

Business education can revive itself by building links with the public sector and embracing policy relevance.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/03/21/business-schools-nexus-with-public-sector/

3/21/2014

*Business schools have operated under the same pedagogical model for the past 30 years, making them a prime target for innovation. **Mark Esposito** pinpoints the emergence of a possible nexus between business schools and policy makers – a connection yet to be fully explored but with massive potential to help address complex problems of the future. While private and public sector cooperation is clearly necessary, more understanding is needed for how they can work best together.*



In May 2013, George sent me an email by the subject line “*I have an idea*”. I was sure it was nothing more than some cordial greetings, but I was mistaken. George was an alumnus of the Harvard University Summer School, working for the European Parliament. In actuality, his approach was transformative for the large gap that still exists today between business education and schools of policy. Through his daily exposure to the public sector, George had come to believe that something could be done to bring a fresh perspective to the long-winded reports that typically circulate in the political world, the content of which was often distant from reality.

A few weeks later, I found myself introducing the third edition of the course on [Systems Thinking at Harvard](#). The course began with a video message recorded by [the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz](#), who challenged the teams formed in the class to undertake a systemic analysis of the reasons for the EU crisis. In conjunction with this challenge, President Schulz and, later, MEP Jorgo Chatzimarkakis extended an invitation – the winning team would travel to Brussels in early 2014 to present their findings in front of a joint session of the European Parliament.

Although this event is exceptional on its own, the real opportunity lies in what remains unspoken. This event marks the emergence of a possible nexus between business schools and policy makers – a connection that we have yet to experience on any significant scale in business education. We spend significant amounts of time educating the current generation on the best practices of business. Recently, the term “sustainable” has become prominent in almost every academic discipline associated with the study of business, as business education has attempted to respond to the apparent increase in sensitivity to ethics and sustainability issues.

As academics, we advocate for inter-disciplinary courses. We have coined various intellectual concepts, such as “[capstone project](#)” which is offered at *Grenoble Ecole de Management*, “[action project](#)” which has become a landmark of *Hult International Business School* and “[live case study](#)” pioneered by the former Dean of IMD and currently the Chairman of his own school, Peter Lorange. The above mentioned are examples of Institutions that have tried to walk the talk of pedagogical innovation, albeit they represent still a small minority.

In many other circumstances, we can see that aesthetics often prevail over heuristics. In fact, we are trapped in the same business model that led to the breaking of the ground of business schools in the past 30 years. Although minor structural advancements have emerged, we cannot deny that symptoms of a structural collapse of this model are



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rapidly becoming visible. Perhaps along the way, we missed an opportunity to ensure a functional connection between the education that we offer and public policy. We are still unsure about how the private and public sectors can work together – we rely on the proliferation of NGOs to close that gap. Although such NGOs are noble, their efforts are not enough.

The Systems Thinking experience at Harvard teaches us that we can bring business modelling and the business mind-set into public policy. We can view governments and their stakeholders as elements of a system. We can analyse the degree of power and influence associated with each element of that system. We can grasp nuances, and investigate grey areas, incongruences and possible biases because we are familiar with an understanding of failure as a constituent of business itself rather than as a negative sum.

Business-school students have the language needed to understand complex problems, but they lack the awareness, pride and legitimacy necessary to do so. They spend large portions of their studies looking at best practices and models that inevitably recall a world of the past rather than a projection of the future. This focus creates a significant challenge for business-school students, who are forced to cope with the gap between their expectations of business and the reality after graduation.

In contrast, public servants spend their careers in contexts characterized by controlled (un)certainty, supported by mechanisms of old-school power dynamics. These dynamics permeate activities, creating a culture in which simplicity is an acceptable way to escape the complex questions. Inevitably, this culture results in complacency and inefficiency.

However, we can help the public sector by creating a dialogue that nurtures the ability to navigate the lack of consensus and the partisan views. We can “on-board” holism with practicality. All that is needed is to trigger a need for the right conversations and a context of cooperation.

In the years to come, business and civil society will be forced to recognize that the previous models of the world have ceased to work. There will be a move to look for areas in which new organizational configurations can be established. We can prepare our current students to accept a role in a territory that they do not yet know and they may not necessarily master – a territory that reflects our generational mutation towards a world of inclusion.

So, we salute people like George, who pioneer on the basis of hunches, design concepts, look for support, and embrace shared values. These are the people who are capable of turning glimpses of hope into beams of light.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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