Social conscience is put firmly on schools’ agenda

Business leaders of tomorrow are being taught how to care today, says Steve Coomber

Are business schools partly responsible for the financial crisis that shook the world in 2008? Did a lack of attention to ethics and social responsibility on MBA programmes help produce corporate leaders with little care for the consequences of their actions?

In the analysis that followed, as stock markets crashed and credit markets crunched, there was the inevitable apportioning of blame. Some suggested business schools might be partly culpable.

If this was ever the case, a close look at the current MBA experience and actions of MBA students suggests it is certainly not true today. Awareness of the social impact of business, for example, is an increasingly integral element of MBA programmes.

"Business does not exist in isolation; it is part of a broader society," says Patricia Palmiotto, executive director of the Center for Business and Society at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth in the US. "For the challenges of the world to be met, business must be engaged. Students need to understand the communities they operate in, the stakeholders that care about their businesses."

Most students have opportunities to involve themselves in tackling social problems. At Tuck, for example, MBA volunteers get hands-on before term starts, helping organisations in the local community with activities ranging from clearing forest trails to demolishing buildings.

Once classes are underway, students can use their business acumen outside the lecture halls, perhaps through pro-bono consultancy work, solving specific challenges for non-profit organisations.

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At Imperial College Business School, London, Reena Popat, an EMBA graduate, took up the school's offer of voluntary consultancy work with a local charity. "We worked with a charity that helped terminally ill children. The objective was to increase the charity's profile, raise funding, and set up a patient referral pathway," she says. "I think everyone involved felt that they were trying to do something good and make a difference."

Some students travel farther afield. Swathi Bonda is an MBA at Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania, and co-president of the student-run and funded Wharton International Volunteer Programme. "We send teams of pro-bono student consultants abroad for two weeks to do projects with NGOs and social enterprises in the developing world," Bonda says. Recent examples include one team sent to Rwanda to work with a coffee farming cooperative, and another that advised octopus fishermen in Madagascar.

Tuck also provides MBA students with the chance to be non-voting, non-executive directors at local non-profit organisations.

Other business schools are using technology to get to grips with some of society's thorniest problems. For example, Said Business School has recently introduced its Global Opportunities and Threats at Oxford online platform. It allows MBA students, alumni and other academics across the Oxford University community to interact as they deliberate on and discuss a range of social issues.

Peter Tufano, Dean at Said, says: "Chief executives are increasingly preoccupied with issues like demographic change, environmental change, energy security, new technologies and generational conflict. Business schools need to prepare students who can engage with bigger, longer-term issues."

Palmiotto says: "Providing MBA students with opportunities to make a difference helps them to understand, with both heads and hearts, the needs of others. I would like them all to graduate with that as part of their thinking when they make decisions in the future."

Above and top: the octopus fishermen of Madagascar were helped by MBA students