Modern Academia and the Impact of Good (Zen!) Management

by

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Abstract

Nowadays, academic institutions seem to be undergoing a rapid transformation over the past 5 or so years, which is a continuation of the trends observed over the past 1-2 decades. The difference now is that the changes are more rapid, and hence more evident and identifiable. This article aims to discuss good management strategies so as to ensure sustainability and longevity of an academic institution in the long-term.

Main Article

Academic institutions, universities in particular, are being transformed into a more corporate hybrid which is focused on very short-term profitability measures and indicators, rather than being a cornerstone at the foundations of modern societies.

State funding is not only limited, but also managed in a very direct way by the political climate of a country. This climate defines strategic areas that research should be directed, and also preferentially the funding allocated is aimed for large team formations that will receive it. Therefore there are fewer grants allocated to larger groups, to facilitate easier management by the funding bodies and require fewer people and cost for them as well, and also crucially there is a political trend to continuously decrease the amounts of funding being made available for academic research and education overall. In addition, the strategic goals, for what is deemed as critical politically to invest in, shift very rapidly from year to year, almost like fashions come and go.

Inevitably, academics have to respond to this both to secure their funding for their research, and also on a directly personal level to ensure continuity of their careers in the institutions they serve. Obviously, this leaves little time to focus on deeper scientific and technological questions that each individual may aspire to explore, because such goals are longer-term and in the eyes of the current political-accounting system are viewed as more “higher-risk”.

Page 2 of 13
The impact of this trend is now felt in very clear and obvious ways. Both grant applications take much longer to prepare, and consume a great percentage of time from the daily duties of a modern academic. Furthermore, in my opinion, the quality of the research produced is declining: people respond to the need to secure funding quickly in a competitive environment. And competition is not necessarily just quality, it is also to respond quickly, to form the "right" larger group that will successfully bid for the money, and to find a very good fit with the tightly prescribed centrally planned calls by funding bodies.

Typically, a large group of people will have different skills to bring to the table but also it can lead to lack of coherence and on the real impact such projects will actually have in society and business generation, longer-term. People nowadays resort to what I shall term as "combinatorial research projects". For example given a call that requires some advancement in a field that is deemed politically important, they will use their past experience and work as pieces of a puzzle to produce something that responds to the call. Such research usually is not fundamental, but addresses a topic on the surface just to "tick the box of having done the work" in the eyes of the "system".

Such a project may even generate a spin-out company or two, but again the product put forward is just a combinatorial re-adjustment of previously given knowledge. That is so because when the pieces of the "puzzle" assemble to a totally known in advance outcome, "the picture in the front of the box" speaking about puzzle games(1), this cannot under any circumstances constitute anything original or innovative. Hence this is an actual waste of tax-payers' money, as it will not generate something viable long-term and it will not generate a new sustainable circle of business and new employment opportunities in society.

In summary linear combinations of such technologies, basically of things from yesterday recombined and sold as innovation for tomorrow, do not bring about a significant advancement neither in knowledge generation, nor in actual radical product innovation. The result is actually much less than the sum total of its constituent parts! As such, these policies and resulting practices actually result in wasting the very same tax-payers' money.
that modern politicians use as a *mantra*, proclaiming they are saving with their spending cuts in fundamental areas for society such as education and health-care, in order of course to secure their own careers and re-election.

And here is where the internal management structures of an academic institution come to play a very key, and a very defining role. Defining in the sense that they will secure both the short-term goals of state supported funding, as well as serve more fundamentally to secure the longevity and legacy of the institution as a contributor of knowledge generation, education, and outreach to society at large for the years to come. Unfortunately, under tight financial pressures, the types of managers that are of the enlightened and self-secure type are very few nowadays, despite my hope that everybody is doing the best they can given this shift in the academic landscape.

Let me take an “unusual” example of management style in the western world first: Zen management is not a joke and neither is it something that is of metaphysical nature. Zen is more of philosophy and attitude towards life in general, a path through it, for which the interested reader may refer to the outstanding work by one of the most eminent contemporary Japanese Zen Masters, the late Omori Sogen of Rinzai Zen, founder of Hanazono University in Kyoto in Japan, as a starting point of understanding Zen [10, 11]. Master Omori is probably also the most widely known and influential representative of Zen thought in the West [12].

