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Open up the Business School! From Rigour and Relevance to Purpose, Responsibility and Quality

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MIXING OIL AND WATER

The *Financial Times* headline expresses it clearly enough: 'Academic focus limits business schools' contribution to society.'[1] We have heard this one before. As the argument goes, the push towards a particular model of high-quality research is getting in the way of practical application.

Despite the punchy headline, the *FT* article starts by heading in the opposite direction: 'On subjects from climate change to knife crime and racism in recruitment to kidney transplants, business school professors are conducting research geared towards making a positive impact on society.' It seems that at least some business school researchers are doing their best to serve society after all.

Are business schools obsessed with high-level academic publication and a narrow definition of research excellence? Or do they serve an important societal mission, working constructively with the business community and a range of stakeholders?

Based on my experience, both points of view are - at least partly - valid. Many of us working in the business school world can point to examples of the 'excellence' agenda pushing aside practical importance and societal impact. As one example, journal rankings and citation data seem to weigh more heavily within many academic hiring processes than engagement with practitioners or even teaching abilities.

Nevertheless, serious engagement with sustainability, societal inequality and business transformation can also be found - even if some of us would like to see more. For recent evidence, look no further than the 2021 report from the Chartered ABS Taskforce on *Business Schools and the Public Good*[2]. This presents a series of UK-based case-studies across research but also teaching, operations and engagement activities. There are legitimate concerns about the balance between 'academic focus' and 'contribution to society'. However, both undeniably exist within the contemporary business school.

So what's the problem? What is wrong with a situation where one group of business school researchers addresses practical matters while others seek to develop new theoretical models and contribute to academic knowledge? As it has been put to me, there are two kinds of researcher: those who seek truth and those who want to save the world. Can't we just agree that both are important – and then get on with it?

One answer can be found in a classic article from 1967[3]. Back then, the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon presented the business school as a problem in organisational design. The challenge for Simon was to balance 'the disciplines' and 'the professions': 'the social system of practitioners, on the one hand, and the social system of scientists in the relevant disciplines, on the other'. But as long as the practical professions and the academically-oriented disciplines peacefully co-exist then everything is fine. Right?

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Wrong, said Simon. The problem is that if one leaves 'the disciplines' and 'the professions' to themselves then the goal of the business school gets lost. Access to practical problems leads to creative ideas, creative ideas help us see and act upon the world in new ways. And business school professors do not have the monopoly on creative ideas. Arguably, they have as much to learn from practical engagement as they have to give.

According to Simon's analysis, not every piece of research has to be immediately relevant. However, if there is no link whatsoever to relevance, then why be in the business school? To be even more provocative, without such a link why actually have the business school at all? Just like oil and water, the professional and the disciplinary will tend to separate. For Herbert Simon, the challenge for business school deans is to push against this: to mix the elements up vigorously and not let them settle into their separate silos.

This account of the oil and the water of the modern business school is a great help in understanding the tension between academic rigour and societal relevance which, as the *Financial Times* article confirms, still lingers over 50 years after Simon's original article[4]. Simon even provided some practical advice as to how to keep the mixing process going: don't, for example, allow the different groups to cluster their offices apart from each other. To put it bluntly, many business schools can boast on a web-site that they 'combine world-class excellence with real world impact'. However, if the people doing that work never actually speak to each other, and certainly never share ideas, what exactly is gained?

The implication is that we need to dig deeper into the nature of business school research and come up with some fresh ideas. It's not simply a matter of getting Prof. Rigour and Dr. Relevance to have a coffee together every few weeks (although that might be a start). It is also a question of how we define 'rigour' and 'relevance' in the first place. Couldn't we find ways of tackling these crucial matters without resorting to the old separation between academic excellence and practical application? Does this have to be a zero-sum game?

BEYOND THE GREAT DIVIDE

Several years ago, I was trying to promote a business school-wide initiative centred on what we called 'Business-in-Society (or BiS) platforms'. The idea was to draw upon research across several parts of the business school in order to address significant societal challenges.

Thinking back, the underlying case for 'BiS platforms' was very much in line with Simon's oil and water approach. And, since the business school in question was actually a 'business university' (Copenhagen Business School) my case at the time was that, rather than leaving researchers to sit in their own academic domains, we should get the full benefit of our substantial scale, broad research strengths and cross-disciplinarity.

