



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

importance of science and medicine, but also that of ethics, history and the political economy (Sher, 2006). Through open public debate and publication it was not only the *literati* but also a wider population who were able to question the role of people, institutions and their place within society. We do not claim here to review the effects of The Enlightenment but one small illustration that is recorded is the development of an independent, critical approach of viewing a wider world promoted by a freedom of thought less tied to a singular institutional way of thinking. The generation of a critical view of the world and the promotion of responsibility is endorsed in this paper in connection to business schools. Seen as a potential singular institution we question their accountability to themselves, their students, future employers and the wider society.

To serve our purposes within this paper, we distinguish between two aspects of 'enlightenment': the propensity to reflect on current behaviour and assumptions and the propensity of seeing values other than profitability. Thus, one of the two dimensions in the 2×2 matrix (Fig. 1) runs horizontally from 'narrow-mindedness' (non-enlightened) to 'open-mindedness' (enlightened). The latter has the capacity to take more parameters into account and is more revealing of alternative thinking than the former. The vertical dimension starts from 'profit-centred' (non-enlightened) culminating in 'open to other societal values' (enlightened).

2. Quadrant 1. The replacer

At these schools, an average of 95 percent of 2011 graduates had jobs three months after graduating (Wecker, 2012).

Quadrant 1 houses a BSG who is profit-centred and narrow-minded (Fig. 1). The type of BSG produced by a business school in this quadrant we call the *Replacer*. Replacers are supposed to 'replace' those existing BSGs who retire or leave their jobs. The newly-educated Replacers have a similar competence to those they are replacing. They do not bring any new ideas to the job; they are no worse (and no better) than the ones they are replacing. Their business school education provides them with the appropriate tools, a skills-based foundation on which to replicate that which has gone before. A speculative justification for a business school to produce Replacers might simply be that somebody has to supply organizations with new BSGs, to replace those who are retiring.

The talents of these unenlightened BSGs are well in line with what Hutchins noted and warned against. He identified a trend in business education, already established in the 1930's when there was a tendency among American colleges and universities to approach their education as professional training, which simply prepared people for their life of work (Hutchins, 1995). The basic assumption upon which this conceptualisation of BSGs rests is training rather than education, and maintenance of the *status quo*. Thus, there is no need for change or improvement, but rather a need to maintain and uphold current standards (and existing inequalities).

This conceptualisation of a BSG can be verified by colleagues who claim that syllabi in business administration should be compiled in close collaboration with practitioners – people working in business. A comment typically illustrating the

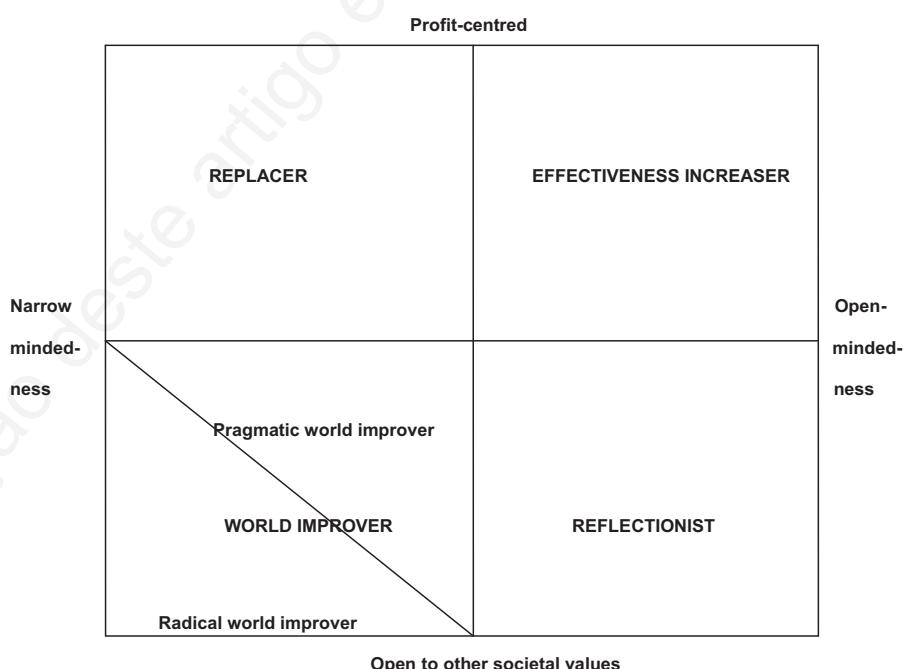


Fig. 1. Typology of business school graduates.

