

# Building Back Better: Purpose-Driven Business Schools

MARTIN KITCHENER AND RACHEL ASHWORTH

Despite their many achievements, business schools are criticised for prioritising the achievement of outcomes, such as revenue and rankings, over the pursuit of their purpose.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the inherent variation among the world's many business schools, most were created with some idea of enhancing the public good by nurturing the management profession and conducting related scholarship. With many business schools having lost sight of their purpose, it is ironic that a reform movement is currently driving corporations to return to their purpose of generating "profitable solutions for the problems of people and planet, while not profiting from creating problems for either."<sup>2</sup>

As business schools display inertia while corporations change to pursue purpose, a rift is emerging between the interests of participants in the business school industry. On one side, employers want to hire the brightest minds to drive their purpose-driven companies, and graduates seek purposeful careers. On the other side, many business schools still operate teaching pedagogies, research agendas, and strategies that concentrate on the achievement of outcomes. This fissure exists despite programmatic calls for changes to business school operations issued by some journal editors, research funders, and former deans. It continues even though some business school academics play a leading role in the corporate reform movement. It carries on even though purpose is the first principle of the Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative.<sup>3</sup>

To prevent the chasm widening, business school leaders must not default back into their pre-COVID approaches to achieving outcomes. Instead, they should build back better business schools that are purpose-driven (henceforth, P-Schools). This article illustrates the potential for such change from a report on the emergence of purpose-driven business schools in the UK,<sup>4</sup> and a study of strategic change at one of the first P-Schools.<sup>5</sup>

## EARLY SIGHTINGS OF THE P-SCHOOL

A recent study of UK business schools examined ways that they seek to purposefully enhance public good through their four main activities: teaching, research, internal operations, and external engagement activities. Four broad approaches were identified. In the Traditional mode, strategic thinking is dominated by the achievement of outcomes such as revenue and rankings. As a result, purposeful activity remains a low priority and is restricted to a small number of discrete projects conducted by, what could be termed, 'purpose entrepreneurs'. In the Planned Development category, purpose-driven activity is reported to be a rising strategic priority, but it is still restricted to a small number of un-coordinated projects. A generous interpreter of this configuration might suggest a well-intentioned, and possibly temporary, disconnect between espoused and enacted strategy. A less kind observer might suggest 'purpose-washing'.

The Emergent category comprises schools which report that purpose-driven activity has risen-up the strategic agenda, and which can demonstrate aligned innovations across some, but not all, of the School's four main activity areas. In contrast, business schools in the Purpose-Driven (P-School) group share three characteristics, with each having:

- (a) articulated their reason for being within a 'statement of purpose' that defines the positive contribution to public good that they will make,
- (b) developed a purpose function to inspire and co-ordinate innovations across their four main activity areas, and
- (c) started to develop approaches to reporting 'progress towards purpose'.

The P-School category comprises a diverse combination of seven business schools based at the universities of: Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow Caledonian, University of Arts London (UAL), Manchester, Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), and Queen's Belfast. This group includes five research-intensive schools located in major cities (Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester, QMUL, Queen's Belfast), a school within a Scottish teaching-led university (Glasgow Caledonian), and one smaller business school specialising in the fashion industry (UAL). Despite this diversity, each P-School has begun to move away from outcomes-based strategies to state, coordinate, and report its purpose.

### Stating Business School Purpose

All seven P-Schools display leadership approaches based on inculcating in colleagues a higher, clearer sense of their contribution to what the school does, and why and how they do it. In other words, a sense of purpose. A common foundation is that each P-School has articulated a 'statement of purpose' that defines their intended positive contribution to society.

The purpose statements of the seven P-Schools vary in two main respects. First, the local conceptualisation of purpose varies in each school. So, for example, while Manchester exists to promote 'Social Responsibility', Birmingham enhances 'Responsible Management', and Glasgow Caledonian enhances the 'Common Good'. The second point of variation among P-Schools is the source of the local conception of purpose. While four P-Schools developed the conception of purpose themselves (Birmingham, Cardiff, Queen's Belfast, and QMUL), in the other three cases, the local version of purpose was conceived by the parent university (Manchester, Glasgow Caledonian, and UAL). It will be interesting to observe whether the source of the local version of purpose has implications for staff buy-in, resource support, and sustainability.

### Co-ordinating Delivery of Purpose

In addition to purpose statements, each of the P-Schools have established some form of purpose function to inspire and co-ordinate aligned innovations across their four main activity areas. This often involves the Dean, or some combination of senior leaders, performing a Chief Purpose Officer (CPO) role. The main objective is to inspire purposeful innovation from colleagues, and to report purposeful activity upwards internally, and to external audiences. At most of the P-Schools, the CPO role operates in collaboration with a committee or board charged with purposeful strategy development. At Birmingham this is called the Responsible Business Committee, at Cardiff it is the Shadow Management Board (described later), and at Manchester it is the Social Responsibility Committee.

