

By
Michaela Rankin, Suzanne Young and Suzanne O'Keefe

Transforming Education in Australian business schools: Our past, present, and future



Historically, business schools have seen their mission as delivering curriculum to ensure the development of technical skills and capabilities to allow graduates to seamlessly enter the business world; but the past twenty years have seen rapid changes, not only in education but in what business and society is expecting from business schools and their graduates. Recent events have also sharpened the focus on disruption and have given weight to the notion that multidisciplinary is essential to confront pressing environmental and societal challenges. Business schools have an important role to play in developing future leaders who will be equipped to work across geographical and disciplinary boundaries, and this requires a rethink of curriculum and pedagogy. Using climate action as an example, in this article we examine recent curriculum innovations by Australian schools to produce graduates who are prepared for the world of work, but who also see their own potential as agents for social change and future leaders. Recognising there is still some way to go, we propose a model of education that has the potential to develop graduates who are able to take on the increasingly complex challenges of business and society.

Australia is an island continent that has traditionally relied on fossil fuels as a major source of both energy and of export income. This has significantly influenced government policy on energy and climate change. The Federal Government has come under increasing pressure following recent climate-related fires and floods across the country, and from other members of the G7, to commit to stronger emissions targets by 2030, and Net Zero by 2050. In practice, until now the Federal Government has taken a hands-off approach,

and leaving real action to individual State governments and industry. Universities across the country, including our own, are also leading in Net Zero commitments. This activity has put climate policy and action at the forefront of business and is driving the need for business school graduates to be equipped to contribute to strategy and action on climate, in addition to other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since 2007, the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management (PRME) has provided a framework and capability-building platform for business schools globally to critically examine their environments and transition their learning outcomes and delivery. Currently 32 business schools in Australia – approximately 75% – are signatories to PRME. Australian PRME signatory schools have, for some time, been integrating climate change and sustainability into their curriculum and research in various ways, with great impact. Climate change has been identified as a significant issue by the Australian Business Deans' Council, which is currently funding research exploring best practice in both actions to combat climate change, and best practice in curriculum design. Examples include: La Trobe's Business School, which has developed a business analytics tool for the University (La Trobe Energy Analytics Platform) to monitor energy consumption across the campus; a new major in Climate Change that has been introduced with subjects addressing La Trobe's Sustainability Thinking Essential; a Climate Change Week hosted by UNSW; a Climate Talks podcast offered by the University of Melbourne; research themes on Climate Adaptation explored at UNSW, University of Queensland, and Newcastle Business School, to name a few. The University

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of Queensland Business School offers an extra-curricular Carbon Literacy Program to both staff and students in order to fill the knowledge gap and to put participants in a position to be able to take action. Monash Business School is supporting industry education through its executive education programme 'Climate Change and Business Risk'.

While in many ways business schools are leading the way in climate action through research and education, some students are still struggling to understand the relevance of sustainability and climate to the world of business and their future careers. For example, with a focus on Responsible Management, students in La Trobe's MBA have questioned how the focus on 'responsibility' will assist them in their careers. It is therefore the responsibility of academic leaders to ensure that students, and our own colleagues, understand the link between climate action and the SDGs more broadly, and the world of work. We also need to be clear about the role business schools play in developing graduates who are agents for social change and their future roles in industry as innovative strategic thinkers, and as leaders for society in adapting to the changing global and local environment.

To ensure we develop graduates who can contribute, through their future careers, to successfully tackling climate change and meeting other SDGs we need to develop educational experiences that are interdisciplinary and immersive. We know that interdisciplinary research teams are needed to successfully tackle global challenges. For example, through an interdisciplinary whole-of-university approach, La Trobe's Climate Network brings together academics from across the University to engage with the challenges faced by climate change; while Monash's RISE (Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments) programme brings together academics from across the university to work at the intersection of health, environment water, and sanitation across



informal settlements in Indonesia and Fiji. Monash University is taking an interdisciplinary approach to offer a funded, immersive education experience, at scale, to all undergraduate students in their second year of study. At Monash, with a focus on the SDGs, this transformative education experience provides the opportunity for students from all faculties to complete at one of Monash's overseas campuses or study centres. Multidisciplinary student teams work with over 100 education, government, industry and NGO partners. This approach provides an opportunity for students to experience academics collaborating with partners, and to engage in an education experience with purpose. Evidence suggests that this approach has a positive influence on grades, student retention, and employability.





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To effect this transformation, there is a need for entrepreneurial change agents or institutional entrepreneurs to drive change in business schools from the bottom up and top down. Only by having a multi-level, whole-of-university approach will change occur where business school academics work with those in environmental science, political science, and history.

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About the authors

Michaela Rankin is Professor and Deputy Dean, International and Accreditation at Monash Business School, Melbourne, Australia

Suzanne Young is Associate Dean, Academic Partnerships and Suzanne O'Keefe is Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching at La Trobe Business School, Melbourne, Australia