influence on BSGs from this Quadrant is from educators who claim that 'we have no idea what the companies out there need, while sitting in our offices formulating syllabi, pretending that we do have an idea' (Former colleague to one of the authors). There is simply an emphasis on the production of more of 'the same'. One example from an HEI web page is their claim that their BSGs can 'take on any role, in any industry, in any part of the world'. Further, it can be assumed that those who only think of careers will be unlikely to contribute in any other way other than being a Replacer, replacing those 'outgoing' business employees or economists. Potential students are lured by promises to 'become more marketable to their future employers'; 'be able to navigate their career'; 'advance and maximize their career prospects'; 'meet their career goals and lifestyle demands'; and/or 'have a high return on their investment into their education'. There are also business schools who offer 'best career resources', who guarantee that 'almost all their students find jobs within three months after graduating' and 'enjoy the highest median starting salaries'. They call themselves a 'launch-pad into a successful career in business'.

3. Quadrant 2. The effectiveness increaser

It all started with Dr. Vikram Sarabhai and a few spirited industrialists realizing that agriculture, education, health, transportation, population control, energy and public administration were vital elements in a growing society, and that it was necessary to efficiently manage these industries (Indian Institute of Management, 'About IIMA', 2012).

In Quadrant 2 (Fig. 1) we find another type of BSG called the *Effectiveness Increaser*. In our typology these people are profit-centred and open-minded. The latter implies a willingness to continuously consider alternative lines of action and thought to reaching objectives (as long as these lines of thoughts/ways of reaching objectives result in the attainment of the original objectives).

If, on the one hand, we assume that different business schools produce BSGs, in terms of Effectiveness Increasers, of a similar standard then this would imply that the company which is first to replace their older BSGs will gain a competitive advantage until the point of time when other companies replace theirs (cf. Grey, 2003, p. 7). The mission of universities and business schools would, thus, be to produce BSGs who can help the companies to, temporarily at least, out-compete their competitors.

Given the assumption that business schools compete with each other in offering the best education, then the level of competence amongst BSGs will vary in accordance to which school they studied at. Companies with the ability to attract the best BSGs will enjoy a more enduring competitive advantage. If business schools educate Effectiveness Increasers and compete with other business schools in providing the best Effectiveness Increasers to employers, then they are simply helping a relatively few number of companies (namely those that employ their graduates) to increase their own company's effectiveness by employing these graduates. This is something that business schools need to justify. One might question business school education, offered by public universities, and their indirect assistance in offering some companies a competitive advantage. The only way that this could be legitimized is by believing that increased competition is a success factor for society *per se*.

It does not come as a surprise that many business schools on their web sites promise to turn their students into people who can 'outsmart the competition'; 'manage effectively'; 'increase productivity'; and 'operate the business effectively'. They are, in short, efficiently groomed by their business schools to be effective.

4. Quadrant 3. The world improver

In the course of their operations, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice (The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2010; Ch. 1, Section 5).

Quadrant 3 offers a radically different type of BSG in the *World Improver* who is open to considering values, other than profit, but in a relatively narrow-minded way. This BSG type, for instance, reflects the sentiments set out in the Swedish legal framework for universities, as portrayed in the above quotation. They can also be reflected in many business schools' homepages. Business schools claim that they educate BSGs, who 'make a contribution of lasting significance for the world'; to 'create value everywhere in the world'; to 'create new wealth and economic opportunity for all people' and to 'improve the world'.

We have identified two types of World Improvers: the *Pragmatic World Improver* and the *Radical World Improver*. The Pragmatic World Improver, occupying the half of the quadrant closer to profit-centred and open-mindedness (Fig. 1), aims to make companies as humane, ethical, and eco-friendly as possible as long as this does not interfere with the companies' ability to remain profitable. Among the numerous business texts that adopt this as a starting point is one by Bouquet, Crane, and Deutsch (2009). They offer a cynical discussion on how multinational companies invest in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes to increase their profit: 'Companies with a low commitment to corporate social responsibility can reap cost benefits, while those with highly developed corporate social responsibility programmes can build a strong reputation for good citizenship that makes a difference in international markets' (p. 79). We believe that the following quotations from business school home web pages illustrate this sentiment in recognising that 'long-term business success depends not just on

profit, but on responsiveness to resource, social and environmental issues to become more competitive, profitable and sustainable' and 'blending doing the right thing for people and the planet with business goals'.

To put this into perspective, newly-graduated BSGs might entice their company to consider the potential economic benefits of green marketing or the advantages of introducing better working conditions to increase effectiveness. Well-being and effectiveness go hand-in-hand (cf. the so-called 'unitary perspective', e.g., Huczynski, 1992, p. 18; also known as the 'harmony perspective'). This view holds that workers and management share common interests and goals. An alternative interpretation, however, is that the World Improver is simply a more seductive form of the Effectiveness Increaser. It is easy for business schools to justify educating this type of BSG; one who greens effectiveness by claiming that their graduates are groomed for the needs of business world who are, essentially, the clients of the business schools. The bottom line, however, is that company operational goals will be given priority over any form of greening.

