

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing business buccaneers: employer expectations of emergent leaders

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Abstract

This study investigates employer expectations of graduates to inform pedagogical practice within a context of industry-university collaboration. Employers' views of graduates as future leaders are explored through interviews, focus groups and a survey, with a regional sample of 146 managers. Findings show employers have different understandings and diverse expectations of leadership traits and generic competencies. Employers anticipate future graduates will need greater adaptability and flexibility for volatile business contexts; with some highlighting rule-breaking that implies a buccaneer approach rather than responsible leadership. The dissonance between an academic aim to educate socially responsible, global citizens and industry demands, potentially undermine the coherence of partnership. Consequently, this study casts doubt on implicit assumptions that practice-informed, industry-university, collaboration will deliver better leaders. The main implications are that educators need to clearly communicate to employers how university learning transfers into actual work practice, and for graduates to better articulate their broad capabilities. The research offers fresh insights on educators' responsibility to nurture capabilities in critical thinking and graduates with the learning agility to question and responsibly navigate organisational rules. The study also contributes to the industry-university partnership debate by revealing the academic complexity of developing future leaders given the multiple lenses of practice-informed views.

Keywords: *Emergent leaders; employer expectations; industry-university collaboration; responsible leader development; business buccaneers*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine employer expectations in recruiting business graduates with leadership potential. The Witty Review (2013, 13) stressed the importance of university-industry collaborative research 'rooted in a sound understanding of a locality's comparative economic advantage'. This study responds to Witty's call with a focus on regional employers based in an affluent business sector of the UK's South East. The notion of industry-business school partnerships is affirmed by the Wilson Report (2012) that depicts universities as 'anchor

institutions'; for business development and economic growth. Industry collaboration is encouraged as a new source of higher education revenue, essential for economic survival. Hence the relevance of the industry-university discourse for the future of business school education (Confederation of British Industry 2015). However, this raises a question as to whether funding interests may run counter to academic integrity and autonomy. This research is timely in examining government policy ideals of pedagogic approaches to leadership development that equip graduates with 'real' world skill; what matters in industry (Dries and Pepermans 2012; Pfeffer and Fong 2004). One specific skill set often expected of business school graduates is leadership potential. The study therefore investigates employer perceptions of an effective leadership skill set from a work practice position.

Industry invests heavily in leadership training as indicated by estimates of annual development spend ranging from \$10 billion in the U.S.A to \$30 billion worldwide (Hannah and Alvolio 2010; Reade and Thomas 2004). Despite this financial investment leadership results are disappointing: only 38% of organisations rate their leaders as excellent or very good, while 31% believe their leaders are poor or at best fair (Boatman, Wellins and Selkovits 2011). Recent recessionary pressures have increased the focus on leadership but, in many cases, leaders are found wanting with calls for more responsible and ethical leaders to address the diminishing trust of followers (CIPD 2013; Patel and Hamlin 2012). Cunningham (2010) argues there is little evidence of better leadership in organisations despite the prominence of leadership education in business schools. Employers still look to universities to sustain a pipeline of effective leaders despite debates about leadership education as an employability factor (Tymon 2013). As Caza, Brower and Wayne (2015, 80) observe: 'Perhaps the critics of business education are correct and we are not doing enough to prepare future leaders'. Consequently, a perceived dissatisfaction with the academic provision of graduate leadership education warrants investigation.

This ongoing study, grounded in a UK business school, seeks to highlight the specific competencies that employers rank as important for emergent leaders. The research questions centre on: What do employers look for in recruiting graduates with leadership potential? To what extent is there consensus, or divergence, of view across a range of employers? How do employer expectations align with a university education oriented towards the development of socially responsible citizens? This empirical study adds fresh insights on employers' articulation of graduate qualities and their perceptions of leadership concepts embedded in university curricula. The study reveals the complexity of practice-informed education that constrains the integrity of academic independence in developing the leadership capability and moral vision of graduates. This paper begins by reviewing the assumptions of industry-university collaboration and the curriculum scope of leadership development including traditional, new paradigm theories and responsible leadership. Then we discuss the phenomenological interpretivist research methodology. Next we present the data with an analysis of findings and discuss the implications of this study. We conclude by providing evidence of the complex pedagogical dimensions in interpreting what employers say they expect of graduate recruits. In doing so, this study reflects on diverse industry expectations of future leaders and the multiple challenges of practice-informed education.

