

### Shut down the business school

Some time ago, while representing a business school in Africa, I sat down to have a meal with the dean of another UK business school, the head of an African business institute and several other academics. We were later joined by a prominent politician. Over the main course, the dean shared with me how he had developed a terrific PhD programme. He had signed up 35 people in this visit to do PhDs, most of them related to the local banking industry. Suitably impressed by this number, I commented on how lucky he was to have so many staff in the business school to support this cohort. He assured me they did not have that many, but that the beauty of this product was that he would organise three sessions each year where he and a colleague would go fly out to the country for three days and supervise the cohort together. The cohort would complete their PhDs in three years, despite most being in fulltime employment, by focussing on a series of milestones. There would be support supervisors to focus on the disciplinary detail, working via Skype and email. When I asked him what these PhDs would contribute to theory and practice in their areas, and how he would know that if there was not sustained expert disciplinary support, he suggested it was more important to maintain the milestone formula; 30,000 words literature review, 10,000 words methodology chapter and so on. The politician confirmed this, noting that he and the head of the African institute would both receive PhDs in this cohort. Their director of studies for both would be the Dean, who was responsible for brokering institutional contracts with both of them. Over dessert, I quizzed them further about conflict of interest and different forms of academic corruption. The first question led to alterations in the supervision teams. The second was less easy to pin down because the nature of a PhD, involving critical thinking and original research did not seem clear to them. This was corruption in the broader sense of breaking down the meaning of the academic practice (Robinson, 2013). Here was a good example of the commodification of education; painting by numbers. The real focus was on making money not on higher learning or research, all to maintain the business school, and in turn to maintain the parent university.

Just the latest in a series of books and articles to attack such practices is Martin Parker's *Shut Down the Business School; What's Wrong with Management Education* (2018). Parker's book is a formidable polemic against business schools, summing up critiques of business schools over the past decades. At times, it has the air of polite academic reflection (the author even turning down the exclamation mark recommended by the publishers for the title). But his critique urges radical thinking about an institution which seems to have lost any semblance of integrity.

In this editorial, I will consider some of his arguments and then focus on the responsibility of business schools and universities more generally. Universities have seen business schools as "cash cows", selling "products" to customers focussed in business utility. This consumer model was reinforced by the introduction of payment of university fees. Worse than this, in the credit crisis business schools, in reports, research, consultancy and teaching, consistently supported or ignored behaviour which was either corrupt or did not reflect the practice of responsibility (Khurana, 2010), and were well rewarded for it. It is not just that they did not have the courage to challenge business. They did not even reflect on their values and practice enough to make the practice of courage an issue. Not surprisingly this has led to arguments that business schools were partially responsible the credit crisis (Sun *et al.*, 2010), and that they and associated models of practice have influenced the commodification of HE and the managerialist approach of governments to HE.



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This demands dialogue about the values and purpose of business schools. Two things have skewed such an articulation of purpose: the uncritical acceptance of utility, and the focus on the scientific model of business studies. The first of these sees the purpose of business schools as largely contributing to individual and national economic performance. From the stress on performance comes the need to develop tools, most often based in rational and linear approaches to management and problem solving. The second largely provides theory and empirical support for this performative approach.

Having worked in a business school for the past five years, I find it extraordinary how this performative approach has dominated teaching and research, exemplified by the way in which agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) still clings to the curriculum. The dissonance is there for all to see. This so-called theory is based not in science but in the presumption that corporate leaders are not to be trusted. Their motivation is entirely self-centred, and they are to be controlled by the board largely through money. Go to the seminar room next door and the work on leadership goes ever deeper into complexity, the need to develop on-going trust in leadership, and the need to challenge the assumption the CEO actually does know everything. This suggests that performance is not simply about hitting targets but also about relationships. Faced by such arguments and the leakage of values into economics there is a rear-guard action (Erhard and Jensen, 2014) which argues that trust is based on the success of intended performance, which is the basis of a non-normative view of integrity. From this we are told that genuine science must avoid normativity. At this point, we are into major questions about the nature of theory, how theory relates not just to practice but to value (worth) and values and how any idea of worth can be justified (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). None of this is addressed by business schools, at least not beyond the curriculum.

The second problem has been the focus on science. Bennis and O'Toole (2005; Bennis, 2012) note how, focused in the development of the MBA, business studies adopted a strictly scientific approach, partly to legitimise its academic identity. This is reinforced by research exercises which focus on the production of starred journal articles, further focusing on the narrow rational approach to management and leadership, and leading to a polarisation of theory and practice, with academic energy and expertise focussed on the development of theory (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Bennis, 2012). This in turn has led an erosion of engagement with business.

