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INTEGRATING LIBERAL ARTS INTO MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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Management education is too narrowly focused and should adopt an inter-disciplinary approach...or face an inevitable demise

In the 2011 book *“Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession”*, the authors made the case that most undergraduate business programmes in the United States were “too narrow, failing to challenge students to question assumptions, think creatively, or understand the place of business in larger institutional contexts”. To overcome these limitations, business schools should “integrat[e] the best elements of liberal arts learning with business curriculum to help students develop wise, ethically grounded professional judgment”.

Building on that, the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland launched the Humanities Business Project (HBP) to provide an European angle to the argument. Seven European business schools, plus Singapore Management University, were selected from 20 institutions who agreed to participate in a study on the practice of inter-disciplinary management education. The final report is currently being finalised, but if the process of putting together the whole enterprise is any indication, incorporating humanities and liberal arts into business school is unlikely to be a straightforward matter.

“We wrote to 107 institutions asking them if they were practicing inter-disciplinary management education, and if so, on what level?” recounts **Ulrike Landfester**, Vice-President of the University of St. Gallen. “The London School of Economics refused twice. 22 responded, 20 were affirmative. The other two said, ‘We want to nothing to do with humanities and social sciences.’”

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Landfester made those revelations at a recent SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre Lunch Talk titled, “Humanities and Social Sciences & the Future of Management Education”, where she presented the main findings of the study. While echoing *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*, HBP also found that the concept of knowledge stood in the way of humanities being integrated into management education.

“One of the problems of integrated management education linking several disciplines together to give a well-rounded type of management education is the concept of knowledge,” Landfester laments. “We still hold on to the idea that knowledge is a kind of coherent entity with no categorical differences between the domains of knowledge or disciplines. This is completely wrong.

“This is an outdated essentialist notion. It doesn’t work like that these days. Management studies, humanities and social sciences produce a very different type of knowledge. What we need to do is relate this type of knowledge to each other. For example, nobody at the schools we visited could explain what exactly ‘management’ is. We asked, ‘Can you tell me in three sentences in a way that I could explain to a student who’s not in management studies?’ While we couldn’t find anyone who could do that, we got some smiles from the usual suspects but we never got a coherent branding narrative on management.”

Landfester, whose background as a philologist almost prevented her from being appointed to her current position – “I did Goethe, Romantic literature, theatre, everything a traditional Germanist did” – also pointed to what she termed “the behavioural complexity of professors”.

“The freedom of academic research and teaching is a precious good but it makes it hell to tell a teacher what he has to do,” she remarks. “If you’re the President or even the programme director of a university, try to get a professor to teach what you think is necessary and the professor will tell you, ‘No. I know better. It’s my discipline.’

“Why did we have so many courses [come under review] at the [2001] Bologna reform? Simple: every sub-discipline is absolutely convinced that [it] needs [its] own master programme. That’s what we get stuck with loads and loads of courses, and students have legitimate complaints about being over-burdened with coursework that offer too little credit points.”

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Practical considerations about professors’ career and academic advancement complicate matters. Academic disciplines evolved intellectually by organising huge bodies of knowledge in a way that makes sense and allows study and analysis. Despite the need for integration and an inter-disciplinary approach to dealing with problems, academics are deep into their own fields by the time they are professors. How can universities achieve both seemingly conflicting goals?

“There’s nothing straightforward about it,” she concedes. “The obvious answer is: As long as universities are hiring scholars for their disciplinary expertise, expecting clearly defining disciplinary profiles which can be evaluated in comparison with other profiles, nothing will change. This is the reason I stress the need for top-down support for IME (Integrated Management Education) projects.

“The disciplinary system is done, it’s going to crack. It either cracks voluntarily, meaning us as universities consciously deal with that, or we can wait until we find no more disciplinary scholars whom we want to recruit that is up to our standards. I know this is a tall order but we’ve been tiptoeing around this issue for ages now.”

She concludes, pointing a finger at the business schools who said no to the HBP and, by extension, the business elite who are reluctant to look beyond the current narrow scope of management education.

“Business schools leaders are still selected from within their own brands. That has been the system of universities, and in the case of business schools that means those who are trained in management studies and scholars as such. They apply the skills and theories of business schools.

“There are some leaders who engage with inter-disciplinary education, but it only works if they know what they are doing. It’s not a fashion to take up. It’s something you have to understand.”