



With business and management education coming under increasing scrutiny, **Julie Davies** and **Toni Hilton** suggest some ways that business schools can be structured to achieve individual excellence

BUILDING BETTER BUSINESS SCHOOLS

The contemporary purpose of a business school is to develop and enhance the individual's and the collective's abilities to innovate. That means not merely creating, inventing, and imagining but also commercialising products and services and contributing to new theoretical knowledge.

More specifically, to achieve positive impact the role of business schools is to create and disseminate knowledge that can be applied to enhance the practice of professional managers, whatever their organisations' purpose, scope, size or location. It is imperative that business schools foster an understanding of the human behaviours that both facilitate and impede the achievement of organisational and social goals.

At the same time, these need to support pressing concerns such as environmental and demographic changes, health, hunger, inequalities, ageing, poverty, geopolitical and technological shifts, and so on.

In this respect, business schools are key integrating actors and anchors within the academic world, the economy, and society more broadly.

Integration implies proactive engagement with collaborators and the designing of business schools that are institutionally and socially embedded while retaining a degree of self-determination.



Business schools are clearly in the reputation business, with a strong focus on brand, journal citations, league tables, and the professional careers of staff and students. How can they make their mark?

Now that is a tall order. It is, therefore, unlikely that any one business school can be all things to all people. A large part of our argument revolves around the need for specialisation. It is by standing apart from the crowd, rather than through delivering to the "common denominator", that we can achieve meaningful impact.

Business schools are clearly in the reputation business, with a strong focus on brand, journal citations, league tables, and the professional careers of staff and students. How can they make their mark?

Despite those who bemoan the unfulfilled promise of the project to professionalise management and the suggestion by Howard Thomas, Dean of Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University, and others that business schools may have reached a "tripping point", there is no denying that we have done well to professionalise ourselves.

This has been achieved through accreditation agencies and national business school bodies. In the context of criticisms about business schools' isolationism in iconic buildings, disciplinary silos, decoupling from wicked interdisciplinary problems in society and being distinguished as "cash cows", we argue for integration and further differentiation.

How do we innovate from within, encouraging experimentation, creativity and risk taking while assuring compliance with quality standards? How do we practise the critical thinking and responsibility that we profess? How do we communicate new forms of legitimacy based on academic entrepreneurship when many faculty members are so focused on journal publications and deans on the tyranny of rankings?

With diverse stakeholders, how do we build a shared sense of purpose and nudge scholars, administrative staff, collaborators, and co-creators (including our students) to a shared sense of purpose while differentiating ourselves from our competitors?

Clarity of purpose and positioning are imperative when seeking to build a distinctive reputation as a leading business school. There are risks attached to being different but these should be outweighed by the advantages of becoming known as the place to study or the business school to work with among a given target audience.





Deans are frequently reluctant to risk current revenue streams, particularly if it means negotiating a period of investment in cultural and behavioural changes with the vice-chancellor

It takes courage to commit to standing out from the crowd, prioritising a particular direction and thereby rejecting others that might seem attractive or represent today's portfolio. Deans are frequently reluctant to risk current revenue streams, particularly if it means negotiating a period of investment in cultural and behavioural changes with the vice-chancellor.

Identifying the different forms, purposes, sizes and locations of organisations provides an opportunity to segment in order to specialise. The nature of the relationship that a business school wishes to have with practice and practitioners represents an important strategic decision.

Business schools can differentiate themselves by selecting which types of organisation they wish to specialise in understanding and supporting. It would surely be possible to build a remarkable business school that prioritises regional or national needs. It would be a very different place to study or work at than a business school that seeks to build its reputation among global businesses.

The programme portfolio provides another opportunity to differentiate, particularly around postgraduate provision, given the proliferation of specialist masters programmes. Business schools can tailor these programmes to support particular industry sectors and/or organisational purposes.

Establishing a critical mass of faculty with the required specialist research, consultancy, and teaching expertise to ensure high-quality support can build reputation among a target market with strong intellectual foundations.

A key challenge for business schools is that they do not possess all the resources and capabilities necessary to create and disseminate knowledge that can be applied to enhance management practice. Hence they need to draw on the resources of other parties.

They also need to manage, and probably lead, collaborative activities beyond the provision of qualification-based education. The employability agenda looms large. Internships and industry placements need to be built into our programmes along with other activities such as international study opportunities and provision for life-long learning. Having a clear, differentiated position will assist in the identification of appropriate industry and international higher education partners to work with.

Knowledge creation is a socially constructed process within communities. Academics and practitioners differ in the type of knowledge that they deal with and exchange with business and management students.