The Radical World Improver, occupying the half of the quadrant that comes closer to 'narrow-mindedness' and being 'open to other societal values' (Fig. 1), prizes ethics, humanism, and a clean environment much more than the profitability of individual companies. If they had to choose, this type of BSG would support the former values. A justification for a business school producing this type of BSG for the market place is simply to offer a fashionable alternative to the 'business focused' BSGs. Radical World Improvers can be recognized amongst the radical student population. Frequently they are 'taught' by radical academic staff who claim a radical approach (i.e. critical in accordance with certain radical thinkers). They often refer either to Foucault or Habermas (or both), and all thoughts that are not based on these, or similar thinkers, are given less credit. Although being less profit-centred than the Pragmatic World Improver, the Radical World Improver is just as narrow-minded, or in a way even more narrow-minded. As highlighted by several scholars their narrow-mindedness is shared with their 'trainers'. Ryan (2009), for instance, argues that 'a counter orthodoxy becomes an orthodoxy of its own' (p. 952), or, as Ford et al. (2010) insightfully, express in their self-critique as teachers during management development courses:

What is critical to us may therefore appear uncritical to others who may take it as 'truth'. This reflection led us to a concern that we are perhaps replacing one 'truth' with another (p. S77; see also Parker, 2002; pp. 127–128).

We find this perception of BSGs on business schools' home web pages reflected in the following quotations: 'commitment to focus management knowledge, skills, and technologies for the betterment of society' and 'We do not tolerate discrimination or abuse of any kind towards students or staff and will do everything in our power to ensure that everyone at the Business School has the opportunity to develop themselves to their full potential and that we all continue to enjoy our diverse and hard-working community.'

5. Quadrant 4. The reflectionist

Departing from Chomsky's conception of anarchist thinking and his humanistic view of education, if we talk about culture and openness in many corporations and educational business institutions we have to take into account the myopic discourse of our business, educational and media environments in dealing with such terms usually employed by Chomsky as 'anarchy,' 'openness,' 'cultural diversity,' or 'social responsibility'. Many of these terms would be considered by mainstream business thinking as synonymous with chaos, violence, disorder, pandemonium, and apocalypse (Rabasso & Rabasso, 2010, p. 74).

The fourth quadrant in our typology introduces the *Reflectionist* – a type of BSG that emerges as open-minded and has penchant for (also) 'seeing to other societal values'. In promoting Reflectionists the aim of business schools is 'enlightenment' because as Starkey and Tempest (2009) observe, 'conventional wisdom has led to carnage on Wall Street and in all the world's other major business centres' (p. 576). The students here learn to be critical (or sceptical/questioning) in all of the four senses that Mingers (2000) takes up: '(1) ...being able to evaluate whether people's arguments and propositions are sound in a logical sense...; ... (2) [b]eing sceptical of conventional wisdom, ... taking less for granted and questioning deeper the more fundamental assumptions that we usually make ... (3) [b]eing sceptical of one dominant view...as opposed to a plurality of different but valid perspectives ... (4) [b]eing sceptical of information and knowledge...questioning the validity of the knowledge and information that is available, and recognizing that it is never value-free and objective' (pp. 225–226).

Many scholars, not least referring to the anti-utilitarian educational guru Wilhelm von Humboldt, have argued that to educate people in free thinking and free inquiry is the very purpose of university education, or at least that this type of education be emphasised more than the utilitarian purpose of teaching people 'useful' knowledge (Calhoun, 2009; Kolakowski, 1997; Ryan, 2009). French and Grey (1996) suggest that one should view management education as an education in political science. One may study politics, but never become a politician. The same, they attest, might apply to management education. Business schools' primary aim, and consequently the BSGs' very purpose should be to critically comment, review and examine business practice rather than praise and teach people how to replicate it. As French and Grey (1996) have succinctly observed, 'management education would begin from the desire to stress its 'educative' rather than its managerial aspects. ... This involves an appreciation of management as a social, political and moral practice' (p. 6).

