

By
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Reflections of a former business school dean: Mounting efforts to transform business school rankings

I am writing this article as a former business school dean who came to understand the tremendous influence that rankings can have on a school's priorities, including the research of the faculty, for better or worse. In fact, I found the influence of the *Financial Times* ranking to be so profound that some selection committee members tried to argue that candidates without a strong publication record in FT50 journals should be eliminated from consideration for faculty and leadership appointments.

This contribution is a brief story of my efforts to challenge this type of thinking, while building a school committed to 'business as a force for good'. It is also an invitation to business school deans from around the world to engage with initiatives underway to transform business schools and rankings' metrics, to help build a more sustainable future.

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Building a vision: Towards sustainability

For ten years (2009-2019) I served as dean of a newly-created college of business and economics at the University of Guelph, Canada. The vision we adopted in 2010, through a highly collaborative process, was 'to be and develop leaders for a sustainable world'. Further, we identified three guiding pillars: transformational learning, research with impact, and community engagement. These mutually reinforcing commitments reflected the interests of our faculty, students, and alumni, as well as the University's commitment to 'improve life'. They also powerfully served to differentiate us from the many, well established, and well-funded internationally ranked Canadian business schools in close geographic proximity.

Our vision was met with a range of reactions at the time, from hostility and scepticism in some quarters, to offers of support and enthusiastic endorsement in others. Inspiration and encouragement for enacting our vision came in part from our active engagement with the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI) and, later, the founding of the GRLI's Dean's and Directors cohort; a group of likeminded decanal change agents who not only shared a common commitment to transforming business education and research, but also the strategies and tactics they had successfully employed to do so (<https://grli.org/initiatives/deanscohort/>).



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My school had also become an active member of the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (or PRME) champions group. I had the honour of representing PRME signatories at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in NYC in 2015. This assembly was focused on the need to support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 agenda. In my address I called for radical change in what and how business schools teach as well as better mutually supportive partnerships between business schools and UN Global Compact members – organisations committed to stakeholder capitalism. I also challenged rankings' metrics (such as salary increases) that drive business school priorities away from a focus on sustainability and toward short-termism and shareholder primacy.

Curricular innovation: The great ethical dilemma

One of the strategies that proved particularly effective in helping move Guelph's business school forward, was hiring a faculty member – Kathleen Rodenburg – for the express purpose of transforming our Introduction to Management course into one that would creatively 'onboard' approximately 800 new BComm students to our values each fall. The approach that emerged saw senior undergraduate students trained as learning facilitators, teaching seminar sections of approximately 50 students each. In the seminars, first semester students were assigned the task of studying particular industries and organisations, and then – as a culminating project – were presented with a 'great ethical dilemma', a fictional yet realistic problem that an organisation in the industry they had studied might well encounter. Applying various ethical frameworks, each team was required to propose and justify a solution to a board of directors, comprised of actual industry executives and volunteer faculty. Feedback about the course has been resoundingly positive, with testimony to the transferable skills



and values students have acquired, including critical thinking, ethical problem solving, teamwork, and presentation skills, laying a solid foundation for future courses.

In subsequent years, students were required to take a course on the SDGs, while SDG themes were incorporated in discipline-focused courses across the curriculum. In the final year, the SDGs were explicitly revisited once again, in an integrated way, in a final capstone strategy course.

The need for external validation: The power of accreditation & rankings

Despite implementing numerous innovations such as the one just described, one of the biggest challenges I faced was the lack of formal external validation. When I was appointed dean, we were not yet accredited, ranked, or named and my mandate was very clear; I had ten years to deliver on all three. And





so, I was more than relieved when towards the end of my first term, AACSB began to revise its approach, ultimately embracing new standards, allowing schools to pursue their own strategic plans and values. Prior, sustainability and ethics had not been a major focus for AACSB, and I had not been prepared to give up our differentiating vision to accommodate a successful bid. Accreditation through EFMD was also on the school's agenda, but we had decided to complete our work with AACSB first – becoming successfully accredited in 2021.