Leadership education

Business school and industry collaboration

The context of industry-university collaboration assumes that diverse stakeholders share common aims in leadership education. In this paper the term business school will be used to refer to a *university* business school, rooted in a specific UK higher education institution, in contrast to privately funded business schools. Universities are seen as central in filling a skilled talent pipeline, and the UK government places increasing economic demands on higher education to foster social mobility, enhance employability and strengthen business collaboration (Thune 2011; Ferlie, McGivern and De Moraes 2010). The Dearing Report (2002) highlights this economic role: ‘Universities are the source of strength in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century’ acknowledging the critical linkage of education and business growth. Moreover, the Witty Review (2013, 15) argues the facilitation of economic growth is a mutual aim of industry partnership:

for many universities effective economic engagement is actually one of the conditions of success... effective economic engagement is not an alternative to excellence in research and teaching but enabled and catalysed by it, and vice-versa.

Arguably, the ideal envisaged is for stakeholders in industry and academia to learn from each other, to accord with the contemporary demands of a global economy and interconnected environment. These aspirations are summarised by Thune (2011, 43) as HEIs expectations that:

Cooperation with industry will contribute to strengthening the academic environment and create high quality and relevant study programmes that are attractive to prospective students.

This underlines the assumption that a business school curriculum informed by practice will boost graduate employability; enhancing students’ practical skills and knowledge through education. In addition, industry collaboration ensures the currency of educational programmes and boosts graduate perceptions of academic relevance. Such partnerships are used to promote business school enrolments in demonstrating practical work-related opportunities, and positive outcomes for students, employers, universities and government (Wilson 2012). In spite of the laudable aspirations of industry-university collaboration, there are claims that the fundamental values of corporate business conflict with the overarching principles of higher education.

A primary duty of university educators is to teach the values of ethical practice, professional ideology and civic responsibilities; emphasising the impact of business on civil society (Ortenblad, Anders and Koris 2014; Ferlie et al. 2010; Pfeffer and Fong 2004). Many academics assert the civic duty of education in nurturing responsible citizens who will work within societal values of the common good rather than as individual mercenaries. Adopting this stance dictates that universities guide leadership education and development towards responsible, ethical and sustainable models. Pfeffer and Fong (2004) underline the danger of business schools imitating management consulting firms that steers academic research towards a narrow market-driven agenda away from broader research of intellectual curiosity (Mabey 2013; Ferlie et al. 2010). Alajoutsijarvi, Juusola and Siltaoja (2015, 283) accuse business schools of adopting a neoclassical

ideology which: ‘dictates the type of knowledge that becomes a best-selling commodity is the right type of knowledge’. Consequently, Ferlie et al. (2010, 64) posit that to ensure academic integrity and detachment:

“Business schools need to be decoupled from the narrow interests which have funded them and consider much broader societally relevant concerns.’

This proposition may appear naive in an institutional context of government policy that urges greater industry collaboration to sustain economic needs. Still, recent UK controversy reveals the damage of overdependence on specific donors. As two such examples, the Libyan funding donations to the London School of Economics and opaque resourcing at the London Metropolitan University underline the risks of corporate interests directing educational curricula. The detrimental impact on academic reputation and sullied academic integrity can threaten a university’s stability.

The focus of leadership education

Research studies attest to employers’ dissatisfaction with graduate recruits; Jackson (2010, 48) notes: ‘Almost all of employer respondents reported college-educated work entrants as ‘deficient’ in leadership skills although considered very important by a significant majority’. The gap between the supply of effective leaders and employer demand for better leadership is a perennial problem for many organisations (Alajoutsijarvi, Juusola and Siltaoja 2015; Elmuti, Minnis and Abede 2005). Broadly, this is interpreted as a failure in higher education provision to meet industry needs. Alternatively, from an educator’s viewpoint this may be seen as industry reluctance to invest in leadership education that builds on university learning. There are various potential explanations for these differing viewpoints on the content and outcomes of education.

For example, there has been a renewed focus on the teaching of responsible, ethical and sustainable leadership (Blakeley and Higgs 2014) due to a decline of trust in business leaders (CIPD 2013; Patel and Hamlin 2012). This has increased scrutiny of the effectiveness of leadership development in business education. Blame for dysfunctional leadership during the recent economic global crisis was attributed to business schools (Elmuti, Minnis and Abede 2005). Moreover, recent academic literature indicates a shift away from traditional models of leadership qualities towards a new paradigm of leadership which is less leader-centric (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron and Antes 2009; Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter and Tymon 2011). New paradigm approaches emphasise relationship management, and highlight the importance of followers’ participation. A shift in power and control is significant in these theories; for example, leader-member-exchange (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995); distributed leadership (Gronn 2000) and servant leadership (Greenleaf 1997). According to Kellerman (2008) employee followers have become bolder, through empowerment, and consequently savvy business leaders need to adapt. Drawing on contemporary research on dynamic, participative organisations (Friedman 2005) most business schools now teach these new paradigm theories of leadership. These contemporary academic

models of leadership imply that traditional organisational hierarchies dominated by command-and-control leaders have given way to flatter structures of diverse employees.

