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**Paper title:** Communities in Conflict? Communities of Practice within the Business-School

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### **Summary**

This developmental paper intends to be provocative, to incite discussion. We introduce our inquiry examining the teaching-research nexus from the perspective of Business-School academics in post '92, non-research-intensive, UK universities. We propose that academic identity has become conflicted and threatened as the changing character and demands of the contemporary Business-School means that distinct communities / identities exist in parallel and there is no clear path between them. Drawing initially upon a single case-study, and taking a phenomenological stance using semi-structured interviews in an attempt to access academics' life-worlds, the research seeks to answer the question: *how do academics within post '92 Business-Schools understand themselves as academics?*

## Background

This developmental paper intends to be provocative, to incite discussion. We introduce our inquiry examining the teaching-research nexus from the perspective of Business-School academics in post '92, non-research-intensive, UK universities. We propose that academics' identities have become conflicted and threatened (Knights and Clarke, 2013) as the changing character and demands of the contemporary Business-School means that distinct communities / identities exist in parallel and there is no clear path between them (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2010).

Drawing initially upon a single case-study, and taking an interpretative phenomenological stance using semi-structured interviews, in an attempt to access academics' life-worlds, the research seeks to answer the question: *how do academics within post '92 Business-Schools understand themselves as academics?*

To examine this question, the paper is structured as follows. First, we consider the journey being made by some UK post '92 university Business-Schools from their origins of providing education *for* practice that is, to improve managers' business practices, through to a research-focus with an associated shift to providing education *about* the practices of business to predominantly full-time students with no managerial experience (Ivory et al., 2016). Much of this teaching *about* has been undertaken as a second-class activity by academics for whom research is a priority and moreover, good pedagogic practice has been unrewarded. For some institutions, there has though been a more recent refocus upon good educational practice in response to the challenges of ever more diverse recruitment, the marketisation of higher education and the associated escalating demands of students and to meet the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF) metric. Second, we establish a rationale for the research before third, exploring the 'community-of-practice' literatures that we consider will provide traction in answering our question. Fourth, we outline our empirical study, finally, posing questions to delegates to inform our unfolding inquiry.

## Case of the Business-School

The origins of UK post '92 Business-Schools were inextricably associated with the growth of management as a distinct activity and the attribution of failing economic performance in the West to the shortcomings of managers (e.g., Simon, 1967; Mintzberg 2004). Early on, Business-School academics within both the 1960 established Schools such as Manchester, and within the new polytechnics, were managers who saw themselves as experts providing instruction in their practice-based craft, prioritising practical business tools and techniques. Their programmes were designed to be directly relevant to practicing managers and their organisations (Ivory et al., 2016; Tiratsoo, 1998). Understandably, little attention was paid to research or theorising as the activity was conceptualised, similarly to education and nursing at the time, as craft-based not knowledge-based (Augier and March, 2011; Khurana and Spender, 2012).

However, influenced by efforts to gain academic legitimacy within the wider university and to become a legitimate academic community, and following the trend in professions generally towards evidence-based policy making and practice, so the focus is now upon the theorisation of management and achieving research outputs. This focus is fueled by the heavy influence of achievements in the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF) on a Business School's league table position (Alojoutsijarvi et al., 2015). Moreover, following a trend that began in the US, this move has been fuelled as the education of part-time or mid-career business practitioners, learning *for* management, has been eclipsed by the education of full-time pre-

work business students who are learning ‘*about*’ business (Ivory et al., 2016; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Our systematic review of the ‘history of business schools’ literature much of which is informed by Tiratsoo (e.g. Tiratsoo, 1998, 1998b, Tiratsoo et al., 2003), shows that traditional education ‘*for*’ business was based in practice-knowledge and knowing and facilitated by a practitioner or ex-practitioner with extensive personal experience and whose credibility to teach derived from her or his personal practice knowledge and wisdom (Ivory et al., 2016; Tiratsoo, 1998). By contrast, the newer ‘*about*’ business education is typically grounded in research and theory delivered by a research-academic who has limited, often no, personal business experience and whose credibility to teach comes from mastery of abstract, propositional knowledge (Seeck and Laakron, 2010; Brown et al., 1996).

However, multiple education-related metrics such as the UK’s NSS and TEF, the preponderance of students with little/no business experience and the challenges of working with students with limited preparedness for higher education yet with high expectations, are starting to shift the focus of some pre and post ’92 Business-Schools. Therefore, recently an education-orientated academic has emerged who attempts to draw upon knowledge *about* business but to enable learning *for* practice.