### Reporting on Purpose

To mitigate the risk of implementation gaps emerging between espoused strategies (e.g., purpose statements) and enacted activities, the corporate re-purposing movement recommends that organisations develop approaches to reporting on purpose. This involves extending beyond the standard reporting of outcomes, to include the production and usage of a broad range of capitals, including human, intellectual, natural, social, material, and financial. Among the P-Schools that have begun to address this challenge, the most common approach involves reporting to PRME principles<sup>6</sup>, typically within Sharing of Information of Progress (SiP) reports, and internal processes of curriculum auditing and review.

Cardiff Business Schools' *Annual Public Value Report* is the first known attempt to measure and narrate a business school's progress towards its purpose using indicators of economic and social impact, sustainability, and staff attitudes. Whilst demonstrating the School's strong economic and social contribution and progressive model of governance, the report also found that the largest contributor to the School's carbon footprint is the travel of international students who are also, of course, its largest source of revenue. Whilst now evidenced, this tension has yet to be resolved. This is, in part, because resolution lies beyond the School, at the university-level of policy.

Despite the early stages of P-School development, and beyond the inevitable tensions that exist, their reported emergence in the UK indicates that some academic leaders have demonstrated the will and capacity to move away from the prevailing strategic pre-occupation with outcomes. Instead, they are trying to re-purpose their schools towards enhancing the public good. The next section provides a more detailed account of the process by which this is being attempted at one P-School.<sup>7</sup>



## DEVELOPING A P-SCHOOL

Cardiff Business School (CARBS) is a large, multi-disciplinary academic community that is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> for research in the UK and is in the capital city of Wales. Since 2016, the School has pursued its stated purpose of enhancing public value by transforming activity across each of its four main activity areas. The change process began in 2013, in a standard way, with an in-coming Dean (Kitchener) conducting a strategic review of the School. In an unusual feature of the review, Kitchener conducted a search for a purpose-led strategic approach that suited the social scientific tradition of the School, and which offered an alternative to the outcomes-focused strategies that had come to dominate UK universities and their business schools. Unfortunately, Kitchener found little inspiration from either the practice or study of business school management. After a more than a year of searching, a senior colleague and friend (Rick Delbridge) suggested that Kitchener read John Brewer's sociological thesis on the *Public Value of Social Science*.<sup>8</sup> Reading that book led Kitchener to start conceiving the purpose of CARBS to be the delivery of public value.

The nascent idea of the 'public value business school', and Brewer's manifesto for change, were adapted to the School's distinctive character through a series of strategy development workshops that involved an extensive range of internal colleagues and external partners including: the School's advisory board, senior university leaders, employers, and government.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this widespread involvement in the strategy formulation process was to offer knowledgeable and committed colleagues the opportunity to contribute both to strategy conceptualisation, and to the development of aligned innovations across CARBS' activities. It was only after three years of this collaborative strategic process that Kitchener was able to formally launch the School's statement of purpose at a public event in 2018. Attendees were told that Cardiff, as the world's first public value business school, existed to:

*"Promote economic and social improvement through interdisciplinary scholarship that addresses the grand challenges of our time, while operating a strong and progressive approach to our own governance".*

In addition to this purpose statement, the second output of the collaborative strategic work was the following broad 'directions of purposeful travel' for the School's four main areas of activity:

(a) teaching and learning develops moral sentiments and capacities to promote economic and social improvement,

- (b) interdisciplinary research addresses the grand challenges of our time,
- (c) external engagement extends across a fuller range of partners, and
- (d) a progressive approach to school governance.

Rather than following the more standard strategic approach of attempting to deliver key performance indicators defined by management, CARBS had committed to four broad directions of travel in pursuit of its purpose to enhance public value. In this sense, the strategy was oblique; no destination was specified.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it was left to colleagues to identify aligned innovations in each of the School's activity areas to advance the strategic journey. Progress in each area is summarised below.

### Purposeful Teaching

CARBS colleagues have made clear progress in delivering public good through innovative teaching and learning that develops moral sensitivities and capacities to promote public good through economic and social improvement. The School's Education and Students strategy has produced curricula that are: research-informed, interdisciplinary, and Grand Challenge-oriented; collaborative in encouraging partnership with a wide range of stakeholders; and community-oriented, working in conjunction with social enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises, multi-nationals and third sector bodies locally, nationally, and globally. Graduate attributes reflect public value with the aim of enabling students to be confident in their knowledge, skills and ability; ready to challenge societal and economic norms; empathetic and compassionate in dealing with others; aware of their reliance on one another and the environment; and healthy and happy.

