

Shining a Spotlight on IP in Business Schools

The Center for Intellectual Property Understanding (CIPU) report on Intellectual Property (IP) Education in US Business School is timely and attention worthy. But it begs the question: Why has no one done this before?

Intellectual property rights and their management are increasingly of significance to the skill set of business leaders in all sectors of all economies, local, national and international. Yet the extent to which intellectual property rights feature as a component of the Business School curriculum is somewhat of a dark secret, shrouded in mystery. CIPU's research has shone a spotlight on the top twenty-one United States business schools. What CIPU has identified is of interest and significance not only within the USA, but to all developing and developed countries that appreciate the huge role IP plays in their commercial success. It would be a great compliment to CIPU's ground-breaking efforts if public and private institutions across the globe undertook similar research into the IP education provided by their own country's business schools.

The report highlights the constraints CIPU found in building a comprehensive picture of IP education provision. For example, 'There is not a uniform way to search for curricula, and sometimes official course catalogues were inaccessible without school credentials'. The researchers suspect that more courses exist than their efforts uncovered and would welcome a more formal survey to provide more certainty. They are clear on thing, that not all business students are exposed to IP in their MBA coursework.

Shift in perspective

CIPU notes that not all courses are founded on the law and legality of IP. There is a shift in perspective from IP as a legal concept to IP as a business concept. This finding is a clue to overcoming one of the hurdles facing anyone seeking to introduce IP education in a business school: how to combat the negative connotations, for non-law students and academics, of a course including 'law' or 'legal' in its title? The report asks 'Are lawyers the best profession to be tasked with MBA based IP courses?' and suggests that strategy, technology transfer and commercialisation approaches are popular alternatives.

CIPU took the initiative to survey courses provided according to Business School academic departments. Unsurprisingly, Entrepreneurship & Innovation departments offer the most IP education opportunities. Their students are more likely to take courses that focus, or just touch, on IP. Law departments are the next most generous providers of IP education, followed by Strategy, Management and Economics departments. Fewest IP courses came from Accounting, Logistics, Marketing, Organisational Behaviour and Operations departments. Academics described university administrations as defensive and bureaucratic, in the context of IP education.

Useful insights into the paucity of Business School IP education are provided by the IP centric academics interviewed on the question 'who should teach IP?' Traditionally taught by lawyers, Kasznik asks 'what exposure do lawyers have to business?' Conley asserts 'inventors must teach IP because...they understand what it means for IP to be a business

asset'. Teece suggests economists should teach IP courses because business students 'need to see the bigger picture of how IP impacts economic policies and value'. Pisano sidesteps such issues by labelling his course 'Driving Profitable Growth'. Such diversity of opinion amongst the most eminent of IP educators wont lighten the task of convincing more departments in more business schools to offer IP education as an element of the MBA experience. Trying to get a department to adopt a course that is cognitively at odds with their own is not easy, says Conley, who 'strives to be fluent in the other departments' pedagogies'. Preparing students to 'identify when IP is important so they can ask the right questions' is Luo's approach. The academics suggest a reason for so few IP courses in business schools is because professors rarely support topics outside their interest and expertise.

Lack of IP research

Another inhibitor to growth of business school IP courses is the lack of academic research dedicated to IP. The evidence of IP-intensive industries' direct contribution to US GDP, and the need for business leaders to deploy IP-centric strategies for the sake of its economy, does not translate into research funding. Teece theorizes that it is necessary to create a greater body of scholarship on the management of IP, which would lead more business schools to include it in their curriculum.

The report highlights how some business schools approach IP as an interdisciplinary subject since it is 'constructed by law, birthed in innovation, monetized by managers and valued by accountants'. Interdisciplinary courses aim to draw students from multiple departments, often offered from different departments working together, and in some students can take courses from schools other than their own.

Business schools may be enjoying a growing recognition of IP's relevance to the business world, and business school students may have a growing appetite for IP literacy. This report concludes, however that IP is not included in the business school core curriculum. That conclusion is of more than national significance. Since Business Schools compete internationally, it would be encouraging to see CIPU's initiative followed up by similar research projects in other countries.

Stimulus for change, to more consistent IP education provision in business schools, may well come from the students themselves. Hopefully, the professors and the administrators will be listening.