

Johan Roos explains how Jönköping International Business School in Sweden is being reformed and reinvigorated

Making the good even better

You are probably not very familiar with Jönköping International Business School (JIBS) or its Swedish name Internationella Handelshögskolan but our goal is that within five years you will be.

Having become its Dean two years ago, I have been working with my management team and faculty to put us on the path to having a global footprint far beyond our small size and remote setting in central Sweden. What we are doing at JIBS makes an interesting case for any business school leader who seeks to transform his or her organisation.

Happy 20th anniversary

JIBS is among the world's youngest business schools yet has achieved quite a lot in its 20-year history. Founded in 1994, the pioneering faculty made good use of the freedom that came with having been set up as a limited company owned by a foundation.

Capitalising on an entrepreneurial and international spirit, JIBS quickly established a strong research reputation, attracted PhD candidates from around the world and developed networks in entrepreneurship, family business and regional economics.

Today JIBS has become one of the most international business schools in Scandinavia, attracting some 45% of its 1,800 students and 35% of its 140 faculty and PhD candidates from outside Sweden.

Our research groups in family business and regional economics are world renowned. Our undergraduate business education is among the top-rated programmes in Sweden. With as many PhD candidates as faculty members, JIBS has become a noted research centre, a fact mirrored in its culture of generous allocation of research time.

45%

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Our research group in family business was recently ranked first in Europe and third in the world. Our undergraduate business education is among the top-rated programmes in Sweden

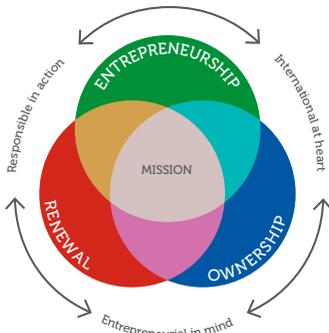


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No resting on laurels

When I took office, JIBS had just come through several turbulent years. The school’s financial resources were strained since it had worked up a large debt to its owner, the Jönköping University Foundation (JUF). The business model that made JIBS what it was had reached its limits.

JIBS faced significant challenges. From a strategic perspective, JIBS’ pioneering focus on internationalisation and entrepreneurship that had formerly set it apart no longer did so and this was not accounted for in the school’s strategic planning.

The school’s regional stakeholders were increasingly asking for more engagement and more contributions at home.

Meanwhile, the allocation of research time to faculty did not always result in corresponding outputs. Increased competition for external research grants stressed our economic model. Furthermore, our teaching relied heavily on PhD candidates, which is not compatible with the requirements of international accreditation.

To develop a more sustainable model that would better correspond to new external and internal realities, my colleagues and I have over the last two years begun to reform JIBS along its basic business dimensions. These transformations have already started to help renew the pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit of the school and are worth understanding.

Developing a focused and do-able strategy

JIBS’ initial 1994 strategy was to deliver “internationally competitive management education.” Over time, this straightforward mission evolved to include statements about excellence in research and education and a special focus on entrepreneurship and business renewal. The strategy expanded in 2010 to include a commitment to be among the leading international business schools in the world. The business plan for 2012 included 72 priorities.

In becoming Dean, I saw a scattered pattern of objectives not clearly connected to an overall strategic direction.

One of my first actions was to ask each member of the management team to refine the elaborate business plan into a much shorter action plan. We had to settle on only a few priorities for each department and function. We placed the short-list of actions on the intranet and each leader was responsible for updating his or her progress. This made our goals more visible to all colleagues and the leaders more accountable for their actions.

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JIBS’ strategy includes a commitment to be among the leading international business schools in the world, as such the business plan for 2012 included 72 priorities

From this first step, it was vital to develop a focused and do-able strategy. We needed a few clear, strategy-driven priorities that aligned with stakeholder expectations. I put in place an open process to review the strategy, inviting all colleagues to discuss it.

By the end of my first year, the JIBS board of directors gave us a green light to implement a renewed strategy, which we summarised both in a document and in a one-page “strategy map”. To acknowledge and honour the fact that the new strategy was grounded in the successful past of JIBS, we labelled it “Back to the Future.”

JIBS’ mission is now simply “To advance the theory and practice of business, with a special emphasis on Entrepreneurship, Renewal and Ownership.” These focus areas are intentionally broadly defined and are prominent in internal conversations and external communication. For example, in salary talks each faculty member indicates how their research, grounded in their academic discipline, strengthens these focus areas as well as the direction of their research in this landscape.

We also outlined our three-year strategic priorities, which after the first annual update are:

- Strengthen our education
- Improve our research
- Increase our “footprint” in the broader society

Each priority is manifested by a handful of three-year action points that, in turn, are translated into annual action plans with associated performance measures and clear responsibilities among leaders.

All of the above rests on three guiding principles we developed that reflect JIBS’ culture, spirit and commitment to its stakeholders: “International at Heart, Entrepreneurial in Mind, and Responsible in Action.” These guiding principles are what attract students and differentiate JIBS from its peers, as reflected in our marketing materials and student recruitment activities.