Following Brewer, a key aim is to help students develop a better understanding of 'marginalised' workers who face challenges such as a lack of social protection, poor working practices, and wage stagnation. The School's Public Value Engagement Fellowships provide 'seedcorn' funding and workload reduction so that colleagues can develop relationships to underpin the co-creation of teaching. Examples include a partnership with Anti-Slavery International where students produced collaborative research to support Baroness Young's Modern Slavery (Transparency in Supply Chains) Bill and a collaboration with the Living Wage Foundation where module assessments involved working with employers on the Real Living Wage, with one student group credited in a local Health Board's recent decision to accredit to the Real Living Wage to over 2000 low paid employees.

Throughout their study, CARBS students are encouraged to consider how they can make a difference to the world around them. In terms of curricula development, public value is the central theme within a new MBA programme launched in 2021, and it is a key theme in the annual review of all programmes, encouraging multi-disciplinary and challenged content. On the new MBA programme, individual coaching helps participants identify purposeful careers, and the final, capstone, module links the themes of individual and organisational purpose.

By the end of 2018, there were signs that CARBS students valued the School's new purposeful approach to teaching as they contributed testimonials on the **School's "I stand for" initiative:**



#### **I stand for change**

"It's not just about having a strong moral direction; it's having the inspiration and motivation to go out and do something. This is what I want the world to be. I feel I have the support from Cardiff Business School to go out and make a difference."

**Ieuan Davies**  
Cardiff Business School student



#### **I stand for progress**

"We have to understand the world we live in. Businesses, NGOs and government need to collaborate to impact the communities they operate in. It's about helping society progress together."

**Shazerinna Zainal**  
Cardiff Business School student

### **Purposeful Research**

Following the launch of the purpose-driven strategy in 2016, the School's Research Committee decided to re-direct its discretionary research budget to follow Brewer's manifesto and support interdisciplinary studies that address society's grand challenges. Following an innovative 'idea crowd-sourcing project' among faculty, the School adopted five grand challenges: decent work, fair and sustainable

economies, future organisations, good governance and responsible innovation.<sup>11</sup> Of course, faculty are still encouraged to pursue their own research interests, and much public value research had been conducted in the School before this change process. The School's values have evolved into important Public Value principles that underpin our research activities. There is a focus on *co-creating knowledge* where researchers and stakeholders are equal partners in the research endeavour, *developing inter-disciplinary connections* through our multi-disciplinary research groups and new Social Science park, *sustaining a collegial research culture* where early career researcher engagement and altruistic academic leadership is promoted, and *inclusive engagement* involving a full range of social and economic stakeholders. The prioritization of public value criteria and ways of working in the allocation of research funding supports a growing portfolio of interdisciplinary research groups, public value research projects, and a stream of scholarship in public value. The public value research environment enables colleagues to contribute to their disciplines, and to society and in keeping with the School's traditions in critical management and open debate, some have also been inspired to write questioning the potential for purposeful change in the current political and economic climate.

### **PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT.<sup>12</sup>**

In addition to maintaining a business schools' conventional elite engagements (including its International Advisory Board, chaired by Adele Blakebrough MBE CEO of the Social Business Trust and co-location with the Institute of Directors in Wales), CARBS increasingly promotes economic and social improvement through a diverse range of collaborations. While some of these are international in scope, (e.g., UNPRME), others are local including the School's partnership with Llamau, a Welsh homeless charity. The School facilitates collaboration and engagement through monthly Breakfast Briefing sessions oriented around Grand Challenges and problem-oriented roundtables, while it has extended and strengthened relationships with a variety of SMEs, social enterprises and entrepreneurs, including under-represented and excluded groups such as women and BAME entrepreneurs. Partners such as the School's double cohort of public value entrepreneurs in residence are especially important to the purposeful change project because they help give credibility to an intrapreneurial approach that challenges dominant assumptions and practices, and they provide examples and learning opportunities to students.<sup>13</sup>



## Purposeful School Governance

Under the previous governance approach at CARBS, and many other business schools, the combination of strong financial and academic performance, and compliance with legal requirements would constitute satisfactory outcomes. One of the distinctive elements of Cardiff's view of a purposeful business school is the commitment to delivering public good through a progressive approach to its own the governance.

The first steps began in 2013 with the collaborative strategy-making process and continued during its implementation. Almost immediately, this approach had the desired effect of inspiring many inclusivity initiatives including the development of an innovative Shadow Management Board (SMB). This body comprises a diverse mix of academic and professional service colleagues, most of whom have not previously held leadership roles. Established to widen participation and diversity in strategic decision-making, SMB includes faculty and professional service representatives of all grades and influences School decision-making by providing constructive challenge while developing its own policy proposals. The development of the new public value full-time MBA was prompted by a SMB review of the School's Postgraduate Education Portfolio. In 2017, the initial SMB chair became the first board member to join the senior management team, and she was then subsequently appointed Dean; the first woman to be Head of School.