All of this offers a picture of fragmentation, polarisation and even denial of responsibility ("we are simply doing what the university wants, bringing in money"). Absent from this is any reflection or dialogue which attempts to bring together theory and practice with value. The presence of value would bring in social, psychological and intellectual complexity, reflecting the reality of practice. It would also bring a focus on the skills and virtues needed to negotiate such complexity, not least the practice of judgment. There are voices which argue for this, not least in leadership studies (Western, 2008; Robinson and Smith, 2014), but there is little evidence that business schools actually articulate this debate as part of the development of their identity, in their management and governance.

With polemic verve Parker tees up such dissonance, doffs his cap at the good guys who have tried to change things and offers a radical solution, to which I want to respond. We know the good guys. The first good guys are in critical management theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), behavioural economics (Mullainathan and Thaler, 2001) and organisational wisdom (Thompson and Bevan, 2013). Such approaches want show a new perspective on business practice, not least deliberation which is creative, i.e. not focussed on narrow problem solving. Diagonal thinking enables clearer perception, taking decision-making away from prescribed options to an openness to possibilities (Nussbaum 2000, and see especially Boulous Walker, 2016 for a holistic view of deliberation and learning). The focus

on personal and organisational wisdom suggests the need to develop the virtues and skills of responsible practice (Thompson and Bevan, 2013).

The second group of good guys is of those who look to reflect on the identity of business in society. These thinkers emphasise the social ontology of business. Business is a part of society not apart from it. This is the basis for an identity of business or management that is about service in much the same way as the great professions of medicine, law or engineering. Each of these has a pre moral good (Airaksinen 1994) which show the worth of its purpose and practice, such as health or justice (Khurana, 2010); providing real resonance with Medical, Law Schools. Hence, Khurana wants us to make business or management into a profession.

Both of these approaches are from the inside. A third makes use of the external reputation of the UN; the PRME, principles for responsible management education. This provides several things: support of the external body; a network of practice across business schools (each country has its own PRME network); a focus on integrated practice in the curriculum; a focus on real change. There is some form of accountability in this, with business schools having to report back to PRME every two years.

Parker views of all of these attempts positively and has been involved in at least one. The problem is that while all are worthy they have had little effect on the culture of business schools. The first is simply an alternative theory and therefore will compete with other theories in the curriculum unless the leadership of the school aims to locate it more in the identity of the school. There is not sufficient traction in this to push back against managerialist pressure from the University, not simply to make money but to make financial cuts. The same thing can be said about the second approach. It looks good in the pages of Harvard Business Review; however, it does not help the business school hit its targets.

PRME has become something of a hostage. On the one hand it offers a fig leaf that will cover the business school, to show that they have a conscience or a sense of social responsibility. The logo looks good, but there is little sense of understanding the ideas or practice involved. As Parker puts it:

When pressed, business school deans insist that they do care about diversity, the environment and social justice. Look at the modules we offer on corporate social responsibility and business ethics! Look at our signatures on the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education! Look at our recycling bins! (Parker, 2018b).

Recent and ongoing research (Kaul and Smith, 2012) confirms that business school deans have little grasp of what PRME actually involves or how it might be integrated into both the curriculum and relationships with business. In the face of this Parker argues that internal dissent has become institutionalised. It is recognised by some academic journals; hence, business schools are happy to tolerate it. However, in practice business schools are too busy oiling the wheels that enable survival to actually apply much of the insights to their practice.

Parker argues that all of this leaves the real problem untouched, that business schools teach only one form of organising – market managerialism. This leads to isomorphism. Business schools look the same, with generic modern architecture and interiors focused on business mantras; they teach the same ideas based in performativity; and they all charge massive fees. The business school pays attention to sustainability and business ethics in the curriculum, but, Parker argues, its actions, and hidden curriculum, offer a different view of values and worth, focused in the development of heroic transformational leadership and an underlying ideology of rational egoism. And it sells this ideology as a science. All this simply reinforces the financial usefulness of the business school to the university in which it rests. It also undermines the integrity of the business school and the university itself, not least becomes it undermines any plausible view of truth. In a recent article, Parker sums this

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up and how easy it is for business schools to get away with it, commenting on the nature of knowledge:

Because it borrows the gown and mortarboard of the university, and cloaks its knowledge in the apparatus of science – journals, professors, big words – it is relatively easy to imagine that the knowledge the business school sells and the way that it sells it somehow less vulgar and stupid than it really is ([Kaul and Smith, 2012](#)).