However, we question the extent to which new leadership styles and ethical leadership are visible in the realities of organisational practice. In times of rapid environmental change, employees seek security in powerful leaders (Bligh and Schyns 2007). Termed the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich 1985) this perception glorifies a leader as a highly capable individual to whom employees look to instil confidence if job security is under threat. As Raelin (2011, 197) observes:

‘Leaders make a pact with followers that accord the former power, and privilege, in exchange for the assumption of the weight of responsibility in an increasingly ominous world’.

In short, employees relish the idea of a heroic leader whereas a participative, democratic approach such as distributed leadership might appear threatening. Perhaps the ‘great men’ traits (Grint 2005) of traditional leadership styles alleviate employee anxiety about business survival. Therefore employers may be more likely to seek graduate recruits who conform to traditional stereotypes of leadership behaviour as opposed to new paradigm leadership theories espoused by a business school curriculum.

Competing expectations of education: employers, students and government

If employers, students and government expect graduates to leave university having been trained in context specific skills and knowledge, then they may be disappointed. One fundamental cause of dissatisfaction could be a misunderstanding of the terms leader and leadership, and training, development and education, which are subtly different in meaning and outcomes. Leaders are individuals whereas leadership concerns the collective and involves processes, systems, followers and environment (Day 2001). Training and development is focused on outputs, addressing identified gaps in knowledge and skills and as such are more short term and contextual. Whereas education is concerned with inputs and focusses on concepts, ideas and theories with broad unspecific outcomes that are assimilated and adapted over the longer term and as such are more transferable (Tyman and Mackay 2013). Employers are naturally concerned with enhanced capability that can deliver improved productivity and organisational performance in the short term (Mabey 2013; Russon and Reinelt 2004) and so may want trained and developed leaders. Realistically, however, a university business school is best suited to providing broad education and not specific skills training. Warhurst (2012) argues that leader training and development are feasible and do happen in university teaching, but others suggests this is more effectively achieved within organisations through experiential learning (Conger 2006; McCall 2010; Grint 2005; Raelin 2011; Yukl 2013). Similarly, although business schools can and do teach leadership, the collective and contextual nature of this concept, means training and development of skills to enact it are unlikely and transferability of such learning is limited.

Simultaneously, the perceived commodification (Gold and Bratton 2014; Sinclair 2007) and the spiralling fees of higher education positions students as consumers with accompanying

customer demands (Alajoutsijarvi et al., 2015). As such students’ instrumental priorities mean they may find it hard to embrace the broad unspecific outcomes of education and deeper philosophical approaches, such as ethical leadership or global citizenship. This increases the pressure on business schools to demonstrate vocational relevance through leadership development that clearly meet employers’ needs. However, educators have a responsibility to students to encourage thinking beyond short-term employment and provide professional education for sustainable career development (Mackay and Tymon 2014). Where a business school has strength is in providing students with choices about what they learn (Ortenblad, Koris, Farquarson and Hsu 2013); presenting leader and leadership concepts, ideas and theories, to stimulate individual thought and reflection. Such education can hone qualities to shape a leader identity which in turn can guide behaviour and actions (Carden and Callahan 2007). Developing critical reflection and leader identity through education may also help meet societal expectations of higher education.

Societal expectations of education

There are societal expectations of education oriented towards moral values and ethics, so that business schools produce responsible leaders with high levels of moral reasoning (Ortenblad, Koris, Farquarson and Hsu 2013), a view embodied in the concept of a global citizen. Durden (2007) defines a theoretical profile of a ‘Global Citizen’; as a person able to engage effectively and productively with international academic, business, civic and cultural environments. Although the UK business school landscape is influenced by Anglo-American perceptions of leadership, research suggests there is similarity across diverse countries and cultures in how effective leaders are viewed (Patel and Hamlin 2005). Hamlin (2005, 22) even suggests leadership ‘competencies are more universalistic than contingent’ which reinforces the notion of competencies set out for the education of a global citizen. The bridge between theory and practice is created through the application of leadership qualities and demonstrated skills and competencies in context. The Global Leaders’ Report (2011, 11) concludes: ‘Equipped with these competencies, graduates can become the future leaders of global businesses.’ These core competencies are summarised below (see Table 1).

