the new mentoring scheme at Exeter University is a case in point, supporting a system designed to boost career development opportunities and combat loneliness. But given that we have tended to focus on diagnosis of root causes and the sharing of practice to date, and significant cultural shifts are likely to require a five-ten year time horizon, we will need to devote more attention and investment to evaluate wellbeing initiatives.

Limitations

This collection offers a variety of insights and contributions, but it was not possible to be fully comprehensive, and so there are gaps, with particular facets of health and wellbeing in business schools that might be further explored in the future. For example, with some key exceptions, our contributions mostly addressed health and wellbeing impacts for faculty, with slightly less attention devoted to interventions directed towards students and especially to professional staff. Equally, the papers have tended to consider health and wellbeing impacts in broad terms, and so our papers have not engaged in deeper discussions of mental health issues, impacts and outcomes, which, as we know, are becoming increasingly severe. This is especially the case for business school students who tend to exhibit higher levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, often falling victim to a 'work hard, play hard' mindset (Fiset and Robertson, 2023:2). As Reb and Peters identify, we often fail to provide the personal development they require to deal with a complex and uncertain world, running a risk that they will "graduate technically competent but emotionally depleted, cognitively scattered, and disconnected from purpose."

While several of our authors discuss aspects of EDI, we need to devote more attention to health and wellbeing impacts for those with protected characteristics and marginalised groups, especially in terms of intersectional effects. Many of our contributors were senior academics, often having held senior leadership roles. While most papers focused their discussions on other groups of colleagues, especially early-career academics, we do need to hear from a wider range of voices and institutions in future, including those of our professional staff. Finally, the implementation studies in the collection report signs of success, but we need to invest in multi-method research that provides analysis of health and wellbeing initiatives in the short, medium and long-term. This should capture the lived experience of those working with wellbeing interventions and provide insight into growth trajectories and longitudinal outcomes.

Where Next on Wellbeing? Stark Choices and Collective Action

There are stark field-wide choices to be made as we move forward. We can continue to optimise performance metrics, accept credibility gaps and exploit vulnerable constituencies, while making laudable attempts to make change on the ground. Or, we can more proactively build purposeful, healthy wellbeing cultures, which requires clarifying purpose, strategy and meaning; building community and collaborative spirit; investing carefully and selectively; reforming governance mechanisms and building and orchestrating change strategically at a field-level.

Our authors have made repeated reference to the need to prioritise a sense of organisational purpose that foregrounds health and wellbeing. In Lagos, there was evidence that communitarian values strengthened and reinforced schools' identity and purpose, which in turn helped to resist wider institutional pressures, with a similar story of integration from Ghorfi and Hatimi at ESCA, and at IPADE, where "wellbeing is embedded… not treated as an add-on." Our authors describe the influence of our field-level instrumental, output-driven culture, which, it is argued, has directed our attention away from enhancing the public good in all four areas of business school operation – education, research, engagement and governance/operations (Kitchener, 2025). There is a consensus within this collection that this situation is not sustainable.

Suddaby reminds us that institutions can only endure if they integrate moral and technical elements and infuse their organisations with meaning, while Thomas and Ambrosini argue that business schools can only be credible institutions committed to the public good "if they reimagine success not as a race for outputs, but as a collective journey toward purpose, integrity, and human flourishing." This takes us back to Grandy's emphasis on "care, connection, engagement, and sustainability" and her recommendation to "talk about wellness, and invest in it, as a function of people, systems *and* space."

To address this we will need to work collectively to confront logics that "prioritise publication quantity over quality, privilege the research destination over the journey (the research process), favour research over any other academic role, and are fixated on our individual academic achievements rather than our positive impact on our stakeholders" (Sathish and Harzing, 2025:2). Our authors offer various prescriptions here. For Cornelius et al., "closing this (credibility) gap requires more than symbolic gestures: it demands embedding fairness and wellbeing into the structures of workload systems, promotion criteria, and accountability frameworks" while Reb and Peters emphasise the need to return to our 'deeper mission', "to educate thoughtful, grounded, and self-aware human beings." For Suddaby, the key to restoring moral purpose within business schools lies in crafting collegiality which involves "designing institutional spaces that reward reflection and dialogue, selecting leaders who embody moral stewardship, and embracing academic work as a craft through which meaning, not metrics, becomes the measure of value." This will require leaders who not only infuse purpose into the life of others but can visibly enact purpose in their own practices (Kitchener, 2025).

The Need to Act

We have witnessed repeated 'calls to action', but in the spirit of Sathish and Harzing's recommendation to act rather than to call for action, we suggest the following.

Scholars and staff within the business school field, and academic leaders of professional organisations, must coordinate so that we can remodel the meaning and purpose of business schools, drawing on innovative models and practices. Working collectively and collegially, we need to develop alternative and more rounded models of scholarly contribution and act more intentionally in this respect, drawing on the wealth of our own evidence. As Bothello and Roulet indicate in their account of imposter syndrome in business schools, we must change incentives so business school academics are motivated "to act less as mercenaries and more as public intellectuals, loyal to institutions that promote and cherish a holistic contribution" (2019: 860).

Deans of business schools must do whatever possible to invest 'intentionality, time and commitment' (Delbridge) so they can develop purposeful, agentic strategies within their schools that embed health and wellbeing. This may involve the recruitment of different kinds of leaders, but at the very least, leadership development and personal approaches will need to adapt, with a recognition that empathy, resourcefulness, openness, and authenticity are key (Sindhawi et al., 2019). Given the number of policies and practices determined at the parent university level, deans will also need to work more closely with university leaders if we want to develop more fulfilling models of collegiality and restore meaning to our work.