The *Reflectionist*, therefore, has a perspective in which management approaches and management techniques are permeated by values (cf. Grey, 2004) which can be agreed with or not, and criticized. The *Reflectionist* is trained in 'reflexive critique' (Antonacopoulou, 2010) which 'encourages a critique of existing ways of seeing, a critique of prevailing perspectives,

a critique of arguments and propositions (verbal and written), a critique of commonsense as common (it rarely is), a critique of received wisdom and dominant assumptions, a critique of personal biases and partialities based on personal interests' (p. S9). In contrast to the Radical World Improver, the critical thinking performed by the Reflectionist is not limited to a specific critical theory. Rather, it includes 'being critical of the critical orientation one applies in assessing any situation including one's own reason and practice' (Antonacopoulou, 2010, p. S9) and using the critical frame of reference also for self-criticism and reflection, something which (even) critical academics need to make time to do (see e.g., Cunliffe, Forray, & Knights, 2002, p. 489).

We note that some business schools emphasize 'intellectual engagement'; 'respect for others'; 'integrity'; 'owning one's actions'; and 'critical analytical thinking' on their homepages.

6. Conclusions

Instructors who have received a 'conventional' management education are likely to pass this on (Grey, 2004, p. 184).

This paper has proposed a typology to overview some typical conceptualisations of BSGs. Insights from colleagues and revelations from business school home web pages added to the BSG typology. We have named these business school graduates Replacers, Effectiveness Increasers, World Improvers (either Pragmatic World Improvers or Radical World Improvers) and Reflectionists. Perhaps the typological conceptualisation of BSGs can offer a common frame of reference to aid constructive discussion and debate and to stimulate future research. We suggest that, as a matter of self-regulatory evaluation, all business school staff and students regularly monitor their approach to learning and education, and critically ascertain 'how' and 'what' they have been teaching and studying respectively.

From a wider societal perspective Radical World Improvers or Reflectionists might be beneficial. This would strike an accord with the suggestion that business schools should serve some kind of public interest (Ferlie, McGivern, & De Moraes, 2010; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004; pp. 1503–1506). We believe that even private business schools, financed by parents and sponsors, might benefit from double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996) by not only questioning their own mission, purpose and benefit but also doing so for the wider community.

Educating Reflectionists, something which we clearly favour, does not necessarily rule out educating other types of BSGs simultaneously. As Hutchins (1995) noted, universities are preparing people for their life of work and there should be freedom to experiment and explore other ideals as long as the institutions offer a critical platform from which to question all ideals. A BSG should be able to increase effectiveness because an organization may not be able to grow purely on ideology and principles, no matter how correct the principals. In addition to being able to increase effectiveness, the BSG should feel equally comfortable with the concepts of improvement and reflection. In the long run, however, companies and society might benefit from those who strive towards making the environment safer, kinder and more secure. Perhaps the ability and willingness to critically reflect should be the indispensable 'thread' that universities weave throughout their teaching.

Business schools might be considered for a partial, if not a total, refurbishment but what they might attempt to change is perhaps for another paper. We have one suggestion to offer. Just as doctors have an ethical protocol to abide by and an ethics committee to answer to when they do wrong, the same might be considered for the business community. So numerous are the examples of wrong doing, from simple deception to downright fraud that, just like the doctor who can lose their license to practice medicine, so too might a businessperson lose their right to practice business (Currie et al., 2010). To some extent, the school from which the wrong-doer graduated might also be held accountable. This might reduce the propensity of students to study business solely to maximize profit. Pfeffer and Fong (2004) warn against and discourage schools to teach only profit-maximization, i.e. the 'self-interest' paradigm or, as Antonacopoulou (2010) calls it, 'an economic logic' (p. S10; see also Tourish, Craig, & Amernic, 2010; pp. S53–S54).

The rise of business education is historically rooted in a neo-liberal context where there have appeared a deregulation of market and globalization (e.g., Grey, 1996), and under such a context business schools also face a stiff competition that seems to lionize certain versions of business education (Korpiaho, Päiviö, & Räsänen, 2007). However, while this particular context may result in a potential homogeneity of business education or even education in general (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), we still witness a diversity of business schools that resists a universalized standard:

...unlike most mainstream western business schools, our concern is as much with challenging the status quo rather than perpetuating it. We create space to debate management and seek in doing so to give voice to those individuals, groups and societies who are traditionally overlooked in global management and organizational processes, to propose alternative forms of organization (University of Leicester School of Management, 'Our Vision', 2012).

Hence, while we believe that business schools' action space is limited by various kinds of institutional constraints, our intention with the present paper is to encourage further debate, which might result in more business schools joining this wave of resistance.

To finish it seems appropriate to refer to the words of C.P. Biddle, a former Assistant Dean at Harvard Business School, who said in 1926 that the purpose of the business school is to train 'heads' or future leaders in business, not 'hands' or merely successful money-makers (Khurana, 2007, p. 5). We would add to Biddle and also suggest 'souls' as well as 'moral backbone'.

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