

2008 Oxford Leadership Prize

What aspects of leadership in the 21st Century can contribute most towards a global ambition of ‘improving health and saving lives’?

Essay Submission:

***Brain drain, a wicked problem, a development problem:
that’s enough analysis, it’s time for leadership.***

by

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Leadership in the 21st century requires bravery to face wicked problems. In particular, those “wicked problems” (Rittel and Weber 1973) that are preventing us from effectively pursuing our global ambition of ‘improving health and saving lives’. One such example, the ‘brain drain’ of science, engineering, health and medical workers from developing to developed countries. When the Malawi health system is on the brink of collapse because of the loss of qualified health workers to the UK (Elliot 2005), addressing brain drain is an issue directly related to improving health and saving lives.

In this essay I present a personal reflection of my intellectual struggle to make sense of the implications for leadership when facing a “wicked problem” (Rittel and Weber 193). This reflection is necessary as I believe the complexity of problems and environment of the 21st Century will see an increase in the number of wicked problems which will have significant implications for leaders in all areas of society. Wicked problems are more than just bad or devious problems, wicked problems tend to be characterized by a circularity, contradictory certitudes (people holding fundamentally different perspectives on how the world is) and often the definition of the solution in many ways defines the problem (Rayner 2006). I take the opportunity of this essay competition to go beyond my recent work (Logue 2008) and to highlight the nature of wicked problems, presenting brain drain as a case in point, and to explore the implications for leadership. The foremost implication, I believe, will be bravery from leaders to reconceptualise and accept issues as ‘wicked problems’, and build consensus around this notion. This will include but need more than inspiration, charisma, vision and the skills and principles outlined by previous essay winners (for

example Patriokva 2007; Gortora 2005). It will require, as noted (yet underexplored) by last year's essay winner, a tolerance for ambiguity (Jurvale 2007) and arguably an ability to exploit ambiguity, uncertainty and deal with uncomfortable knowledge (Rayner 2006). In regards to the brain drain, I'm tired of the circularity of the debate; I think 2264 articles over a forty year period is enough analysis (Logue 2008). Theoretically and empirically it makes sense to reconceptualise this issue as a wicked problem. Yet will leaders be able to embrace this concept? And what aspects of leadership will this require? Firstly, I will outline the theoretical underpinnings and thinking behind 'wicked problems'. I will then present how I see brain drain as a wicked problem. I will then personally reflect on what I think this means for leadership in the 21st century when faced with wicked problems, especially those that are tied to our global ambition of improving health and saving lives. It's time for (brave) leadership.

What is a wicked problem?

My first reaction upon hearing the concept of 'wicked problems' from my supervisor was outright scepticism. Coming from a background of development and foreign aid projects, I thought it sounded like the easy way out, and appeared to be labelling things as 'too hard'. It was not until I had the results of my MSc fieldwork and realised the complexity (and mess) surrounding brain drain as a policy issue, and all the conflicting beliefs, that I began to revisit and explore the notion of wicked problems and a way of making sense of my findings.

Wicked problems (Rittel and Weber 1973) comes out of discussions on policies relating to urban planning, and the difficulties and ultimate futility of searching for scientific bases of social problems. The difficulty and wickedness of some social problems arises from the collision of problem definition, goal formation and equity issues (Rittel and Weber 1973:156). This is more than other policy issues and problems where initial conflicts are eventually negotiated and an agreement is achieved. For wicked problems, there is a lack of consensus on the desired outcomes, the nature of the problem, and questions surrounding what is the 'right' and fair thing to do. The notion of 'wicked' problems was recently taken up in the corporate world, and extolled by Camillus (2008) in the Harvard Business Review. In presenting corporate strategy formation as a wicked problem, Camillus provides a concise review of Rittel and Weber's 10 characteristics of wicked problems, noting that wicked problems can have some or all of the characteristics. Firstly, there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem. Wicked problems have no stopping rule, it is unclear when a solution is reached, and so the search for a solution never stops. Solutions to wicked problems are a matter of judgement of whether they are good or bad, rather than true or false. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a solution to a wicked problem, the solutions may generate unexpected consequences over time. Solutions to wicked problems have consequences that cannot be undone, and there is not a set of exhaustively describable solutions available. Wicked problems are essentially unique and have the added difficulty of being considered as symptoms of other problems. They "involve many stakeholders, who will have different ideas about what the problem really is and what its causes are" (Camillus 2008:101). Finally, that problem solvers dealing with wicked issues are held liable for the

consequences of any actions they take, “because those actions will have such a large impact and are hard to justify” (Camillus 2008:101).