These shifts in the remit of UK Business-Schools have resulted in a divergent academic staff-base orientating towards opposite ends of a teaching-research continuum and the emergence of distinct academic communities, with differing priorities, knowledge-bases and, crucially, assuming different, often conflicting (Delanty, 2008), identities of what it is to be a Business-School academic (Henkel, 2010). Our initial conceptualisation of these communities is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Proposed communities of Business-School academics

<b>Proposed community</b>	<b>Community characteristics</b>
Traditional Business and Management academics (‘experts’) <i>A largely legacy community</i>	Credibility is from personal business experience Knowledge base is from personal-knowing and wisdom Implicit aim is instruction <i>for</i> business
Modern Business and Management academics (‘lecturers’) <i>A legacy community in retreat</i>	Credibility is from knowledge of business from text-books and Masters degrees Implicit aim is to teach <i>about</i> business
New Business and Management academics (‘professors’) <i>A community in the ascendant</i>	Credibility is from research Knowledge base is propositional knowledge of research-evidence and theory Implicit aim is education <i>about</i> business
New-Modern Business and Management academics who want to be educators (‘teacher-scholars’) <i>An emergent community</i>	Credibility comes from excellent teaching / educational leadership Knowledge base is partly teaching-craft and partly pedagogic research Implicit aim is to prepare students <i>for</i> business [cf. for management]

We propose that there is a community of academics (we are calling these '*professors*') whose destination and identity is very much research. Mindful of the 'publish or perish' rhetoric (Colquhoun, 2011), they pursue an academic identity that is sustained by a strong tally of star-rated journal publications (Adler and Harzing, 2009), and while seemingly caricature, their perceived need to publish at all costs, will typically be at the expense of their active contribution to teaching, administration, citizenship and educational development (Fernando, 2018; Clarke and Knights, 2015) and their contribution to business practice (Gabriel, 2010). In many institutions this group are in the ascendant. Concurrently, there is an academic community who see themselves as educators first and foremost ('*teacher-scholars*'). While strategic emphasis is upon 'professors', operationally this 'teacher-scholar' community is crucial. Their primary orientation is towards facilitating quality education experiences for their learners informed by their personal craft-knowledge of teaching and, occasionally, by pedagogic scholarship.

However, these education-focused 'teacher-scholars' face persistent identity threats. They are typically perceived by university managers to be failing to 'make the mark' in contributing to the REF and are singled out for blame for the sector-wide declining student satisfaction rates even though this decline has been associated more with the changing nature of students than with any clear erosion in teaching quality (e.g. Gunn, 2016). Moreover, these '*teacher-scholars*' also largely shoulder the burden of ever-increasing administration (Deem, 2016) which restricts their opportunities for research activities, thereby ensuring that '*teacher-scholars*' get stuck at the currently less-favoured, career-limiting, education community, and so polarization increases. Between these two communities sit other Business-School academic communities who are striving towards, and are perhaps torn between both the research and education communities concurrently.

### **Context of the study**

Our initial research is based in a case-study large Metropolitan post '92, AACSB-accredited Business School in the North of England. Seemingly typical of Business-School housed within these 'modern' post '92 universities, it is characterised by managerialism and performativity. The focus of its senior management is increasingly upon achieving good research (REF) outcomes, which augments the sense-of-self of the community of research-orientated academics. However, from the perspective of the education-orientated academics, who make up over half of the School staff (a relatively equal split of '*lecturers*' and '*teacher-scholars*') the Business-School is overshooting on the research metric at the expense of the educational outcomes that characterises its *raison-d'être* as an institution where virtually all the income derives from teaching students. Polarisation is resulting, and the impact of this is reflected in the recent staff survey that shows low staff engagement and a weak sense of belonging to the Business-School especially by those falling within the education community and between the communities.

The empirical inquiry will extend to comparative case-studies with other post '92 Business-School that have pursued similar, research-orientated, trajectories.

### **Why is this research important?**

While initially contextualised within one Business-School, we consider this research to have wider value as follows:

- Previous research has examined the diversifying academic and professional identities in higher education, (e.g. Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010; Evans and Nixon, 2015), specifically how academics are positioning themselves in relation to the, often, conflicting job pressures. However, research attention has yet to examine the consequences of the emerging strategic need to prioritise teaching
- Previous research has focused upon the differing cultures of different academic fields (Becher and Trowler, 1989) and upon the differing teaching “regimes” of different departments within the same subject areas (Trowler and Knight, 1999). However, to date, studies have not focused upon the potential conflicts arising from distinct communities of academics with their distinct identities and seeking differing directions of travel within one academic field and teaching “regime”.
- While currently contextualised within one UK University, the research has wider relevance for other post '92 Business-Schools and may inform the related shift being experienced particularly within pre '92 Business-Schools with academics being employed on distinct ‘teaching and research’ and ‘teaching and scholarship’ tracks.