The first two principles were already brand statements for JIBS, especially “international” but in the new strategy we upgraded it from being just a focus area to an underlying value in everything we do. The third principle was an important new message that I wanted all faculty members to adopt and take to heart.

A few months earlier the founder of the UN Principles of Responsible Management Education, Manuel Escudero, talked about PRME during a staff meeting. A few months later in early 2013 we became PRME signatories.

A transparent organisation led by a small team

The next step was to modernise our structure. The school had five very different departments, two of which mirrored distinct academic disciplines, while business administration was split between the other three.

Each department had developed its own management processes and approaches to reward teaching, research and external services, and each was a “black-box” in terms of its financial management.

Consequently, departments had evolved very different cultures. For example, faculty in one department kept track of “overtime” in teaching, which was unheard of in another.

In early 2013, two external experts – a leader of a Norwegian business school and a leader of a Danish higher education think tank – began working with the Associate Deans of Education and Research and me.

Our task was to rethink what kind of organisation would best deliver the agreed strategy without being constrained by our existing structure and ways of working.

To test our new ideas, I consulted faculty throughout the process, particularly a small group of three highly regarded senior professors, all “founders” of JIBS.

In addition, I met several times with each department. We shared a rough version of our proposal during a major full staff meeting, and adjusted it afterwards.

In May 2013, the board agreed to our proposal for a more collegiate and effective organisation, to be developed through such actions as:

- Dissolve all departments since they neither reflected our focus areas nor helped deliver on the strategic priorities
- Strengthen the education dimension, clustering the 20 study programmes into six programme groups, each led by a devoted faculty member working with a handful of colleagues
- Ensure that research centres focus on research and strengthen their link with the three focus areas of our mission
- Increase connections with external stakeholders by establishing external advisory boards to each programme group and research centre
- Streamline all management processes, such as budgeting, financial control, and ways of rewarding teaching time and external funding
- Strengthen the role of the Associate Deans of Research and Education by assigning them budget responsibility for research and education



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The management team in place when I took office included 12 people. Today the new leadership team includes just five members with distinct responsibilities for education, research, faculty and operations – all new colleagues recruited from within. The new organisation was in place by July 1, 2013. Previous members of the JIBS leadership remain faculty colleagues.

Giving culture a friendly nudge

JIBS has two EPAS accredited programmes, but aspires to join the small group of business schools accredited by both EQUIS and AACSB (we are not eligible for AMBA since we do not offer MBA programmes).



Those accreditations come with requirements that impose significant changes on us, like we have to increase qualified faculty time available for teaching. Over the last two years we have taken several initiatives to cultivate a stronger teaching culture and sent signals that it is both important and necessary.

Despite a strong research reputation, current financial realities mean we have to increase research productivity as well as external funding. To this end, we have staged intensive workshops for grant application writing, engaged more with national research councils, and brought in prominent role-model scholars to inspire colleagues.



We are also expanding our visibility, starting nationally. When I joined JIBS, few faculty colleagues were cited in the traditional press. Almost none wrote their own blogs or participated in Twitter and other social media.

Now, with one of the three strategic priorities being to “increase the footprint” of JIBS in the broader society, I sent frequent signals that I wanted many more JIBS faculty to become sought-after experts and advisors to private and public organisations and the government and to have a presence in social and traditional media.

In 2013 we launched a project to attract, train and promote faculty members in the social and traditional media, which quickly garnered kudos in social media and in the Swedish national press, radio and TV. The possibility for faculty members to create and fuel the public debate is now also one of the questions I ask during development talks with professors.

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So far, so good

Although much work remains for us to make the good business school JIBS even better, I have learned a few things on the journey so far, including:

- There is a thin line between vision and illusion. Nice words and grandiose statements about the future may prevent change and even give some people the excuse to opt out of what needs to be done. At JIBS we have intentionally abandoned “vision” for a more concrete and action-oriented mission.
- Nobody is perfect. No matter how great an organisation is there will always be unresolved issues to deal with, especially when you come in as a new leader. At JIBS we have pulled our head out of the sand and constructively dealt with issues swept under the rug for more than a decade. We faced the problems, talked openly and avoided blame games.
- Keep in touch with the culture. The change management literature is full of advice but I think the best one is never let go of the culture. Easier said than done, it requires leaders to immerse themselves in the organisation in many different ways: publicly standing up; walking around; participating in coffee break chats; engaging “founders” and outside key stakeholders. Another way we kept in touch with the deep structures in JIBS was to recruit the new leaders reporting to me from the inside.

Conclusion

In my years of experience at six business schools in five countries, I have witnessed first-hand how academic institutions do not change readily or easily, though they do adapt to the environment one way or another. The question is: do they adapt fast enough?

In the case of JIBS, I posit that the answer is yes. Over the last two years, we have reformed the basic business dimensions of JIBS – strategy, organisation, leadership and ways of execution. And we have begun the much longer journey to cultivate a culture that better serves our stakeholders locally, nationally and globally.

Stay tuned... you will be hearing more about JIBS in coming years.