

CLADEA
Guide to
Responsible
Business
Education in
Latin America

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Business education responsibility among Latin American educational institutions

An Ecuadorian perspective

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The National Polytechnic School (Escuela Politécnica Nacional—EPN) is one of the most renowned higher education institutions in Ecuador. In late 2013 the administrative and academic vision of EPN underwent changes due to the election of a new dean and two vice-deans of research and teaching—two managerial positions that did not exist before. This change directly affected the direction of the School of Administrative Sciences. In addition, the school required the generation of a new curricular structure, experienced a 50 percent reduction of its staff due to retirement, and needed to strengthen research areas and community outreach. A new working group was created to participate in the process of change. With a new group of professors, we started to design a new comprehensive curriculum for both the undergraduate and graduate programs.

Keywords: business administration, collaborative working, sustainable education, National Polytechnic School

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Introduction

The National Polytechnic School (*Escuela Politécnica Nacional*—EPN) is one of the most renowned higher education institutions in Ecuador. It was founded in 1869 by the Ecuadorian president at the time, Gabriel García Moreno, as the country's first scientific research and educational center. The institution was established with an integrational purpose in the hope that it would contribute to the country's development (National Polytechnic School, 2016).

The Masters in Business Administration (MBA) graduate program was established in 1978 with a vision to provide complementary education to professionals across diverse academic areas. A few years later, in 1998, three undergraduate majors were established: BS in Business, BS in Economics and Finance, and BS in Procedural Administration. Afterwards, in 2007, the School of Administrative Sciences was established to further the work that had been previously developed within the Graduate School of Administrative and Economic Sciences (*Escuela de Posgrado en Ciencias Administrativas y Económicas*—EPCAE).

The School of Administrative Sciences was created in 2007. When established, it had only a single research department and housed three business administration graduate programs that provided specific educational skills to professionals in diverse areas of knowledge. The school offered the following graduate programs: MBA, Masters and Specialization in Health Services Management, Specialization³ in Project Management, Specialization in Market Management, Specialization in Financial Management, Specialization in Human Resources and Organization, Diploma in Project Management, and a Masters in Education for Higher Education Institutions.

The nature and importance of this new educational vision within the School of Administrative Sciences is related to a focus on social management. As a social theory, social management fosters changes in society and allows individuals to contribute to society and organizations. This is because, through a change in classical management orientation, human beings are prioritized over capital. Thus, the school's priority is now to search for a new form of management that puts human beings first, taking into account their gender, and new forms of local work within a context of respect for nature.

Challenges

Changes in the higher education system were the result of the Organic Law of Higher Education (*Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior*—LOES), approved in August 2010,

³ A specialization is a graduate-level degree, shorter than a master's degree, that looks to develop specific professional skills.

and the Ecuadorian government's intervention, which has never before been systematically assessed and evaluated. This law and the set of regulations that came with it paved the way for an environment that allowed for the creation of networks for both research and curriculum design.

In late 2013 the administrative and academic vision of EPN underwent general changes due to the election of a new dean and two vice-deans of research and teaching respectively—two managerial positions that did not exist before. This change directly affected the direction of the School of Administrative Sciences, due to the appointment of a dean who had a new administrative vision that was not based on instrumental rationality.

In addition to the aforementioned arguments, the school faced great challenges and a greater number of specific restrictions, thus requiring the generation of a new curricular structure, a 50 percent reduction of its staff due to retirement, and a need to strengthen research areas and community outreach. In addition to all these challenges, the school had not worked on these issues for many years, making it even more difficult to adapt.

In general, business schools had worked for years to provide knowledge that was exclusively based on models and tools taken from abroad and did not have a strong theoretical base. This stopped students and researchers from being able to generate discussions around the field of management from a local perspective. Thus, in order to have a change of mindset within the school and the National Polytechnic School, it was necessary to take the risk of completely changing the field and teaching business administration by using a theoretical approach, as well as emphasizing the importance it has for the development of society.

What we did and how we dealt with the challenges

In order to make a profound change, the dean of the School of Administration, linked the university with schools that have a broader view of real life in Ecuador and that have worked for several years with this point of view. The establishment of a theoretical approach is needed not as a repetition of steps that you might find in a textbook, but as a way of thinking that turns the understanding of the relationship between humans and organizations around. This was only the beginning of the work that had to be done.

To complete the work and establish an understanding that focused on the desired objectives set by the new dean, a new working group was created to participate in the process of change. The first activity was to discuss the basis of the project with this group and generate a long-term commitment. All of this was based on the need to create a different vision of management, so that it would generate educational and professional results which would drive change among institutions and society.

The project started with a selection process and the hiring of 14 professors. This selection process was a big challenge for the team that had been formed because most academics were not prepared for this new vision of management. One of the most important issues considered by the team was that, in order to be hired, academics should have specific skills such as teamwork, dynamism, research capabilities, and continuous learning.

After this, and with a new group of professors, we started to design a new comprehensive curriculum for both the undergraduate and graduate programs. The first step was to determine the research fields that would guide the school's work. With this in mind, we also started the design of the new MBA program as well as the PhD in Technology Management program. These two programs resulted in internal work changes, as there was a shift from individual and isolated work to collaborative work, both internally and externally, with national and international institutions linked to these topics.

