The business school's journey from unbundling to networks to ecosystems

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The traditional "business model" of business schools is being challenged in fundamental ways. This relates to what education is offered and how, what role knowledge generation will play in the future, to what extent business and societal impact will become the other side of the "research coin", and, finally, what type of faculty and staff will be needed to successfully way-find into the future of the business school. Some may argue that academia – and business schools within it – are under siege. I disagree with this term. We are rather at the beginning of a new era of higher education that will elevate the ambition of management education to an unforeseen level, in alignment with the technological and socio-economic disruptions that are reconfiguring the role of business organisations in bringing purpose and value to their stakeholders.

In this context, the emergence of the ecosystem as a novel form of organising and delivering business school activities will play a central role. This volume contains nine thought-provoking contributions that examine the evolving role of ecosystems from complementary perspectives. A common message is embedded in all of these articles: business schools should get ready and embrace this new concept; it will improve what they are doing right now and help them future-proof their competitive positioning and operations! No doubt, much appreciated comfort zones will disappear in the process, and many adjustments will cause pain to entrenched interests, but this will all be to the benefit of business school stakeholders, in particular students ("learners"). This explains why we have chosen learning ecosystems as the main focus of this supplement.

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Business schools are on a journey towards ecosystems that starts with the unbundling of existing activities (e.g., stackable degrees), leads to a stronger reliance on networks for the sharing of value chains (e.g., the emergence of the distributed business school) and adds fluidity as well as a transitory element when moving on to ecosystems (e.g., a shift that is already visible today in entrepreneurial spaces nurtured by business schools). With the conviction that these three steps describe the general trajectory of business school development, the articles in this supplement examine what will change as we are approaching the final destination. Readers will gain a deeper insight into what ecosystems are, why they are relevant for higher education and business schools in particular, and how they can be utilised as an institutional development opportunity that has far more upside than downside potential for established players and newcomers.

Arnoud De Meyer (author of *Ecosystem Edge: Sustaining competitiveness in the face of disruption*, Stanford Business Books, 2020) opens our inquiry by asking what business schools can learn from businesses. Based on case examples, de Meyer argues that business schools can improve their competitive positioning by refining their service offer and utilising ecosystem capabilities. It will help them to become more business relevant, more impactful, and will help them to evolve into "true" schools "for" business.

Markus Kreutzer and Pia Neudert follow this up by explaining what kind of paradigm shifts are associated with a move towards ecosystems and why it is a much further-reaching challenge than strategic alliance management. Ecosystem partners are complementors that adopt a flexible and fluid way of working together, and this helps to make organisational boundaries and functional silos more permeable. Applying this logic to business schools, the authors argue that schools will be less and less able to meet client demands as single players. Ecosystems offer all the advantages of a strategic partnership network but are more easy to reconfigure as new opportunities arise.

Mark Greeven and Dominique Turpin take a closer look at the management and leadership dimension of operating within an ecosystem that they define in terms of boundary-less and client-centric organisations that operate much like a biological ecosystem. Using IMD as an example, the authors conjecture that a different way of organising business education will be required. This will involve an experimental mindset, the willingness to delegate responsibility as well as focus on a well-defined value proposition. Embracing an ecosystem approach is, in their view, without alternative; we must adopt and move forward or be left behind.

Impact and relevance have recently received a good deal of airtime in the business school community. Amanda Gudmundsson and Robina

Xavier examine how the connectedness with institutions outside of academia and the added value created in the process need to be seen in a different light as business schools are evolving into ecosystem players. These, for instance, include collaboration as a shared cross-institutional phenomenon drawing on a wider population of organisations and a redefinition of roles within the network of partnerships. Citing a number of Australian case examples, the authors argue that ecosystems encourage multi-level, continuous interactions that allow business schools to tackle more complex projects, thereby giving the concept of "impact" greater meaning.

Business schools have much to learn from organisations outside of academia when it comes to transitioning successfully into ecosystem mode. Denis Konanchuk and Marat Atnashev use the complementarity between business ecosystems used for value creation and supportive learning ecosystems as a starting point of their investigation and then derive five key design principles for the latter. The authors propose a far-reaching, learner-centric design and resourcing of talent management that carries important lessons for business schools, both in terms of schools maintaining their complementarity to the education provision of corporate partners and in terms of profiting from the successful innovations emerging in the corporate sphere.

Xiaobo Wu and Linan Lei explain how the ecosystem embeddedness of business schools / universities can be a source of competitive advantage for a region and the schools within it. They cite the example of innovation and entrepreneurship education in Shanghai and Hangzhou, one region known as the Chinese Silicon Valley and the other a centre of SME companies as well as home of Alibaba and Ant Financial. The respective ecosystems are represented as three-layered environments with an interdisciplinary circle within the university, an interorganisational circle built around the university, including institutions of national relevance, and an international circle that insources talent and resources globally for innovation and start-up formation.

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Giuseppe "Beppe" Soda and Gabriele Troilo explore the role of Edtech as a catalyst for the advancement of ecosystem-based management education. With the arrival of COVID-19, Edtech has experienced an enormous innovation boost to facilitate virtual learning and also, increasingly, cross-school virtual collaboration. The authors explain why the arrival of new technologies can speed up the transition to providing education in learning ecosystems. This can simultaneously happen in two directions, demand-pull as well as supply-push.

Steven Poelmans, Bart Cambré and Wouter Van Bockhaven argue that ecosystems provide a mental model well suited for solving wicked problems increasingly common in the business world and in higher education. The authors suggest that a variety of leadership paradoxes can arise such as dealing with the tension between the emergence and intentionality of ecosystems. They offer a paradoxical leadership framework that describes behavioural alternatives useful in such a complex and fluid environment.

Finally, Ulrich Hommel and Sarah Vaughan explore the emerging challenges for managing quality in an ecosystem setting. They base their analysis on three ecosystem dimensions – knowledge sharing, innovation, and learning – and offer reflections on how quality management (assurance) will be impacted, in terms of strategic positioning and leadership, technology platforms and tools, the redesign of the learning experience, and the advancement of supportive learning analytics. The authors conclude that agile quality managers will excel in this new environment; the shift to ecosystems can be a positive game-changer for their careers.

It is the hope of all contributors that this publication will initiate a much-needed debate on the future role of ecosystems in the business school sector, for learning alongside more or less all other activities and services, and speed up the discovery and sharing of best practices within the management education community. The readers are invited to engage with us in this discourse.