



Survival of the fittest

THE NEW WORLD ORDER IN EDUCATION

The education market has never been more buoyant. But that also means more change and new challenges to traditional business schools. If they do not respond, says **Richard Taylor**, they may face extinction

The world is changing at a faster rate than we have ever witnessed. The education sector is benefiting from increasing advances in technology and the barriers to entry are lower than ever, as more people look to cash in on this growing global market.

We are not yet at the tipping point, where the old will meet the new, and I don't believe that traditional institutional education providers are fully aware of the *tsunami* of competition that's about to hit them. I am not sure whether it is a case of the old brigade burying their heads in the sand or whether they simply do not know how to become again relevant to their students.

Either way, unless business schools embrace change, they will face the risk of losing relevance and slowly dying. We have identified four key challenges that may stop the onslaught and allow business schools to grow and prosper:



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Key challenge 1: Democratising the world of learning

The world of learning is being democratised at an astonishingly rapid rate, which is driven in large part by the fact that technology is opening new doors to anyone and everyone across the planet. "EdTech" is rapidly evolving and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are one of the first new products making a small dent in the sector.

MOOCs from some of the world's leading education providers (Harvard, MIT, Caltech) can now be found online (edX, Coursera and FutureLearn) and point to an exciting new channel of learning.

However, MOOCs are just the first wave of digital learning and though they provide a glimpse of the future, at present they are challenged as a product because they offer no "real-world" commercial value. They are simply not being taken seriously by business: but this is not surprising, given that there is no formal qualification upon completion, they are often free and the completion rates are in single digit percentages.

The "price versus value" equation will no doubt evolve as they become ever more present in our lives. Furthermore, their cultural and economic significance should not be underestimated, as they point to a growing digital education market.

But just what does this mean for business schools?

It means that innovation has to be at the heart of the organisation: traditional schools need to act more like fast and nimble tech start-ups and less like lethargic bureaucracies. It is tough as the old world still rules – but we are fast approaching this tipping point. Those that embrace change and "try, try and try again" will succeed, more often than not by testing new approaches, but also by their sheer determination to do something new and innovative.

Those that do not embrace this democratic world face an uncertain future with an avalanche of new entrants coming to steal their students.

Key challenge 2:

Tailored and bespoke learning

The traditional paradigm of your life being ruled by learning is coming to an end.

Technology is not only helping to democratise learning, it is now at the stage of helping students to fit their studies around their increasingly hectic lives. There is increased potential for bringing more graduates into the market as schools support them with programmes that are tailored to their lifestyles, and to their unique business challenges.

Blended learning is a trend that we shall see evolve further with technology.

However, the impact of face-to-face interaction cannot be underestimated. In time, technology will deliver a more advanced face-to-face learning experience but it will never truly replicate the experience of being in the room with others and co-learning, side-by-side. As humans, we simply connect better when we are face-to-face with each other.

Postgraduate students are more inclined than ever to look at tailored learning to drive their career forward: whether with a masters, MBA or executive education programme. So learning that is tailored to a particular job role or commercial challenge is going to become the norm.

The postgraduate student might no longer be able to afford the learning, which will leave them reliant on the employer to foot the bill. This points to a key opportunity for business schools. We no longer live in a "job for life" world and, as a result, employers are reluctant to train talented people in case they jump ship two or three years down the line.

So business schools need to be adaptable. They need to create unique tailored programmes around companies' and students' needs in order to deliver in the short-term.

Management consultants are already challenging this space of learning and, if successful, it will help to bring the business schools and the business world much closer – thus generating mutual benefits.

Tailored learning is currently in its infancy – which provides a great opportunity for business schools.

It leaves us with two goals for schools to focus on: to build their internal structures, processes and people around their primary customers (students); and to build and deepen their networks with commerce, which will ensure that they remain relevant to both.



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The schools need to do what they can to remove the barriers and just collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. It sounds simple but years of legacy processes and procedures mean that delivering real change is often hard work, so it ends up being easier to do what people have always done before.

Change is culturally hard and as human beings we prefer to maintain the *status quo*. But without change many business schools face the prospect of slipping down the all-important league tables – and into oblivion.

Key challenge 3: The new world order

The education world order is changing in a number of ways, as new entrants vie for space and a tougher international market looks to entice students away from Europe.

More and more countries are investing in their own education infrastructures in a move to stimulate their economies towards more prosperous post-recession times.

The UK has always been regarded as the exemplar for best practice but is now struggling to stay ahead of the game (partly due to a lack of investment) as governments in the US and Asia look to invest in order to build their economies. In fact, US President Barack Obama recently stated that his country needs “to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world”.

Additionally, many management consultancies, membership organisations and education start-ups are looking to challenge the traditional institutions by offering similar products and services in what they see as a lucrative and untapped market. Many of them work closely with their commercial partners and those deep-rooted relationships will make it tougher for traditional business schools that have always been viewed as “old school” theoretical outsiders.

These “new world order” challenges point to the issue of relevance and making sure that the products and services delivered by business schools are relevant to the needs of students – and, more importantly, to business.

The business schools that succeed in the future will be those that deliver a product that best meets the needs of commerce and industry. And they may just win by partnering with the organisations that already have strong relationships with the wider commercial world.

Key challenge 4: Disrupt the norm

My work lets me enjoy contact with a wide variety of business sectors and I now know what works and what doesn't in the world of branding and marketing.

When we first started working in the education sector a decade ago, we were shocked by the similarities that most brands exhibited. We christened it a world of “bland-ing”.

Each institution blends into the next with a bland brand that lacks any meaningful differentiation or imagination. Traditional business schools tend to lack any real differences. From a visual perspective most are either blue or green and have traditional emblems and crests alongside Latin inscriptions.

How does this engage with a tech-savvy young audience that watch *Game of Thrones* and play *Candy Crush* on their iPhones? There is an opportunity in the fact that, if everyone starts to look the same, you only need to act and behave a little differently to stand out – a huge commercial opportunity.

Very few business schools seem to be disrupting the norm and engaging either the students they are looking to recruit or the businesses they are looking to support. Most seem to just follow what they have done for decades and have the philosophy of “if it's not broke we won't fix it”.

Our focus as a business is to help brands stand out by ensuring they are relevant to their audience (how they position their brand) and different to their competitors (how that position is unique to the organisation). If you get both right you stand every chance of succeeding in the future.

But so few are practising what their internal marketing lecturers are no doubt preaching – where others zig we should look to zag, and do it “our way”. Too few just follow the herd into oblivion.

In conclusion, the education market is moving at warp speed, with a host of new entrants coming in to take some of the lucrative market share as it grows globally. It is, in the truest sense of the phrase, “survival of the fittest”.

Those business schools that embrace innovation and technology, along with building products and services that are relevant to their students and the wider business world, stand a good chance of winning. To win big they need a strong brand that stands out from the competition and offers students something uniquely different: a product that relates to their lives and future career ambitions.

As yet, we do not see many embracing the change – but if they wait much longer it might just be too late.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Taylor is an international brand strategy and communications consultant. He founded Brandon Consulting in 2013 and previously had two decades of experience working on international transformation programmes across the government, education, FMCG and retail sectors.