Inevitably, as I have chosen to present Zen as a management methodology I will have to explain briefly what it is about, as well as contrast it with common views in the West. As a word, Zen in English means “empty awareness”, *i.e.* without preconceptions and without interpretation of reality via some mental construct, but rather perceiving something exactly “as is, in the here and now”, and then acting confidently according to one's intent. If the intent is honorable and noble, and aims to alleviate any form of suffering, then it is implicit according to Zen philosophy that there is nothing that anyone cannot achieve, and that there is absolutely nothing to be fearful of in pursuing such a goal.
Zen as a philosophical path of life is diametrical to all psychoanalytic approaches, popular in the West even when used or quoted informally in everyday life. In these, one tries to “understand who they are” by accounting their historical past experiences and how these shaped their personality in a passive way, which almost invariably tends to shift blame to people and events of the past, in one form or the another. More precisely, psychoanalysis tends to split experiences into the content of what one was directly responsible for, and what was out of their control – but this very attempt is based on a very ill-defined and very subjective demarcation of the boundary of what is self and what is others, philosophically, or at least what each were precisely responsible for, in practical terms!

The issue with it is that it relies on the fact that a person is assumed capable of recalling past experiences in the correct historical sequence, which is an impossibility as events connect in a very nonlinear and parallel way with each other simultaneously, let alone understanding completely the thinking and the motivations behind the actions of other people, so complete awareness and knowledge is an impossibility. Zen regards the issue of “who one is” in sharp contrast to such approaches in that “it is we who define ourselves and not anything or anyone else”, in each and every moment of “the single now” we experience.

In this view, our past experiences are to be regarded merely as independent articles of a large encyclopedia, which we read selectively so as to form a coherent string of knowledge to achieve each specific purpose we have ourselves defined. As an aside, this begins to explain the idea of “no-self” which is fundamental in Buddhism overall: we have no such thing as a self, until we define it freely according to our preferences in each moment of time. What we have, and all that we are, in effect is only choice: to define ourselves by our intent and by our actions, without reference to any spatial location or any other time than the present one!

Literally Zen is a vigorous, full of vitality way of life that empowers the individual to maximize their potential under any given circumstances, and to achieve anything they wish to set as their goals no matter what the external pressures are. This requires heightened self-awareness, and security and confidence in oneself as an individual. It
requires addressing any issue without fear, and without falling into the trap of what-if-then-else scenarios which constitute endless, recursively infinite and growing loops in trying to predict in advance the worst case outcomes of situations. And it requires also letting go of any preconceptions based on past experiences, particularly so because in each situation the context is always different, as well as the connectivity of the web individuals form with their interrelationships is always shifting temporally.

It requires further in the particular case of a good academic manager the following ingredients:

1. Confidence in his/her strategy and clarity of the goals set.

2. Full understanding of their academic staff and crucially familiarity with them as actual persons: what their expertise is, what their aspirations are, etc. And it is not hard to do so: it just requires a bit of time to really get to know them, and to listen and advise them on their career paths and aims, and how to achieve these to the maximum. It requires patience as well as firmness in guiding people, as well as a strict moral code in managing them with dignity and respect, and to lead them by example.

3. Facilitation rather than delegation. A good manager institutes measures and systems within an organization to ensure that each staff member, with their own individuality and idiosyncrasies, can have access to pooled contacts, secretarial and administrative support and adequate training and guidance to achieve their goals, as well as those of the collective organization by fusing the two together.