In effect, Parker is offering a picture of the business school as confidence trickster, offering ways to achieve success in business which actually subvert truth and integrity and encourage personal greed. In the light of that Parker argues that business schools have to go. Some might argue that they are already on the slippery downward slope with the worth of the MBA in question. In their place, Parker offers a radical overhaul of management education, proposing what he calls a “School for Organising”. Such a School would first recognise that the practice of management transcends the market and thus would not restrict itself to the study of managerial capitalism. It would offer a wider interdisciplinary and trans-professional approach, giving weight to social sciences and reflecting on “the variety of ways in which human beings can come together and solve collective problems”. Different human arrangements include families, co-operatives, collectives, NGOs, trade unions and family businesses. A good example ([Bounds, 2013](#)) is the steady growth in social enterprise. Parker looks at the example of the cooperative Suma which operates on the principle of “self-management”, not “management by managers”. The co-op thus enabled its members to work through not simply CEO remuneration but the philosophy and practice of remuneration to all 161 employees. The result was an equal pay policy with all employees earning £40,000 a year in 2016. In turn this reinforced the responsibility of all staff for the success of the organisation, with employees taking turns in doing multiple tasks. Rational egoism, Parker suggests, simply reinforces inequality in every aspect of business. Focus on responsibility can actually contribute to equality. The School for Organising would enable greater critical thinking, more awareness of the social, economic and physical environment, greater creativity and greater, shared, responsibility.

The School for Organising is a bold idea, precisely because it moves away from corporate interests and focuses on a key aspect of practice, and related disciplines and associated data. It moves away from narrow, predetermined views of context and looks to build successful organisations in whatever context. It also reinforces a key aspect of higher education itself, disinterestedness.

Parker’s book neither does address the politics of this radical idea nor does it address the detail of how the new school might look. It does, however, raise critical challenges. First, it raises a challenge to the good guys. In a sense they are precisely too good. It is easy to represent business ethics, CSR and so on as simply about goodness. At which point it becomes a matter of trying to work out what goodness has to do with the practice of business. The danger there is that the core practice remains the same; informed by the underlying world view of rational egoism. Of course, it is not just rational egoism. There are also a number of values called on to support this, not least freedom. The point is that the relationship between “goodness” and “success” is not actually worked through. Neither idea is really challenged. Ultimately, this leads to organisations who have developed impressive CSR policies or ethical codes but have not practised responsibly, from Enron to the credit crisis ([Sun et al., 2010](#)). Perhaps, the most striking case has been that of the Mid Staffs Hospital Trust in the UK. Here hospital staff became so focused in a form of market managerialism that they were unaware of the needs of the patients or the questions from the families, leading to over 200 unnecessary patient deaths ([Francis Report, 2013](#)). Some refer

to this phenomenon as “organisational schizophrenia”, involving a breakdown in rational meaning and affective response. The members of staff at the Trust could not believe they had behaved in the way they did.

Such a breakdown of meaning can be amplified in business schools not least because of the silo thinking of disciplinary. Then, very quickly, the wall goes up between the discipline of business ethics and the discipline of marketing or whatever. At best this leads unnecessary duplication; for instance models of ethical decision making and discrete models of decision making (as if the two are different!). At worst it leads polarisation which undervalues the different disciplines or sees one as intrusive or irrelevant. The discipline of ethics can then be seen as a matter of changing the values of the other rather than helping them to reflect.

This is highlighted in a conceptual failing around the idea of responsibility and how it is used in business schools. It is seen largely as a moral concept. This fails to make the connection between responsibility as a moral concept and responsibility as an intellectual, psychological, social and practical idea. Aristotle signals this when he suggests that practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue and is essential to ethics. It focusses less on core ethical values and more on the purpose and worth of the practice in question. A responsible leader, for instance, then becomes someone who knows the value of their task as leader, as much as any ethical values about the how particular relationships involved should be pursued. The rest of the intellectual virtues then connect learning to practice, to awareness, to value: scientific knowledge (episteme), art (techne), contemplative reason (nous), wisdom (sophia), deliberative excellence (euboulia), understanding (synesia), quickness of mind (agxinoia), consideration (gnome), consideration for others (suggnome) and cleverness, including the ability to carry out actions and achieve goals (deinotes). All of these things work together in the practice or responsibility alongside the moral virtues of courage, justice and so on. To put it bluntly, responsibility is as much about knowing what you think and do as about doing good.