Table 1 : Insert here

<i>Global mindset competencies</i>
Ability to communicate and manage people of different cultures and backgrounds
Leading teams
Multi-lingualism
An adaptability and flexibility that extends to being open to global assignments
A knowledge of global affairs that shape their work and life
Social etiquette

Learning agility
Empathy

Table I: Adapted from Global Graduates into Global Leaders' Report 2011

These skills and competencies are affirmed by the Chartered Management Institute research (June 2014) of 1,065 employers from small, medium and larger businesses across diverse sectors. The report highlights the need for business schools to emphasise: 'cross-cultural working' but also 'more inclusive, transparent leadership models...the importance of ethics' (p9). A liberal arts education includes broad and adaptive learning and the critical importance of personal and social responsibility. This research appears to demonstrate agreement on the need for ethical and sustainable practices embedded in professional standards. However, the provenance of this research starts from an enthusiasm for industry-university partnership which is not universally endorsed. A traditional university education emphasises a more liberal arts approach with the need to learn and re-learn technical skills and knowledge, a sophisticated skill set of continuous learning through critical thinking and reflective practice (Mackay and Tymon 2014). As educators the university role is to nurture and refine this skill set in constantly working with, and adapting to, business needs and demands for a supply of talent.

In summary, the literature raises tensions for educators about employers' voiced beliefs in the 'right' qualities, competencies and skills required for successful leadership. Educators face numerous challenges in attempting to satisfy multiple stakeholders. First, in providing graduates with learning that will support a sustainable career (Mackay and Tymon 2014). Second, in balancing academic integrity with a fundamental responsibility: 'to guide the development of the next generation of capable and ethical leaders' (Connaughton, Lawrence and Ruben 2003, 46). Third, in nurturing effective graduate leaders who can facilitate connections between business, government and society (Ferlie et al. 2010; Ortenblad et al. 2013). These tasks demand that business schools understand what employers regard as effective leadership qualities; an issue that guides this research study.

Methodology

To reiterate the study aims to explore employers' expectations of graduate recruits with the potential to become future leaders of an organisation. Specifically the research seeks to discover: what do employers look for in recruiting graduates with leadership potential? How do employer expectations align with a university education oriented towards the development of socially responsible citizens? This study employs a pragmatic and mixed methods approach (Coulson-Thomas 2013) based on an inductive research philosophy. A phenomenological research dimension privileges a subjective view of reality; exploring employers' situated view of

requirements from a practice context (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2011). Figure 1 summarises the data collection methods.

Figure 1: Insert here

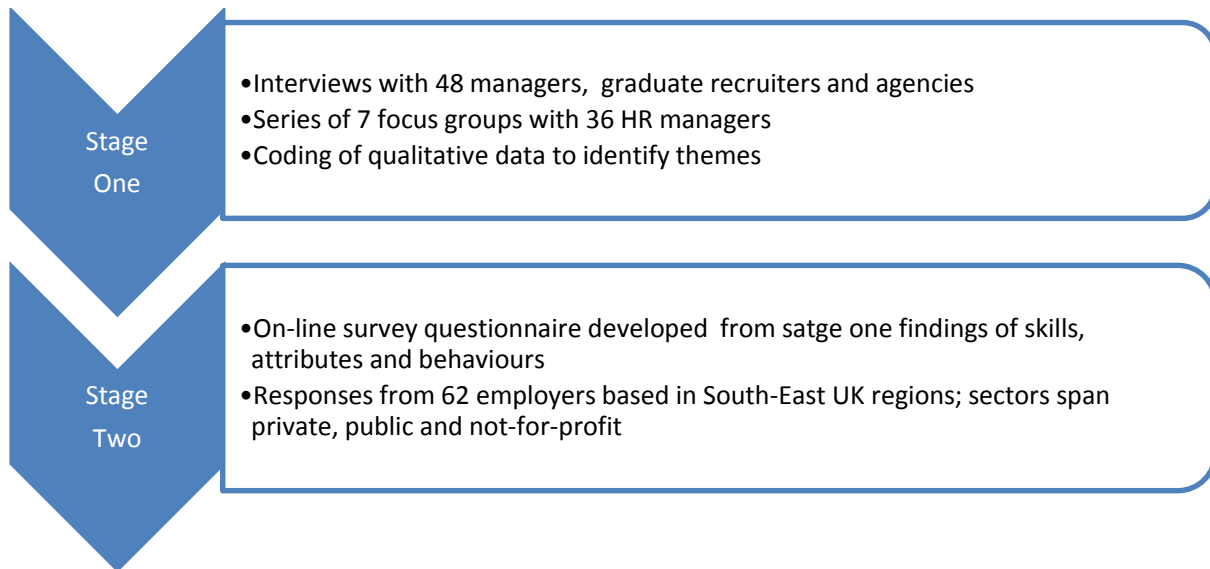


Figure 1: Data collection methods

The sampling strategy for interviews was purposive to select line managers and human resource (HR) specialists who have an informed work-practice view of graduate qualities. First, volunteers were sought from graduate recruiters of private and public sector organisations attending a regional graduate recruitment fair. Other volunteer interviewees included senior managers attending university public seminars and professional members attending CIPD branch meetings, who were interested in recruiting graduates. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 12 to 35 minutes and followed a protocol of questions about desired competencies and skills:

- ~ Do you look for leadership or leader potential in graduate recruits?
- ~ What skills, knowledge, traits and/or behaviours do you look for?
- ~ How do you measure these?
- ~ If you had to select only *three* key competencies and skills, which *three* would be essential and why?