One discussion with a senior professor (and, let me stress, valued colleague) really caught my attention. The focus of this exchange was climate change. For me this was an intellectually challenging and societally significant problem, requiring application of the highest-level scholarship to a matter of pressing concern – and one where management research is often relegated to a secondary position. Saving the world *and* doing world-class research? Who would not vote for that?

My colleague's reaction brought me down with a bump. Our debate focused specifically on research excellence. For the professor in question, excellence was basically judged by what could be published in top-tier academic journals. Cross-disciplinary and 'relevant' research might be interesting and worthy. It might score us some points with external stakeholders. However, it would never strengthen the publication record of an ambitious researcher in his field.

What for me was straightforwardly positive, for him posed a choice. Do we want to be a world-class research institution or a strong player in the regional business and political community? When an internationally-leading researcher poses a question in that way, it is not hard to guess what the answer will be.

The fundamental issue then is whether a concern with the societal impact of research detracts from excellence – not least by diverting precious resources. Or, as I was suggesting, does such a concern actually augment and stimulate research excellence – and at the same time fulfil an important responsibility?

Looking back, what is particularly striking is the rather limited, and decidedly binary, way in which our discussion was conducted. The whole problem with 'bridging' between high-quality research and practice is that it assumes two different sides: rigour *and* relevance, excellence *and* application, 'academic focus' *and* 'contribution to society'.

My professor colleague and I kicked the issues backwards and forwards. I don't actually think either of us changed our mind. I do know that the Business-in-Society initiative went ahead. But 'winning' the debate is not the only point. We need these open and challenging conversations if research strategies are to have any meaning. I came away more convinced than ever that the underlying model of rigour-relevance separation is no longer fit for purpose. In a world of cross-border, pan-institutional, co-created and trans-disciplinary challenges, is this really the best we can do?

Creative ideas are urgently needed. Let me offer just three. I do not claim that these are entirely new. They may not even be the most creative. However, I do think they can stimulate new perspectives and new conversations.

PURPOSE

John Brewer has proposed we adopt 'public value' as a focus for research and teaching across the social sciences[5]. Serious attention to public value suggests that we move beyond the language of 'academic focus', 'societal relevance', even 'impact', and instead address more fundamental goals and ambitions. What I like about this approach is that it quickly leads to the deeper issue of purpose.

What is it that business schools in general are trying to achieve? What is it that any particular business school is trying to achieve? How does a business school define its own role and its own ambition? Brewer puts particular emphasis on values such as trust, empathy, tolerance, compromise and a sense of belonging. Business schools might want to add other forms of 'public value' – public welfare, the creation of opportunities, sustainability, social equity, innovation. That could and should be a matter of serious reflection. It should also bring fresh perspective to questions of business school organisation, recruitment processes and incentive structures.

The 2021 report from the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) on *Business Schools and the Public Good* advances this discussion in a number of important ways[2]. This is not surprising when one of the report's co-chairs, Martin Kitchener, has previously drawn on Brewer's ideas in order to develop Cardiff Business School towards the delivery of public value – or what he calls 'leading with purpose'[6]. The CABS report specifically identifies 'purpose-led' business schools, but also those where 'public good entrepreneurs' are active.

The point is not that we will all agree on the public value of the business school or take the same approach across different contexts and settings. The questions might be just as important as the answers. One good place to start is by asking for whom we are trying to add value and how.

In terms of business school research, purpose can be defined in many ways. It can also operate at a number of levels. The Business-in-Society platforms initiated at Copenhagen Business School were just one attempt to draw together researchers across different specialties in a sense of collective mission. Purpose cannot necessarily be imposed from above. However, attention to the purpose of business schools – including business school research – can be the start of a rewarding journey.

RESPONSIBILITY

There have long been discussions concerning the social, political and ethical implications of the natural sciences and engineering. What is the best relationship between science and democracy? What is the social responsibility of the scientist? How do we ensure a larger and more meaningful public engagement with new areas of innovation?[7]

Sometimes, these discussions arise in very general terms. More often, they relate to specific, perhaps controversial, areas of innovation and change: nanotechnology, driverless cars, genetically-modified food. Whilst these are often viewed as technical issues – as a matter for the experts – the point is that they simultaneously raise important societal questions. What about the ethics, the politics, the costs and the benefits, the overall direction of innovation?