Academic institutions are about product innovation. Both in delivering cutting edge, up-to-date competitive courses, as well as leading in innovative research both for the very short-term as well as longer-term future. It is the only way to satisfy the accounting needs of the present climate, and simultaneously to also ensure continuity and growth of the contribution of the institution in the distant future.
I selected the example of Zen management style not only because it feels closer to my own heart, but also on purpose: Google employ a Zen Master as a consultant within their organization, and the late Steve Jobs the CEO of Apple himself had trained for years in Zen and applied the techniques to achieve the “Miracle of Apple” in recent years, before he died prematurely. Both of these two corporate organizations do not need further elaboration as to their effectiveness, reach, technological innovation and contribution, as well as their tremendous success and growth. For the interested reader, I will also point out that there are articles from the 1970’s onward in very prestigious journals, like the Harvard Business Review [1], that present these concepts and investigate them very seriously indeed.

This management style is also along the lines of the work done by Mr. Simon Sinek, of Simon Sinek Inc. (https://simonsinek.com/), who started out a few years back as a motivational speaker and business/management consultant. His message, although intuitive and very simple, it is right at the heart of the matter and is totally aligned with Zen management principles. I would refer the interested reader again to a YouTube presentation, one of Mr. Sinek’s early ones [2]. A related and also very clear presentation is by Dr. Axel Zein on managerial leadership [3].

I will now present alongside with the above outlined ideas an extreme example so as to create sufficient contrast to show how an organization instead of being successful can literally be run straight to the ground by bad management and lack of strategic vision. But more importantly, by completely alienating and literally hurting its people in the first place.

As a hypothetical scenario, consider a manager who instead of leading by example, tries to lead by authority. As Mr. Sinek highlights in the presentation link given above, “leadership reminds us why we came here, authority tells us what to do”. Consider also a manager who because of their own insecurities and inadequacies and not having a clear mindset and vision, they lead increasingly by pressuring staff and by literally bullying people, in extreme but of unfortunately increasing frequency reported cases particularly so
in the UK [4], to do what he/she expects them to do without any feedback loops in place, even leading to staff suicides [5, 6, 7, 8, 9].

Such a manager, by necessity being a very insecure person in themselves and without any form of empathy towards his/her colleagues in the first place, as they are preoccupied with their own intense fears and centered around themselves defensively, focuses obsessively for example on the “bottom line” of the daily accounting sheets, of how to please his/her own bosses in his/her own self-limiting and distorted perceptions of course, driven by his/her own intense fear of authority, instead of doing his/her job to set goals and facilitate their materialization with determination and courage by showing true leadership – and being confident and ready to defend his position and policies at any instant if challenged by those higher above.

This person will become invariably very oppressive like a veritable tyrant, justifying everything he/she does as necessary and unavoidable compromises and actions, firstly to himself/herself and then trying to convince others, no matter how unpalatable and hurtful these things are towards his/her staff. Finally, he/she will turn the entire organization, the university department or company division, and if they are at higher positions of management even the entire university or company, into a literal disaster zone!

I don’t need to continue on with the obvious outcomes for very long. The results of such a management style are as follows, among others:

1. Staff alienation.
2. Mistrust towards the management structure and persons.
3. Mistrust amongst co-workers.
4. Escalation into fight-or-flight mode of functioning, “each for oneself” instead of the “one for all, and all for one” ideal.
5. Constant and mounting levels of work-related stress among the staff members.

6. Increase in sick-leave related absences.

7. Conflicts at the workplace among the staff who become disjointed and lose the loyalty to the organization.

8. Spending more and more time in dealing with self-created problems within the organization itself.

9. Rapid decline in productivity.

10. Staff preoccupation with securing fallback placements in other organizations, determined with conviction that they will leave at the first opportunity offered, reducing finally their loyalty towards their current employer to absolute zero.

11. Shut-down of institutions/companies or, as is trendy in academia in the UK nowadays, to restructure in a veiled way by mergers of departments (that often have little commonalities). Such restructuring has only one goal: to reduce staff numbers, as is done also in the more traditional corporate world. We have yet to see entire universities shutting down, and although unlikely to happen to the traditional large ones, smaller universities may have to suffer from such a fate if these trends continue.

12. "Spin-doctor" statements to justify such restructuring as an … "achievement", claiming them as "win-win" decisions for the absorbing entity and the one absorbed. This of course leads to further fuel staff cynicism, and a further decline in the business and in the entire sector as a natural consequence.

