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Business school output: A conceptualisation of business school graduates

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ABSTRACT

Extant literature has illustrated that business schools are currently pre-occupied with promoting and teaching optimization, efficiency and effectiveness, maximization and profitability. Too little attention is afforded to promoting the skills of analysis and critical thinking or the mastery of theories, abstract conception or a wider appreciation of moral principles. Our contribution deepens the debate about the purpose of business schools by creating a typology of 'types' of Business School Graduates (BSGs). We suggest that, as well as influencing the future of their graduates, business schools should be responsible for what 'type' of BSG they produce. Our typology offers four types – the Replacer, the Effectiveness Increaser, the World Improver and the Reflectionist. We propose that in future business schools should place emphasis on providing a wider education balancing human, environmental and economic perspectives. More credence must be given to the latter two types of BSG as opposed to the first two, who are the favoured choices of today.
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> *Academic research related to the conduct of business and management has had some very significant and negative influences on the practice of management […] by propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 76).*

Recently business schools have come under attack and received much criticism. They have been accused of stressing business values to the detriment of other values (Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010; Grey, 2004; Khurana, 2007; Starkey, Hatchuel, & Tempest, 2004; Starkey & Tempest, 2009). This is revealed in the educational approach of business schools. They stand accused of giving too much importance to the concept of optimization by overtly emphasising efficiency and effectiveness; by promoting maximization solely for the benefit of higher profitability; by adopting a sell-sell-sell mentality (e.g., Hussey & Smith, 2010; Khurana, 2007; Starkey & Tempest, 2009; Zell, 2001); by being too market driven (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005); by pandering to government imposed league tables and ratings (Ghoshal, 2005); by standing for 'entrepreneurial capitalism' (Hubbard, 2006) through having lost their ability to think critically (Starkey & Tempest, 2009) and, as a result, accused of ethical bankruptcy (Starkey et al., 2004).

The four authors of this article, who have been working at business schools for a cumulative period of over 40 years, empathise with this critique of business schools. There is reason to consider a more important place for intellectual curiosity (Zell, 2001), critical thinking (Hussey & Smith, 2010) and introspection (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010), or for developing

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and nurturing a knowledge environment prompting intellectual challenge, imagination and creativity in the business school (Chonko, Tanner, & Davis, 2002). We believe that to be the case but question how to respond?

We might, as Grey (2002) suggested, try to influence peoples' assumptions about the purpose of business schools. Grey suggested that the standard answer to the question 'what are business schools for?' is to 'supply people who are technically equipped to manage better as a result of their MBAs (and other qualifications), so they are hired by companies, which in turn perform better, contributing to the economic competitiveness of nations' (pp. 497–498). An alternative answer has been offered by other scholars within the critical wing of management education research. They state that business schools are there to create value for the society at large (Hay, 2008; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Starkey, 2009; Starkey et al., 2004; Starkey & Tempest, 2009).

In an attempt to take this debate further we build on rather than confront previous arguments. We explore possible answers to the question about the 'output' of the business school (a term created by Mintzberg, 1989) by examining the 'types' of 'Business School Graduate' (BSG) produced. One important factor in the shaping of BSGs is the delivery of business school education. Four identities, or 'types', of BSGs are conceptualised in this paper.

We believe that rather than presenting one single alternative picture of what BSGs might be – an alternative to the somewhat glorified anti-hero/hero personified in Gordon Gekko (the main antagonist of the 1987 film Wall Street which displays the ruthlessness one exercised to make one's ways in the world of 'yuppies', shady business deals, the 'good life', fast money and women) – an overview of comparisons of possibilities might be more convincing. This insight might give more opportunity for teachers within Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to critically reflect upon their own concept of what a BSG might represent. We present a typology of four conceptualisations of BSGs currently being educated at business schools in the form of the Replacer, the Effectiveness Increaser, the World Improver (represented in two variants: the Pragmatic World Improver and the Radical World Improver) and finally the Reflectionist.

Our main contribution lies in the interpretation of current explicit and implicit arguments about the purpose of business schools, their influence on BSGs and how both stand to serve the business and wider community. In addition to providing a basis for further academic research on business schools, our typology might contribute to a reflexive questioning about the purpose of business schools by suggesting alternatives for those who are not yet convinced that business schools need to embrace major change. The typology allows comparison between different BSGs. By discussing the perceived and actual roles of the business school graduates this paper increases the scope of debate. Thus, we hope to question decision makers running business schools and lecturers who uncritically see it as their task to teach 'business' from a 'business-perspective'. More importantly, the debate also extends to those who employ BSGs and questions their contribution and responsibility to the wider society.

The term BSG is defined in this paper to cover all student graduates from business schools, ready to be recruited by various employers. Whilst a significant proportion of the previous literature, critically examining business school education, has explicitly or implicitly been pre-occupied with the role of 'managers' we take the liberty of extending this examination to include marketers, economists, accountants, finance analysts etc. We are inclusive of these roles because of the increase in the scandals and criminal activities of BSGs in the commercial world who, when caught, often deny responsibility.

The paper proceeds in the following manner. First, we present a background to our typology of Business School Graduates and thereafter the typology itself. Each type of BSG is illustrated with quotations lifted from business schools home web pages. Finally, we add to the debate questions and concerns about the propagation of our future BSGs – the worlds' future business leaders, managers and economists.

1. Conceptualizing BSGs

> *You may have whatever perspective, but at this school you shall understand that we have the business perspective* (An example of what a former colleague told all freshmen).

Inspiration for our typology comes from the concept and period in history called 'The Enlightenment'. We view 'enlightenment' as a frame of critical open-mindedness, measured in response to and for action. It encapsulates respect for knowledge, the value of that knowledge when activated and the consequences of actions. We promote 'enlightenment' within the typology in response to a perceived need to improve the philosophical and moral conditions, if not material and political economic conditions, of business schools and their graduates and the wider community in which they will serve after graduation.

The term 'enlightenment' is thus borrowed from the Enlightenment period when Adam Smith (1723–1790) was recognised as one of the six leading Scottish *philosophes*. Smith alone probably has had the greatest impact on posterity. His influence on economics resonates within the walls of economic institutions and business schools today and in this paper we allude to a diffusion of philosophical ideas from that period to encourage debate. During the period of 'enlightenment' there was not only a promotion of a scientific way of thinking and a deployment of scientific methods to view the world but also an interest in approaches to moral philosophy or ethics, history and the political economy, the latter providing an important platform for the analysis and advocacy of progress in society (Robertson, 2000).

'Enlightenment' was furthered by those 'who placed a high premium on polite learning as well as on humane and humanitarian values, such as cosmopolitanism, religious toleration, sociable conviviality, and moral and economic improvement' (Broadie, 2003, p. 4). Richard Sher, who is claimed to have created this cultural definition, recognized not only the

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