## Literature review

Our study is taking a phenomenological stance in an attempt to access the Business-School academics’ life-worlds and to understand their perceptions and meanings of ‘being’ an academic. From this perspective, concepts and theories will emerge from the data. However, the study is, at this stage, informed by the ‘communities-of-practice’ literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Farnsworth et al., 2016). As practitioner-researchers our observations of distinct communities of academics orientating either towards research or towards education suggests that this communities-of-practice theorising will enable deeper understanding of the tensions and conflicts that we, and others, note are emerging within Business-Schools.

### *Communities of practice*

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘communities-of-practice’ (CoP) comprises a group of people who share a common purpose and ways of knowing and doing, and who learn from each other as they interact. While the concept is criticised for conceptual/terminological ambiguity (Handley et al., 2006) and its inadequate conceptualisation of learning (Hughes, 2007), CoP is a widely-used concept within both the ‘higher education’ and ‘business/management’ contexts. However, to date, despite being well-used, it has seen limited theoretical development (Lars and Canning, 2010), and has become “increasingly fuzzy” in its application (Tight, 2015). Our research aims to address this concern, theory-building through a concurrent focus upon socio-cultural identity theorising.

Initial learning within a CoP is enabled through the process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 29) which ensures individuals traverse a pathway of participation from periphery to core, as they learn not only the specific knowledge and skills of the community but also to appropriate its social and cultural practices; that is, they learn how to ‘be’, their identity, within that community. Yet, with individuals potentially participating across and orientating towards multiple CoPs, so tensions exist not only between communities but within individuals. For individuals, identities can be conflicted and require renegotiation as they seek to secure a ‘sense-of-self’ beyond their home community. Figure One, models four distinct communities-of-practice likely to be found in a Business-School.

Academics' pre-existing identities will inevitably orientate them towards a particular CoP and within which they secure legitimisation. This legitimisation then fosters and reinforces that identity. However, some may seek participation in other CoPs in efforts to craft an aspired identity or as a "calculated engagement" (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, 189) to protect their personal interests. Yet, participation necessitates that the community accepts (legitimises) the academic and allows them access to the practice. For some, participation might be prevented or hindered. Other academics may make it to the periphery of a community but be unable to traverse the pathway of legitimate participation towards its core. CoPs may therefore, be as exclusive as they are inclusive (Wenger, 1998).

## Methods

As noted, our study is taking an interpretative phenomenological stance to explore Business-School academics' life-worlds, their lived experiences, perceptions and meanings of 'being' a Business-School academic. A qualitative, approach is therefore being adopted.

A cross-sectional research design is involving volunteer academic participants from the case-study Business-School. These participants are selected as an exemplifying case (Yin, 2013). We are aiming for an initial sample of twelve participants for the research. However, recruitment will continue in efforts to reach data saturation point.

We recognise that the contextual and dynamic nature of experience, perception and meaning present methodological challenges, and might be best examined through a series of data generation methods. However, given the context of the study it is our intention to limit the impact on already pressured participants. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are being employed. Given our own immersion in the research context we recognise the need for reflexivity to ensure that our meanings do not swamp our participants' meanings (e.g. Cunliffe, 2008; Hibbert et al., 2010). The interviews, which are lasting between 30 and 67 minutes, are being recorded and transcribed. Inductive thematic analysis will be undertaken, verified through two independent coders (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998). Throughout the research process, care will be taken to ensure that it conforms to the accepted standards for contemporary qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2010).

Drawing upon the findings of this initial single case-study we will later extend our research to undertake a comparative case-study approach with other comparable post '92 Business-Schools.

## Questions arising for us to date

At this stage in the research process, questions are arising and we welcome delegates' thoughts. These questions include:

1. Would an autoethnographic study (perhaps as a prelude to our interpretative phenomenological study), provide useful insights (methodologically and theoretically), or does autoethnography amount to no more than narcissistic egotism?
2. Do the problems we outline of conflicting communities and conflicted selves resonate or are Business-Schools more generally happy, harmonious places where academics are confident in who they are, whether they see themselves as 'professors', 'teacher-scholars' or attempting to be both?
3. Do our four proposed academic communities resonate?
4. (What) are there opportunities for knowledge exchange and/or movement for academics between these communities?



5. Does a CoP lens have potential, or could we be ‘shoe-horning’ academics’ experiences in?
6. How can identity foster understanding and help enhance contemporary business education?

We look forward to discussing these questions, and many others that we and our delegates may have, at the conference.

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