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Developing globally responsible leaders: What role for business schools in the future?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a collaborative research process to explore the future role of business schools in the development of globally responsible leaders. Swinburne University of Technology held a collaborative workshop of academics across disciplines and a range of business leaders to explore firstly what a globally responsible leader would look like and secondly how these capabilities would be developed. In taking forwards actions from the workshop, the Business School was noticeably absent which raised the specific question regarding the on-going role for business schools in the future development of leaders, and how they would need to change in order to maintain a future role in this sphere. The paper reflects on the transformative process necessary within business schools if they are to meet this future agenda.

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1. Introduction

Swinburne University was a sponsoring co-author of the 50+20 agenda which was a collaboration of business schools and interested parties that came together to challenge the role of management education from the starting point that the current economic model of unrestricted growth and consumption is obsolete. The 50+20 Agenda 'describes a vision for the transformation of management education, in which the common tenet of being the best in the world is revised in favour of creating businesses that are designed and led to achieve the best for the world'.¹ The 50 represents the 50 years from the Ford and Carnegie Foundation Report on business schools (Gordon & Howell, 1959), and the 20 signifies the next 20 years ahead. The Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI) who were co-convenors for the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME)² are now the sponsors and drivers behind the 50+20 agenda. GRLI was founded in 2004 by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) and the UN Global Compact, and PRME was established in 2007 as a result of 60 Deans coming together to articulate a challenge to the dominant agenda of management education. The promotion of this agenda has therefore been developing over a decade, with the culmination of the publication of the 50+20 agenda in 2012 which outlines more fully how the PRME principles can be turned into a broader agenda and curriculum and is a call to action rather than a set of motherhood statements of principle.

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¹ The 50+20 Agenda: Management Education for the World, P2. Available at <http://www.50plus20.org> Accessed 15.06.12.

² The Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) is a principles based global engagement platform for Business Schools who have agreed to adopt a set of six principle statements that outline the agenda for how they will approach their activities. See www.unprme.org for more details.

The agenda suggests three new roles of management education. First, to refocus education to ensure that we educate and develop globally responsible leaders; second, to transform research into an applied field, with the clear purpose of enabling business organisations to serve the common good; and third, to add a new role for management educators to engage in the transformation of business and the economy by joining the ongoing public debate. As such, the 50+20 vision is represented by the philosophy of a *collaboratory* – an open space for action learning and research. This paper outlines an action research process to explore how globally responsible leaders might be developed in the future, bringing together industry and university representatives to explore the issues around leadership development that need to be resolved if the 50+20 vision is to be achieved.

2. The need for change in business schools

Prior to the global financial crisis, there has been much criticism of the business school agenda and curriculum which has largely centred around the MBA. In 2002, while Mintzberg and Gosling accused business schools of teaching a 1908 product using 1950s teaching strategy (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002), Pfeffer and Fong questioned whether the end of business schools was on the horizon as they had been less successful in reality than the rhetoric they espoused, particularly with regards to application of research in practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Bennis and O'Toole (2005) criticised the failure to impart useful skills preparing graduates for good jobs (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005), and Blass and Weight (2005) questioned whether the MBA had become little more than a business graduate conversion program (Blass & Weight, 2005). As late as 2009, Ellson noted that there still appeared to be little use of practitioner learning in the classroom despite its benefits being widely extolled by the teaching staff (Ellson, 2009), while being published in the leading journals is key to academic promotion, rather than contribution to practice either in or out of the classroom (Seggie & Griffith, 2009).

Post the GFC and the relevance of business schools is being challenged further. Despite the fact that business ethics and corporate responsibility have been commonplace in the curriculum for years, the current economic crisis clearly needs us to reflect on where business schools have gone wrong (Lozano, 2012). While not placing all the blame on higher education, Lozano suggests that both the management discourse theory that is espoused within business schools and the ethos of the institutions that deliver such training to future managers both need to be scrutinised (Lozano, 2012). This aligns with the 50+20 agenda in that it is both the curriculum and the nature of the business school that are identified as needing to changing to create a new vision of a business school in the future.

Wilson and Thomas (2012) question the legitimacy of the business of business schools and suggest that they change their central concerns to issues of central relevance to society and policy including, for example, climate change and exogenous events (Wilson & Thomas, 2012). David, David, and David (2011) compared business graduate CVs against a content analysis of 200 corporate job descriptions finding that low to no proficiency on the job description derived skill sets amongst the graduates CVs (David et al., 2011). Perhaps business school academics are not interested in what goes on in organisations? (Podolny, 2009) Thomas and Wilson (2011) summarise business school failure to three main causes: the knowledge creation is wrong (i.e. they research the wrong things); the pedagogy is wrong (i.e. they teach the wrong things); and the ideology is wrong (almost exclusive focus on free market economics) (Thomas & Wilson, 2011). They call for prioritising learning over value-added in business education, and for greater emphasis to be placed on the ethical and moral questions that lead to a critical examination of modern capitalism.³ Many business schools are trying to embrace some of these priorities and are piloting new pedagogies including issue-centred learning, reflective practice, and transformative learning processes, as showcased on the 50+20 website as emerging benchmarks,⁴ but the wider transformation of the curriculum within business schools has not yet developed.

While Thomas and Wilson (2011) may have an appealing message, the extreme positioning of the message could both alienate and undermine it's the credibility of the points it is trying to raise. While the knowledge creation may be focussed in researching 'the wrong things', not all research in business schools is 'wrong', and the move towards practice-based, meaningful action research through the introduction of professional doctorates rather than PhD's is one way in which business schools could be argued to be shifting in a direction more preferable to the authors. Equally, arguably not all pedagogy is wrong; in order to bring about change, there needs to be some understanding of the world as it is and the how the world got to where it is, and hence some attention needs to be paid to the current curriculum in order to understand how it has got us to where we are now (both in business and in business education). While it is easy to be critical of the current free market economic ideology, it would be interesting to explore what might replace it. Given the criticisms presented, more than one ideological perspective should be presented to develop a greater sense of moral, social and economic reasoning to underpin globally responsible decision making.

Asides from the literature questioning the future role and legitimacy of business schools, an article in Human Relations explored how business leaders legitimised their success over their career history. The researchers found four bases of legitimacy: defying the odds, staying the course, succeeding through talent, and giving back to society. The latter was the weakest of the claims to legitimacy amongst the group of 16 leaders involved in the study, and the only one which did not appear at all in some of the leader's claims to legitimacy (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012). This driver was not therefore clearly evident and dominant in their measure of their own success, and hence was unlikely to have been an influencing

³ Op. cit. Wilson and Thomas (2012).

⁴ <http://50plus20.org/benchmarks>.

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