

BSIS: A Journey of Self-Discovery

Michel Kalika and Gordon Shenton assess
the role of BSIS after seven years

When BSIS (Business School Impact System) was created in 2012, the main aim was to develop a system that would allow business schools to convince their stakeholders of their impact and the extent of their usefulness to their impact zone.

At that time, the main challenge was to explain that business schools, in spite of their focus on internationalisation, research and accreditation, do continue to add value to their territories. Hence, the original purpose was to create a tool for a better operational communication with external stakeholders.

Seven years later and after having involved more than 45 business schools from 14 countries in BSIS it is time to step back and take stock of the situation. The first BSIS Symposium, which took place at HEC Liège, Belgium, in April 2019 and which brought together people from 25 Business Schools, was an opportunity to do this.

The purpose of this post-BSIS Symposium article is to suggest that beyond impact assessment there are hidden, unexpected managerial issues that are both strategic and organisational. A colleague and experienced expert commented after the BSIS visit how much he had appreciated the strategic discussions with the school's dean and staff.

Impact assessment and strategic issues

A striking feature of the reactions to the BSIS experience that were expressed during the recent symposium is the extent to which they portray the benefit of the system as a strategic tool and not simply as an effective impact-measurement tool. One school described the process as a *"journey of self-discovery"* identifying key strengths and opportunities for development in line with its historical identity. In this perspective, BSIS is seen as a clarifier of fundamental strategic purpose. *"BSIS gave direction on what the school is and where it should go"*.

The first step in the process leads a school to define its impact zone: that is to say, the community or communities it is serving and in which it seeks to be a major player. This is usually a complex balance of regional, national and international aspirations that have to be interwoven. *"Regional embeddedness"* will increasingly be seen as a requirement even for the most internationally prominent institutions.

In other cases schools may seek to redefine their regional ambitions to include broader geographical areas in which they can play a leading role. We can observe a growing concern for schools to clarify their position in the *"local educational, economic and administrative ecosystems"*.

The construction of a portfolio of educational programmes will require a coherent positioning in the different segments of the market. A high-quality bachelors programme will serve the aspirations of local families as their children enter the world of higher education and will allow a school to retain good students from the region.

A range of high-quality masters programmes will allow a school to serve the needs of companies in the region and to attract top-rate students from other parts of the country and from abroad.

The BSIS framework for tracking student flows in and out of its programmes will sharpen awareness of the need for *"careful strategic positioning"* aligned with the needs of the local business world and the resource capabilities of a school.

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The purpose of this post-BSIS Symposium article is to suggest that beyond impact assessment there are hidden, unexpected managerial issues that are both strategic and organisational. This confirms what a colleague with a long experience in accreditation told us at the end of a BSIS visit: "I never had such a strategic discussion with a dean in an accreditation visit".

7 yrs

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45

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14

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BSIS helps schools think through the problems linked to effective differentiation. BSIS becomes “a way to show the distinctiveness of a school and to highlight these differences”. BSIS also plays an important role in leading schools to discover many things they were not previously aware of. The “*unintended outcomes*” often surprise everybody. Sometimes BSIS even acts as a “*game changer*” with several cases in which the name of the school and its logo have been rationalised as a result of the BSIS analysis.

Going through the BSIS process has also raised the awareness of the need for a more strategic view of a school's communications. The collection of extensive new data across a broad range of areas underpins a concern to “*work on the school's narrative and to tell a better story*”.

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BSIS has been instrumental in opening up the debate on the objectives of research in order to look for “*managerial, regional and societal impact alongside the traditional academic perspective*”.

Among the key questions for understanding a school's overall positioning we can also add the societal agenda, which is becoming a more and more urgent problem for many institutions as external pressure mounts. They welcome the help BSIS can bring in this highly strategic area while urging the system to do more.

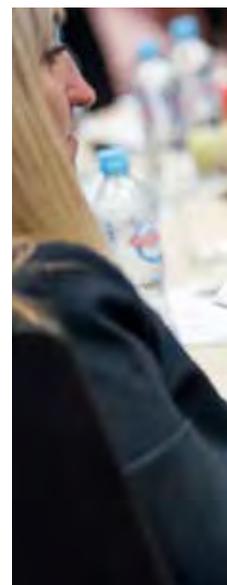
Impact assessment and organisational issues

“*Improving self-esteem*” has been mentioned as the result of an impact assessment process. Indeed, in any business school there are a lot of different activities (research, teaching, relations with companies, entrepreneurship support etc) and not all of them are valued equally in terms of perception. Nowadays, because of rankings and accreditation, business schools value academic research and A-journal publications a lot more than the other activities of the school.

This means that all those who are not concerned with these activities could feel ignored or under-valued. Because impact assessment is calculated by measuring all activities in a school that are a source of external impact, all the people in a school, whatever they are doing (teaching, applied research, partnership with companies, management of internships, communications etc.), feel proud of their school and of what they are doing. Impact assessment “*creates a sense of pride*” and “*keeps staff proud of their mission while confirming their motivation*”.

“*It can be a very inclusive process if you plan it that way*”. Beyond the fact that BSIS can create a lot of pride and a sense of achievement, the necessity to collect data in the different parts of the school implies communications and project co-ordination that reinforce the cohesion of the group and fosters “*improved networking relationships internally and externally*”.

“*The BSIS process clearly improved the data collection*”. Because impact assessment relies on data, there is obviously an impact upon schools' information systems. Moreover, even if there is





overlap with data required for accreditation, some specific data is needed because the process focuses more on external issues than internal ones. Furthermore the process generates in some schools the creation of an Impact Information System (IIS) and a KPI-based impact dashboard.

Impact assessment *can have an impact on the organisation of a business school*. Because it increases impact awareness and favours better relationships with stakeholders, it can generate the creation of the position of “impact manager” or reinforce the services in charge of external relations and communications.

The impact assessment process usually generates an essential change in the culture of the business schools. They have moved from an internal culture focused on standards and a number of well-ranked published articles to an impact culture that strives to take into account the outputs and externalities of schools’ numerous activities.



This impact culture is reflected in the behaviour of researchers, who now communicate more systematically on social networks and on their own personal websites. They are also more likely to communicate to groups of managers through conferences or through articles in professional magazines.

Thus they take into greater consideration the impact of their research results on the world of practitioners. In the same way, those who manage relationships with organisations (consulting, missions, internships) are more likely to consider their action not only as pedagogical actions but also as a contribution of the business school to the development of companies and public authorities.

The change to an impact culture can also be encouraged by an incentive system that recognises all the ways for academics to transfer knowledge and real-life experiences into the world of managerial practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion to the feedback from the participants at the BSIS Symposium, we have to underline the very positive role of the BSIS visit, using a consultative and advisory approach that is considered by the schools to have a considerable impact upon them. Because it

is a “process” with a positive state of mind, the internal impact is as important as the initially targeted external impact.

It is also important to highlight another unexpected effect of the impact journey, that is to say, the fact that the business schools involved in the process expressed the need for the creation of a community committed to more exchange on impact issues. That is why we decided to create a dedicated LinkedIn group and to schedule a second symposium on 4-5 May 2020 to share our experience and identify best practices in terms of impact assessment and management.



References

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