In terms of rankings, after a review of the criteria of several 'name brand' options, including the FT50, we concluded that the best match for us was Corporate Knights' 'better world' MBA ranking. Following a business school deans meeting in Davos during the 2018 World Economic Forum (WEF), hosted by Corporate Knights and the UN's PRME Champions group, we made the decision to participate. We had no idea how we would perform, but we were keen to establish a benchmark for continuous improvement, hopeful that we might appear anywhere in the 'top 40'. We were understandably thrilled when we ranked in the top ten globally, most recently in sixth place.

Contributing to a global movement for change

During the roundtable portion of the 2018 Davos meeting, I had challenged the lack of rankings for undergraduate programs, suggesting that MBA rankings may be falsely creating a 'halo effect' for some business schools, not accurately reflecting the experience of undergraduate students. Some at the meeting agreed that resources could be deliberately redirected away from large undergraduate programs in order to improve rankings in elite MBA offerings, while driving school reputation overall. Accordingly, I was delighted when Corporate Knights launched a ranking of Canadian undergraduate business programs in 2020.

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Witnessing the power of Davos to focus attention on business school rankings and bring about change, I was pleased to have the opportunity to facilitate two subsequent events in Davos, in which the unintended consequences of rankings were further explored and recommendations made to mitigate them. In 2019, the *Dean's Dialogue at Davos*, centred on the report "Business School Rankings for the 21st Century" (Pitt-Watson & Quigley, 2019). The focus groups for this publication were supported in part by John North, Executive Director of the GRLI and the findings were simultaneously released at EFMD's meeting for Deans and Directors in Shanghai. The discussion that followed was captured in the report '2019 Dialogue at WEF Davos on Business School Rankings'. At this event, participants observed that (pg. 1)

'many existing business school ranking systems [...] have had perverse (unintended) consequences on the focus of faculty research, curricular and pedagogical innovation, and the student experience (particularly for undergraduate students). Driven by the desire to be well-ranked (with the concomitant rewards that such rankings engender – such as significantly enhanced brand and credibility amongst potential donors – faculty, students and senior university administrators), business schools have been strongly incentivised to "play the game" and engineer results, particularly in the areas of student salaries and faculty research.'

During WEF 2020, a similar event for deans and other business school stakeholders was held. An invited panel representing Corporate Knights, the FT50, and the Positive Impact Rating (PIR) further debated the shortcomings of current rankings, resulting in additional recommendations for change. Participants agreed it was time to (p. 2):



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‘fundamentally reconsider the metrics and methods used to rank and rate business schools, in order to create a more aligned system, in which business schools are encouraged and recognised for prioritising actions that contribute to long-term, positive societal impact in their teaching, research and service activities.’

The results of PIR’s first foray were also announced in 2020, along with powerful recommendations from students, which included ‘making sustainability and social impact training mandatory in curricula’ (p. 3). Given that the PIR’s results largely came from undergraduate student perceptions, I was particularly pleased that Guelph was rated highly, as a balance to our MBA rating.

While I personally benefitted – and was energised – from the opportunity to work with and learn from global change agents at these various events, the results proved seminal to the successful naming of Guelph’s business school. Benefactors Stu and Kim Lang had been contemplating naming my school for some

time but wanted to first be assured that we had the potential to be globally leading. More specifically, they had challenged me to secure an internationally recognised endorsement. With a ranking and rating in hand, and with accreditation well underway, in 2019 they decided to name Guelph’s business school after Stu’s father Gordon, who throughout his career had promoted ethical and humane business practices. In my final month as dean, Stu and Kim provided a gift of 21 million USD to support the school’s sustainability initiatives, the largest single gift in the University of Guelph’s history.



Life post-Dean

As I stepped down as dean and had the opportunity to consider the next chapter in my career, I reflected on the tremendous power of rankings and accreditation bodies to shape the priorities of business schools and universities, and how they are perceived. I decided to continue to be an advocate for change in curricular innovation, as well as through my own research and external service activity.

In July 2021 I was appointed President of Yorkville University (YU). In my new role, and with the support of CarringtonCrisp, I am focused on revising our business education, particularly for international students aspiring to remain in Canada, and for mature, undergraduate domestic students (studying online). In YU's other disciplines, such as education, there is already a strong social justice agenda, and I have enjoyed learning of our approach, not only the curriculum, but also innovation in student and faculty assessment. We also offer one of North America's largest Master's programs in Counselling Psychology, helping meet the ever-increasing societal need for mental health support.

