The ideal model

Eugenia Bieto describes how a leading Spanish business school has responded to a paradigm shift in management education.
The ideal model | Eugenia Bieto
reviewing the content taught in the curricula of all key programmes and commissioning specific opinions from several faculty members with expertise in this area.

The process culminated in a strategic plan and a clear conclusion: studying at ESADE had to be a unique, innovative and transformative experience. Hence, the launch of ESADE’s “Student First” project.

Placing students firmly at the centre of the entire educational process, ESADE’s new model is based on four main features:

• First, the emphasis has been shifted away from transmitting information (a unidirectional, hierarchical process) and towards creating meta-knowledge. Instructors select and filter dense, rigorous knowledge, which students then put to the test, consolidate, and check through challenges and action-oriented projects. This is achieved through a blended-learning process that uses both classroom and digital elements.

• Second, face-to-face work is reserved for shared learning involving intense group dynamics. This is where the classroom remains irreplaceable. Students work on basic theory before coming to class and classroom time is used to clear up doubts, discuss the material in depth, and share and compare perspectives.

• Third, digital platforms and content play a fundamental role throughout the process, as they make it possible for a large portion of individual learning, instructor-student interaction and even learning assessments to be moved outside the classroom.

Although the quote above is from the 19th Century French poet, novelist and dramatist Victor Hugo, it could just as easily apply to our current reality. There is no denying that today the business school sector is facing a new future that calls for a paradigm shift.

The combination of globalisation and the technological revolution has affected all industries (tourism, transport, entertainment and banking) and transformed the business models of most companies.

Business schools are no exception. Everyone would agree that traditional teaching methods are, at least partially, in crisis. Access to basic knowledge has become more widespread, whilst digital technology enables more independent, asynchronous learning. As a result, some aspects of traditional classroom activity are no longer as valuable as once they were.

Moreover, these changes have given rise to a major contradiction. On the one hand, the vast majority of participants in our programmes are increasingly used to acquiring content in a fragmented, superficial way and demand more personalised training. On the other, large recruiting companies are looking for a radically different skill set: complexity management; teamwork; or the ability to make decisions in uncertain environments.

At ESADE, a business and law school within Ramon Llull University in Spain, we decided to face up and react to this reality and paradigm shift. The entire institution and all of our main stakeholders participated in the reflective process. We dedicated the necessary time and effort, reviewing the content taught in the curricula of all key programmes and commissioning specific opinions from several faculty members with expertise in this area.

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“The future has many names. For the weak, it is called the impossible; for the timid, it is called the unknown; for thinkers and the brave, it is called the ideal."
• Finally, students learn in "wide-angle" mode, transcending the boundaries between academic disciplines. The world is not a puzzle of discrete subjects designed by instructors working within isolated silos of knowledge; it is a complex reality that we must learn to understand and manage in a multidisciplinary way.

It should be noted that this commitment also entails a change in the "psychological contract" between the two main stakeholders in the educational process: students, who must take greater responsibility for their own education and assume a more autonomous and proactive attitude; and instructors, who are being asked to change dramatically their teaching format (lecture plus practical classes), to renew their craft by designing new blended-learning experiences and to become co-creators of knowledge with their students.

As a result of the foregoing, I can confidently state that ESADE is in the process of reinventing itself. On the cusp of our foundation’s 60th anniversary, and recalling the courage of ESADE’s founders, who launched a business school in a context of similar uncertainty, we have decided to look to the future as an opportunity and to take a new leap forward.

Over the first year of the implementation process, we created an educational innovation centre and chose eight faculty members from different departments to use the new method to teach subjects to more than 1,000 students. For the vast majority, the results were highly satisfactory.

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Our goal is to shape the leaders of tomorrow, people who are open to teamwork and collaboration, able to reflect and think critically, unafraid to take on challenges outside their comfort zone, used to working in an environment marked by horizontal decision making and able to manage diversity.

In the current academic year, 2016/2017, we have expanded the project to include one-third of the ESADE faculty. Our ultimate goal is to have the new educational model fully implemented within three years: that is by the 2018/2019 academic year.

To achieve this educational transformation, ESADE will invest €10 million in adding new technological infrastructure, adapting physical spaces and, especially, designing advanced laboratories for experimentation and simulation that are better equipped to foster links between research, learning and the reality of today’s business world. The key to the model is not just the new classrooms, but these labs, as the learning model will essentially be an experiential process.

To this end, we have decided to locate the new labs on the international campus we inaugurated eight years ago, specifically, in the ESADE Creapolis building, designed to promote innovation processes.

The five learning hubs will be:

• the Decision Lab (a place for researchers and students interested in studying people’s decision-making processes in markets)
• the Design Factory (a space for students to use design thinking to tackle challenges and devise solutions to companies’ problems)
• the Fab Lab (for building prototypes and testing new products through 3D printing)
• the EGarage (to encourage entrepreneurship among students)
• the EWorks (for putting ideas and projects into practice)

In short, ESADE will create a new learning ecosystem, which we called the ‘Rambla of Innovation’, for use by the nearly 2,000 students a year who participate in MBA, MSc and BBA programmes on ESADE’s campus. This environment will combine entrepreneurship and innovation while placing students at the centre of their learning and value-creation journey.

Socrates once said: ‘I cannot teach anyone anything; I can only make them think’. That is our goal: to shape the leaders of tomorrow, people who are open to teamwork and collaboration, able to reflect and think critically, unafraid to take on challenges outside their comfort zone, used to working in an environment marked by horizontal decision making and able to manage diversity.

We aim to create the next generation of managers, people with the ability and courage to make decisions in environments of constant uncertainty and who, like ESADE, are willing to reinvent themselves.