

Reintegrating Scholarship in Business Schools: Reclaiming *Bildung* and the University's Civic Purpose

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Abstract. This paper responds to sustained critiques of business schools as institutions that have surrendered their foundational educational purposes to the logic of markets, metrics and managerialism. It argues that the shortcomings attributed to business schools—most notably the perceived irrelevance of research, the marginalisation of teaching and weak engagement with societal challenges—stem from a historically-contingent fragmentation of scholarship and an erosion of the civic mission that once animated European universities. Drawing on the European tradition of *Bildung* and on the university ideals of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Cardinal John Henry Newman, the paper argues for a revitalised conception of scholarship in which the cultivation of socially responsible citizens is treated not as an aspiration peripheral to academic life but as its central purpose. The paper situates contemporary business school failures within a longer historical narrative of institutional drift, tracing the displacement of a unified and ethically-grounded scholarly culture by narrow performance regimes and neoliberal market logics. It concludes by outlining conditions under which business schools might recover a more principled, civic and humanistic orientation, offering a response to the question of what universities are for that is adequate to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: bildung, business schools, scholarship, von humboldt, newman, civic university, higher education.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, business schools and management scholars have been subject to sustained criticism for privileging research that secures publication in elite journals over work that addresses ethical concerns or delivers tangible benefits for organisations and society (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; Khurana, 2007). Critics argue that the incentives attached to publication-driven performance systems have encouraged a form of scholarship increasingly

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disconnected from practice, teaching and the public good. As Alvesson et al. (2017, p. 14) observe, this has led to “a proliferation of meaningless research of no value to society,” valued primarily for its role in career advancement. Within this environment, teaching is frequently marginalised, contributing to a growing disjunction between what is researched, what is taught and what is practised.

Alongside concerns about relevance, business schools have been criticised for reinforcing corporate greed, social inequality and forms of economic thinking implicated in financial crises and environmental degradation (Colombo, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2018). Despite the urgency of climate change and sustainability challenges, business schools are often seen as reproducing dominant economic logics rather than critically interrogating them (Benn et al., 2014; CABS, 2021). As a result, curricula and academic practices are increasingly perceived as misaligned with contemporary societal and planetary needs.

This paper argues that these critiques reflect a deeper institutional crisis: the gradual abandonment of the civic, humanistic and moral purposes that once defined the European university. Research, teaching and service to the community have come to be treated as discrete and competing activities rather than as complementary expressions of a shared scholarly endeavour. This fragmentation has narrowed curricula, privileged private gain over the common good and left business schools ill-equipped to address the most pressing challenges of the age. Addressing these shortcomings, therefore, requires not merely procedural reform but a fundamental rethinking of the university’s purpose—what scholars do, how their work is valued and what kind of citizens their institutions are seeking to cultivate.

The paper draws centrally on the concept of *Bildung*—the European educational tradition associated most closely with the Humboldtian university—as a framework for articulating what has been lost and what might be recovered. *Bildung* refers to education as a formative process through which individuals develop intellectual judgement, moral discernment and civic responsibility rather than merely acquiring specialised knowledge or vocational skills (Horlacher, 2004; Östling, 2018). It provides a conceptual and normative foundation for arguing that business schools must recover a holistic, ethically-grounded understanding of education—one adequate to contemporary societal challenges including sustainability, inequality and institutional trust.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the key challenges facing business schools and the institutional context in which they have arisen. Second, it revisits the historical origins of European scholarship and traces the displacement of the Humboldtian ideal through successive phases of marketisation and managerialist reform. Third, it examines how the ideals of von Humboldt and Newman, refracted through the concept of *Bildung*, might inform a revitalised vision of business school scholarship. Finally, it reflects on what a principled institutional response to these challenges might look like with brief consideration of non-Euro-American perspectives.

2. United Kingdom Business Schools: Shortcomings and Challenges

UK higher education has been reshaped over recent decades by policy reforms aligning universities more closely with neoliberal market logics. Extensive scholarship documents how economic instrumentalism, performance measurement and audit cultures increasingly condition teaching, learning and the student experience, reframing education as a commodified input–output process rather than a public good (Molesworth et al., 2011; Ransome, 2011; Taylor, 2017). Within this environment, institutional priorities have shifted towards efficiency, competition and measurable outputs, often at the expense of critical inquiry and educational purpose.

