SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 11, No. 4, (2025), pp. 350-357
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11042529

BUSINESS SCHOOLS AND SDGS, NEW WINE IN OLD WINE SKIN?

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Received: 11/11/2025
Accepted: 18/11/2025

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer a new perspective between business schools and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper argues that business schools in their neoliberal form are incompatible with the generational altruisms of the SDGs. This work rationalizes this gaping difference and the impending dissonance of business schools. It also proposes a new four-pronged framework to radically reform education and business schools with the SDGs. The author's perspective aims to ignite additional discussions about business school reform. It invites more debates that are crucial to disrupting the current status quo of business schools. This is not a quantitative paper, and on the contrary, it is to trigger conceptual and even philosophical debates. There are limitations in every piece of work, and the author hopes that this work will mature into cogent and meaningful debates fortified by fieldwork and the gathering of new data and findings. This paper does not conclude happily. This work illustrates the gaping incompatibility between business schools and SDGs. Business schools are rapidly approaching dissonance, necessitating a radical transformation of their ethos. The authors are wishful of positive implications from this work. The main impetus is to trigger useful debates among scholars and ignite the awareness that we need to refute the over-obsession on the Gordon-Holwell report. Business schools ultimately belong to the field of social science; they are neither a pure branch of science nor a faculty of statistics. This work aims to ignite the ongoing debate.

KEYWORDS: Business Schools, SDGs, Altruism, Deconstruction, Reconstruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between business schools and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper argues that unless we deconstruct their neoliberal nuance, business schools are fundamentally incompatible with the deployment of SDGs (Teck, 2023). This paper explores why the neoliberal business schools are incompatible to the altruism of the SGD (Weybrecht, 2022), akin to new wine in old wine skin. Towards the end, this paper illustrates the impending dissonance of business schools and proposes a way to deconstruct and reconstruct and realign business schools towards achieving the SDGs.

1.1. Sdg And Business Schools

Neoliberal business schools traditionally prioritize profit over social welfare (Friedman, 1970). Traditional management programs have produced rogue entrepreneurs who prioritize profit over the collective good. However, recent corporate scandals have reinstated the need for ethical education (Rasli et al, 2022). Scholars argue that business schools are the root of the current crisis (Giacolone & Wargo, 2009), some calling for reform for business schools to include business ethics and the common good (Sims & Felton, 2005), while others argue that business schools are beyond reform (Parker, 2022).

But business schools have increasingly integrated welfare elements into their curricula. Since 1974, the AACSB International's accreditation standards have mandated some ethics consideration. But critics argued that these watered-down standards and those conventional ethics education fails to deter or foster executive misconduct. In response, the AACSB proposed new standards in 2003, recommending that schools prioritize ethics teaching and elevate it to "first and foremost" topical importance (Sims & Felton, 2005).

Currently, business schools have seen significant growth in integrating ethics into their curriculum under the PRME, a platform to enhance sustainability teaching and prepare students for transformation. Established in 2007, PRME outlines six principles to help members address ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability issues (Avela & Moreno, 2024). Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across four dimensions: social, environmental, and economic. Despite these progressive measures, many business schools have only barely incorporated these principles and have been slow to put them into practice (Weybrecht, 2023). This paper offers a fundamental argument on why business schools are merely engaging in lip service to these goals. The following section of this paper shares this perspective.

1.2. Sdgs And Business Schools a Strange Bedfellow

SDGs are altruistic values, and their implementation requires an unconditional intergenerational altruism for collective welfare (Hu et al., 2018). Altruism is defined as the tendency to behave in the service of others without any concealed goal to benefit oneself. It thus suggests unselfish service motivated by a feeling of kindness and charity. It is after all, the "highest form of social competence" (Haslip & Penn, 2019). However, business schools are not altruistic; but are great capitalists and neoliberals. The question is, can new wine flourish in an old wineskin? The challenge of business schools implementing the SDGs is not as simple as incorporating these principles into pedagogy. There is pervasive contradiction between the SDG altruism and the ethos of business schools at three levels.

First, the intergenerational altruism in SDGs does not sit well with the profiteering intentions of many operators of business schools. Business schools are highly prized and often assume the largest and fanciest facility of an institution. They are supposedly to be the most profitable and competitive unit of any institution. They have the highest number of enrolments, the largest endowments, and are staffed by renowned professors. They had to be as they teach others to be profitable (see Parker, 2019). They form alliances with private corporations, large and small, accepting consultation funds in return for some work or research to resolve corporate woes. They place students in these corporations as interns, and they set up lavish recruitment events to match employment opportunities. Employers sit at their board as advisors in revamping their modules, and they [the employers] are ultimately the consumers of the products that business schools produce. They are not benevolent nor charitable organizations, but they engage in cutthroat competition, devising innovative tactics to lure student enrollment.

