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Needed: academic Triathletes

Santiago Iñiguez argues that what business schools need today is multi-faceted and well-rounded faculty

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When the Olympic Games were founded the king of sports was the Pentathlon. Competitors were required to show supreme skill in five areas:

THE LONG JUMP
JAVELIN
DISCUS THROWING
THE STADION
WRESTLING

When the Olympic Games were founded in Ancient Greece sometime during the eighth century BC, the king of sports was the Pentathlon. As its name suggests, competitors were required to show supreme skill in five areas: the long jump; javelin; discus throwing; the *stadion* (or 180-meter race); and wrestling.

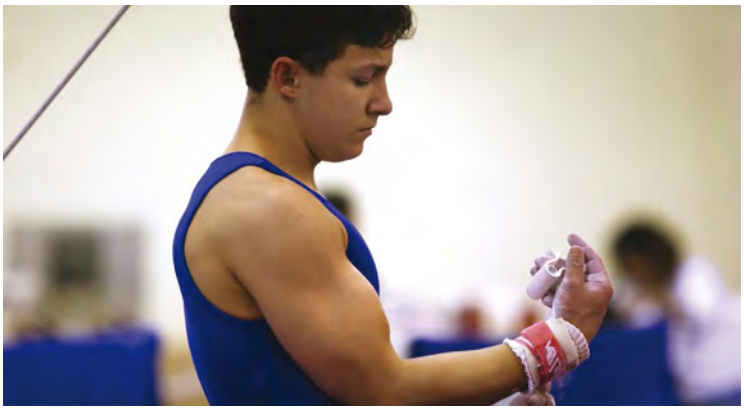
Nobody is sure how the winner of the Pentathlon was established, perhaps by winning three events and doing well in two others. Whatever the method, whenever the Olympics came along, the winners of the Pentathlon were the new heroes. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, tells us that the participants in this sport were the most complete athletes and were honoured with medals and commemorative urns.

When it was decided to revive the Olympic Games at the end of the 19th century, other combined sports were devised, aimed at measuring the overall athletic ability of participants and favouring in many ways the traditional amateur spirit of the Games. Contestants were not professional athletes nor were they usually specialists in a particular sport. Some of these multi-events have survived to this day, notably the Triathlon, made up of swimming, cycling, and running.

Translated to the world of business education, today's academics might usefully be compared to the classical athletes, insomuch as they must show excellence in a number of fields. The academic race is essentially a Triathlon, made up of three main activities: research, teaching and involvement in the world of business – sometimes through consulting or by holding a management or board post.

However, success as an academic has traditionally been tantamount to excellence in research, period. Universities have conventionally selected, promoted, tenured and rewarded scholars who comply with certain requirements related to research activity and output.

Other facets of academic life such as teaching, the spreading of knowledge or interacting with the world outside universities have been considered as secondary activities for an academic career, sometimes even as "improper".



Nobody could reasonably deny the central value that research should play in scholarly careers. It is probably the core activity of the Academic Triathlon since it tests the capacity of the individual to assimilate existing knowledge and to generate new ideas, concepts and models, and at the same time respecting methodological rigor.

However, considering research as an end in itself or the only pure academic activity entails a myopic and incomplete version of the academic vocation.

Revealingly, an article in the *New York Times* described how a Harvard team formed by nine prominent professors of the university and supported by its former President, Derek Bok, was leading an effort to foster the culture of undergraduate teaching and learning.

"The group has issued a report calling for sweeping institutional change, including continuing evaluation and assessment of teaching and learning, and a proposal that teaching be weighed equally with contributions to research in annual salary adjustments." (S Rimer, 'Harvard Task Force Calls for New Focus on Teaching and Not Just Research', *The New York Times*, May 10, 2007.

The need to complement research with teaching and practical work is particularly relevant for business school academics.

Management education requires a special sort of scholar, professionals who can combine many different facets, from a solid research background to the ability to perform effectively in class and to interface with top managers.

I have often said that business schools need not only "Gurus" – wise sages who originate new thought but also "Kangurus" – academics able to jump from their research tasks to teaching and from there to consultancy or an interview with a journalist.

Kangurus of this type are not born but trained and it normally requires a wide career span to exploit the necessary synergies between those different, apparently contradictory but actually intertwined activities.

One of the main missions of business schools is to build bridges between academia and companies, between the world of thinking and research and the practical world of business.

Academic research makes a vital contribution to our body of knowledge on management. Research methodologies bring the rigor and objectivity required for a clear analysis of reality and allow us to come up with solutions based on comparative studies.

In fact, I believe that much of the blame for the recent financial crisis could be attributed to models and ideas from institutions that lacked the rigor that is a feature of academic research.

The reputation of a business school is directly related to the research and knowledge that it produces. From my experience with our stakeholders, and particularly with corporate universities, a key criterion in choosing a school to provide customised programmes is its capacity for generating new knowledge.

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The head of a corporate university told me recently that companies are attracted mainly by business schools associated with new ideas and innovation.

To make business schools' research more relevant, I believe that it is necessary to come up with constructive proposals that will strengthen the ties between the academic and business worlds.

In line with the arguments of Costas Markides, a professor at London Business School, who calls for "ambidextrous professors", I think that it is a mistake to underestimate both the value of academic research or of integrative analysis. To do so will lead to the disappearance of a highly valuable and essential approach that has provided rigor to the management knowledge base we currently draw on.

