

Introducing ‘Business Plus Education Ecosystem’ as a Commentary to Fey (2022)

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ABSTRACT In a recent paper, Carl Fey (2022) ponders the future development of Chinese business schools. He observes that the American model of business education – the target of emulation for most Chinese business schools up to this point – shows signs of serious inadequacy. It is high time, Fey argues, that Chinese business schools come up with ‘indigenous’ models of business education that better serve the needs of China’s social and economical development. The paper then sketches a framework featuring some fundamental aspects of such indigenous models. We find Fey’s central argument and framework both timely and inspiring. In what follows, we draw on what is happening at the School of Management of Zhejiang University (‘the School’) to respond to, and dialogue with, some of Fey’s ideas.

KEYWORDS business schools, China, pedagogical framework

ACCEPTED BY Editor-in-Chief Xiao-Ping Chen

LEADERSHIP WITH ANALYTICAL SKILL AND INNOVATION CAPABILITY

One of the School’s missions is to nurture leadership in its students. Among the many qualities that make a leader, we consider analytical skill and innovation capability to be the two qualities that are most essential for business leaders of today and tomorrow. And our position is well aligned with Fey’s call for more ‘innovative and analytical business teaching’.

The speed of technology advancement in recent years is something that we have never witnessed before, both in and outside China. But inside China, novel ways of conducting business such as industrial digitization emerged from this explosion of technology. With the rapid landscape shift, we envision that business leaders cannot just rely on old repertoire of knowledge – however large that repertoire may be – to solve new problems. They no longer have the luxury of labeling a problem using knowledge from traditional business education; instead, they must

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develop novel insights from seemingly disparate cases. That's why analytical skills are crucial for leaders in an era of change.

Moreover, leaders do not just respond to change; they also initiate change with innovation. A forest metaphor might be useful to understand the macro and micro dynamics of change. We nurture leaders who are able to make sound strategic decisions and are willing to explore untrodden paths in a forest of lush and messy undergrowth. Meanwhile, the leader should also be able to hold each undergrowth in clear view and make sense of its position in relation to the *status quo* and what's possible. The leader should choose a path not because this path simply stands out against a background of blurring haze, but more importantly, because how it links up the undergrowth of the forest-reality to direct meaningful progression.

Analytical skill and innovation capability, then, form a core competency of leadership. Analysis would be purposeless without innovation, and innovation would be disoriented without analysis. Adding to the many inadequacies of the American model of business education that Fey mentions, we feel that the model also falls short of riveting analytical skill and innovation capability in students. The School addresses this shortcoming by launching what we call the *Business Plus Education Ecosystem* initiative, elaborated below.

BUSINESS PLUS EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM

The Business Plus Education Ecosystem is a new pedagogical framework that integrates different disciplines into business research and education, with the goal of bettering society. We call it Business Plus education because we add *technological insights* and *humanistic spirits* as two essential ingredients to complement the traditional *business* part of business education. Fey (2022) observes that the traditional Chinese business school curricula often do not cover a spectrum of disciplines wide enough to tackle the challenges that Chinese firms face. We concur with this observation, and address it with the Business Plus Education Ecosystem. Although fundamentally a pedagogical framework, the Business Plus Education Ecosystem is also implicated in all aspects of the business School's functional triad: research, teaching, and corporate links.

Academic Research

Similar to other pedagogical frameworks, research is the baseline of the Business Plus Education Ecosystem to ensure intellectual vibrancy as well as the currency and relevance of its management education. In the changing landscape of business and society, emergent management issues cannot be conveniently categorized as the domain of any narrowly defined research field, nor are they amenable to any fixed paradigmatic models of inquiries. Rather, they deserve academic attention that combines multiple theoretical perspectives and methods.