These are the traits of many business schools, and their operators ensure that their department remains the most competitive and most profitable unit of the institution, an unambiguous feature of managerialism (Locke & Spender, 2011). This character is not unique to private institutions, as public universities are witnessing the onslaught of

new public management (NPM) and intensive privatization. "In many countries, university culture has definitively moved towards accountingisation, economising, and marketisation, reflecting neo-liberalism and NPM practices" (Parker, Sardesai & Guthrie, 2023). Of course, business schools have found a new rat race to compete in various spectrums of institutional rankings. Like a beauty pageant contest, institutions flamboyantly acclaim their status as 'the entrepreneurial university of the year,' the most 'innovative university,' or for producing the most 'employable graduates,' an all-out "academic sellout" (Gruber, 2014). They compete on almost everything from the campus size, professor-student ratio, publications, citations, grants, international students, signing of memoranda of understanding to competing in being the 'greenest' campus. What does this make of business schools? What implications thereof?

Managerial capitalism is toxic, and it dissipates the soul and purpose of business schools. Do business schools have a soul? What does it look like? Business schools are caught and very much entrapped in the crossfire between neoliberalism, raging capitalism, and the need to fulfil their altruistic SDG responsibilities. By altruism, we mean those duties ascribed to universities since the primordial and mediaeval ages, as the trustee for connecting education with God, spirit, or truth and engaging them in a critical dialogue (Gibss and Barnett, 2013). John Henry Newman in his work titled "The Idea of a University" exemplified the notion of truth and the metaphysical role of higher education (Lanford, 2019). Newman underlined the importance of disseminating the truth to learners. Newman fervently opined that teaching human knowledge must be aligned with the truth to create an epistemological tandem. After all, human knowledge is developed to seek the universal truth that underpins all forms of life.

Yet, managerial capitalism draws business schools away from fulfilling their altruistic roles. The metaphysical origin of universities discolors as they transverse into a post-metaphysical realm, a post-modern era of capitalism, materialism, and the utopians that see wealth accumulation as the primal goal. Instead of propelling its underlying goals of unifying humanity, God, spirit, and truth, they now vacillate between the morals of men and the principles of economism, profit maximization, and greed. "Business schools today are torn between two paradigms: the dominant neoliberal narrative of free markets, profit maximization, free trade, endless growth, and laissez-faire government, and an emergent paradigm of an economy in service to life that supports wellbeing and dignity for all," a very reflective remark on the current dispositions of business schools (Lazlo, Waddock & Scroufe, 2017).

Have business schools lost their soul? Yes, they have, if it means that contemporary business schools are now an alter ego of corporate running dogs and branded as capitalism's "Devil's Advocate". But business schools joined the bandwagon of competing in all sorts of rankings and believing that the quality of a business school can be well represented numerically—a self-defeating fallacy, a treason to the moral DNA of business schools (see Mourkogiannis, 2006). Business schools will remain "dysfunctional" (see Colombo, 2023) and morally crippled, if they choose to defend their capitalistic status quo. Unless the operators of business schools defuse their capitalistic genetics and repurpose their ideology, there is little hope that they can ever meaningfully incorporate SDGs into education.

Second, the implementation of SDGs necessitates that business schools comprehend and make sense of the plight of humanity and its social tragedies. But business schools fit squarely into the category of science, and the faculty are infested with scientific experts who dish out jargon about correlations and regressions but seemingly lack elements of empathy and sympathy. Over the last six decades, the Gordon-Howell Report, along with the Pierson Report, has become the overriding narratives and the biblical inspiration underpinning the scientific research-based education that American business schools so frantically embarked on in the 1960s (Teck, 2023). This, which the late Professor Ghoshal (2005) labelled as the "pretense of knowledge", offers a robust, objective and deductive reasoning, one that is independent of human intentionality.

The fetishism and lusts of business schools in producing scientifically valid research have obscured, if not eliminated, all aspects of humanity. Cold scientific research has created an unintended cycle of prognostic theorists who are stuck in intellectual boxes and obsessed with the validity, measurability, and cogency of their research. Academics, fueled by their superiors' cheers and enthused by the proverbial phrase 'to publish or perish,' have resorted to producing voluminous works that are predominantly jargon-laden, abstract, complicated, and overwhelmed with self-fulfilling academic interests. Empiricists' complexity overwhelms management research, absolving fetishism in empirical evidence and experimental designs derived from pure science. This is because they would rather come up with scientific research

questions than find solutions to those SDG problems in the real world.