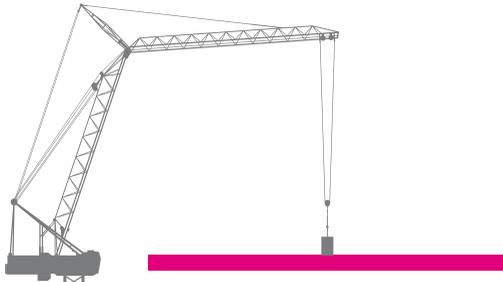
The business curriculum provides explicit knowledge: that which has already been codified and documented and has become generally accepted theory. This provides a firm basis for students entering the workplace.

However, to hit the ground running students really need to understand how theory works in practice, to be exposed to experiential and inquiry-based learning. Students gain access to this tacit knowledge through observing, imitating, adapting and sharing experiences and sense making with practising managers. This is then the real value of academic and industry collaborations from which all parties benefit in both the short- and long-term.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) BENTLEY UNIVERSITY, REGENT'S UNIVERSITY, LONDON, LONDON BUSINESS SCHOOL.





The 2013 innovation report from the Association of Business Schools (ABS) in the UK recommended that business schools adopt distinctly defined roles. For example, some may focus on the local economy, others on international outreach, specific industry sectors, commercialising university-generated technology, innovating in pedagogy or consulting, or on a research-led multidisciplinary model. We are acutely aware of dense clusters of business schools in some parts of the world and we have been impressed by just how clearly such business schools have distinguished themselves from each other.

In Boston, a higher education Mecca, in some places you can throw a rock from one school and it hits another. Yet the business schools are very clearly differentiated from each other.

For example, Babson College is well known for business and entrepreneurship; Bentley University is an EQUIS-accredited business university with a focus on the arts and sciences; Harvard Business School has lead the way with its case method model; MIT Sloan collaborates closely with engineering and science; Boston University School of Management offers many MBA dual degrees; and Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business has a strong cooperative education programme of work experience.

The English Midlands also has a high density of business schools at Aston, Birmingham, Birmingham City, Leicester, Loughborough, Nottingham Trent, Nottingham, and Warwick Universities.

Even in Sherlock Holmes' territory, around Baker Street underground station in London, a cluster of three highly distinctive business schools co-exists. London Business School delivers masters level, PhD and executive development programmes for the post-experience market with a first-class reputation. It is solidly positioned as a provider of excellence at the forefront of global business research with "world-class thought leadership faculty and research." In the same park land, the Business and Management Faculty at Regent's University, London, focuses on full-time undergraduate and pre-experience postgraduate programmes. Westminster Business School across the road is a full-service business school with a well-established reputation among professional

bodies and the government economic service. It has developed a reputation for corporate education and research-based consultancy, particularly within the public sector. Contrasting with the other two business schools, Westminster Business School students tend to be local with the vast majority domiciled within the Greater London area. Westminster Business School is also committed to a widening access agenda and offers a comprehensive range of bursaries to capable students from lower income families.

Mergers such as those at Aalto, Manchester Business School, Skema, and Paris Dauphine's strategic alliance within PSL Research University Paris have allowed for critical mass and new sources of competitive advantage.

Being different requires the courage of conviction and a degree of risk taking and learning from failure. To use a favourite Peter Lorange phrase, "strategy means choice" – about what type of business school you want to be, your identity, what you are definitely not going to do. Do you want, for instance, to be more "business" than "school" or vice versa in balancing your portfolio and expectations about your short- and long-term objectives?

Some business schools focus on international expansion without much regard for their local community. But demographics and social and geopolitical changes demand an appreciation of local needs. Where a business school is located still matters. In conclusion, while Russian President Vladimir Putin argued in *The New York Times* against exceptionalism on the grounds that it creates superior behaviours, we suggest that everyone can be excellent on their own terms.

We spend so much time assessing students, now we can reassess ourselves on how we make significant positive impact.

gf

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Julie Davies is Deputy Chief Executive of the Association of Business Schools in London: jdavies@the-abs.org.uk

Professor Toni Hilton is Dean of the Faculty of Business and Management, Regent's University, London: hilton@regents.ac.uk

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ferlie, E, McGivern, G and De Moraes, A (2010) "Developing a public interest school of management", *British Journal of Management*, 21(S1): 60–70.

Khurana, R (2007) *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putin, VV (2013) "A plea for caution from Russia. What Putin has to say to Americans about Syria", *The New York Times*, 11 September.

Thomas, H, Lorange, P and Sheth, J (2013) *The Business School in the Twenty-First Century: Emergent Challenges and New Business Models*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3

Around Baker Street underground station in London, a cluster of three highly distinctive business schools co-exists – London Business School, Regent's University, London, and Westminster Business School