These characteristics are not a set of rigid criteria, but rather they provide insights for policy makers in determining whether a problem is wicked. They highlight that it is the social complexity, as well as the technical difficulties, that make wicked problems so difficult to manage (Camillus 2008). Let’s pause here, as my sense is that Rittel and Weber’s original intent was that wicked problems can’t be managed, yet since Camillus’ article was published in Harvard Business review, it naturally expresses a tone that solutions are available to these problems. My view is that there are no solutions to wicked problems, only a brave leader to recognise and to use this recognition as a platform for moving forward, and in some cases this may assist us in improving health and saving lives.

Brain Drain as a Wicked Problem

For many years, the migration of scientists, engineers and medical personnel has been constantly tied to the broader goals of improving health and saving lives in developed and developing countries (for example see United Nations World Summit, 2005; UN Millennium Project Report, 2005; UNCTAD, 2005; InterAcademy Council, 2004).

The mobility of scientists and the concern over ‘brain drain’ is not new. Even in the Ptolemaic dynasty, the first king set out to shift the centre of learning from Athens to Alexandria, using state power and influence to secure and attract the scholars themselves (U.S. House of Representatives 1977:999). In drawing upon my MSc (Management Research) at Oxford University, I present the brain drain as a wicked problem to better understand this concept. During my research I analysed the

historical policy discourse and conducted interviews with current policy makers; I found the same debate being played out for several decades. After all this time, there is still much policy discourse and debate focused on defining and attempting to solve this, seemingly ancient, problem. Granted it is complex and at an intersection of social, economic and political tensions. But why has progress, over such a time span, been so limited? Why are we continuing to have the same conversations?

Across my employment experiences in government and foreign aid, I had constantly heard of this brain drain issue. Or was it brain gain? Or was it brain circulation? We needed people on the ground. But it was also good when they sent money home. The actual problem seemed to depend upon to whom you were talking. I was puzzled by these and many other reports and conversations in the field. My historical review revealed more than 2264 (Logue 2008) articles had been published on brain drain over a forty year period. Across the time period 1990 to 2007, more and more actors were drawn into the debate (ministries of science, health, migration, foreign affairs, education; and more international organizations, and even more professional academies for science, engineering, to groups representing specific scientific disciplines etc). The emphasis on who is affected and who is responsible also shifted throughout time; it is now developing and developed countries (with skills shortages and demographic changes) that are affected by the “brain drain” and mobility of their highly skilled workers. I could see from this historical overview some of the characteristics of brain drain that make it a likely case for a wicked problem – an inherent ambiguity in the definition of the problem (if it was a problem at all), the increasing number of stakeholders involved that continue to struggle to define the problem, a continual searching for solutions, brain drain as symptomatic of other

development problems, and the many ideas about the nature of the problem and its causes.

With the advice from my supervisor, I assessed my interview results by using a typology from Neo-Durkheimian cultural theory (Douglas 1978, Thompson et al 1990). The typology (Douglas 1978; Schwarz and Thompson 1990) comprises of four ways of seeing the world and classifies perspectives on an issue as either hierarchical, egalitarian, individualist or fatalist. I embraced the use of the typology immediately. It was clear from the outset that this typology would enable me to frame the competing conceptions of scientific mobility that I found across the field, and connected to Rittel and Weber's (1973) notion of wicked problems.

In brief, according to the hierarchical viewpoint in the typology, the world is controllable and experts are needed to set limits to regulate the environment. The egalitarian viewpoint is situated in a desire to see all actors equal; whereas the individualism viewpoint sees actors as self-seeking and the environment as resilient and able to recover from exploitation (Verweij and Thompson 2006). The fatalistic position is often a passive voice and consequently may not be heard in all policy contexts. In compiling the details of the analysis of the presentations and also the interviews, I found evidence of all four viewpoints existing in the current debate. In this essay I present a tasting of the findings according to the four ways of seeing the world identified in cultural theory:

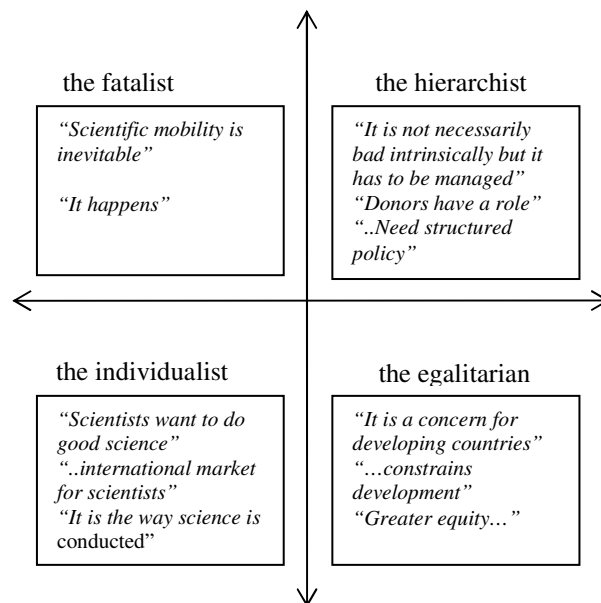


Figure 1. Cultural Theory's Typology applied to the issue of 'brain drain' and scientific mobility.