Instead of promoting intergenerational altruism and empathy, business schools are promoting value-free scholarships. This detaches business schools from the reality of people, presents 'cold' study findings, and hinders their ability to provide beneficial societal influence. The more resources a business school allocates to scientific study, the more it distances itself from achieving the SDGs (Harley, 2019). Altruism at business schools further deteriorates under the influence of turbo capitalism. Their version of business ethics, often portrayed in corporate ethics textbooks, encourages utilitarianism and its "pain versus pleasure" arithmetic. This pragmatism encouraging students to accept immoral acts based on greater pleasure than pain runs counter to the altruism required in fulfilling SDGs.

Third, and potentially more urgent issue is the covert integration of capitalism into the fundamental pedagogies at business schools. What advantages might we obtain from instructing students on capitalistic, corrupt ethical principles? These capitalist nuances do not exhibit any indications of aggressive declarations or profane trespasses into the ethics of management education. Nevertheless, their implicit influence is so deeply ingrained in business practices and ethics education that it is very difficult to identify their inequities. The silent infiltration of these corrupted theories into business ethics teachings is reminiscent of "wolves in sheep's clothing," indoctrinating students tacitly and intrinsically, but lethal. There are two that we will briefly illustrate.

Almost all business ethics textbooks emphasize the teleological influence of utilitarianism on the decision-making process. The pragmatism of the "pain versus pleasure" calculus is undeniably appealing, particularly to businesspersons who Richard Konrad would explicitly endorse as "business as a unique enterprise it requires a special set of rules.". To achieve any level of success in the business world, it is imperative that an individual complies with these regulations. At times, the established moral norms of the community may conflict with the laws of business (Konrad, 1982). This form of perverse instruction is regrettably but widely admired in the field of management education, and its advocates regard it as a moral convention that is not oppressive (Scarre, 2020). By meticulously reviewing any business ethics text, it is evident that utilitarianism, its philosophy, teachings, and propagations are extensively documented within the pages of every business ethics textbook. However, there is no word of caution in those texts regarding the tacit invasion of its amoral values, nor are there any warnings regarding its manipulation and its moral refuge, which is the site of grotesque corporate immoral actions. We believe that the perilous assumption that an immoral act may be justifiable if it produces more pleasure than pain has already established an undeniable stronghold in business practice is a result of the default presentation of their philosophies as the acceptable ethical norm in business. Students are proselytized to accept this view. Please provide two examples to substantiate this assertion.

It's an ages old practice [and] the process of change is going to take time. Too often, well-intentioned human rights groups can cause dramatic negative effects if they scare companies into stopping production and the kids are thrown out on the street (see Boje & Khan, 2009).

These are the words of Donna Gibbs, the spokesperson for Nike Inc. who, with the art of 'moral sanctuary', defended Nike's hideous actions of exploiting child labor for their productions in Pakistan by highlighting the pleasure derived from the exploitation. The Shell Ogoni crisis presents yet another repulsive example of the intrinsic infiltration of capitalism into principles of business ethics. Carefully peruse Shell's statement of defense:

Some say we should pull out. And we understand why. But if we do so now, the project will collapse. Maybe forever. So, let's be clear about who we'd be hurting. Not the present Nigerian government, if that's the intention. The people of the Niger Delta would certainly suffer— the thousands who will work on the project, and thousands more who will benefit in the local economy. Whatever you think of the Nigerian situation today, we know you wouldn't want us to hurt the Nigerian people. Or jeopardise their future (see Mandy, 2000).

This statement is infamously utilitarian, as Shell attempts to substantiate its collusion with the Nigerian government by offering a series of benefits that they anticipate will compensate for their impious actions. Utilitarianism functions by achieving a balance between the consequential suffering and delight of an action for the largest possible number of individuals. In utilitarianism, the corporation itself does not possess intrinsically embedded moral values; rather, these values are contingent upon the consequences of the act, which are determined by the relative pleasure and suffering of a third party. Corporations are morally autonomous; they lack an inherent moral DNA; rather, they guarantee that their management

decisions are pragmatically sanctioned and profitable through utilitarian calculus. It encourages the isolation of "economic decision-making from any moral implications whatsoever" and facilitates the free-market system (Schroth, 2005). At its most detrimental, it expedites capitalism and undermines fundamental principles such as "business is business" and "anything goes." When viewed through this perspective, ethics and corporate social responsibility are reduced to an "add-on," an accessory that serves to mitigate the purportedly detrimental consequences of rampant capitalism and corporate misconduct. We are curious as to how business schools with this type of distorted teachings can genuinely fathom let alone meaningfully implement the SDGs if the notion of moral sanctuary were taught continuously to students and propagated unabridged in textbooks.