To develop this, however, would require the business school taking responsibility for an underpinning philosophy of learning, in relation to core purpose and values. Such a philosophy would inform the identity of the school, giving the basis for the disinterested perspective that Parker argues for. This is less about business schools *per se* and more about higher education. [Barnett \(1994\)](#) argues that underpinning higher education is higher learning, critical reflection which is central, though not exclusive, to personal growth. Higher education is in essence emancipatory and holistic. In effect, it liberates the student from the narrow focus of the disciplines, enabling reflective thinking which can critique the assumptions of the discipline and look beyond to relations with other areas. Products of this process are “self understanding and self empowerment”, enabling students to “come into themselves” ([Barnett, 1994](#)).

This is higher-order thinking involving the development of “analysis, evaluation, criticism and even imagination” ([Barnett, 1994](#), p. 85), and goes beyond interdisciplinarity to a transdisciplinarity focused in practice and the social context of this practice. It is precisely such ideas and practice that can inform the idea of employability, connecting thinking, value and practice. Too often business schools uncritically set out employability skills without knowing how they connect or how they can be developed ([Dowson, 2015](#); [Robinson, 2005](#)).

These skills are precisely learned through the practice of critical discourse ([Oakshott, 1962](#)). [Ford \(2003, p. 23\)](#) suggests that at the heart of collegiality is “intensive, disciplined face to face conversation and debate between contemporaries and across generations.” This critical conversation ([Oakshott, 1962](#)) is one that enables the student and researcher to hear the many voices, appreciate their difference and engage complexity, and take responsibility for what they think and do, and how they learn.

This means that business schools need to take responsibility for their identity. Other “professional schools” like law and medicine do not have this problem. Yes, they will reflect



debate about the nature of health or law and how it is distributed, but they are clear about these as pre-moral goods, and therefore about the service of their professions to society. Business schools do not represent a profession, and it is not clear that what their social worth is. Branding is no substitute for such a good, focussed on image rather than worth). [Khurana et al. \(2005\)](#) and others, of course, did try to articulate the idea of management as a profession, with social worth. However, the comparison with other professions is not exact precisely because they have a framework of discipline and self-regulation which can prevent members from practising. Such arrangements focus on the nature and practice of professional responsibility. A school of “organising” would not address this issue. The term profess involves claims about quality, feeling, status or expertise, or faith or allegiance in something of worth. There is no “profession” of organiser. The absence of a significant overarching professional focus is reinforced by the number of groups who want to claim status of a professional body, in PR and communications, human resources, leadership, management, accountancy and so on. Parker’s vision then may need to go back to the drawing board and engage these different strands of identity as part of the challenge to the business school. This kind of change would need wide strategy that could involve sustained dialogue between stakeholders in developing an account of values, purpose and practice. This includes dialogue with staff and students, the different professional and discipline bodies, the university, and regional and national business leaders. From such a dialogue emerges particularity, embodied in the different narratives. These can be displayed in the school, chipping away at isomorphism. The problem with isomorphism is precisely that it avoids the practice of critical agency or the development of particular narrative.

The business school would then need to re-examine its underlying assumptions. At a UK business school conference in 2016, I asked the head of the Higher Education Funding Council what the philosophy of higher education was that underpinned her presentation on new regulation around teaching. She asked the colleague sitting next to her to share this. He then articulated not a philosophy of higher education but a “philosophy” of accountability; how academics and institutions would be held more accountable. This in turn reflects a market management philosophy of business schools, and the university ([De Vita and Case, 2016](#)), which characterises the relationship of students to university as that of consumer. The UK labour politician Peter Mandelson argued for this essentially contract relationship[1] as the proper focus for accountability. However, this is to assume that contract is the prime and proper focus for accountability. Contract, whilst it is part of accountability, does not have to be a function of the consumer model primarily. Contract accountability is focussed in shared interests rather than shared responsibility for purpose and practice. To stress contract, without any awareness of the underlying philosophy of higher education, and thus any sense and justification of worth and purpose, can easily lead to instrumental rationality ([Bauman, 1989](#)). [De Vita and Case \(2016\)](#) suggest that contract ignores a quite different base for accountability, collegiality. Collegiality is focused in a community of learning, where responsibility for, and commitment to, learning is shared between students and staff. This sets up a dynamic of mutual and plural accountability. [Ramsden \(2009\)](#) among others suggests that focussing on consumerism, often articulated as “student-centred”[2], runs the danger of developing a culture that is quite the opposite of collegiality, stressing satisfaction of individual rights rather than shared learning. It is focussed on passive receipt of goods and is strongly affective, compared to a critical community that requires active engagement focussed in purpose and shared responsibility. This demands greater focus on dialogue and less on surveys to measure satisfaction, or the encouragement of organisational isomorphism ([Thompson and Bevan, 2013](#)) which radically changes the nature of contract. Genuine dialogue with students reveals perspectives that go beyond narrow market focus. A student survey commissioned by the