The parallel focus groups were purposively selected through direct invitations to business school alumni of the accredited professional qualification programme. The 30-45 minute focus groups met in the local business school and included 36 human resource specialists and business partners. Each group of 5-6 participants discussed employer requirements and recorded their thoughts using the same guiding protocol questions as above; two researchers as facilitators made additional notes. The analysis of the interview and focus group data was used to shape the design of an online

employer survey to further explore and verify employer expectations. Employers sampled through the business school industry relationship database were invited via email to complete an online questionnaire and 58 usable responses were obtained. The survey questionnaire included 15 closed-questions based on a competency framework with participant employers asked to rank importance now and in the future. The final survey section invited participants to add open comments about their specific priorities in seeking graduate recruits with leadership potential. Confidentiality remained at the forefront in the research design, data collection and subsequent analysis of the anonymous survey responses. The justification for a framework to support work practice analysis draws on the literature that attests to the use of competencies which ground leadership development by providing ‘clarity, consistency and connectivity’ (Conger and Ready 2004, 43). We acknowledge the critique that generic competencies may appear to be of less pragmatic value than context-specific models (Boak and Coolican 2001; Povah and Sobczak 2010). However, for this research generic competencies enable comparisons between different organisations across diverse sector employers. Moreover, competency frameworks applied to survey instruments serve as a mechanism to guide thinking around the articulation of required skills, behaviours and attributes.

For the data analysis the research team clustered the 85 data items by iterative content coding of responses to identify pattern associations and through re-reading to form twelve categories of competence that capture overlapping qualities. The coding was developed and checked for consistency by three independent researchers drawing on the relevant literature for data interpretation and consensus. Within each category a coding distinction was made between skills and traits. Skills are defined as what an individual can do, demonstrated by behaviour and can be more easily taught, developed and assessed (Mabey 2013). Skills tend to be the subject of leader training whereas traits are more innate leadership qualities and therefore more difficult to train (Tymon 2013). See exemplar **Table II**

Competency cluster	Skills <i>Skills that can be developed in higher education</i>	Traits <i>Innate traits that facilitate skill application</i>
<i>Leading Others</i>	Developing others Lead from the front Mentor others People management skills	Authority/credibility Charisma Inspirational Presence
<i>Team working</i>	Influencing skills Networking Social skills	Adaptable Likeable/approachable Personable
<i>Drive</i>	Independent thinking Personal initiative Problem-solving	Can do attitude Enthusiasm Tenacity

Table II: Example of coding categories

Data presentation and findings

What employers seek

From the aggregated data collected in semi-structured interviews, focus groups and survey, 93% of employers look for leadership potential in graduates. This significant majority identified 85 distinct skills, behaviours and characteristics. There was limited convergence among employers in key competencies identified with 65% of employers only mentioning the same descriptive word, once or twice. Three specific items were mentioned by more than 50% of respondents, namely: communication skills, team work and work experience which echoes research on wider employability skills (Jackson 2010) as opposed to being leader specific. In presenting the data we look first, at the interviews with employers and graduate recruiters, second, the focus groups of human resource managers and third, the survey responses.

Interview data

Two thirds of employers interviewed look for ‘well rounded candidates’ who were performance orientated as well as self-motivated, enthusiastic team players. However, the definition of a ‘well rounded’ individual varies in different organisations. One third identified critical thinking as important:

‘Any graduate degree is good for analytical reasoning ... Other businesses need to see the power of critical thinking for a graduate to be able to persuade others and influence people to follow their direction.’

Other interviewees acknowledged the strong influence of specific organisational frameworks:

‘We select through competency-based assessment and they have to fit with our twelve core competencies.’

Thus employer variation in specifying graduate qualities and leadership skills is affected by respondent interpretations as well as particular organisational discourses.

One third of interviewees identified ‘entrepreneurial’ qualities and ‘commercial awareness’ as key to future success. Employers want graduates to demonstrate leadership potential through greater awareness of the dynamics of the business environment and a sharper perspective on business issues that require an orientation to change and flux (Thune 2011). A mindset of learning and personal drive is seen as critical for leadership success (Mumford et al., 2009). An interviewee noted:

‘Fresh ideas come from a learning mind set and this is how we look for future leadership’.