To this end, the School reshuffles current faculty to establish cross-disciplinary research teams. Academically, the School has an orthodox vertical structure,

consisting of seven departments. Parallel to this structure, the School encourages faculty members to form horizontal research teams that cut across departmental boundaries in what is known as the 1 + 1 + N formula. Each team is led by a leading scholar (the first '1' in the formula) who sets the pace, directs discussions, and oversees the team's overall performance. Each team is also coordinated by a strategic liaison (the second '1' in the formula) who has rich cross-disciplinary experiences as well as corporate contacts. This liaison is a strategic management scholar or engineering researcher who connects research projects to corporate realities in ways similar to what Fey discusses in his article – conducting pilot interviews, hosting joint brainstorm sessions, and listening to business practitioners' feedbacks. The 'N' part of the formula refers to other team members from multiple disciplinary fields.

Thus, faculty members work together in cross-disciplinary research teams to investigate key management issues, following a problem-driven approach. Through a number of measures which will be introduced in the Action Agenda section below, the School ensures that faculty members work as teams, and encourages stand-alone faculty to actively seek out collaborating partners, pool expertise, and synergize in cross-disciplinary research projects. Examples include research teams working on issues related to data-driven business analytics, digital-age consumer behavior, organization change and digital transformation, and neurosciences and decision-making.

After years of effort, a new academic discipline/major – Digital Innovation and Management – was established in 2021 and subsequently approved by the Ministry of Education. This new discipline/major aims to theorize companies' digital transformation, to help companies enhance competitive advantages in digitized business, and to solve key emergent issues that companies face related to digitization. A related initiative currently under planning is the launch of *Digital Management Journal*. This journal will serve as an academic platform to attract high-level publications on cross-disciplinary research.

Teaching

The Business Plus Education Ecosystem initiative materializes the School's strategy, which is 'to accompany the frontiers of management practices'. Curriculum and program designs incorporate the latest research findings. In addition, faculty are encouraged to fill out the gap between management research and education by adopting novel approaches into classroom teaching and student coaching, with the aim of training students to master knowledge and to think critically to tackle real-world problems. This is our answer to Fey's call for a more 'contextualized' business education.

The School implements the above ideas through a series of renovation in curriculum design. In 2018, the School launched the AI Finance major for two reasons. One is that we believe that artificial intelligence is changing the finance management paradigm; undergraduate students should learn financial analytics to understand and lead

new trends in financial management. The second reason is that restructuring the undergraduate major itself embodies the central logic of the Business Plus education. The new majors offer selective courses, such as big data analyses, AI accounting, and technological insights, to prepare undergraduate students with a capability of holistically understanding the future business financial world.

Similar renovations are currently underway with the School’s Master’s and Doctoral programs. For instance, the BAI@QTEM Master’s program embeds business analytics into the background of fast-growing business intelligence. The program is designed to build high competency in skills needed to extract and manage data from disparate sources and implement data-driven management decisions based on quantitative information and algorithm models. At the doctoral level, the School launched the Digital Innovation and Management PhD program in 2021. Students dig into the many challenges, subtleties, and contradictions incurred by digital changes and innovations – how digitization has changed organizational power structures, affected employee work-life balance, optimized organizational operational agility, and engendered new heuristic thinking, to take just a few examples – to formulate new theoretical outlooks on our social world.

The renovation of the School’s professional master’s programs follows a similar problem-driven principle. A series of new MBA tracks have been developed to cater for emergent business trends, and subsequently, managerial needs. Examples include the Business Analytics track, Capital Market track, Healthcare and Medical Industry track, and Cultural Tourism track. In addition, the School recently introduced a new EMBA program known as M-STAR to serve the needs of senior managers and seasoned entrepreneurs. This program situates management theories within an extended network of knowledge – insights from natural sciences, technologies, arts, and philosophies. For instance, courses on leadership draw on traditional Chinese moral thinking, delve into culturally different stereotypes of leadership, and pry open the process whereby the development of leadership ideas is seen as inseparable from the ever-changing notions of arts and technologies. Currently, more M-series EMBA programs are under construction and will be introduced step by step.

Zhejiang University has a formal channel that allows faculty from one college to take up a full-time teaching position in another. Currently, this channel is underutilized due to complicated negotiation processes. With the Business Plus framework, the School is exploring the potential of intercollegiate teaching collaboration, and has made some initial success. For instance, Intelligent Finance is a course that connects management with finance, mathematics, and computer sciences, involving faculty from other colleges.