I also continue to support the work of Kathleen, who now heads a sustainability research team at the University of Guelph. In the spirit of continuous improvement, this work has recently explored the efficacy of the Positive Impact Rating (<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126519>), challenged the SDG framework as a useful tool for measuring research impact, and analysed the extent to which articles published in the FT50 are aligned with the UN's 2030 agenda. Through this work, and consistent with the philosophy of the PIR, we have argued for a greater voice for undergraduate and graduate students in the rankings of their schools, strongly weighting their perceptions of their preparedness to become ethical change makers.



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It is more than time to make these efforts mainstream. And so, this is a call to action

Using an online, cloud-based text analytic software tool, we have analysed the SDGs. Addressing criticisms of conceptual overlap, which have challenged the use of the SDGs as a rigorous assessment tool, we have identified eight unique themes that can be used to evaluate the alignment of the curriculum and research publications of business schools.

Using this same tool, we have also analysed the content of FT50 publications. In 2019, three million unique concepts were presented in the 4576 articles published in FT50 journals. Of these, just over 10% (304,636) were ‘explicitly related to the eight core themes of the SDGs’. Further, a full 76% of these came from just one journal – the *Journal of Business Ethics*. That said, 25% of the concepts were found to have an implicit connection (largely in management-related journals), suggesting that while the content of the majority of FT50 journal articles was neither explicitly nor implicitly aligned with the SDGs, there is an immediate opportunity for greater emphasis, simply by encouraging management scholars to become more explicit about the implications of their work for the SDGs. Our current project is investigating other potential areas of bias in FT50 journals.

With these insights in hand, Kathleen and I have begun to collaborate with others pursuing similar research, such as Wilf Mijndhardt, Policy Director RSM at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, and his school’s SDG Dashboard Project (<https://www.rsm.nl/positive-change/students/sdg-dashboard/>). We have also collaborated with David Steingard from the Haub School of Business, St. Joseph’s University and Simon Linacre, formerly of Cabell’s and their SDG Dashboard (https://sdgdashboard.sju.edu/?page_id=22). Some of this work was presented at the PRME North American conference in April 2022.





GRI and HESI

I have also continued to serve as a Director for the GRI and in particular, support GRI's engagement with the UN's Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI). During 2021, HESI produced a series of articles providing advice to rankings organisations and higher education institutions, encouraging greater alignment with the SDGs. Relatedly, HESI formed the Rankings and Ratings Roundtable, an initiative that has brought together senior individuals from various ranking organisations, including Elsevier, the FT50, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), and others. I have been encouraged by some recent steps, such as the move by the FT50 to include measures of Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) curriculum content alongside additional diversity, inclusion, and equity criteria. THE also launched a new ranking in 2019 to measure the progress of universities toward the SDGs. I am encouraged by the willingness of these rankings organisations to engage with others in improving their approaches, including THE's search for a responsible research assessment tool.

Through HESI, I have also had the opportunity to engage with representatives from the UN's Publishers Compact, helping to catalyse SDG alignment through, for example, changes in the peer review process. Here, I have suggested that editors could have a significant impact, simply by directing reviewers to comment on the extent to which submitted papers are aligned with the SDGs. Where appropriate, they could also encourage authors to make any such connections explicit, in keywords as well as findings, supporting the assessment of SDG alignment and encouraging deeper reflection on social impact.

A Call to Action

There is no doubt in my mind that business schools and their deans can play a major role in catalysing change, helping to address the world's most pressing challenges, contributing to a more sustainable future for our children and our children's children. Thankfully, many already are. It is clearly time for us to move beyond rankings and metrics that have long reinforced shareholder capitalism, arguably contributing to the existential threat the world is facing today. Thankfully, change is underway.

It is more than time to make these efforts mainstream. And so, this is a call to action. For business school deans to acknowledge the potential influence they hold, and to invite them – to invite you – to engage more fully in efforts that are underway, not only to ensure that the curricula, research and rankings your school's faculty are pursuing are aligned with the SDGs, but also that the types of systemic change being explored continue to build momentum.

If you are looking for a way to engage this agenda, the GRI is a terrific place to start.

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About the author

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