

# What should the future business school look like?

Sustainability is increasingly not only a part of business as usual, but companies are engaging as key players in the global sustainability agenda. But business schools themselves are lagging behind. **Giselle Weybrecht** has 100 suggestions how to change this



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The global community has been engaged in sustainable development for decades. But the latest push, in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is perhaps the most important. The goals provide a common framework and language to engage a wide range of different organisations at the local, national and international level to focus energies and move in the same direction.

But when we talk about sustainability, and now SDGs, we do not usually include the potential of business schools in making that vision a reality. In fact, business schools are often thought of as being a part of the problem rather than the solution. But every year students graduate from business schools around the world and each and every one of them has the opportunity to influence what our future will look like.

Equally important is the amount of hours faculty spend doing research on topics related to business but not always accessible or relevant to business managers. What if business schools were a crucial and indispensable part of creating a more sustainable society for us all and an equally strong business community? What if the way we organised a school, so that its degrees and research linked more closely with what is needed by the business and global communities? What if business schools were leading the way?

Unfortunately, the business school of today may in many ways not yet be equipped or positioned to play that role. But what if we took a moment and stood back to look at the bigger picture, to question the assumptions about what a business school does.

What do we need it to look like? How could we change it so that it formed and shaped the business leaders that our organisations and the planet need for a sustainable future, while at the same time creating a much deeper, more meaningful educational and life experience for the students themselves? What would you keep? What would you change? What would you get rid of?

My book *Future MBA: 100 Ideas for Making Sustainability the Business of Business Education* is based on a project that took place in 2014 when I explored 100 ideas of what the future business degree programme could look like. Rather than a specific roadmap, it was meant to be a source of inspiration. Some ideas could be put into practice tomorrow, some would require a complete rethinking of the way we view business education and others were meant to encourage more ideas to turn management education into a key player in moving the sustainability agenda forward.

The ideas have sustainability at their core but are about much more than that. They are about quality education and creating stronger, more impactful business schools.

The discussions relating to sustainability and sustainable development are not separate from what is happening on a day-to-day basis in management education, whether that be research, partnerships, outreach or curriculum and should not be treated as such.

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Discussions about how business is impacted and how it impacts the world around it are increasingly indispensable parts of the education that any business school should be providing. There is a context in which traditional business classes and tools lie and that context is more important, more interdisciplinary and more global than ever.

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There are countless directions that we can take and the ideas in the book explore a wide range of elements pertaining to a business degree, some small details that have potentially large impacts to much larger, structural issues.

As an example, one idea suggests that business schools should not require students to wear suits to events. This typical business school uniform not only makes everyone in the room look similar but also, one could argue, encourages them to act, maybe even think, in a certain similar way, impacting how that they speak up, discuss and explore while also discouraging those who do not own or are not interested in wearing a suit in the first place.

*The Future MBA* could be a place where a wider range of leaders are acknowledged rather than just senior executives or CEOs. What about leaders from sports, arts, music, sciences, a leading pastry chef, a community activist?

These leaders all have a number of traits that have enabled them to succeed individually and as part of a team that could influence and be part of the skill set of a new, more interdisciplinary, generation of business leaders.

And what about skills? *The Future MBA* could have a course and range of exercises specially focused on risk taking and failures, where risk and mistakes are transformed from something to avoid into opportunities for new ideas, new insights and new directions.

Another approach suggested, called Plus One, would require students to always provide more than one answer to questions, encouraging them to move beyond the first, most obvious, answer to exploring the topic further and hence raising additional issues they may not have first considered – but should have.

In terms of the curriculum there could be what *Future MBA* calls “Shifts”, moments in the degree where individual or groups of students are unexpectedly placed in a situation that they need to resolve. Students could also have access to centres for rapid prototyping, where they can take a business idea and very quickly prototype it and iterate through multiple version of that idea with students from other disciplines.

One could rethink the MBA programme format altogether, creating lifelong MBAs with a range of additional courses available for students at different points in their life, at retirement, returning to work after starting a family, wanting to start a business or become an independent consultant.

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Second, the ideas focus on business schools becoming not just a source of new employees but a key and indispensable resource for business. This means playing an important role as a test lab, exploring how business can move forward with important issues that affect them, including the SDGs. The SDGs should be seen not just as a globally recognised checklist for action but one that comes with a range of opportunities and partners ready and eager to engage.

Simply putting the words “sustainability”, “ethics”, “green” or “responsible” at the front of something does not make it so. It is the way that it is taught, where it is taught, how it is taught and what it is being taught alongside whether students can use that information, post graduation, regardless of their career choice, that matters. Sustainability is not a checklist. It needs to be broken down into its individual components and linked to those business issues that it relates to so that all, not just a core group of students, faculty and staff, are exposed.

This is an exciting field full of opportunity, in particular for business schools, and should be embraced as such. Ultimately the future can be shaped into anything we want it to be, and business schools have a chance to explore their own 100 ideas – and should. The collective power that business schools globally, and EFMD schools particularly, can have is potentially huge and should be taken very seriously.

*The Future MBA: 100 Ideas for Making Sustainability the Business of Business Education* is out now. A free, short online course on Re-Imagining the Future Business Degree is available at [www.gowiu.com](http://www.gowiu.com). Over the next 100 days Giselle Weybrecht will be posting 100 examples of business schools taking innovative approaches. For more information visit [www.100futuremba.com](http://www.100futuremba.com)



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Giselle Weybrecht is the author of *The Sustainable MBA: A Business Guide to Sustainability and the founder of GOWI, an online learning platform focused on sustainability and the SDGs. She is a recognised advisor, speaker and author on the topic of sustainability and in particular management education. She is a Special Advisor to the UN PRME and works with a range of business schools, companies and international organisations in this field.*

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One could reinvent the classroom format by holding classes across the community, in pop-up spaces where the general public could also interact with business school students and faculty. A business school might even become a co-operative where its members play a key role in making decisions relating to how the degree programmes and research focus is determined or crowdsourcing ideas as to what the degree should teach in the first place to make it more relevant for that particular community.

Perhaps in the future, rather than every school having its own individual research centre there will be regional or global centres that focus researchers’ energies on truly impactful and relevant research, building on each other’s ideas.

Many of the ideas in the book revolve around two points:

First, the need to help shape true leaders, developing individuals who have a better understanding of the world around them and can make better decisions as a result. It is important that students, and faculty, have the space to think about their actions and their implications, the chance to make mistakes, to experiment and, most importantly, to question, to listen, to respond but also to contribute. Business schools need to start taking responsibility for the kinds of business leaders they are sending out into the world, both the ones they are proud of and the ones that they are not; each can have an important impact.