Whilst this is a simplified presentation of the typology, it is useful in revealing that scientific mobility and 'brain drain' is clearly an issue marked by strong and historically embedded competing conceptions. There is a collision of goal formation (the desired outcome), problem definition (the right thing to do) and equity issues – supporting the notion that brain drain is a wicked problem.

What do wicked problems mean for leadership in the 21st Century?

In this essay I have presented and reflected upon the idea of wicked problems, demonstrating the nature of wicked problems by examining the complex issue of 'brain drain'. I would now like to move beyond my research and consider: so what does this mean for leadership? What leader or policy maker is going to stand up and say to the Malawi people “this is a wicked problem”? Well, a brave leader. What I am concerned about, on reflecting on the implications of using the idea of wicked

problems in development in particular, is that it is used as an easy way out for leaders and policy makers. I do not want this concept used as an excuse, enabling leaders and policy makers to say ‘what’s the point of taking action if it is a wicked problem’? I present the idea as a way of reconceptualising policy issues, particularly an issue like brain drain, and envisage this can provide a platform to move forward.

Reconceptualising brain drain as a wicked problem will hopefully provide the means and space for exciting, varied and brave policy responses. After my year of fieldwork on the “brain drain”, I strongly believe it is in fact irresponsible to spend more time trying to define the issue, gathering statistics, devising single policy solutions.

Leaders need to explicitly recognise that there is no one definition of the problem and so no single policy response available. For example, for the brain drain, I believe a suite of simultaneous and conflicting policy responses is the answer. This is where leaders need to be brave. For example, responses at a national level may include:

- programs to encourage priority workers to stay;
- programs to encourage workers to study and work abroad;
- programs to build linkages and networks with expatriates;
- infrastructure to make it easy to send remittances home;
- programs to address the quality of hospitals, education facilities, electricity supply, water supply and other living conditions (problems of which brain drain is a symptom) i.e. not directly addressing brain drain per se.

This list is not exhaustive, but it is conflicting for policy makers for whom I spoke with during my fieldwork; they are used to having one position, one response. In addition, the traditional idea of evidenced-based policy making may need to be challenged, as in the case of the brain drain, evidence-based policy making will not

work, as the evidence available currently can support any of the viewpoints or conceptions of the issue. In this issue, all competing conceptions are also highly visible and vocal in this debate. In addition, attempting to measure the impact of the responses may also be futile. We may need to consider what other ways we could learn about the impact of the policies and keep in mind that these results may be conflated due to the wickedness of the issue. Perhaps the terminology needs to be changed, as the term 'wicked' carries much connotation. But the underlying premise is the same – leaders must begin to tolerate the ambiguity, uncertainty and messiness surrounding this issue.

Recently, scholars of cultural theory have begun to extend the cultural theory typology presented and talk of “wicked problems” in need of “clumsy solutions” (Verweij and Thompson 2006). Clumsy solutions (Shapiro, 1988) are policies that are generated in a setting where there is a mix of institutional forms, a recognition that there is not one single definition of, or solution to, the problem, and that each viewpoint (hierarchical, egalitarian, individualism, fatalism) needs active consideration and involvement in the proposed (and consequently “inelegant” or “clumsy”) solution. However, I am unconvinced that clumsy solutions are enough, as many of my interviewees often remarked that that is how they see policy responses coming together today. I believe leaders who can tolerate and embrace ambiguity and uncertainty are what are required; to work with uncomfortable knowledge and to bravely reconceptualise sensitive problems as wicked problems.

It will be uncomfortable. I felt this when I presented the results of my study at the Conference for African University Vice Chancellors and University Presidents in

Libya in October 2007. My fellow presenter in my session was one of two remaining nurses in her village. As a leader, what do you say to her? I am not naive in believing this will be easy. But if you have in your mind the wickedness of this issue, it allows you to look at options that may help here at the local level, which may be different to how you address the issue at a national level. You may be able to take direct action immediately because you know that there is no sense in waiting for another report to support your actions (because another one could be prepared to counter your actions), if it has been accepted as a wicked problem. It will be challenging and daring to build consensus about this new way of thinking, not just on this matter, but many others which may also be wicked problems. Leadership in the 21st century will increasingly require bravery to face wicked problems.

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