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Delivering the People's Plan for Nature: An Agenda for UK Business Schools

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Developmental Paper

Abstract:

This paper explores the role of Business Schools in delivering on the People's Plan for Nature: an innovative, inclusive and representative plan to protect and restore nature in the UK (People's Plan, 2023). As educational institutions and collaborators in the world of business, Business Schools are well positioned to actively deliver on some key aspects of the plan. The paper starts by locating the People's Plan within the current interconnections of Business and Nature, particularly as these are theorised and practiced within UK Business Schools. It then identifies the novelty of the plan, which consists less in its findings and recommendations than in the deliberative process through which it was constituted. On this basis I argue for the significance of the People's Plan for Business Schools for delivering meaningful societal and environmental impact, as well as the under-emphasised role of Business actors in contributing to deepening wider democratic culture (Honneth, 2023).

The paper then makes two contributions regarding the delivery of the People's Plan within the context of UK Business Schools. Firstly, it thematically analyses the twenty-six calls for action and identifies six key actions for Business Schools across their various identities as knowledge-producers, as educators, as employers and care-providers, as community members and as land stewards. Secondly, it elaborates key lessons which can be derived *from the process which delivered the People's Plan*. I argue the process was characterised by practices of democratic caring and deliberative education which are also valuable tools for business schools in their own education and management processes. These have particular relevance to driving a revaluation of, and reconnection with, nature. The paper will conclude with an agenda for Business Schools in delivering the People's Plan for Nature.

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Paper Development: Since the paper was accepted, I have responded to reviewer feedback, integrating helpful comments into the structure of the paper. This includes comparing the plans (specifically through articulating the particular significance of this plan) and the potential for including ethnographic reflections. I have also begun to develop an initial analysis for the two key sections of the paper to give a clearer indication of where I plan to take the paper. I have attempted to present an outline of the whole paper, but clearly all sections will be expanded and developed in the final version.

The nature and biodiversity crisis is a global issue which needs to be addressed at the international, national and local levels. This paper focuses on the case of the UK, which is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world, placed in 189th place globally by the Biodiversity Intactness Index (Purvis and de Palma, 2021). According to government figures, large areas of habitats have been lost, with 99.7% of fens, 97% of species-rich grasslands, 80% of lowland heathlands, up to 70% of ancient woodlands, and up to 85% of saltmarshes destroyed or degraded. This has had a severe impact on species, with a quarter of mammals in England and almost a fifth of UK plants threatened with extinction, whilst a third of British pollinator species have declined (Environment Agency, 2022). Studies also show that UK citizens are amongst the most disconnected from nature in the world (Richardson et al, 2022). This is part of a global, urgent nature crisis which threatens the complex ecosystems that provide the food, water, and climate regulation on which the survival of our societies depends. This clearly also presents an under-recognised crisis for Business, with the World Economic Forum estimating that over half of the world's \$44 trillion GDP is threatened by nature loss (WEF, 2020).

Responding to the need for urgent action across the whole of the UK, the People's Plan for Nature (PPfN) was launched in autumn 2022 as a collaborative venture hosted by the WWF, National Trust and the RSPB (People's Plan, 2023). To draw up the plan, a People's Assembly was hosted over four weekends from November 2022 to February 2023, made up initially of 107 citizens recruited through a process of sortition. This means they were representative of the UK population across a wide range of demographic characteristics, including their level of prior interest in nature. Over the first three weekends (one in-person, two online), participants reviewed a wide range of evidence presented by experts, with the content designed under the oversight of an independent advisory board. Supported by expert facilitation, participants deliberated on each presentation of evidence, with key conclusions from each discussion collated. These were used as the basis for 26 calls for action, which were drafted, refined and prioritised during the intense deliberations of the final weekend. Calls for action are directed towards all key societal actors (governments at all levels; business; charities and NGOs; and individuals and communities) alongside a vision for a UK in 2050 where nature has been protected and restored.

Whilst this is far from the only plans for nature protection and restoration in the UK, there are reasons to stress the particularity and significance of the People's Plan. By selecting a representative sample of the UK population, who have reviewed and rationally deliberated on the evidence, the calls for action which emerge have a stronger claim to inclusivity and representativeness of views of the citizenry, rather than a particular interest group. 'Mini publics' like the People's Assembly have been advocated as a way of increasing the quality of democratic decision making (e.g. Fishkin, 2018), and are frequently endorsed by environmental and ecological democratic theorists (e.g. Dryzek and Pickering, 2019; Niemeyer, 2013). A number of People's Assembly's on Climate Change have been held at national and local levels, including in the UK (Climate Assembly UK, 2020) whilst a citizens' assembly specifically on biodiversity loss was held in Ireland in early 2022 (Tionól Saoránach/Citizens' Assembly, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are interesting innovations in the case of PPfN. Notably, the event sponsor is not a governmental body, but an inter-organisational collaboration of three large environmental charities, advised by an independent expert board. There is no political body to oversee implementation: rather, the three NGOs and other partners have committed to using their resources to realise the plan which remains 'owned' only by the assembly itself. The