These pressures are particularly pronounced in business schools, which have become focal points for criticism at multiple levels. At the institutional level, marketisation has eroded trust and academic agency, encouraging compliance with neoliberal “common sense” and discouraging qualitative, critical and civic forms of engagement (Colombo, 2023; Taylor, 2017). As Parker and Guthrie (2010) note, globalisation and marketisation have profoundly reshaped the organisational context within which business schools operate.

At the level of the business school, critics argue that managerialist rationalisation has privileged instrumental, outcome-oriented logics over substantive, values-driven concerns (Kitchener & Delbridge, 2020). This has generated what Harley (2019) describes as a crisis of confidence in management studies, driven by limited academic and practical impact, a narrowing of disciplinary scope, the marginalisation of teaching and intensifying publication pressures. Although business schools have expanded globally and generated significant revenue, their growth model—centred on shareholder primacy and fee-paying, internationally mobile students—has prompted renewed questioning of their societal purpose (Kitchener et al., 2022). As Kitchener (2021, p. 52) concludes, business schools are “university departments in urgent need of repurposing.” Accrediting bodies have also echoed these concerns. The AACSB, for example, has called for a shift from transactional to transformational models of business education that emphasise societal value, ethical leadership and collaborative knowledge creation (AACSB, 2021). Yet a persistent relevance problem remains with business schools continuing to privilege academic rigour over practical and societal impact (Polzer et al., 2009; Redgrave et al., 2022).

At the level of the individual academic, increasing specialisation, workload intensification and audit-driven performance regimes have fragmented the shared knowledge base of the field (Barnett, 2005; Parker, 2014; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has reinforced a hierarchy in which research is prioritised over teaching, contributing to the expansion of teaching-only contracts and signalling the lower institutional value attached to teaching (British Academy, 2021; Jabbar et al., 2018). These dynamics have further widened the perceived gap between research rigour and

relevance while reducing the time available for reflective and integrative scholarship.

What unites these criticisms is a common diagnosis: that the business school has lost its sense of educational purpose. The problems are not primarily technical—they are not solved by better metrics, more impactful research output or refined pedagogical techniques taken in isolation. They reflect an institutional drift away from the foundational commitment to cultivating responsible, reflective, socially-engaged graduates that once defined the European university at its best. Recovering that commitment requires a return to first principles.

3. Scholarship: Its Origins, Fragmentation and the Humboldtian Ideal

Origins

The first European universities—established at Bologna in 1088, Oxford in 1167, Cambridge in 1209 and Paris in 1231 (Reisz, 2008)—were communities of teachers and taught in which scholarship primarily involved rediscovering and transmitting the knowledge of Roman, Greek and Arab scholars. Scholars were regarded as repositories of knowledge within their chosen fields (Altbach, 2004; Keen, 1969). Rooted in the monastic tradition yet oriented towards practical civic preparation, these early institutions educated those who would lead and regulate the major institutions of society (Haskins, 1923). Teaching and inquiry were intertwined; scholarship was understood as the pursuit of the knowledge underpinning both.

As universities evolved, they came to be viewed as autonomous institutions devoted to knowledge and truth for their own sake (Frost, 2015; Haskins, 1923). However, from the seventeenth century onwards, the Enlightenment and industrialisation exposed the limits of the classical curriculum. By the nineteenth century, demand arose—especially in Europe and the USA—for civic universities to serve local industries and communities (Brockliss, 2000; Goddard et al., 2016). This civic ethos was powerfully shaped by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who founded the University of Berlin in 1810 and articulated the principle that teaching and research were inseparable, both serving the disinterested pursuit of truth for the betterment of society (Anderson, 2004).

The Humboldtian vision is associated with the European concept of *Bildung*—education as a formative process through which individuals develop intellectual judgement, moral discernment and civic responsibility rather than merely acquiring specialised knowledge or vocational skills (Horlacher, 2004; Östling, 2018). For von Humboldt, the university was not a training institution but a site of moral and intellectual formation. He warned explicitly that if teaching, research and applied work became separated, knowledge would fragment and universities' ability to educate broadly and contribute to societal progress would be undermined (Anderson, 2004; Dostaler & Tomberlin, 2013; Östling, 2018). A