From an educators’ stance, these leadership skills can be developed within a business school programme and affect future career sustainability as well as business relevance.

A fifth of interviewees acknowledged the increased competition for jobs internationally and remarked on the high volume of graduate applications. A competitive labour pool strengthens employers’ ability to scrutinise graduates and select those with: ‘the right mindset and commitment to get on with it’. Two thirds of interviewees stressed the need for graduates: ‘to articulate their

knowledge and learning for use in the work environment’, ‘to be able to talk with confidence about their experience and competence’. A few commented that European students often possessed greater fluency in conveying relevant work-related experience which supports the literature (Durden 2007; CMI 2014). Interestingly, although some employers discussed the importance of a more international perspective and cultural awareness, global citizen competencies were rarely mentioned. Perhaps more concerning was the sparse consideration of responsible leader qualities, ethical behaviour, moral vision or personal and social responsibility, associated with a liberal arts approach to higher education.

Focus group data

Focus groups provided more opportunity for discussion over graduate requirements and the weight of distinct competencies, but again, there was little consensus on qualities sought. As with the interviews, the more generic skills were mentioned, but greater focus was given to soft skills.

Communication is key to be able to communicate with all levels and be able to interact with service users and colleagues alike. Problem solving matters for graduates to be able to think for themselves and reach sensible, well-thought out conclusions [F2].

We want interpersonal skills, team interaction and people skills. A graduate with an enquiring mind, practical skills and a readiness to learn on the job [F3].

The above quotes also highlight an interest in thinking skills and learning agility. Warhurst (2012) asserts that such transferable leadership skills are an achievable outcome of a well-designed higher education curriculum. But some employers doubt that a business school can achieve a practice-informed education. For example, three of the seven groups underlined that graduates need to have realism and be ready to learn on the job:

Above all graduates really need to understand they may not be the finished article and accept they may need to work up to a level. We call this *humility* [F2]...They have to realise a university degree isn't the finish line [F3]... In simple terms, graduates have to be prepared to start at the bottom [F5].

Many employers viewed attitudinal traits which support enhanced job performance as more important than functional skills. As one example:

‘We want personality rather than leadership – the potential to articulate and be interested in the technical function is much more important. Leaders come later, when they reach their late 20s and early 30s;....so we have a policy of growing our own. It takes two to four years for people to start showing potential’ [F6]

This comment summarises how some employers prefer to shape leadership skills through company relevant situations.

Survey responses

The survey asked employers to rank competencies in order of importance to business needs. The top rated competencies were: Team working, Drive, Analytical thinking, Communication skills and Professionalism, reflecting most generic graduate employability frameworks (Jackson and Chapman 2012; Tymon 2013), with little tailoring to leadership needs. When asked to look ahead to anticipated business changes over the next five years, more than 60% of employers stressed the need for graduates to demonstrate an agile and proactive approach to applying skills and knowledge in the workplace and the following competencies were ranked as vital:

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Critical thinking
- Resilience
- Change Orientation

Regional employers' interest in flexibility, adaptability and proactivity aligns with the Global Leaders Report (2014) on the need for graduates to accept and initiate change. Certainly, an individual's capacity to be innovative and creative stem from a deep resource of critical thinking and analysis, and higher education can build the transferable skills for evaluating alternative options to deal with complex situations.

Data summary

Overall, employers echo habitual responses of generic competency listings. Skills identified lean somewhat towards newer paradigm leadership theories such as distributed, in the prioritisation of team working and social skills which are follower-centric (Gronn 2000; Kellerman 2008). These skills can be developed within an educational setting where there is opportunity to build collaborative relationships through social interaction. Contrastingly, many traits identified are associated more with traditional leader-centric theories for example 'Authority/credibility; Charisma; Inspirational; Presence' which are aligned with the romance of leadership (Bligh and Schyns 2007).

Notably, the data reveals limited concern for global citizens and ethical or responsible leadership. Rather, employers' interests in leadership qualities for the foreseeable future appear dynamic and entrepreneurial. The language that employers use creates ambiguity in their reference to flexibility, adaptability and critical thinking. There is apparent tension around employers wishing to see new recruits challenge the corporate system rather than conform to organisational norms. Some employers overtly describe risk takers, innovators and rule-breakers; for example:

'We need individuals with more courage, innovators and risk takers who are able to change the bureaucracy especially in the public sector. To break the rules but with care and creativity.'