assembly therefore reflects the increased blurring of public, private and civil society realms, described for example in theories of political CSR (Frynas and Stephens, 2015), which have shown how private business increasingly operates in spaces where globalisation and neoliberal regulation have resulted in a lack of governance. Whilst NGOs have always operated in politicised space, we are perhaps nonetheless seeing charities forging a new space for innovative democratic experimentation. It also reflects the growing recognition of the importance of partnership and collaboration for sustainability (Van Huijstee, 2007), with calls for action emerging from the PPfN also directed at all key societal actor, often working in multistakeholder partnerships.

Although Business Schools are not specifically named in the plan, this paper suggests that they represent one important nodal point in the realisation of the plan. They teach and research with/for current Business and educate the future business leaders who will be required to undertake this action. They are a significant player with Higher Education and universities more broadly; and work in partnership with a very wide range of stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors. This means they are well positioned to undertake the interdisciplinary and inter-institutional research and knowledge exchange activities needed to support such large shifts in Business. At the same time, they also function as employers, community members and land stewards. Business Schools are therefore well positioned to actively deliver on a number of key aspects of the plan in all of their different capacities. Indeed, perhaps somewhat belatedly, we have recently seen Business Schools enthusiastically debate and, perhaps to a lesser extent, take up challenges around climate change (e.g. AACSB, 2020; Colombo, 2022) but there is as yet significantly less noise around the related but nevertheless distinct nature crisis and biodiversity loss.

This paper will develop an agenda for Business School derived from the People's Plan for Nature. The paper starts by locating the People's Plan within the current interconnections of Business and Nature, particularly as these are theorised and practiced within UK Business Schools. It then identifies the novelty of the plan, which consists less in its findings and recommendations than in the deliberative process through which it was constituted. The paper then makes two main contributions regarding the delivery of the People's Plan within the context of UK Business Schools. Firstly, it thematically analyses the twenty-six calls for action and identifies six key action for Business Schools across their various identities as knowledge-producers, as educators, as employers, as community members and partners; and as land stewards. Secondly, it elaborates key lessons which can be derived *from the process which delivered the People's Plan*. I argue the process was characterised by practices of democratic caring and deliberative education which are also valuable tools for business schools in their own education and management processes. These have particular relevance to driving a revaluation of, and reconnection with, nature. The paper will conclude with an agenda for Business Schools in delivering the People's Plan for Nature.

Part 1: Locating the People's Plan: Nature, Business and the Business School

In this section, I will lay out a necessarily selective account of the current state of play in relation to the understanding and integration of nature in Business School knowledge and practice.

Part 2: Reflections on the People's Assembly for Nature

As an independent academic observer at the People's Assembly, in this section, I present a short overview of the process and what is particular about *this* plan. I focus on the particular process through which it came into being and its claims for being highly inclusive and representative. As the final plan notes:

If the wider public had the opportunity to undertake a similar process of learning and deliberation, could access a curated and diverse range of lived experiences to draw on, and were facilitated to explore evidence from multiple experts, their conclusions would be likely to be similar to those of the Assembly (People's Plan for Nature, 2023, p. 16)

Interestingly, analysis of participant evaluations taken during the Assembly shows a significant change in participants views on the role and responsibility of business. The number of respondents who thought business can make a large difference rose from 32% in week 1 to 66% by week 4. This was by far the biggest increase for any of the key actors (national, devolved and local government, charities and NGOs, communities and individuals. (p. 76) Similarly, the number of respondents who thought business has a large responsibility increased from 42% to 66% in the same period, an increase of 24% which was again the biggest increase of any actor (p. 76). I will suggest that contributing seriously to delivering the People's Plan will enhance the societal and environmental impact of Business Schools, as well as deepening wider democratic culture (Honneth, 2023).

This section will be supplemented by a short reflection of my experiences and key observations. This is not a detailed ethnography as this was an observation rather than part of a research project with full ethical approval; and I did not have access to group discussions.

Part 3: A Business School Response

The Plan presents 26 high-level calls for action, developed by the assembly at the final weekend, with overarching actions for key actors identified. Whilst it would be possible to evaluate these calls – and, for example, explore whether the actions go far enough to fulfil participant visions for 2050 – for the purposes of this paper, I purposefully stay within the parameters of the calls agreed by the citizens, rather than imposing an agenda which goes beyond them. I therefore ask: how can UK Business School support the delivery of these 26 calls for action across the multiple roles they play: as knowledge-producers, as educators, as employers, as community members and partners; and as land stewards.