Take the concept of Responsible Innovation: 'Responsible innovation means taking care of the future through collective stewardship of science and innovation in the present'[8]. The point is not that scientists should tackle these complex matters on their own. Instead, researchers are encouraged to play their part in facilitating a larger public conversation about the direction of socio-technical development – and the alternative futures that could lie ahead. Business schools should play a key role in these discussions.

Currently, important developments are taking place concerning responsible research in a business and management context. The Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management has presented seven principles in support of its Vision 2030: service to society; valuing both basic and applied contributions; valuing plurality and multidisciplinarity; sound methodology; stakeholder involvement; impact on stakeholders; broad dissemination[9]. Once again, a whole series of questions emerge: not least, about the practical meaning of responsibility. And once again, the discussion might be as important as the specific answers.

Just imagine a business school which plays a core role in society-wide reflections – and interventions - concerning responsible research and innovation: bringing in colleagues from the natural sciences but also multiple stakeholders in order to explore and help create new paths for socio-technical change. Isn't the business school the obvious place for such cross-disciplinary engagement? And wouldn't that put the business school at the very centre of intellectual, technical, social and economic development?

QUALITY

Let us re-claim the 'quality' word[10]. Quality is not only a matter of research excellence – although research quality is crucial. Quality is not only a matter of rankings, citations and evaluation practices. These are not ends but only means. Quality for me is about deciding what is important and setting our standards accordingly.

A serious focus on quality obliges business schools to consider how they define excellence in their activities. This might sound abstract. But it is actually down to earth and practical. What does a 'world class' stakeholder engagement look like? How do we judge excellence in targeting societal challenges and problems? What is the equivalent of the top-level journal article when it comes to cross-disciplinary engagement and helping tackle the challenges of sustainability or questions of social inclusion?

Quality cannot – and should not – be the same for all business schools. And even within the same school, there needs to be space for debate, reflection and difference. Rather than 'one size fits all', we might imagine business schools developing distinctive approaches: from quality in academic publications to quality in research-society relations, from quality in boosting opportunities for disadvantaged groups to quality in co-producing fresh approaches to old problems. The challenge is to re-make quality in new ways – and to keep doing so.

At least two attributes will be important in re-claiming quality. The first is creativity and the capacity of business schools to unleash the imaginative capacity of both their own staff and of a variety of stakeholders. That may not be as easy as it sounds. However, there is no shortage of potential in and around our organisations.

The second attribute is leadership. This is very much a matter of making choices: both about what to do and what not to do. It takes courage right now not to follow the international pack. And, perhaps understandably, there can be a significant strain of conservatism in our institutions. But isn't a sense of possibility the foundation for wise leadership?

OPEN UP THE BUSINESS SCHOOL!

Purpose. Responsibility. Quality. Each of these raises further questions: about their precise meaning in specific business school settings; about the relationship between business school researchers, other scientific disciplines and larger society; about how in practice they can be developed into business school-wide deliberations and conversations. As a former business school dean, I would never under-estimate these challenges. For that reason also, I would generally advocate an approach based on persistent experimentation, long-term thinking and institutional learning – in other words, mixing oil and water.

One leading critic has suggested shutting down the business school[11]. This article takes exactly the opposite approach. This is just the right time to take stock of what business schools are for. And instead of shutting them down, we should open them up to different ways of addressing purpose, responsibility and quality. We need multiple answers to the challenges faced and the opportunities from here.

We can briefly return to issues of climate change. For those who choose to engage, this is not about forcing all faculty to become activists or assuming that our only job in the business school is to find ways of putting the ideas of scientists and engineers into practice. Instead, it involves asking sharp questions about our purpose with regard to business and environmental transformation, identifying ways in which business schools can exercise (and encourage) responsibility, and considering how we can ambitiously raise the quality of our contribution. This is also about being unafraid to engage in areas of uncertainty, ignorance and disagreement. If we wait for these to be resolved, then it will already be too late to take meaningful action.

Purpose, responsibility and quality will not arrive neatly-packaged on the doorstep of the business school. Instead, interrogating, testing out and debating their meaning represents a serious, but also necessary, challenge. What all three concepts have in common is that they force us to ask larger questions and to recognise the possibilities ahead. Each of them also implies building sustained relationships. Business schools need networks and partners, critical friends and experts in different fields.

Rather than thinking about the business school in either/or terms, we need to open up to fresh ways of thinking about, contributing to and organising this crucial institution. We should open up the business school to purpose, responsibility and quality.

Footnotes

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