The last point in the list above, in the particular case of academic institutions, is a last resort to fix the "bottom line": tenured staff are usually contractually associated not directly with the universities they serve, but with their departments (I would advise people
to check the fine detail of their contracts here!). In such a case, it is preferable in the eyes of shortsighted management to undergo such dramatic measures, as they are only accounting-oriented without any understanding, or perhaps even care, of what education and research are about. Furthermore, if this is repeatedly used and overdone in the education sector, it sets a very bad precedent tarnishing the reputation of an academic institution irreversibly, at least with very long-term impact. Dangerously also, it becomes systemic in the entire sector.

Nonetheless, as a former and very successful Ph.D. student of mine once pointed out when discussing their career plans: "don't worry, I will do what is necessary for now, but the world is a very-very big place"! It is interesting that this maxim is somehow not only lost on many modern managers in academia, but equally also and detrimentally on policymakers, on education ministers and strategists at government levels, worldwide. With a shift towards short-term profit and applying this model in academia, they actually cause grave damage not only to the sector at large but to their entire societies, long-term. Talent you see will fly away, and never set foot for a very-very long time to such an organization that still manages to exist somehow still in the future!

Loss of competitiveness, via the loss of quality of education and research, and coupled with increasing levels of fees, will actually turn even the most prestigious institutions of yesterday into the mediocrity of tomorrow. And the market will not only feel it, but it will know it very precisely and respond accordingly. Once a corporate entity begins to falter because of mismanagement, it is the golden opportunity for its competitors to start taking the portion of the market share it once had. In the example of academia, competition for the UK is right next door, in Continental Europe.

In particular, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany (to name a few I can think of and know exactly) have established all their Masters' and Ph.D. programs to be conducted in English. Also, in the case of the Netherlands they have become so multicultural that now they also hire staff to teach and conduct day-to-day business exclusively in English – with a "minor" clause saying that "it would be good if the staff when hired could try to learn the Dutch language also"! Now, if in the UK we continue
down the path presented in this article for the higher education sector, it would be purposeless to describe further here the predictable outcome.

I will add one more important point I know from first hand anecdotal evidence: more and more young people from Cyprus and Greece do not consider coming to the UK for studies (it used to be traditionally their first choice up until say 3–5 years ago), but rather have started preferring to go the Netherlands in particular (for M.Sc. and Ph.D. studies). Also quite a few graduates have started to seek and to find successfully employment in Germany and the Netherlands, with all business conducted exclusively in English.

The same has started to happen with established academics and other professionals: during a recent visit to a university in Amsterdam in the Netherlands for an invited lecture, I was informed that very large numbers of European and British academics alike from the UK are applying for jobs there, all over the country! It is clear that Britain has started to lose the significant relative advantages it enjoyed all these decades: its open academic system with great freedom to explore science and technology, and the so far exclusive advantage of using the modern *lingua franca* in the business and academic world internationally. I would also point out that lucrative academic and industrial jobs exist also elsewhere in rapidly emerging markets, that traditionally used to feed the academic system in the UK, like the Arab countries of the Gulf, China, Hong Kong, and India with its emerging industry and also already using the English language by default.

In the eyes of cynical decision-makers, whether institution-based or at state policy-making levels, all of this does not matter perhaps much as their goals are simple and self-serving: the short-term bottom line to facilitate securing votes and re-election by claiming savings for the taxpayer-voter (a client-like kind of treatment of the voter!). To such people, the solution is simple: being competitive, having high-quality, are all relative terms and fine-print! "We can always shift to an appropriate new market to find customers (i.e. students)", which invariably implies lowering standards of course, but again as we discussed here “it is all relative” for such a mindset after all...
This is all for now, these are the thoughts I have been entertaining by having various discussions with colleagues around the world, as well as more specifically locally in the UK as the academic landscape is shifting very rapidly at present.

As nobody can predict the future, or should even try to do so(!), I will simply say this here: “watch this space”!

References