An initial analysis¹ suggests six key contributions:

(1) A stronger focus on developing an alternative food system

Notably, the strongest emphasis for Business action throughout the Plan is on making profound changes to practices across the food sector. To contribute towards this work, it is crucial to include a stronger focus on researching and teaching the impacts of, and alternatives to, our current food system: Whilst this is particularly significant for institutions and programmes which focus directly on agriculture, food retail and so on, curriculum change is required to

¹ Please note there will be a more detailed mapping presented for the final paper.

educate all students in their multiple roles as citizens, consumers and future leaders of other sectors. Business Schools can also mobilise their considerable resources to work actively alongside multiple partners within the School's local area to contribute to the practical development of fair and accessible locally-produced food systems.

(2) Support the development of easily accessible evidence-base for integrating nature into business decision-making

Besides normalising explicit nature representatives in decision making processes (as per the call for a Director of Nature on all the boards of all companies), Business Schools have a role in developing a clear, easily accessible research evidence-base and best practice for business and other key actors to use. This is an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional exercise, working alongside other academic colleagues and stakeholders, and needs to be sustained beyond the short-term funding lifecycle of many projects.

(3) Changes to knowledge norms within research and teaching

Future Business leaders must be equipped with a clear understanding of the challenges nature face and with the ability to make informed, evidence-based nature-positive decisions (which together we may call 'nature literacy'). Since we cannot wait for the new generation of business leaders to emerge, Business Schools also need to work with current leaders to begin making these changes now, through executive education, knowledge exchange programmes and other mechanisms. At the same time, these changes must feed into the research being funded, published, and cited.

On the one hand, new knowledge must be developed and shared: for example, tools for revaluing nature or alternative nature-friendly business practices. Yet crucially, to change the way business is done, this also involves actively *critiquing and/or removing* business-as-usual material from curricula which encourage or reinforce practices harmful to nature, or which work to actively undermine other key actions foreseen to restore nature. For example, Business Schools can consider whether their knowledge production and dissemination is in tension with accepting legislation to regulate business activities; making business for responsible for externalities; the implementation of 'polluter pays' principles; and thinking beyond sustainability win-wins and accepting certain costs. Of course, there are clearly important issues of academic freedom involved here, and any reviews should be undertaken by academics in collaboration with colleagues. Yet ultimately, all curricula actively evolve and none is neutral: all make and justify choices around inclusion, exclusion and emphasis.

(4) Business Schools as 'nature educators' for/with all constituents

Business Schools are also a forum where other nature-positive ideas can be shared and debated, even in relation to areas less directly linked to business. For example, they may contribute to the foreseen national conversation about diet or re-valuation of water. Such 'educational' activities can be very broadly understood. For example, Business Schools can facilitate, encourage and incentivise activities which reconnect their many constituents (staff, students, partners, communities) with nature, for example by actively seeking to bring them into conversations about locally-managed green spaces or giving employees time to volunteer in green spaces.

(5) Business Schools as nature advocates across their collaborations

Business Schools are already involved in myriad collaboration networks. They can think about the ways in which they mobilise their influence within existing networks and build new ones, in order to promote nature-positive policy more widely. One aspect of this is the integration of

nature into external outreach with business, organisations and communities, as examples of an ‘exploding university’ (Wadham et al, 2022).

(6) Business Schools as nature-positive landowners

Business Schools, and the universities within which most are located, are landowners or stewards, and their decisions have real, and potentially harmful impacts on local nature. In this capacity, Business Schools should re-evaluate how they manage their land (e.g. low mow); consider ‘retrofitting’ for nature (e.g. green walls) and carefully manage (and where possible avoid) further development, ensuring they implement or exceed recommendations on biodiversity in any development.

Part 4: Lessons from Delivering the Plan

Alongside the lessons which can be learnt from the specific output of the Assembly, this paper also suggests that Business Schools can draw lessons *from the process which delivered the People’s Plan*. This is important, since the process produced other desirable outcomes – evident both in participant evaluations and from observations – which are relevant for thinking about how Business Schools might contribute to protecting and restoring nature going forwards. Care should be taken with the evaluation results: a large but not complete number of participants were completed the survey at each stage, so results do not present the views of all assembly members. Meanwhile, a longitudinal study will provide better insights into how long lasting these impacts were. Finally, this is only the results of one particular assembly and of course a number of other factors may be involved in the results. Nevertheless, the initial results which are currently available still tentatively suggest quite impressive outcomes.

