Supporting local and national communities has long been a criterion of the EFMD’s EQUIS accreditation. Mark Thomas and Julie Perrin-Halot recount French experiences in this area.

Beyond the campus

How business schools can contribute to the community
EFMD recently conducted a survey of its member schools to see which of the ten chapters of EQUIS had made the most important contribution to their development. Perhaps not surprisingly they placed “Internationalisation” top of the list.

And which chapter was cited the least? “Contribution to the Community”.

This should not surprise us either. In fact, until recently, the Contribution to the Community standard has remained quietly in the background of the EQUIS accreditation requirements. We believe that this silent standard has finally come into its own as it both requires and encourages schools to look beyond their walls and evaluate their own positive impact within their community as well as to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market.

This standard serves as evidence of the already visionary thinking of EFMD when it incorporated these requirements into the standards, thus espousing a more holistic vision of schools and their role in society beyond the production of graduates.

Most of us have read at least some of the myriad articles that have been written either condemning management schools for their supposed role in the recent crisis and the resulting shock waves or defending their non-responsibility while issuing a call to action to ensure that they are an integrated part of the solution.

But regardless of the positions taken, the debate has been opened. Corporate participants in schools’ business advisory councils are requesting reports on activities; national authorities are implementing new legislation; and stakeholders from various constituencies have raised their voices and are requesting accountability.

One of the loudest voices has been that of current and future students. Student associations have become increasingly active in the last few years. Potential students are turning the questions around to ask institutions, “Just how is your school giving back to society?” A school’s role in the community, both local and at large, has now become a criterion of choice.

The Contribution to the Community standard should serve as a guide for schools to ensure that they are active across the range of areas that constitute contribution. It provides a general framework for institutions to record and evaluate their actions. This standard becomes more relevant once it is aligned with more precise tools.

Let us take the example of what is currently being done in France.

In 2008 the associations that represent universities and Grandes Ecoles in France began working on a documented framework to assist higher education institutions (HEIs) in determining objectives and implementing actions related to social responsibility and sustainable development in five main areas:

- Strategy and governance
- Social policy and community outreach
- Environment
- Education
- Research

Once the framework was decided, a scorecard was created to help schools to evaluate their relative positioning with regards to a four-level gradation of accomplishments and outcomes. HEIs were asked to submit the completed framework annually, thus tracking progress over time and targeting areas where additional effort was needed.
In 2007 the French government made a series of commitments to sustainable development during the Grenelle de l’Environnement summit meetings. These commitments became mandatory through the “Grenelle 1” law of 2009. Article 55 of the Grenelle 1 relates to the HE sector in France, stipulating that all institutions must draft and implement a plan to ensure that environmental concerns have become central to campus planning and development. It also states that certification of schools based on sustainable development criteria would potentially be put into place. While the initial texts were focused primarily on environmental concerns, the institutions and their representatives immediately broadened their thinking to integrate other dimensions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD).

It is within this context that the French HEIs are now moving forward. Diverse tools are being put into place to assist them in structuring their actions.

As mentioned above, the existing framework covers a range of different areas in which CSR and SD initiatives need to be accounted for. The second chapter focuses on what translates literally to “Territorial Anchoring.” This part is the closest to the EQUIS standard.

It covers how HEIs create and implement policies concerning their personnel in areas such as health and safety, diversity, and employment and access for disabled persons. It also covers support given to student associations and outreach projects. Finally, it covers how the school participates in actions of solidarity at the local, national and international levels. HEIs are asked to report on and evaluate their activities in the following categories:

– Commitment of the institution to local economic development
– Socio-cultural initiatives for local populations

– Urban integration of the institution
– Involvement of the institution in the local sustainable development policy

These categories, much like the EQUIS standard, place the schools in a position of having to ask themselves questions about what it means to be a “good citizen” and to what extent they are achieving this.
Beyond the campus: How business schools can contribute to the community by Mark Thomas and Julie Perrin-Halot

We will only be partially successful in this mission if we limit our promotion of these notions to the classroom. We must champion them as institutions making a collective commitment to those with whom we interact every day and by reaching out to the communities we are interacting with.

The student body has therefore been placed at the centre of these activities. We will only be partially successful in this mission, however, if we limit our promotion of these notions to the classroom. We must champion them as institutions making a collective commitment and setting an example of responsible behaviour by reaching in to those with whom we interact every day and by reaching out to the communities we are interacting with.

Is it not the intention of chapter 7 Contribution to the Community to assist schools in setting the example? We believe it is.

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