What happened

Starting to work collaboratively resulted in a greater commitment from the administrative staff and allowed for the generation and integration of all programs that were being designed at the time. A social management and sustainability vision was applied in the designs, which resulted in a new academic vision of the school where research takes the most important position; the lines of research were established in the doctorate program and scattered throughout the whole curricular design, with the approach of these lines being based on a critical and sustainable vision of organizations.

The work done, apart from the generation of a new curriculum design, allowed for a strong research production that included 24 research projects approved by the university's research council. The work was shared with the control bodies at each of the research stages, allowing for necessary corrections to be made not only to curriculum design but also to management processes. This form of working allowed for the work to be shared with other higher education institutions and facilitated the ability to network with other prestigious institutions within the higher education system. Once the designs were approved, this work was shared internally. The school's work was also shared outside the EPN, which was a new experience for an institution like the National Polytechnic School.

Nonetheless, the work had some drawbacks, mainly due to the lack of understanding people often have regarding business administration education as a social science. Thus, the work has required a great effort to share feedback and a sustainable vision of business administration both within EPN and the school itself.

We sought to create a stronger bond with other schools within the EPN and especially to strengthen professionals' skills in these areas. We also sought to have

Academic Perspective of the Faculty of Administrative Sciences

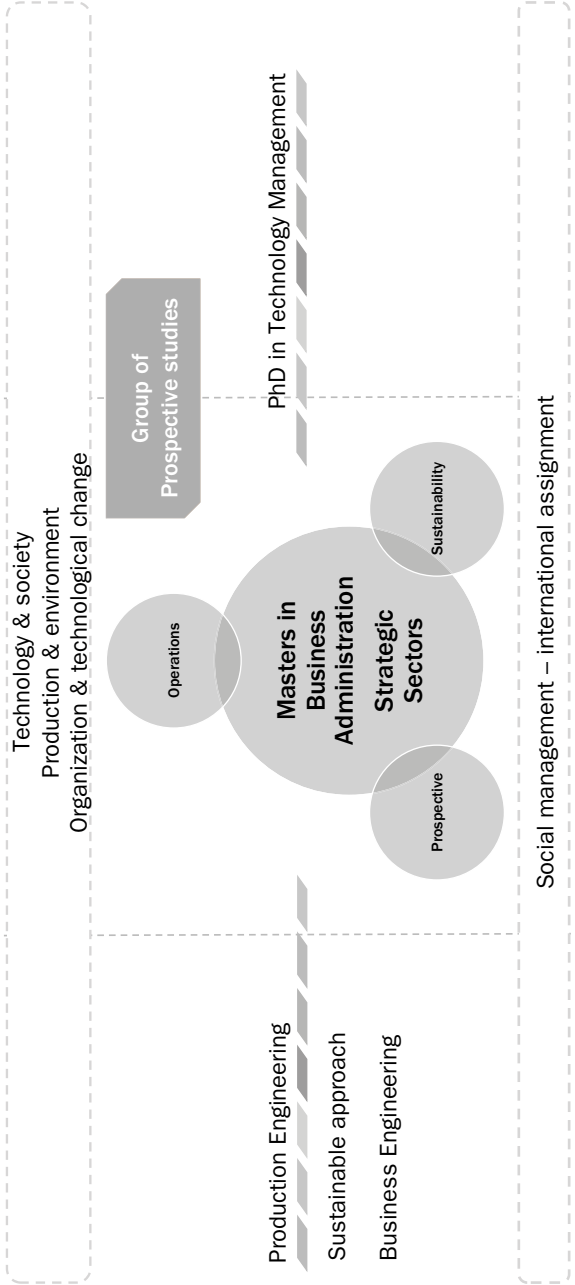


Figure 1: Academic perspective of the school

constitutional responsibility—that is, to be able to give back to society in the best possible way, not only through professionals who have been part of the traditional view of educational models, but through research and networking with a true understanding of management from the Ecuadorian perspective.

What is next and what we'll do in the short term

The school's work has only just begun, but there is still work to be done to consolidate efforts. It is clear to the team that the desired changes will not be achieved overnight and that we have yet to spread the work done by the school. Additionally, within the two departments that the school has, we are trying to consolidate a critical view of business administration. For this, the doctorate program serves as a guiding element and we have scheduled a series of conferences, where the entire faculty participates. Such conferences will allow a discussion space for those participating in the PhD program in Technology Management as well.

The challenge now is to work on local and international research networks more actively and link such research with classroom work. The structure of the teaching process is also being changed because nowadays it requires a higher number of hours per class and there are more topics in the same semester; beside this, the different topics of a program are now linked with a specific research field. Nonetheless, there are still some areas we can improve upon and the dean's management has allowed for a significant increase in the number of graduate students. Furthermore, the graduation process is now continuously monitored and forming links with alumni has been of great importance.

The work done points to the fact that there is much more to be done and that the commitment must be even greater still so as to achieve a profound change among professionals who manage organizations and who engage in organizational processes.