I also agree with Professor Markides that it is a mistake to foster the separation between research academics and practitioners. (See his article "In Search of Ambidextrous Professors", *Academy of Management Journal* Vol. 50, No. 4 (2007), 762-768.)

His proposals to encourage younger scholars to publish not just in academic journals but also in professional publications are the way forward.

In this way we will see the transfer of research into teaching as well as encouraging co-operation between businesses and consultancies to identify new ideas and models for research.

In his book (*Thought Leadership Meets Business: How Business Schools Can Become More Succesful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 182), Peter Lorange also highlighted the need for business schools to adopt an "interactive, two-way approach, where propositional knowledge meets prescriptive knowledge". This mutually beneficial virtuous cycle can be seen in executive education or MBA programmes where participants have considerable experience, giving teachers the opportunity to benefit from feedback by professionals attending their classes.

Despite constant criticism to the opposite, business schools are in reality proactive when it comes to developing the mechanisms needed to change the systems that generate and distribute knowledge.

This is shown by a concern for strengthening the clinical relevance of research, reflected in the significant number of articles on the subject published in recent years by the Academy of Management, the most influential forum on a global level for academic research into management.

To return to the analogy with Ancient Greece, below are some further proposals that might contribute to strengthening the links between Academia and the *Agora* (the market).

Redesign PhD management programmes so that participants, aside from developing the skills of sound researchers, are also given the opportunity to practise the complementary facets that will allow them to teach effectively and also to take advantage of teaching to disseminate the results of their own research.

What's more, doctoral programmes should also facilitate contact between students and business leaders to give them first-hand experience of the real problems of management. This could also be achieved through internships.

Adapt tenure systems to take into account not only candidates' published academic output but also their teaching skills. Furthermore, it would be advisable to introduce procedures to evaluate to what extent teachers maintain links with the world of business, either through membership of boards or consulting work. Obviously, overall

evaluation will still emphasise research output; the challenge is to find a balance that will allow teachers to incorporate these proposals over time. Once again, the Triathlon analogy comes to mind.

The proposals mentioned above would probably require evaluation periods of at least one year to provide sufficient perspective on the results and impact in each of the areas.

Work with business leaders to identify the key issues affecting the business world. A growing number of business schools have already set up interdisciplinary centres aimed at going beyond the remit of traditional academic departments by setting up direct links with companies to develop specific projects. These centres not only encourage interdisciplinary research but also develop training programmes that address specific issues relating to business management.

At the same time, it is important that business schools' boards and advisory councils understand the strengths and weaknesses of their respective institutions. These councils are generally made up of business people or alumni who can provide invaluable feedback on what the real world's knowledge needs are.

Encourage ties between research-oriented teachers and practitioners. So far, this kind of co-operation has usually been restricted to developing teaching material for programmes. But it can be extended to other areas. Responsibility for bringing together the two should be a key objective of department heads, who can advance joint research initiatives.

Develop procedures to assimilate knowledge produced outside the academic environment. Business schools should act as knowledge hubs, bringing in new ideas, concepts and models generated outside their immediate sphere, for example in consultancies, corporate universities and other forums. New communication and information technologies offer limitless potential for testing and developing ideas.

Appoint "embedded academics" within companies. This would be another step toward setting up chairs financed by companies in business schools. The professors appointed to these chairs would work on specific projects with the sponsoring companies. This approach is already in use among consultancies, which send consultants into a company for long-term or highly important projects. "Embedded academics" would have one foot in academia and another in the business world.

At IE business school in Madrid, Spain, we have already put this approach into practice: we have a Human Resources Chair sponsored by leading Spanish fashion retailer group Inditex and Accenture's Competitive Strategy Chair. The professors who hold the chairs spend a significant amount of their time working on specific projects with the companies involved, at the same time pursuing relevant and up-to-the-minute academic research in their respective areas.

Develop ways to measure the impact of academic research on the real world. This would mean going beyond the standard bibliometric indicators or article citation rates. We know that in management, as in the social sciences, the impact of ideas cannot just be measured by how often they are turned into patents or registered as inventions, the approach generally used in other scientific disciplines.

I would suggest two approaches:

• recognising a piece of academic work on the basis of its inclusion in management programmes taught around the world; for example, models or concepts such as the Balanced Scorecard, Blue Ocean Strategies or Non-market Strategies, which are now part of just about every MBA programme

• bringing together academics from business schools, corporate universities, development departments, consultancies and even the publishers of management publications to design systems that would allow for periodic analysis of research produced by schools and their use as management tools in the business world. Ideally, this would come up with a range of measuring systems reflecting diverse cultural and business practices and thus the heterogeneity of the research.

Research is one of the most valuable assets of the academic world, and should be encouraged and increased. Sadly, at times of crisis, research, development and innovation (R+D+I) spending tends to be the first to be axed, a policy that in the long term leads only to loss of competitiveness and innovative capacity.

It is essential to raise awareness of the value of academic research for the business world, and this is something in which business schools can play a key role. **gf**

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This is an adapted and edited extract from Santiago Iñiguez's book *The Learning Curve: How Business Schools Are Reinventing Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2011)