Corporate Links

The linkage with technology-driven entrepreneurial communities is an integral and essential part of the Business Plus Education Ecosystem initiative. The

School reaches out to an array of partners including business communities, alumni groups, and other social organizations. Resonating with Fey's emphasis on Chinese business schools' practical impacts, the School encourages its faculty to publish in leading international journals while maintaining a strong presence in practice-oriented research and business consulting projects.

In this regard, the Business Plus Education Ecosystem proceeds in two important ways. One is that the School pushes its faculty to immerse themselves in business practices, based on which they glean theoretical insights. There are always genuinely good lessons to be learned from business practices. However, often, these lessons are either theorized for academic readership – as Fey puts it, they are published in academic journals and written in a style unfriendly to business practitioners – or, lessons are collected by economic historians and financial journalists and are thus quite indistinguishable from archival documents. The School takes an alternative approach, with professors and PhD students teaming up to conduct single-case ethnographic studies – often more than three months – in some major-league private firms based in Zhejiang. These studies produce theorized accounts of business practices for general readership (the *Legendary Zheshang Series*: eight books are published and more are on the way), and they are very positively rated by entrepreneurs. Many entrepreneurs provided feedback to us, saying that these studies help them clarify their views on their own businesses as well as those of others.

Meanwhile, the School launches MBA action learning with business incubation. The School treats action learning, now a standard component of all MBA programs under Business Plus, as an opportunity for reciprocal learning. In practice, partner firms produce a list of up to eight management issues that they feel most troublesome, and this list is then matched to an equal size of MBA teams (and their mentors) on the basis of interest and expertise. This arrangement allows for fruitful counsels to incur and, in turn, further collaborations with the firms. Sustainable collaborations are built upon a series of small wins among partners; the School follows up these small wins carefully, nudging collaborations forward by creating conditions and supplying resources. For instance, joint workshops and seminars convene old partners to review old ideas as well as to ponder new ones. A part of the School's new building is set aside as co-working spaces for students, alumni, and business associates to meet and discuss on regular basis. In addition, the School organizes joint expert panels to review students' business plans, and to financially sponsor high-potential start-ups in a diverse array of industrial sectors.

ACTION AGENDA

To put Business Plus Education Ecosystem in action, the School has engaged in three primary activities: building up collaborative infrastructure, redesigning performance evaluation, and balancing resources.

The School now operates around a platform-and-project infrastructure. Administrative units (e.g., the MBA office) become platforms that provide resources and conduct routine management, while research and teaching evaluation is targeted at projects (e.g., cross-disciplinary research teams, MBA teaching tracks). This is to ensure that project leaders take full responsibility of team performance, and that team work together to achieve common goals.

The School is currently adjusting its research and teaching evaluation metrics. For research teams, their KPIs are extended from the number of top-level publications to the degree of research’s practical impacts. Obviously, setting evaluation criteria is difficult – pilot enquires are being conducted, and the two metrics suggested by Fey are helpful. For teaching, one primary agenda is to start evaluating the diversity of MBA thesis-topics. It is not uncommon that an MBA supervisor uses just one framework (e.g., business model canvas) to produce of a string of theses. This practice, which defines management problems with own tunnel solutions, clearly runs against the analytical core of Business Plus education and will be promptly rectified.

The School balances financial resources to encourage cross-disciplinary and problem-driven research and teaching. It sets up a special fund to sponsor cross-disciplinary research, using it primarily to attract high-caliber scholars around the globe. In addition, the School recently launched a new reward scheme for high quality research and teaching. Since this scheme mainly targets projects, it provides additional incentives for stand-alone faculty to join cross-disciplinary research teams, and for MBA-track teams to develop new teaching cases.

To conclude, we agree with Fey (2022) that the time is ripe for Chinese business schools to go beyond the American model of business education. The business and social dynamics in China make this move not only a possibility, but also a necessity – to fulfill a business school’s social responsibility. ‘To forge ahead, or to fall behind’? The Business Plus Education Ecosystem initiative shows the School’s determination, as well as efforts, to forge ahead.

REFERENCE

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