

Confronting the Janus-Faced Approach to Sustainability in Business Education

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In 2013, one year after the appointment of a new Director for Research and Innovation, Regent Business School's management and academic staff were bombarded with robust argument regarding the integrity and relevance of the institution's academic curriculum, specific to the issue of sustainability. The incumbent director was of the opinion that given business education's traditional bias towards economic performance and strategic management, it had lost its moral compass in dealing with issues regarding the despoliation of the natural environment and human sustainability. We soon realised that we were dealing with a champion for sustainability. The leader in question was head of Environmental Studies and Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research at the erstwhile University of Durban Westville, Executive Director for Outreach at the University of KwaZulu Natal and an International Urban Research Fellow of Johns Hopkins University in the USA. At a now common event at REGENT Business School – called the Brown Bag Seminar Series – senior management and academics were challenged by the Director to interrogate the core business education curriculum and to include issues of sustainability. He convincingly argued for a paradigm shift not only in terms of graduate attributes and the curriculum, but also in terms of transforming the prevailing mind-sets of individuals. Indeed, further debates ensued and we were assiduously persuaded that society and social issues were of very little value in conventional business education and there was dire need for a theoretical *volta-face*.

Equally, we were vociferously challenged to interrogate business education praxis which the Director informed us was self-centered to the extent that it falsely made assumptions about its ability to diffuse its overall pedagogic successes in the education of future business managers for the greater good of society. In short, the trickledown effect does not work. He was steadfast on this issue, and insisted that we critically question the quintessential multiplier challenges of our time (poverty, inequality, food and water insecurity, conflicts and human sustainability) and to appreciate the extent to which the prevailing business ethos had contributed to these intractable problems. He argued that business education needed to interrogate the foundational principles of a false premise which privileges the belief that individual and corporate organisational success will in the long run engender societal advantages. The recent global financial crises and the food price increases of 2008, puts to rest this false proposition. Whilst there continues to be contestations with the incumbent on a number of his theoretical propositions, we were one on the need to redefine the framework of business education to include an integrated approach to questions of sustainability. Fundamental to this organisational paradigm shift was the need to reintroduce issues of society and move them to the centre stage of a business education curriculum and narrative. Business education academics were obliged to incorporate issues of societal sustainability into their praxis, especially in terms of teaching

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and learning strategies and in this respect to confront their own values and attitudes. It was the right thing to do. We had concluded our first step in rethinking business education with a new and inspired perspective. We had found our own moral compass point for sustainability. Thus began our sustainability expedition.

After much discussion and debate we decided to integrate issues of sustainability and ethics into the core curriculum of business education at Regent Business School. Simultaneously, we decided to establish a Centre for Green Entrepreneurship to compliment the research and policy making endeavours of the Centres for Public Sector Management and Health Care Management. Our journey of discovery informed us that as academics in business education were led to believe that in order to become *specialists* in a particular subject field, they had to keep their intellect focused only on their area of inquiry. In the process, it seems that academics and researchers lost perspective of the larger picture of human endeavour and the value of inter-disciplinarity. We seemed to have adopted a state of 'blind consciousness' – happy in the belief that the 'silo effect' of knowledge production was in the best interest of all concerned. We were wrong. Our subject field was simply a component or a cog of the knowledge production arena. In reality, we needed a holistic and multi-dimensional picture of the human endeavour, not a uni-linear parochial one.

In terms of the vision to integrate sustainability into our core business education curriculum, we realised that we needed to promote an idea – a way of life – which would empower our students to believe that as graduates and potential new generation leaders that they needed to espouse a philosophy which would kindle economic enterprise that is both socially appropriate and just and environmentally sound. This captured the notion of graduates for the 21st century, who have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for future leaders and entrepreneurs. Our intellectual voyage of discovery also alerted us to the fact that sustainability cannot be achieved by piecemeal solutions. We also realised that it was incumbent on us to assist to critically engage with issues reshaping human value systems.

We needed to be innovative and open-minded, in the hope that sustainability can be achieved through a new slate of thought processes – interrogating the very theoretical foundations of our curriculum and teaching and learning agenda. The issue of global warming and its multiplier effects, for example, had to be seriously considered and factored into our business education curricula – *in toto*. Our teaching and learning and research vision, likewise, had to respond to our contemporary environmental predicament, if not, pending disaster. Furthermore, our pedagogy needed to adopt a new perspective which demanded a holistic view of problems and challenges. Silo-based knowledge production is simply inappropriate. Collective action and response is in the begging. Our interrogation of the serious questions also suggests contributions and inputs from different stakeholders and related fields of expertise was an exercise that could not be dismissed. Dialogue between various stakeholders helped shape the overall outcomes of our new business education curriculum. The upshot was to empower our students to find innovative and sustainable solutions to the environmental crises.

We are now not only hopeful, but convinced that REGENT's new approaches business education curriculum in sustainability will significantly contribute towards stimulating sustainable

societies. We aim to mould a new generation of scholars, professionals and educators with the necessary skills and vision to help us address the fundamental questions related to human well-being for the pursuit of a good life for all on finite planet earth. We are confident that this new trajectory of sustainability will positively enhance the capacities of our students to provide innovative responses to the environmental crises.

The seeds of sustainable education in the core curriculum of business education have been sown at REGENT Business School and have proven to be flourishing. They have provided fertile ground for the establishment of green pedagogy and research. The imperatives of the need to sincerely address the global warming crisis have afforded us a meaningful journey of self discovery. We aim to extend the intrinsic benefits of our sustainability expedition to an international platform – our second international thematic conference on ‘Business Not As Usual’.

We invite all higher education providers of business education, scholars, academics, researchers, professionals, policy makers, civil society organizations and education statutory bodies to join us on this journey of sustainability. We owe it to future generations.

We welcome your comments, critique and suggestions.

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7th April 2014

Durban

South Africa