Recent developments include the creation in 2020 of a Race Equality Committee designed to address continued societal and economic inequality, disadvantage and discrimination. Chaired by Professor Emmanuel Ogbonna, the Committee ensures that the School's workplace culture, learning environment, education curricula and teaching practices are diverse, inclusive and non-discriminatory, while addressing attainment gaps and amplifying BAME voices within the School.

The School's commitment to enhancing public good through its governance has also inspired a range of academic and professional service colleagues to work together to introduce a series of innovations in administrative areas including the production of the public value report, and a values-based approach to academic hiring.

## CONCLUSION

This article began by arguing that as business school leaders emerge from the challenges of the COVID pandemic, they must not default back to their outcomes-based strategies. Instead, they should build back better business schools that are purpose-driven (P-Schools). To pursue this agenda, at least two linked changes are required. Among the business school community, leaders must combine their agency (albeit bounded) with a will to replace outcome-

oriented strategies with purpose-driven alternatives. Fully recognising the complexity and magnitude of this challenge, this article has illustrated the potential for such change from a study that reports the emergence of P-Schools in the UK, and study of strategic change at one of the first P-Schools.

With different conceptions of purpose emerging in each P-School, all share three characteristics: they have articulated their reason for being within a statement of purpose; they have developed a purpose function to co-ordinate aligned innovations; and they have all started to develop approaches to reporting 'progress towards purpose'. The more in-depth account of development at Cardiff Business School illustrated a highly inclusive process that took nearly three years to produce a purpose statement and set of broad directions of purposeful travel in teaching, research, internal operations, and external engagement. Of course, the early purposeful innovations such as the Shadow Management Board are not yet enough to fully establish a purposeful business school. Instead, tensions continue to shadow the reform project, as they would within the many university contexts that are dominated by strategies to achieve outcomes.

At a wider level of change, the re-purposing of business schools will require a co-ordinated effort amongst diverse participants from the media, accreditation bodies, research funders, foundations, professional associations, students, and corporations. The corporate reform movement would seem to be a useful ally within any such coalition of the willing. It is also worth remembering that Milton Friedman, one of the inspirations for outcomes-focused corporate strategy, noted that solutions to crises often emerge from ideas that are lying around at the time. This article has argued that those charged with leading business schools should prioritise the pursuit of purpose over the achievement of outcomes. It is hoped that the emergence of P-Schools reported here may provide a source of inspiration for others who wish to build back better business schools.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kitchener, M, and R. Delbridge. (2020). "Lessons from Creating a Business School for Public Good: Obliquity, Waysetting and Wayfinding in Substantively Rational Change." *Academy of Management Teaching and Learning* 19/3: 307-322.

<sup>2</sup> British Academy. (2021). *Policy & Practice for Purposeful Business: The Final Report of the Future of the Corporation Programme*. London: The British Academy.

<sup>3</sup> [unprme.org](https://unprme.org)

<sup>4</sup> Chartered Association of Business Schools. (2021). *Business Schools and the Public Good*. London: Chartered ABS. <https://charteredabs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Chartered-ABS-Business-Schools-and-the-Public-Good-Taskforce-Report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Kitchener and Delbridge (2020) *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> [unprme.org](https://unprme.org)

<sup>7</sup> A fuller, and more personal, account of strategy development at CARBS is provided in Kitchener, M. (2021). "Leading with Purpose: Developing the First Business School for Public Good." In A. Lindgreen, A. Irwin, F. Poulfelt, and T. U. Thomsen (Eds.) *How to Lead Academic Departments Successfully*, Edward Elgar.

<sup>8</sup> Brewer, J. D. (2013). *The Public Value of the Social Sciences*. London: Bloomsbury.

<sup>9</sup> Kitchener, M. (2019). "The Public Value of Social Science: From Manifesto to Organisational Strategy." In Lindgreen, A., Koenig-Lewis, N., Kitchener, M., Brewer, J. D., Moore, M. H. and Meynhardt, T. (Eds). *Public Value: Deepening, Enriching, and Broadening the Theory and Practice*, pp. 301-315. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Kitchener and Delbridge (2020) *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/business-school/research/grand-challenges>

<sup>12</sup> A more detailed analysis of purposeful engagement in P-Schools is provided in Kitchener, M., T. Levitt, and L. Thomas (2021). "Towards Purposeful Business Schools: Deepening and Broadening External Engagement". Available from author on request.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/business-school/people/public-value-entrepreneurs-in-residence>



---

## About the Authors

Martin Kitchener is Professor of Management, and former Dean, at Cardiff Business School.

Rachel Ashworth is Dean and Professor of Public Services Management at Cardiff University Business School.