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The question of morale

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Centre for Higher
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Institutional Research and “Story-telling” or “Sense-making”

What does IR tell us about story-telling in institutions?

- **Morale**
- **Strategic freedom of action**
- **Management of reputation**
- **Institutional effectiveness**

A research question

Why is so much discourse about contemporary higher education structured around (real and imagined) unhappiness?

What should we be doing about it?

An SMT reflects

- **We don't have enough money to do our jobs properly, but we are really good at them**
- **We are severely oppressed, but we are also happy in our work**
- **The government should support higher education better, and it should do this by giving us (our university) more than them (that other university)**
- **We can't give students what they really need, but it is our duty to attract the very best to come and study with us.**
- **In attracting these highly qualified students, what counts is the quality of our research, not our teaching**
- **The league tables are terrible, but we must climb them and the higher we climb them the less publicly we shall criticise them**

The story of institutions

An organisation exists to get something done and requires management while an institution is less concrete and is largely held together by people in the mind as part of their frame of reference. An institution is composed of the diverse fantasies and projections of those associated with it. These ideas are not consciously negotiated or agreed upon, but they exist (Dean of Westminster quoted in Watson, D. *Managing Strategy* [Open University Press 2000: 97]).



Testing the story

- **Authenticity**
- **Autonomy**
- **Adaptability**
- **Analysis**
- **Ambition**

The “happiness” publishing deluge

- **elegiac nostalgia (Ehrenreich);**
- **furious dystopianism (James);**
- **international competitiveness (Wiener);**
- **radical therapeutics (Layard);**
- **critique of such therapeutics (Ecclestone);**
- **popular self-help (Ben-Shahar).**



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Unhappiness in general: sources

- **Legal developments**
- **Social developments**
- **Philosophical developments**
- **Political developments**
- **The battle of the generations**

Sue Townsend

“England was an unhappy land. The people were fearful, believing that life itself was composed of danger, and unknown and unknowable threats to their safety. Old people did not leave their houses after dark, children were not allowed to play outside even in the day-light hours and were escorted everywhere by anxious adults. To make themselves feel better the people spend their money on things that diverted and amused them. There was always something they thought they must have to make themselves happy. But when they had bought the object of their desire they found to their profound disappointment that the object was no longer desirable, and that far from making them happy, they felt nothing but remorse and the sadness of loss...” (*Queen Camilla*, 2006: 11).

A culture of complaint

“At its noblest, complaint – as a directed expression of refusal or inability to accept that things are not as they ought to be – lies at the heart of all campaigns to create a better, more just world. At its worst complaint is manifest in a grievance culture which undermines ethics and replaces it with a legislative set of attitudes which undermine responsibility, freedom and a proper sense of life’s contingencies” (Baggini, Complaint, 2008: 127).



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What are the main sources of low morale in HEIs?

Students

Are students primarily:

- **consumers;**
- **members;**
- **co-creators; or**
- **“soft citizens”?**

Unhappy students (and their families)

- **Student “satisfaction”**
- **Value for money**
- **“Truth in advertising”**
- **“Extremism on campus”**
- **Academic “appeals”**
- **“Special needs”**

Staff

Are members of staff primarily:

- **employees;**
- **co-creators; or**
- **guardians?**

Unhappy staff

- **Legal “entitlement”**
- **Occupational health**
- **Career prospects, pay and pensions**
- **Performance management**
- **Bullying, harassment and grievances**
- **Work-life balance**
- **“academic populism” (Furedi)**



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A tale of two surveys

'100 voices' (2007)

- * **“This is the most exciting time in HE that I have known in 10 years in the profession” (14 -Russell Group PVC).**
- * **“I am frustratingly satisfied with my role over the past 10 years” (54 - Russell Group Assistant Registrar).**
- * **Despite universities achieving overall excellent teaching and research results over the past decade they are in general pretty unhappy places” (60 - “new” university Assistant Dean).**

The '100 voices'

Roles (%)

Heads of institutions (3)
Deputies or PVCs (13)
Senior administrators (21)
Other administrators (24)
HE "experts" (20)
HE "agencies" (9)
Professional bodies (inc. unions) (5)
Academics under 40 (5)
Student leader (1)

Characteristics (%)

Male (58)
Female (42)

"Academic" (46)
"Support" (54)

1-10 years service (22)
11-20 (43)
21-30 (22)
31-40 (14)

'100 voices:' responses (1)

The UK system is improving:

