



Shifting from competition to collaboration

Rumina Dhalla and JC Carteron argue that if business schools are to authentically contribute to the SDGs, then there is a need to shift both business and business schools towards collaborative business models

More and more business schools and business scholars across the globe are making an overt commitment to practice responsible leadership and integrate UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their teaching and research. It is without a doubt that many are signalling their commitment by joining global organisations such as [Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative](#) (GRLI) and Principles of Responsible Management Education ([PRME](#)).

Some, however, may be failing to meet their stated commitment and by consequence are failing to meet stakeholder expectations. Lars Moratis and Frans Melissen, who have investigated this lack of success, offer some insights in a [recent article](#) in *Global Focus*.

They suggest that responsible management strategies at business schools are isolated, are implemented sporadically, poorly, or inauthentically or are considered a fringe topic (*“Are business schools talking the walk?”* (2022), *EFMD Global Focus*, 16(1): 8-13).

Their investigation also found that commitment and integration effort at SDG are communicated poorly. Those who do excel in communication in the promotion of their positive, anecdotal actions, are likely have to be accused of greenwashing by their stakeholders.

We acknowledge that it is likely that some business schools may be authentically achieving their stated goals and are incorrectly perceived to be greenwashing, thus further investigation is needed to highlight those who are successfully accomplishing SDG integration.

Building on prior work, we suggest that the lack of success in the integration of SDG content in business school education is likely due to the traditional business school mindset of competition (not to say the dogma) rather than

collaboration which is critical for authentic responsible leadership and transformation to responsible management education.

For example, much of the popular media attention on business school is focused on rankings, signalling competition between business schools. A quick search online for the best business schools quickly brings up some

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well-recognised media names all purporting to rank the 'best' including *Forbes (The Best Business Schools List)*, *Princeton Review's Best Business Schools*, and *US News Best Global Universities for Economics and Finance*.

The rankings and the jockeying for a top spot signal a culture of competitiveness among business schools. We believe that successful integration of responsible leadership mindset requires a shift from an entrenched mindset of competition to greater collaboration across business schools, across nations, and across disciplines.

It is not a question of denying that competition exists, or even that it can sometimes drive innovation, but rather of allowing spaces for collaboration. Thus, while competition can be an effective and well-known strategy to bring people together to focus on a common issue and seek out the best solutions, cooperation between stakeholders has a number of advantages.

For example, collaborators can share expertise and resources for mutual benefit, thus reducing need for individual investments, they can benefit from diversity brought by collaborators and benefit from the individual participants' social capital and network. Collaborations can diffuse risk for potential failures and mistakes and allow collaborators to leverage on economies of scale.

Another advantage of specific cooperation between institutions of higher education, based on personal, anecdotal experience of one of the authors of this article, is that it can reduce the potential of unethical competition, as without mutual trust and respect, authentic collaboration is unlikely. For example, it is less likely one will openly compete with the same institutions that have helped yours by sharing their best practices.

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No institution can claim to know all the solutions, how to implement them and how to single-handedly transform the whole system. No longer can climate crisis and societal challenges be the responsibility of a 'few'.

SDG 17 specifically calls for partnerships and collaboration for sustainable development. We are beginning to see a number of universities publicly commit to cooperation. For example, higher education institutions are heeding the SDG 17 call and universities are signing pledges for cooperation for SDGs. In Canada, universities have launched a pan-Canadian initiative that highlights SDG-related involvement and collaborative projects.

Focusing on individualism for competitive and reputational reasons, while very well accepted and practised in the traditional profit-driven business models, need now to be authentically transformed to strategies that engender a collaborative, inclusive approach.

Popular media has taken business school education to task by pointing out that business schools teach traditional business practices and commitment to responsibility and ethics are inauthentic, and simply decoration.

This is particularly important if we are to be able to include previously excluded stakeholders and nations. We must be willing to reach across nations and disciplines to engage to find solutions to societal issues and address the climate crisis and sustainable development.

Where in the past business schools were able to achieve sustained competitive advantages through specialisations, branding, and achieving top spots in rankings, winning at sustainable development will require collaborative, inclusive, and responsible leadership. Anything less will be considered inauthentic and 'greenwashing'. A mindset of focusing on one's own success will create barriers required to seek innovative, inclusive solutions.

Schools may value the power and performance of certain corporations and their ability to innovate in order to outperform, or even overwhelm, their competitors, and Michael Porter's *Five Forces* framework is a familiar tool to assess competition in business and strategy.

If business schools are to authentically contribute to the SDGs, then responsible leadership dictates that there is a need to shift both business and business schools towards collaborative business models. This will likely require the dedication of meaningful resources to design and deploy their strategies at an institutional and systems level.

Collaboration is a 'bolder vision for business schools' as noted by [Peter Tufano](#) in *Harvard Business Review*. Tufano argues that if business schools are going to call upon businesses to collaborate and partner with stakeholders and be inclusive, then business schools themselves must also do so, authentically, and lead by example.

Business schools must acknowledge that the time where control and competition for competitive advantage has melded into the past; the current turbulent times require collaborative and responsible leadership to solve the critical issues facing our society.

In nature, competition certainly exists, however, cooperation and mutual aid between and within species is widespread and effective. While much of business strategy focuses on the tenets of survival of the fittest, the natural environment thrives on connectedness and sharing of resources.

It may benefit the higher education institutions to be inspired by what has made life a highly resilient system. SDGs address global challenges at a systems level and successful solutions will require collaboration across systems. This has implications for individual institutional survival as well.

Business schools are seen to be lagging behind business in addressing climate change issues in their activities, thus if they are to espouse their vision and commitment to sustainability but enact anything less, they will likely always be stuck at 'greenwashing'. ■

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