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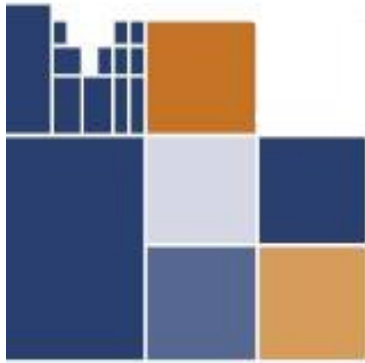


Symposium on Curriculum Review and Renewal
Friday 3 November 2006

*The postgraduate business curriculum:
The frontline in the war between
professionalism and academic irrelevance*

Professor David Hensher

Associate Dean, Postgraduate Coursework
Faculty of Economics and Business



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Development and Improvement of the business curricula

❖ Polarised Themes:

❖ Make the curriculum more relevant

❖ Ignore relevance—focus on research

❖ Is there a middle ground?



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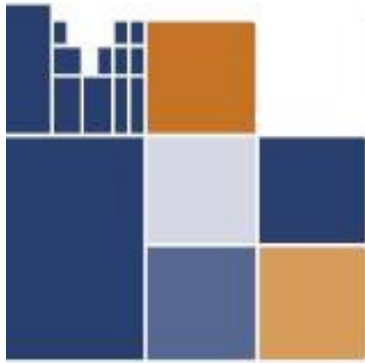
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Development of the business curricula

- ❖ Strong market forces call for universities to respond to the business education customer's demands for curriculum change towards more 'relevant' professional training.
 - ❖ a real danger in the future that universities will cede market share to the growing number of non-traditional education providers (for example, industry initiatives such as the Woolworth Academy)
- ❖ The risk is a move back towards the narrow, functional industry training characteristics of the 1950s which will result in a movement of resources away from research and lifelong learning.



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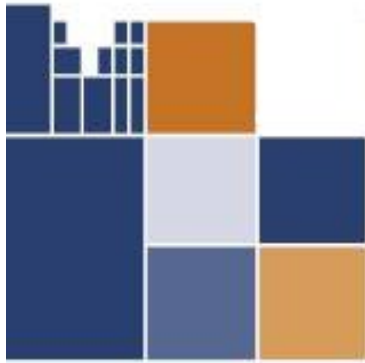
Explorers

The academics

versus

Exploiters

Stakeholders including current students, alumni, faculty members, taxpayers, corporate recruiters, accrediting agencies, local communities or anyone with a vested interest in the competitiveness of business.



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The explorers

- ❖ Tradition of academic freedom.
- ❖ Lack of market pressure / competitors.
- ❖ Research-focused reward system for business professors.
- ❖ Long term exploration which benefits both current and future students and, ultimately, society.



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The exploiters

- ❖ Calls for greater relevance of the postgraduate business curricula; teaching skills with a short half-life which make graduates immediately employable.
- ❖ Increasingly commodified buyers' market fuelled by the dramatic rise of MBA salaries, rising cost of the MBA degree and the media rankings.
- ❖ Change in discourse to 'products', 'clients', 'customers', 'markets' and 'competitors' reflects a symbolic and conceptual convergence.



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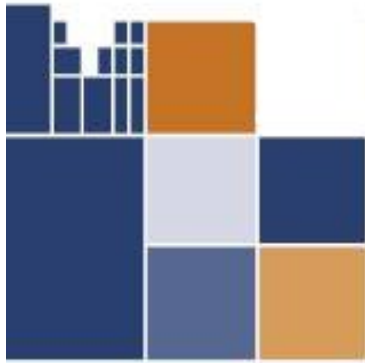
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Dangers of the exploiters' curricula

- ❖ Frequent curricula changes in response to fads.
- ❖ Removal of ethics as core curricula (ethics is not popular with students).
- ❖ Dumbing-down of course content.
- ❖ Inflation of grades in an attempt to improve student satisfaction.
- ❖ Increased focus on teaching at the expense of research, move to teaching-focused reward system for business professors.
- ❖ Pressure for 'immediately applicable' research results that are readily cited in the media and demanded by students and business.



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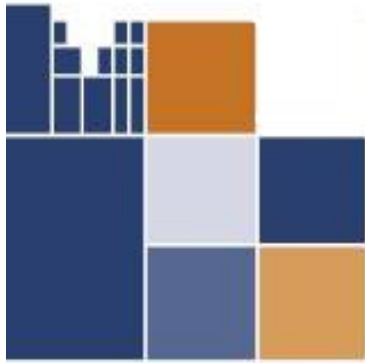
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A new business curricula?

- ❖ **Pedagogical innovation** – focus on individual learning and learning-by-doing (action learning) rather than a spoon-fed classroom based approach; provide opportunities for reflection as well as learning.
- ❖ **Trusting partnerships between academia and industry** to enable blended learning by introducing a clinical or practical component and / or other opportunities for industry engagement e.g., guest speakers, plant tours.
- ❖ **'Soft skills'** – e.g., interpersonal, multicultural and negotiation skills; change management; creativity; leadership; communications; ethics (popular with CEOs but not with students).



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A new business curricula?

- ❖ **Analytical skills** – e.g., developing scientific methodology, from hypothesis generation through to research and analysis; problem solving methodologies; systems thinking; deep immersion in theory.
- ❖ **Lead rather than follow management fashion.** Academia needs to be: more timely; more aware of and concerned with new developments in business; more focused on the real issues that management knowledge consumers face, or will face in the future.
- ❖ **Differentiate** – avoid market driven short-term fads and embrace the broader longer-term career needs of students differentiating the curricula through the research strengths of the offering institution (their “comparative advantage”).