This was an intriguing finding, with several employers emphasising the need for emergent leaders to be able to creatively navigate organisational norms. Employers identified a need for graduates to have:

'More courage and be able to break the rules...Think outside of the box...Graduates need to demonstrate agility and be adaptable... They have to be capable of dealing with unexpected...And willing to take risks'

These views appear to reflect the romance of leadership with organisations perhaps wishing for emergent leaders willing and able to take command in uncertain and unpredictable futures (Bligh and Schyns 2007). Certainly the quest for creative, market-responsive thinking increases the risk of rule breaking. For educational providers based in a UK business school, these opinions are difficult to interpret. What is the operational value of 'breaking the rules' and the meaning of these applied qualities in the workplace? If educators focus on risk-taking characteristics, then business schools may further encourage a buccaneering approach which panders to unethical practice. These employer comments resonate with corporate language that speaks of business piracy and contemporary buccaneering. For example, Lush cosmetics accuse Amazon of business practice that is representative of 'piracy capitalism' (Observer 1 Dec 2013) while the business media regards the same organization as a highly successful operating model. Buccaneer was the name given to early 17th century pirates and as Parker (2009, 170) points out most maritime heroes spent time as 'state-licensed pirates' in Elizabethan England. The rise of buccaneers in cut-throat business development is at odds with societal expectations of graduate leaders.

Discussion

This study offers empirical evidence of the educational complexity of a practice-informed view of developing future leaders. We add to the literature in providing empirical evidence of the multiple lenses of employer expectations that blur academic understandings of industry needs. The data demonstrates the challenge for business schools in meeting employers' demands and raises two fundamental questions: how do these collected views of business practice inform leadership education; and to what extent can one regional business school address such differing expectations?

Business school curriculum

Employers' expectations of graduates are multi-layered and affected by different practice contexts. The sheer range of competencies evidenced in 85 different items identified by employers as key to leadership potential present a challenge. Findings also reveal many employers' tend to perceive effective leadership as an innate quality (Day 2001; Mabey 2013). To attempt to address this variance and range in employer interpretations of competence and practice-based priorities within a curriculum blunts the focus of a leadership programme. Core leader skills such as communications, team working and critical thinking can be developed within a business school where there is time and space for immersive reflective practice (Mackay and Tymon 2014), but the list of skills, by necessity, must be limited to those things a university education can do well. University education can support the development of a leader identity but leadership skills such as

organisational citizenship and stakeholder awareness may be better animated through experiential work-based initiatives (Conger 2006; McCall 2010; Grint 2005; Raelin 2011; Yukl 2013).

This study also highlights the challenge for business schools in teaching responsible leadership when there is limited mention of these qualities by employers. Funding crises, economic recession and public scandals over deficiencies in leadership behaviour have triggered a re-evaluation of the business school curriculum and the need to critically question the relevance of the educational offering (Currie, Knights and Starkey 2010). At one extreme an exclusive focus on employer market-led demands has the potential to produce buccaneer qualities as future leaders with a dubious moral compass. By contrast, educators are focused on a universal education that improves the quality of graduates moral vision and leadership capability. This is not to deny the commercial dynamism of a market-led economy but this sometimes thrives by operating on the margins of what constitutes effective leadership and ethically responsible behaviour. A more subtle interpretation may be that the business school aspires, or should aspire, to educate not necessarily rule-breakers but graduates who are capable of challenging those rules, navigating the institutional bureaucracy and possessing a sophisticated skill set to be able to critically question practice (Hamlin 2005; Povah and Sobczak 2010). Therefore educators need to counter a limited view of education as work-readiness and promote the development of graduates` independent thinking, responsibility and accountability to a code of ethics that can contribute to societal interests (Mackay 2015). This represents a political response to the instrumental prevalence of employability in higher education curricula which overlooks the value of education for life (Durden 2007). In rethinking a pedagogical emphasis on ethical leadership behaviour, Padilla and Mulvey (2008) argue business schools can restore the societal responsibility dimensions of work-readiness. Thus educators have a role to play in managing employer and societal expectations, taking employers` opinions as a starting point not a blueprint for providing education and mentoring for responsible leadership.

The data also highlights the need for creating realistic expectations in students. Employers want graduates to clearly communicate the critical skills and learning agility acquired from higher education study. To facilitate this, educators should better articulate that a profound engagement in a broad and adaptive degree programme has vocational value. Simultaneously, educators need to raise student awareness that their degree is not the end point, rather they still have much to learn when entering an organisation to develop their leadership potential.

The nature of collaboration between industry and university

Research findings also express dissonance between the qualitative and quantitative data demonstrating the complexity of a mixed-method research approach. For example, in interviews some employers exclaimed a need for independent thinkers, courageous rule breakers and mavericks. By contrast, the majority of survey responses listed a desire for generic competencies that conform to hierarchical organizations. As researchers we wrestle with the apparent contradictions in the data. An industry-university partnership does not necessarily share mutual aims and intended outcomes and collaboration can operate on multiple levels.