- in teaching - 57% (9% strongly)
- in research - 61 (16)
- in services to business - 63 (11)
- in service to society - 50 (11)

My own institution is improving:

- in teaching - 57 (14)
- in research - 48 (29)
- in services to business - 53 (18)
- in service to society - 53 (13)

‘100 voices:’ responses (2)

- **Student motivation has declined in the last 10 years - 27 (2)**
- **Student performance has improved in the past 10 years - 33 (2) [40 unsure or unchanged]**
- **Institutions “well-managed on the whole” - 58 (6)**
- **The sector is still significant - 64 (23)**
- **Increase proportion of private funding - yes 40, no 51**
- **Public confidence in HE has declined over the past 10 years - yes 33, no 34 [32 undecided]**
- **UK HE “winning a global race” - yes 22, no 25 [44 undecided]**

“Higher education and human good” (McNay and Bone 2007)

300+ responses - open invitation

(% agreeing)

- **“emphasis in universities more on systems than people” - 85**
- **“fear of sanctions against those who speak truth to power” - 79**
- **“pressure from PIs and formula funding has led to leniency” - 75**
- **“research integrity has been compromised” - 70**
- **HE has “lost its role as conscience and critic of society” - 72**



Academic membership: the “deal”

Honesty (inc. scientific procedure)

Reciprocity

Manners

Self-motivation

Discipline

Respect for the environment

Collective agreement



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“Academic populism” vs. “new managerialism”

The question of civility

Being a dean in an arts faculty is very tough. Why? Because colleagues in the social sciences and humanities have been trained to be hyper-critical. Their disciplinary expertise provides them with a toolbox of devices to dissect and unravel the implementation of the best-intended strategic initiatives. They increasingly exercise this talent in extraordinarily difficult funding environments.... They operate in an environment in which a quickly written email may generate detailed semiotic analysis and imputation of ill intent.

In the academic environment, very clever people may turn their very clever minds to negative ends. We can understand and rationalise this. It reflects in some ways colleagues' passionate commitment to their discipline, to their scholarship and their intellectual autonomy. It reflects the influence of the challenging, under-resourced environment in which we work.

But it also may reflect an unwillingness to exercise what John Paul Lederach calls the moral imagination, the ability to empathise, to build peace, in this case with those who do their best to lead. (Sharon Bell, "The Australian" 12 September 2007)

The question of civility (2)

- **“bullying does not occur exclusively in formal hierarchical relationships between managers and their line reports, although this is the most commonly-observed relationship...bullying is also reported as occurring between peers, subordinates, line managers and external customers or clients” (CMI, 2008, *Bullying at Work 2008: the experience of managers*. 3.6).**
- **Sims, D. (2005) “You Bastard: a narrative exploration of the experience of indignation within organisations.” *Organization Studies* 26 (11), 1625-1640.**
- **Twale, D.J., and De Luca, B.M. (2008) *Faculty Incivility: the rise of the academic bully culture and what to do about it*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.**

Unhappy “stakeholders”

Who owns the university?

- **Politicians**
- **Employers**
- **Neighbours**
- **The media**
- **“Partners” and “clients”**
- **The HE “gangs”**
- **The “green ink file”**

Managing unhappiness?

The science of “happiness”

- **Economics (Layard)**
- **Positive psychology (Ben-Shahar)**
- **Cultural nostalgia (Schoch)**

Or -

Reflective pragmatism

- **Emotional intelligence**
- **Strategic “humbition” (Kaufmann)**
- **Self-knowledge**
- **A “grown-up” culture**



"We get it, Tom—you're management now."

“Work-life balance” or “self-care”

[Work-life balance] “is based on three flawed assumptions: life is good, work is bad, and they are divisible” (Richard Reeves and John Knell, *The 80 Minute MBA*, Headline Publishers, 2009: 81)

“We often lead a split role; we own all of our skills in the role of therapist but forbid ourselves to use them in the role of employee” (Gerhard Wilke, *AUCC Journal*, 2000, 4)

The duty of self-care

- **The zone of self-management**
- **Lines in the sand**
- **Officers of last resort**
- **Families and tribes**
- **“Third-space professionals” (Celia Whitchurch)**



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How do you encourage “self-care”?

Discussion: “the Quantum of Happiness”?

What is the smallest amount of happiness a university needs to be comfortable - but not too comfortable?

David Watson, *The Question of Morale: managing happiness and unhappiness in university life*, Open University Press, 2009