1.3. Sdgs, Business Schools and Dissonance

The future of business schools is bleak. Their amoral discourse prevents them from fulfilling the increasing demands for SDGs. They are placed in the "valley of death" and are approaching "ethical dissonance," a phrase borrowed from Burgelman and Andy Grove's concept of strategic dissonance, first defined in their 1996 classic work. In a nutshell, "strategic dissonance" refers to a situation in which a company's business plan expires because of shifting externalities. A company that does not refresh its strategies will eventually reach a "strategic inflection point" and exit the competitive landscape owing to strategy obsolescence. Companies that innovate, adjust, and adapt will endure.

Using this approach, we will now depict the current state of business schools graphically in Figure 1 below:

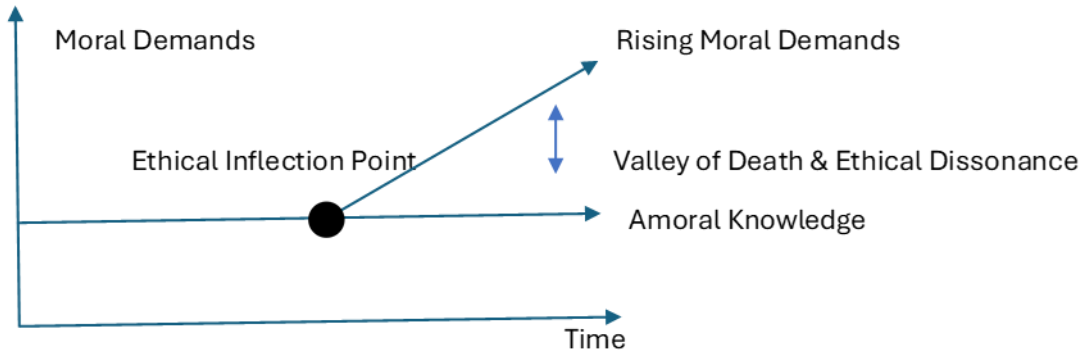

Figure 1: The Valley Of Death

Figure 1 depicts the current state of business schools. A linear axis best represents the amoral and objective scientific beliefs taught in business schools. Regardless of the rising demands for SDGs, the linearity of their practice remains constant and unaltered over time. However, one can see that the propagation of amoral principles in business schools is beginning to stray from rising moral demands to fulfill the SDGs. As moral expectations rise, business schools are reaching an ethical tipping point because their impersonal foundations are becoming more and more different from the needs of the times. As time passes, the curvature slopes steeper, and business schools become more distant, deepening the "valley of death.". As business schools continue to remove themselves from these virtuous demands, they will experience "ethical dissonance" because of the separation of their amoral character and rising moral standards. The continuing widening of the "valley of death" would surely lead to more "ethical dissonance," resulting in the eventual demise of business schools.

1.4. Deconstruct And Reconstruct the Business Schools

Pouring new wine into old wine skin will cause the wine skin to rupture and the wine to spill and waste. Identically, one cannot expect the business school in their current capitalistic and neoliberalist nature to contain let alone accomplish the altruistic missions of the SDGs. The business schools must be deconstructed and reconstructed, and in management term, they must change.

The discourse surrounding the reform of business schools is not novel; it is a recurrent academic phenomenon, with reform advocates suggesting numerous iterations of enhancements. The reformists are classified into three categories. The initial group consists of the courteous populace, seeking to reallocate the functions of business schools. This category supports the idea of repurposing teaching pedagogy in business schools (Kitchener, 2024) by

incorporating the values of responsible management education (or membership in PRME) into their teaching as they address the world's current grand challenges. A salient illustration is the integration of a business ethics module into management curricula, which has been extensively contested. A second academic cohort conceptualizes a "university of hope" (Rhodes & Pullen, 2023; Connell, 2019), directed by a framework of virtues that a university should exemplify. This category conceptualizes the university as an institution that "serves society by educating citizens and generating knowledge that fosters shared prosperity, social equality, and human flourishing" (Rhodes & Pullen, 2023). The third group comprises impatient reformers who have started to denounce the ineptitude of business schools, referring to them as "shutdown," designating them as "fucking management," and alleging that they are "beyond reform" (Parker, 2022). Some assert that business schools have "lost their way" (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005) and are nearing collapse (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