Higher Education Academy, UK, and National Union of Students ([Drayson et al., 2014](#)) found that 80 per cent of students believe that sustainable development should be actively promoted and incorporated by UK universities in the curriculum. This finding has been confirmed over several years and also suggests that the belief is strengthened as students' progress through their studies. A second significant finding is that students feel that developing attitudes and skills related to sustainability is important to their employability. Remarkably respondents also showed a desire for roles that would positively influence social and environmental change, and just over half of respondents said they would be willing to make a salary sacrifice of £3000 to work in such a role. A third aspect of the survey is the way it connects the different cognate concepts with a wide definition of sustainability attitudes and skills, including CSR and business ethics. Such surveys suggest that not all students buy into the narrow positivistic approaches of much business studies. They have different perspectives on worth, and the surveys suggest that students are prepared to take responsibility for developing these ideas; as partners not customers.

Reflection on higher learning takes the focus away from business schools and onto higher education and thus raises the question about the responsibility of the university. By allowing business schools to continue their narrow focus universities demonstrate a lack of integrity, partly shown by a lack of mutual and plural accountability. The school of business is mutually accountable to the university, the students, the different professional bodies inside and outside business, each of which proposes a strong sense of worth (see e.g. ICAEW 2009), and the wider business and social world. The absence of this was exemplified by the case of Nottingham University Business School's acceptance of several million pounds for a Centre for CSR. Whatever the rights of this, the Business School did not see itself as accountable to the Medical School, the Student Union, the wider student population, the University or wider stakeholders ([Robinson, 2011](#)). Far from the University enabling dialogue that reinforced mutual accountability, and with that any sense of shared identity, it encouraged silo thinking and the fragmentation of responsibility.

This suggests that any change has to be a function of the dialogue between the different stakeholders, and the development of a shared narrative. Engaging the stakeholders means developing partnerships, not "selling products", and the sign of success would be both the particularity noted above and great differences in idea and practice.

A key stakeholder in all, and therefore a key agent of change, is government. [De Vita and Case \(2016\)](#) suggest, in fact, government (certainly in the UK) is perhaps the biggest block to any change. Through systems of regulation, based in narrow criteria of excellence the government has actually encouraged isomorphism. Hence, in the name of accountability business school, lecturers receive rules on good practice which include deadlines for making PowerPoint available to students before the lecture, "templates on course guides, teaching formats and associated time slots, modes of assessment and moderation, systems of e-marking and e-feedback, and procedures for up loading marks" ([De Vita and Case, 2016](#), p. 354, [Thomas and Cornuel, 2012](#)). The search for the perfect system thus begins to squeeze out purpose and particularity, and crowds out the practice of judgement and related skills and virtues ([Moore, 2006](#)). Government and Higher Education as a whole then are equally responsible for the problems of the business school.

## Conclusion

Parker's polemic is an effective reminder that business schools and universities are not practising responsibility, for coherently articulating purpose and worth; developing genuine accountability across and between institutions; or for developing creativity which brings together purpose, value or practice. It is not just that they are squeezing out "the good", they are squeezing out critical thinking, leading to the kind of story I began with. Parker's splendid title

is reminiscent of Dick's response to Jack Cade, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers" (Henry VI, part 2: 4, 2). Both ideas raise the blood, but look less useful, or likely, once the complexity of governance becomes clear. A "school of organising" puts its finger on the need to transcend interest, and to include other disciplines. What it does not do is to provide the identity, purpose and worth, which ultimately will connect different disciplines and professions. Change will not occur in business schools unless the key stakeholders, the university, the government and business take responsibility for developing a shared critical narrative. Regulation and response then become a function of dialogue (King III, De Vita and Case, 2016). This posits the view of business schools, along with professions and the universities providing leadership to society, not being led by interest, in the practice of critical thinking and creativity. In MacIntyre's (1990) words, these would be places where "conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to working detail practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated" so that "wider society learn how to conduct its own debates, practical or theoretical, in a rationally defensible way".

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## Notes

1. [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/8316658.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/8316658.stm)
2. This is a weak attempt to appeal to the value of choice. The stronger form of the value focuses not on choice but critical reflection, where the student takes responsibility for learning.

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