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...the way that programs increasingly resemble one another stems from the rankings. As schools try to tailor their programs to move higher on the Business Week list, programs become more and more generic.

Doria et al., 2003:42



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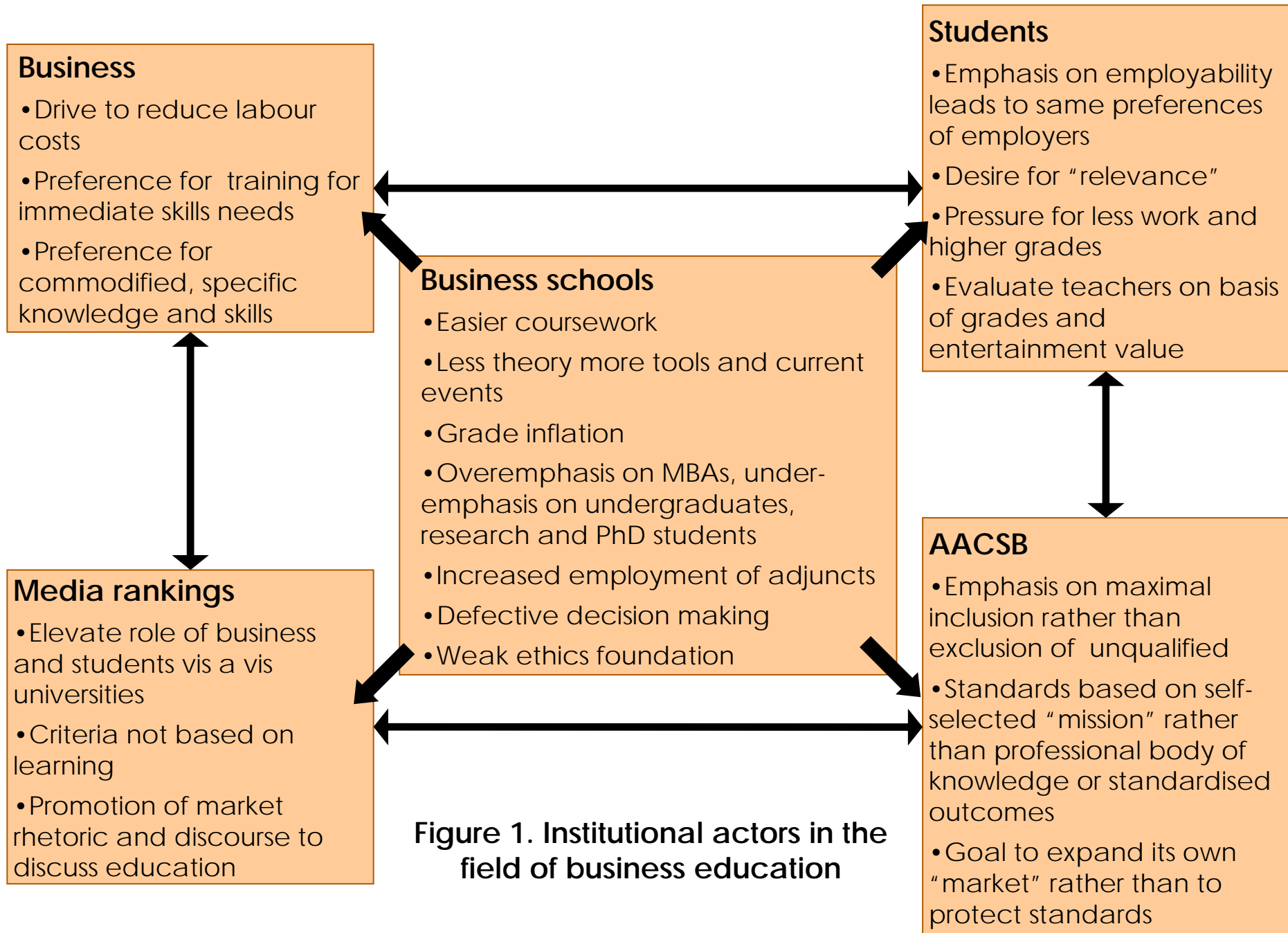
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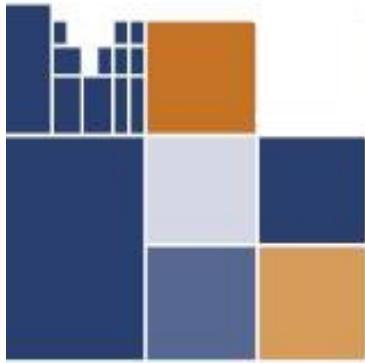


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Our comparative advantage (the new FEB)

- ❖ Our comparative advantage = our unique role as a research institution.
- ❖ Emphasise what we do well, maintain standards of excellence and avoid the functional silos that provide the organisational framework for departments and the curricula of typical business programs.
- ❖ Even where research-led teaching does not feature in the curriculum, students benefit from association with the research 'cluster' in terms of the enhanced prestige that research delivers to the school. Ideally, a research 'cluster' will attract both 'explorers' and 'exploiters' including employers with a passion for the research being undertaken.
- ❖ The aim is to impart the complex knowledge and research skills that practitioners need while allowing student feedback to guide research away from irrelevancy.





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Knowles, L. and Hensher D., (2005) The Postgraduate Business Curriculum: The Frontline in the War between Professionalism and Academic Irrelevance, *The International Journal of Management Education*, (3), 31-40