The UK government advocates industry-university collaboration to stimulate economic growth and innovation which heralds more frequent partnerships between employers and academics (Thune 2011). Concurrently, criticism of woeful moral leadership during the 2008 financial crisis has prompted calls internationally for educators to re-examine the curriculum in order: ‘to reflect more deeply and critically on the purpose and content of management education’ (Gold and Bratton 2014, 2). Arguably, a functional view of education as serving the needs of business can create bias in framing leadership development as packaged, short-term outcomes. The societal responsibility to educate global citizens and responsible leaders can be put at risk by a business school with a corporate funding dependence. Business schools need to expand views of educational development beyond narrowly focused employer demands and nurture longer-term capacities for collective practice and greater self-knowledge to contribute to societal interests (Mackay 2015). A government agenda for industry-university collaboration places an emphasis on practice-informed education to better support graduate employability. Business school-industry cooperation is important (Wilson Report 2012; Witty Review 2013), but so too is recognition of employer investment in further training and a shared responsibility to develop graduate leaders. As Ortenblad, Anders and Koris (2014, 205) sagely observe business schools: ‘Should listen more to other stakeholders, but not necessarily always act on their suggestions.’ Still, this overarching critical perspective to retain academic independence and resist intimate partnerships with industry may detract from the needs of institutional growth.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that the research is constrained by the limitations of self-reports from employers, a regional UK business sample, and prevailing economic conditions. Moreover, the use of a competency framework can appear to impose a standard template on employers to agree to an academic view of desired competencies. Therefore our aim is not to take employers’ opinions as definitive but to see these as a baseline survey of viewpoints as we continue with this longitudinal research. In particular, employer interview studies show promise in illuminating a more in-depth perspective of leadership practice that can guide understanding of industry espoused ideals. So, a future avenue for research is to continue to map employer requirements against the educational curriculum.

Conclusion

This research contributes to current debates on the renewed importance of industry-university collaboration. The question remains: what do employers expect of graduate recruits? What should be the emphasis of industry-informed leadership education? To answer this we adopt an inductive research philosophy to gather practice-informed data from a UK regional sample of 146 managers, recruiting agencies and human resource specialists. The study found employer expectations of graduates’ leadership potential are not clear-cut. Contradictory results indicate ambiguity in views,

which restricts how this data can be used to inform the direction and relevance of pedagogical practice.

Findings reveal that employers' demands are wide-ranging including 85 skills and traits, some associated with newer paradigm leadership theories and others grounded in the more traditional. Such breadth and diversity presents challenges for educators in deciding what and how to teach leadership. Second, data shows scarce employer orientation towards the characteristics of global citizens capable of responsible leadership. Third, discrepancies emerge in employers' voiced beliefs about future needs for bold, almost buccaneer, approaches and responses that indicate a required 'humility' expected of new recruits. Differences between employers stated needs raise questions about the assessment and selection of leaders in practice. Do employers want graduates who are: flexible; adaptable; proactive; can think outside the box; and take risks; or do they want graduates with generic skills who will follow company norms? Should universities remain with the traditional principles of higher education that assume the societal primacy of the common good, or should they teach what matters in industry? (Dries and Pepermans 2012; Pfeffer and Fong 2004). Finally, employers seek graduates who are better able to present their skills and characteristics. We posit that educators should facilitate this by being more articulate in demonstrating the importance of a liberal arts education that improves individual leadership capability and enhances the quality of graduates' moral vision.

To conclude, this empirical research demonstrates industry-university collaboration is not a straightforward proposition. This study casts doubt on implicit assumptions that practice-informed, industry-university, collaboration will deliver better leaders. The interface between employers and business school educators is vital for dynamic exchange of knowledge, research and experience through industry-university partnerships. However, stakeholder expectations are diverse and specific elements of technical knowledge and expertise are better learned by practice experimentation in context. Thus universities need to remind stakeholders that education resembles a conscious process rather than a product (Alajoutsijarvi et al., 2015). The challenge for educators is that employers and graduates may not fully appreciate the relevance of a longer-term developmental perspective. Leadership education at its best can focus on transferable qualities that can add real value to organisations and society. Educators can encourage students to question managerial interests and analyse their own values, morals and ethics. By maintaining academic independence, this critically reflective education may help form a robust leader identity, to provide strength in the face of organizational resistance. This may contribute positively to a sustainable future for an organisation and the leader, rather than just a buccaneer leader scooping up the spoils for personal gain. Such leadership education and development may allow responsible and ethical leaders to challenge the status quo with a buccaneering spirit that aims to strengthen the organization.

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