We need a majority of business school faculty members (including the senior professoriate) to invest in cultivating horizontal collegiality initiatives, speak the truth, nurture one another and support collective action on metrics and governance mechanisms. Thomas and Ambrosini also suggest that early-career academics invest in being collegial by "supporting each other, speaking up in meetings, and celebrating each other's achievements … they should also challenge toxic behaviour and question unrealistic expectations." Additionally, there is scope for 'subtle activism' on all our parts, where everyday acts can challenge toxic norms without confrontation (Sathish and Harzing, 2025). Importantly, as both Delbridge and Cornelius et al. demonstrate, there are specific challenges in maintaining collegiality in the context of hybrid and digital working that need to be considered too in a bid to combat academic loneliness.

Our accreditation agencies have been making important incremental changes, but we now need a more transformative approach, which has humanity, belonging, diversity, health and wellbeing, rather than 'excellence', at its heart. This will require a willingness to pivot, 'see around the corners' and develop and commit to improving the quality and long-term viability of management scholarship and education, along with a willingness to pay greater attention to mental health (Fiset and Robertson, 2023). Finally, while individuals and business school associations have been attempting to influence journal and institutional rankings organisations, perhaps it is time for some bolder, collective action in this regard that may require disengagement from these systems at some point, as we have seen in some parts of Europe.

Final Thoughts

We believe that those who read and consider the insights from these papers, alongside evidence from the growing literature on health and wellbeing in business schools and beyond (including those from Professor Cary Cooper), will view this challenge positively and collaborate in taking action, which is essential to the long-term survival of meaningful business and management education, scholars and scholarship.

As scholars, we can take a range of actions to address this. We might support movements, such as Positive Academia referenced by Thomas and Ambrosini, which aims to disrupt the 'vicious cycle' by building a "academic heterotopia through a concrete, comprehensive, and coherent re-imagination of both our academic values and our interactions" (Sathish and Harzing, 2025). It might mean taking a form of 'Aristotelian Oath' advocated by Kong, which could commit scholars to ethical practices, and institutions to creating and maintaining healthy research environments. It could entail collective action through better coordination of business schools and their deans, which enables us to focus on 'grand challenge' as opposed to rankings, or warrant a personal commitment to normalising localised approaches that restore meaning within our work and ensure this is reflected within our recognition systems.

These kinds of actions are needed to ensure our organisations are better placed to transition towards purposeful, public value-oriented, collegial communities, with health and wellbeing at their core. As Korica (2021) emphasises in her call for a more humane academy, ultimately, the prospects for change come down to each of us: "A better academia is possible if we live it."

References

Bothello, J. and Roulet, T. J. (2019). "The imposter syndrome, or the mis-representation of self in academic life." *Journal of Management Studies 56*(4), pp. 854-861.

Fiset, J. and Robertson, M.C.S. (2023). Navigating the support landscape: Bridging the divide between social support in business schools and student mental health. *The International Journal of Management Education, 21*(3), p.100897.

Korica, M. (2022). A hopeful manifesto for a more humane academia. *Organization Studies, 43*(9), pp.1523-1526.

Kitchener, M. (2024). Re-purposing business schools: potential, progress, and precarity. *Journal of Management Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13171

Sathish, C. and Harzing, A.W. (2025). Let's form a positive academia collective transformation: Re-imagining our academic values and interactions. *Management Learning*, 13505076251351089.

Sindhawi, S., Connor, J. and Thomas, H. (2019). "The Missing Shifts", *Global Focus, 13*(1), pp. 52-55

About the authors

Rachel Ashworth is a Professor at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, where she served six years as dean and focused on embedding the School's Public Value strategy. She researches organisational and institutional change, scrutiny and accountability and equality, diversity and inclusion in public service organisations, and has published in leading journals including British Journal of Management, Journal of Public Administration, Research and Theory, Journal of Management Studies, Public Administration and Public Administration Review, and Public Management Review. Rachel is President-Elect of the International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management (IFSAM), a member of the Council of the Learned Society of Wales, and serves on the Chartered ABS Policy Committee.

Howard Thomas is an Emeritus Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education at Singapore Management University (SMU) and former dean at leading business schools, including SMU, Warwick Business School (UK) and the College of Business at UIUC (Illinois, USA). As a highly respected consultant, author and scholar he has been awarded fellowships by the Academy of Management (AOM, USA), the Strategic Management Society (SMS, USA), the British Academy of Management (BAM), the European Academy of Management (EURAM), the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS, UK), the Institute of Directors, (UK) and, most importantly, the Learned Society of Wales (LSW). He was also President of SMS while dean at Illinois. He has chaired leading professional educational organisations such as AACSB (USA), GMAC (USA), and CABS (UK). He has also received Lifetime Achievement Awards from BAM (UK) and the European Foundation of Management Education (EFMD), and a number of honorary doctoral degrees during his distinguished academic career. He is currently a senior advisor to the President and Managing Director of EFMD

The EFMD Business Magazine | Annual Research | 2026

Addressing Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Contemporary Business School: The Role of Culture, Collegiality and Leadership

EFMD aisbl
Rue Gachard 88 – Box 3
1050 Brussels, Belgium

Phone +32 2 629 08 10
Email info@efmdglobal.org
Website www.efmdglobal.org

Design by www.pilipilipigment.be

YOUR SAY
We are always pleased to hear your thoughts on our publications. Please address comments and ideas to Matthew Wood at EFMD: matthew.wood@efmdglob.org