

BSIS was designed to measure the impact of business schools on their environment. But, ask **Gordon Shenton** and **Michel Kalika**, what is the 'impact' of the Business School Impact System, and what effect does undergoing the BSIS process have on business schools themselves?

# The impact of BSIS

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The Business School Impact System (BSIS), a joint venture between EFMD and FNEGE (the French National Foundation for Management Education), is designed to help business schools identify, measure and assess the impact that they are having on the world around them. The purpose of this article, however, is to assess the impact that BSIS has on the schools that go through the process. What are the positive outcomes, the changes and the improvements that result from the BSIS experience?

Based on the direct and usually intense experience with more than 20 schools in nine countries (Belgium, Canada, China, France, Hungary, Lebanon, Spain, Switzerland, US) and on the formal feedback from these schools regarding their progress in implementing the recommendations made, a pattern is emerging of the way in which BSIS contributes to business school development.

From the data collected we can identify five main areas in which BSIS has a substantial impact.

### **Institutional outreach and engagement with the local ecosystems**

The first dimension is undoubtedly the sharpening of the schools' outward-facing capacity with a much clearer focus on the areas in which they wish to have an impact. We have observed in almost all cases a raised awareness of the various educational, economic and political ecosystems in which the schools can aspire to operate as more significant players.

The most striking feature here is the increased involvement with various entities – local government bodies, professional organisations and companies – concerned with the economic development of the local region.

At a time when many cities and regions are facing harder times and need to clarify their image, business schools have a key role to play as professionally competent partners. This impact is directly linked with the fact that BSIS helps a business school to communicate more clearly with its stakeholders.

### **Identity, mission and strategic positioning**

Although it is not its initial purpose, the BSIS exercise leads schools to take a hard look at who they are and what their fundamental purpose is and often brings to the fore a series of existential questions that had remained unresolved.

It is significant that in more than half the cases the exercise has led to a clarification of schools' names. The issue of branding or re-branding has frequently been high on their development agenda.

When a school's external relations are examined, as they are in the BSIS process, questions of identity and historical roots immediately arise. The schools find themselves obliged to define the strategic balance between their international, their national and their regional positioning.

The regional positioning itself may be multi-tiered with the city and the wider region requiring differentiation according to the type of impact and the nature of the stakeholders. In many cases BSIS has helped schools to reach a much better understanding of how their sphere of impact is structured and who their key stakeholders are.

This reflection clearly has an impact on a school's market positioning and the balance within its portfolio of undergraduate, pre-experience, post-experience, specialised postgraduate and non-degree executive education programmes.

For example, if a school defines itself as essentially a regional school it is more likely to emphasise its educational role in the pre-experience segment for younger students.

In addition, it is worth noting that questions arise not just in relation to a school's external positioning but also in relation to its positioning within the wider university of which it may be a part. In several cases, the BSIS process has led to an important clarification of this issue.

The fact that *societal impact* is one of the seven areas in the BSIS process has given schools an opportunity to clearly state where they stand in relation to CSR, ethical management and sustainable development both in the educational

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process and in their own practice as socially responsible institutions within their community.

The evidence provided by this still, admittedly, small group of schools reveals a high level of awareness of this dimension and a concern to go beyond good intentions. Most are able to tell a good story in this area in which they are often role models for their local environment.

### **Action learning and practice-oriented programmes**

The objective of building closer links with companies and organisations has had considerable impact on the schools' programmes, opening up both course syllabi and pedagogy.

A common feature in almost all the schools that have been through BSIS is the much stronger emphasis on entrepreneurship, new business creation and innovation, leading to new courses or new tracks within existing courses. At the same time there has been pressure to develop new specialisations in sync with the economic and cultural characteristics of the regions in which the schools are operating. This is extremely relevant in the many cases where a school's environment is marked by strong cultural and economic traditions.

On the pedagogical side the shift has been to involve companies much more in programme design and execution and to send students out into the corporate world as part of their course work through a proliferation of internships, in-company projects, student consulting missions, apprenticeship schemes and so forth. The move is decisively towards action learning in which students are seen as potentially valuable resources at the disposal of companies during their studies.

The concern to serve the regional corporate community better has also led to an extension of executive education offerings, often within schools that had previously put little strategic emphasis on this segment of their programme portfolio.



### **Regionally relevant research agendas**

The impact that business schools are having in the area of research remains a controversial theme in the management education community. It is appropriate, therefore, that BSIS, without passing judgement on a school's strategy in this area, should attach particular importance to the issue of local and managerial impact.

We note that the system has helped schools in three ways:

First, it encourages them to track research that relates to their regional environment in one way or another, either because the research topics are relevant to regional concerns or because local companies are involved in the research either as partners or as subjects of the field work.

Second, it encourages schools to go beyond this basic level of tracking output *a posteriori* and to link their research agendas strategically to the characteristics of the regional environment so that certain emerging specialisations are directly relevant to regional concerns. This is linked in many cases to the establishment of funded chairs or institutes within which corporate members sit alongside the academics.

Third, BSIS has encouraged schools to proactively disseminate the managerial relevance of their research output to the local community by means of annual research reports, newsletters and webinars and to organise regular onsite briefings and discussion events around significant themes. The schools have a role to play as intellectual forums within their local environment.



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### **Enabling measures for professionalising the schools' internal organisation**

In all cases BSIS has had a broad impact on the schools' internal organisation through the creation of new positions and structures in crucial areas such as data collection, corporate relations, career services, database management, alumni relations, research management, impact information systems and (last and far from least) communications.

These measures are designed to professionalise the management of these areas and can be considered enabling structures to raise the schools' impact potential and their ability to communicate their achievements more effectively. BSIS helps schools to operate better in pursuit of their intended impact and to tell a better story in their chosen environment.

In addition to these very specific enabling measures to improve external relations we have often observed the emergence of an internal impact culture whereby faculty and staff gain an increased awareness of their own individual contribution and of the collective impact of their school's activities. This cultural change is recognised by many schools as a major benefit.

It became apparent that in more than half of the schools visited *alumni* were an underused resource in the management of external relations. Systems are being put in place for registering, tracking and mobilising these former students, some of whom occupy senior positions in local and national companies.

Another related observation frequently made during the BSIS exercise was that international students could be mobilised as ambassadors and skilled resources for the schools' corporate partners.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of BSIS is clearly both operational and strategic. Many of the recommendations made to a school in the course of the onsite visit and in the final report relate to the details of its operations with a multitude of practical recommendations for incremental progress.

However, in most cases the impact of BSIS goes much beyond this operational level to raise fundamental questions about identity, mission, strategic positioning, target markets, research policy, programme segmentation, educational policy and so on.

The impact of BSIS on business school development is only complete when it brings together these two dimensions. This is not to say that BSIS sets out to tell schools what their strategy should be but the process does lead schools to look at identity and purpose from a different angle and provides a neutral space to discuss the issues with internal and external stakeholders.

*The authors thank Griet Houbrechts for her very useful comments on this article.*

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