To achieve an effective transformation, business schools must implement a four-pronged approach. First, business schools must be challenged to abandon their Gordon-Holwell obsession. Significant change necessitates the disruption, deconstruction, or destabilization of the faculty. Lewin termed this phenomenon organizational disequilibrium (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). The faculty must be consistently encouraged to collectively move away from the fixation on the Gordon-Howell framework. Faculty should be encouraged to critically examine the status quo and reintegrate the dynamic debates characteristic of historical research philosophies. Faculty advocating for reforms should initiate discussions regarding contentious organizational theories of sensemaking, poetic and social psychology, or ethnography. Numerous scholars tend to bypass philosophical debates, opting instead to concentrate on research methodologies, validity, and the precision of findings. The faculty should be provided with sufficient space and a platform to discuss these contentious issues and reflect on the contributions of notable scholars from the past. Scholars should be motivated to engage intellectually and highlight the diversity of research philosophies by categorizing them into distinct groups, fostering friendly competition, comparing their achievements, and acknowledging their differences. This is essential for reintroducing diversity in research, comprehending individual strengths and limitations, and ultimately establishing a coalition in diversity. Conferences, symposiums, publications, and doctoral theses must exemplify this principle. KPIs must incentivize individuals who implement changes.

Second, to reignite these debates and accelerate disruption, the faculty seeks help from social good agencies. As faculty work toward the 17 SDGs and the common good, the PRME, Yunus Social Business Center, and Enactus can channel newly inspired energy into building a global movement in responsible management education. The faculty should use these positive deconstruction tools and begin singing against capitalism as they sensemake social calamities. Organizations like Yunus Social Business can accelerate business school research and change it. A community-based enterprise agenda strengthens the overall scheme during philosophical debates and as the faculty moves toward the common good. Faculty members identify unresolved social issues or seek more efficient solutions. Regardless, the faculty works together to find a solution that promotes social values (Yunus, 2009).

The faculty's gradual transition towards community service positions them as a social enterprise that emphasizes community values (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). This leads to the third point: the faculty modifies its ethos, and with support from global institutions in aligning social efforts with the SDGs, the faculty initiates outreach and transforms the community through value-generating research. Achieving the SDGs results in the faculty becoming "institutionalized," thereby acquiring enhanced legitimacy and social license.

The faculty must explicitly delineate the segment of the community they intend to serve. Delegating the responsibility of addressing the most serious social problems to the faculty is unjust. Eliminating pollution, cleaning rivers, and removing atmospheric pollutants cannot be achieved independently. Requiring this will compromise the integrity of the faculty. Business school's service to the community must be selective and should not allocate resources to capitalist organizations that do not need support. Assisting corporations in software design, product patenting, or formula copyrighting does not qualify as "social enterprise." To achieve this, it is essential to systematically identify our beneficiaries: those most deserving, the most vulnerable, and individuals unable to afford payment. The stakeholder matrix (Mendelow, 1981) enables the faculty to delineate stakeholder categories and respond accordingly. Logically a company should prioritize the input of stakeholders who possess both high power and high interest, while also considering those with high interest but low power. Business schools must act

against logic and prioritize minority stakeholders, who often represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. The strong do not necessitate assistance, whereas the weak do.

The four-pronged framework provides for a systematic and altruistic disruption and reconstruction of business school legitimacy. It eliminates scientific nuance from the faculty, addresses the contradiction of profiteering, serves only the most deserving stakeholders, and enhances our moral legitimacy.

2. CONCLUSION

Pouring new wine into old wineskin is futile, so is coercing a neoliberal entity like the business schools to generate social good; it is equally pointless. Business schools are getting too good at making money and teaching others similar skills of trade. They have done extremely well over the past decades, garnering support from Fortune 100 or 500 companies. They are not designed to for empathy nor consider social disasters, so asking them to do so is a waste of gas. Any hope that business schools can fulfill the SDGs is only possible if the business schools are deconstructed and reconstructed; that is, they change and change radically. They, in their current form, are antithetical to the altruism of social goals.

Acknowledgement: Acknowledgement: I would like to thank all my co- authors who have contributed meticulously to the publication of this article. I also would like to thank the reviewers who have given their feedback for this paper our moral legitimacy.

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