This paper suggests three areas which are of relevance for nature-friendly teaching and management processes within Business Schools: that is to say, both how we teach students and other stakeholders, and how we manage schools and develop and enact effective nature-friendly strategies.

1. An increase in knowledge and democratic skills

The deliberative model of the assembly was a model for delivering nature education. This was clearly recognised by participants as demonstrated by the evaluation statistics. Between weekend 1 and weekend 4, the number of participants reporting that they had a lot or quite a lot of knowledge about nature rose from 34% to 67%. (People’s Plan, 2023, p. 72) At the same time, the number agreeing or strongly agreeing that their country has lost more nature and wildlife than almost every other country increased 30% to 67% (ibid., p. 73). As an observer, it was notable that by the final weekend, participants – who came from all educational backgrounds – were able to cope with large amounts of complex information, and their collaborative outputs were consistently thoughtful and high quality.

Importantly, this new knowledge was not ‘deposited’ in students along the lines of the ‘banking’ model of education criticised by Freire (2017). A number of short presentations from experts were followed by considerably longer periods to deliberate on what they had heard in smaller groups. Not only did this mean that the knowledge gained was critically and collaboratively processed, it also meant that the increase in knowledge was complemented with the development of other deliberation capacities. On the one hand, more than half of participants agreed or strongly agreed across all four weekends that their initial views changed

after listening to others, with only around 10% disagreeing. (People's Plan, 2023, p. 61) On the other, throughout all four weekends, participants reported being comfortable expressing their views. However, the number who *strongly* agreed that they felt comfortable increased from 50% in weekend 1 to 81% in weekend 4. (p. 60) From an observer perspective, and from conversations with facilitators and participants at the final session, it became clearer that participants had 'learnt to disagree' with each other, and this could have contributed to these results. Further research would need to assess the extent to which such capacity building was taken out into other aspects of participants' lives. Nevertheless, these are tentative indications that similar educational models have the potential to deliver effective education and democratic citizenship skills.

There would, of course, be difficulties in replication, particularly at scale. For example, a crucial role was played by facilitators in effectively enabling participants to navigate the deliberation process. It is notable that there were extremely strong evaluations of the effectiveness of facilitators, with over 60% consistently rating them excellent, and no one rating lower than average/neutral (p. 64). Yet whilst a lack of trained, expert facilitators is a barrier to replication, this observation also emphasises the currently under-valued skill of facilitation as a key area of training for all students within management education.

2. Valuing the process

There was evidence of considerable commitment to the People's Assembly on the part of participants. There was a very low attrition rate with 107 starting and 103 finishing across a long and demanding process (People's Plan, 2023, p.17). The commitment to the process was notable as an observer during the in-person weekends, where participants consistently returned promptly from breaks, engaged at tables in discussions, and created tangible energy in the room. particularly at the end of weekend 1 and during points of weekend 4. The number of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed the assembly was 98% and the number who were proud of taking part with 95% (Ibid., p. 65). Perhaps most interestingly, as we noted at the time, the third most popular call was: 'Greater government accountability through a *permanent Assembly for Nature* made up of NGOs, industry and public expertise.' (51) (emphasis added). This points towards the value which participants placed on their experience of the Citizen's Assembly and a possible role for a similar body.

3. Increasing care through democratic deliberation

It is notable that through the deliberative process of a representative sample of citizens, many of whom had no particular prior interest in nature, emerged what may be considered a *care for nature*. This is evident in the agreed calls to action, which are significantly more ambitious than government plans, and the moving visions produced for 2050 of a UK where nature is protected and restored. There are also indications that the assembly process might drive positive future action for nature. 84% of participants reported that they would be interested in continuing to explore ways to protect and restore nature at home, work or local community (p. 68) though further research would need to confirm whether these intentions were realised.

The final version of this paper will therefore develop a sustained case that the deliberative process can be seen as a practice of 'democratic caring' (Tronto, 2013) which can contribute towards revaluing and reconnecting with nature. Observations suggested that sustained

practices of care for the process and the participants on the part of the organisers fostered further practices of care: in particular, care for and commitment to the work of the assembly, including the need for constructive disagreement, as well as care for those not in the room: diverse UK and global communities, future generations and nature itself. This suggests that practices of democratic caring and deliberative education could be valuable tools for the revaluation of, and reconnection with, nature, not just within strictly-defined political spheres but across increasingly blurred realms, including at the organisational level, and within inter-organisational collaborations.

Conclusion

The paper concludes with an agenda for Business Schools to deliver on the People's Plan for Nature. The agenda draws together the analysis of the role of Business Schools in delivering the calls for action, and the analysis of the process itself: advocating practices of democratic caring and deliberative education as tools for revaluing and reconnecting with nature.

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