

Ethics in Crisis: A Call for Alternatives

14th Annual European Business Ethics Network (UK) Conference
April 7-9, 2010, Queen Mary, University of London

Options, choices, alternatives – such was the market in business ethics before the multiple crises which hit the global economy in 2008 and 2009. We have since witnessed a financial crisis which hit financial markets around the world, an economic crisis which slowed down economies in all parts of the world to zero or even negative growth rates, and, as a result, a social crisis affecting the lives of millions of people around the globe. Before these crises, the future seemed to belong to the sellers of corporate social responsibility, good governance, and accountability. But now the crash has come, ethics tries to package itself, desperately discounted, as an everyday essential, something no firm can do without, even in hard times. But it's a hard sell, while the diagnosis of the meltdown wobbles from greedy bankers to timid politicians before its collapse on the over-mortgaged doors of so-called 'irresponsible' borrowers. What is to be done in the sober light of day? In turning once again to the question of ethics, we find here is nothing amid the rubble but *alternatives*. There is no going back. Today, we might say, there is no alternative but the alternative.

The 14th annual European Business Ethics Network UK conference calls on business, academia and wider communities to work together towards the formation of ethically responsible alternatives to the current crisis. This is a call on business to end the excesses which are now raising revolutionary consciousness across the globe. At the same time it is a call on thinkers, whether employed in academic institutions or not, to return to an almost forgotten art – that is, the imagination and public promotion of real alternatives, grounded not merely in a utopian imaginary but in analyses of what the present has made possible.

This is, then, a business ethics conference that will break the conventional academic mould by working out of the boundaries of the business school to promote concrete alternatives to the current financial-ethical crisis. The conference uses its central London location to open up the conference to engagements with wider agencies and constituencies as a means by which to achieve maximum public impact.

Academic paper presentations and discussion seminars will be integrated with contributions from high-profile keynote speakers and NGOs. This rests in a conviction that isolation of business from responsible thinking can lead to the most grotesque of offences and that isolated and rarefied research can fail to take responsibility for the world outside the windows of the ivory tower.

This conference is open to presentation on a wide range of topics related to business ethics and corporate responsibility, although we specifically invite consideration of the alternative possibilities produced by the analysis. Themes that might be addressed include, but are not restricted to the following questions:

- Do we need to rethink existing approaches towards 'managing' for corporate responsibility and ethical behaviour? If so, how did is the crisis impacting the discourse on selected issues like human rights, transparency and anti-corruption, as well as labour standards?

- What can and should business ethics and corporate responsibility do in order to make the most of the crisis scenario? How do we keep individuals and organizations from returning to 'business as usual' too quickly?
- How can we rethink corporate and global governance in the light of the lost trust in the private sector? What are the effects of this loss of trust for existing institutional arrangements, such as public-private partnerships?
- How has the institutional infrastructure of corporate responsibility (e.g., regarding voluntary standards) been shaped and reshaped through the multiple crises?
- How does the sustainability agenda look like in an after-crises scenario? Do the social and environmental agendas converge under the umbrella of corporate responsibility?
- Considering COP15 in Copenhagen, have we come up with a viable solution to the climate challenge? Are the financial and economic crises likely to be joined by an even more severe sustainability crisis?
- In which ways do the crises help us to rethink and challenge existing dominant logics in theorizing? Which assumptions do we need to question?
- Do we need to rethink the way we educate students about business ethics and corporate responsibility? Do we have to rethink our educational frameworks to work with students towards preventing future crises?

We are interested in conceptual and empirical studies that address these questions, but we also welcome contributions which reach beyond the mentioned issue areas. We welcome contributions that draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives and in quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches.

In addition to plenary presentations and paper presentations, the conference will feature three special events:

Finance Watch:

This year's conference will include a launch event for *Finance Watch*, the new independent watchdog that seeks to promote transparency and social justice in the City of London.

High Pay Commission:

The conference will also host an event by the High Pay Commission campaign of the London-based Compass think-tank, which seeks to further public debate on oversized compensation and bonus packages.

Responsible Management Education:

The European Business Ethics Network UK endorses the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME: www.unprme.org), and is working with the United Nations to promote corporate responsibility and sustainability in business schools. This year's conference will involve a workshop hosted by Andreas Rasche of Warwick Business School who is the Education Officer for EBEN UK. The session will discuss progress and obstacles in schools signing up to the Principles, and issues faced in turning endorsement of the principles into practical responsible alternatives for business school classrooms. This workshop is the ideal venue for PRME adopters to exchange accounts of positive and negative experiences while implementing the PRME, and for non-adopters to learn about the Principles and their relevance to management education.

Business Ethics: A European Review

Delegates at the conference will receive one year's paper subscription to the journal *Business Ethics: A European Review* as part of the conference fee. The first issue of the year will be provided to delegates at the conference, and the remaining three will be delivered by post. For more information, visit www.blackwellpublishing.com.

Submissions

Paper abstracts of no longer than 500 words should be sent as a Word attachment to ebenuk@qmul.ac.uk no later than 15 January 2010. Notification of acceptance will be provided by 31 January 2010 and full papers for inclusion in the conference proceedings (to be published with ISBN numbers) will be required by 15 March 2009.

We also invite non-conventional papers and contributions from non-academics. In such cases please write to discuss your ideas. We will also consider proposals for chaired sessions or panels.

Organising Committee

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About the European Business Ethics Network

EBEN UK is a division of the European Business Ethics Network (www.eben.org). For more information about EBEN UK and this conference visit www.ebenuk.org.