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# The credibility of the business school and the new Carnegie paradigm

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In a Financial Times article that appeared in 2014, British leadership scholar David Collinson argued that the introduction of “McDonaldised” US-style audit cultures stifled rather than enhanced the quality of research in business schools in the UK. One of the things that attracted his attention was the management practice of using the publication of peer-reviewed articles in specific journals as the only yardstick for assessing the relevance of scholarly research activity. Oddly enough, this excludes measures for what outsiders might still consider the core business of any school, i.e. the quality of teaching.

## Business schools are letting us down

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This is not the only misgiving one can formulate against a system that claims the high ground, but falls short on delivery. Historians of science have long understood that many breakthroughs take place at the margins, or outside the scientific mainstream. At times they even have to battle it out against prevailing paradigms. This explains the inertia that innovators have to overcome before they can rally a critical mass of early adopters. This in itself is not new. And neither is it a reason for concern, providing a marketplace for competing ideas continues to exist.

It is here, however, that business schools are letting us down, by demolishing the marketplace and making way for a research monoculture: most journals on the various ‘quality lists’ brandished by university managers as their New Bible - and a crucial simplifier of their strategizing - adhere to one or another form of positivist empiricism. Unfortunately, many contributions in this school excel not in sense-making, but in the slightness of the increments they add to already existing theory. Meanwhile, equally legitimate alternative or critical lines of enquiry and methodologies are given the cold shoulder by the cream of the crop of journals.

## A mechanistic approach to organizations

The performative assessment culture that is increasing its footprint in business schools also dismisses intellectual output other than articles in quality lists journals. This emulation of practice in the natural sciences was justified in the past, when the discipline of business and management still had to establish its scientific credibility. Nowadays, however, there is no reason why the discipline should continue to limit the venue and form of debate to such a small number of outlets and channels, and to one type of scientific contribution. The *raison d'être* of the natural sciences is different from that of business and



Recent calls that business schools are becoming irrelevant base themselves on the observation that, instead of addressing real-world problems or informing modern management practice, the apparent purpose of much of their research is to provide a forum for a new type of scholasticism, whose loftiness serves nobody but the 'paradigm community'.

### **Intellectual eco-systems of heterodoxy and alterity**

While the charge sheet against the turn taken by many business schools is beginning to be established by critical scholars (another topical issue are retractions of articles in top journals, and similar on-goings), this is not my main point. Intriguingly, Collinson also touched upon the fact that it was in pockets of the much-criticized US educational system that intellectual eco-systems of heterodoxy and alterity were weathering the ongoing storm. The fetishisation of audit culture then is a truly British, and European, phenomenon, and can be partly explained by the lack of philanthropism on par with the United States.

The European disciples are equally likely to sleep through another minor revolution that is currently taking place across the Atlantic. In a study published in 2011 and titled Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession, the influential Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching urged a major reconfiguration of management education.

### **Liberal learning for the Profession**

It has to be recalled that the last time a major shake-up occurred in the discipline, in 1959, this was based on recommendations from the same entity. While the criticism then had been that business schools were not sufficiently distinct from vocational schools, and had to become more solidly embedded in the academe, the new Carnegie paradigm holds that management education today is off target: it produces managers who have an unwarranted faith in linear one-way causation and an instrumentalist frame of mind, both of which incapacitate thinking outside the box and comprehending the bigger picture.

The new study insinuates that this is the worst possible position to be in for confronting the sustainability challenge. It therefore calls for a new generation of mindful and integrative thinkers, manager-humanists and leaders capable of reconciling opposites, and argues that this educational goal can only be achieved through an inclusion, in business school curricula, of the systemic skills taught through the liberal arts and humanities.

### **Remodifying the focus of management education**

In concrete terms, this means that the modes of thought which became the focus of management education after 1959 (logical empiricism, rational choice and agency theory, or LERCAT) are outdated and have to give way to an emphasis on the new modes of analytical thinking, multiple framing, reflective exploration of meaning, and practical reasoning.

This puts the new Carnegie paradigm at odds with the recent direction taken by many management schools. It is equally out of phase with the factory model that underlies not only the way research contributions are assessed, but also the 'product' that is outputted at the end of the line.

However, contrary to the situation in 1959, when there were only a handful of business schools in the world (and these were concentrated in a small number of places), today's Carnegie recommendations are likely to run into a barrage of hostile fire, or be ignored. With a never-ending torrent of candidates from emerging economies for competitive places at reputable Western business schools, deans inaccessible to reasoned argument do have the option of putting their heads in the sand and playing ostrich.

### **The role of modern philanthropy**

Salvation is not likely to come from academics and staff either, as Martin Parker, professor at the University of Leicester School of Management, noted in a speaking out piece on 'change management' at an anonymized British business school. The last hope really lies with the business school's other stakeholders, and in particular the business community. As the example of Andrew Carnegie shows, there is a lot to be said about committed philanthropists who provide correctives to overblown mainstream agenda.

