

## SIEC-ISBE: Quo Vadis? Strategy suggestions for the SIEC-ISBE



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### Abstract

In order to escape the danger of stagnation, the SIEC-ISBE needs fresh perspectives. A strategy to increase membership numbers will be introduced in this paper, based on a study instigated from the Austrian chapter. After a short introduction of the status quo of the SIEC-ISBE, the paper will focus on the USP (Unqique Selling Proposition) and the benefits of SIEC-ISBE membership. Some selected recommendations (for instance lowering the threshold for attending conferences or increased targeting of students) form the completion of this thesis.

### Introduction

Faced with dwindling membership numbers, SIEC-ISBE has to take measures in order to increase its attractiveness for potential new members recruited not only from the domains of schools, colleges and universities, but also from the business world. The following study on future perspectives for the SIEC-ISBE was conducted with a view to the specifics of the Austrian chapter, but many findings can be generalized, as the Austrian situation is by no means unique.

### SIEC-ISBE Status Quo

Founded in 1906 in Zürich, the SIEC-ISBE looks back on a long and eventful history (Moore & Anderson & Carlock & Ristau, 2001). Recent developments however have revealed a disquieting trend: Many members, who have contributed a lot to the society, are nearing retirement and gradually withdrawing from active participation. Replacements are hard to find due to a distinct lack of young blood. Fast benefits of memberships are not sufficiently transparent to potential new members.

This problem affects most of the organization's national chapters. In Austria, the situation is particularly problematic, as the Austrian national chapter used to cater mainly

to teachers and to recruit its new members from a fairly limited pool of schools. Public relations efforts were minimal and knowledge of the society was therefore limited to the selected few. The current demographic makeup of the Austrian chapter suggests that this state of affairs will not be tenable for the foreseeable future. A reorientation is called for in order to win new members and strengthen existing members' commitment to the objectives of SIEC-ISBE.

This was the challenge faced by Hermine Sperl when she was elected president of the Austrian chapter in May 2008. In order to gain some fresh perspectives she asked the Department of Business Education and Development of the Karl-Franzens-University Graz to provide recommendations for measures to make the Austrian chapter more attractive for potential members. A team of three students (Yvonne Beutl, Martina Rechbauer and Katharina Stöttinger) supervised by Michaela Stock, head of the department of Business Education and Development in Graz, was tasked with the development of a strategical concept for the SIEC-ISBE based on the clarification of target group, unique selling proposition and benefits of membership. Strategic recommendations were derived from a survey of official SIEC-ISBE publications (national and international webpage, newsletters), interviews with ISBE-members about their observations when attending conferences and a survey of other networks fulfilling a similar function as the SIEC-ISBE.

Once those questions of strategic importance had been addressed in the development project, different benefit dimensions of membership were identified and described in more detail by developing a set of criteria measuring their attractiveness. The resulting catalogue of criteria was used as an instrument for a best practice analysis of other networks, fulfilling similar functions as the SIEC-ISBE for potential members. The best practice analysis serves as a basis for recommendations. A selection of these recommendations will be presented at the end of this article.

Further recommendations are available upon request in the form of a strategy paper, which aims at encouraging a lively debate on the future of the SIEC-ISBE on the national and international level.

## **Project Objectives**

*The desire to catch fish is not sufficient. You also have to bring a net. (Chinese Wisdom)*

Just as fish cannot be caught without a net, a society like the SIEC-ISBE cannot attract members without providing the benefits of networking. Yet, when aiming to increase its network's utility, the SIEC-ISBE is confronted with a basic dilemma: In order to attract more members, a network has to provide more benefits. In order to provide more benefits, more members have to get involved in the network. The network can only provide a framework, but its actual value is generated by the interaction of its members. The goal is to optimize the framework in order to facilitate and inspire such interaction, for instance by creating the right mix of presentations and informal activities in order to encourage subject related discourse as well as socializing while preventing conferences from being perceived as sight-seeing trips first and foremost. This requires a profound

reexamination of the society's target group, unique identity and purpose, as a mere increase in promotional activities would only scratch the surface of the dilemma.

## **Target Group and Unique Selling Proposition**

The official target group of the SIEC-ISBE comprises everyone who has a professional interest in Business Education and Development, regardless of whether this interest stems from a professional background in secondary or tertiary business education or business. So far, most activities of ISBE Austria have been directed towards teachers on the secondary level however.

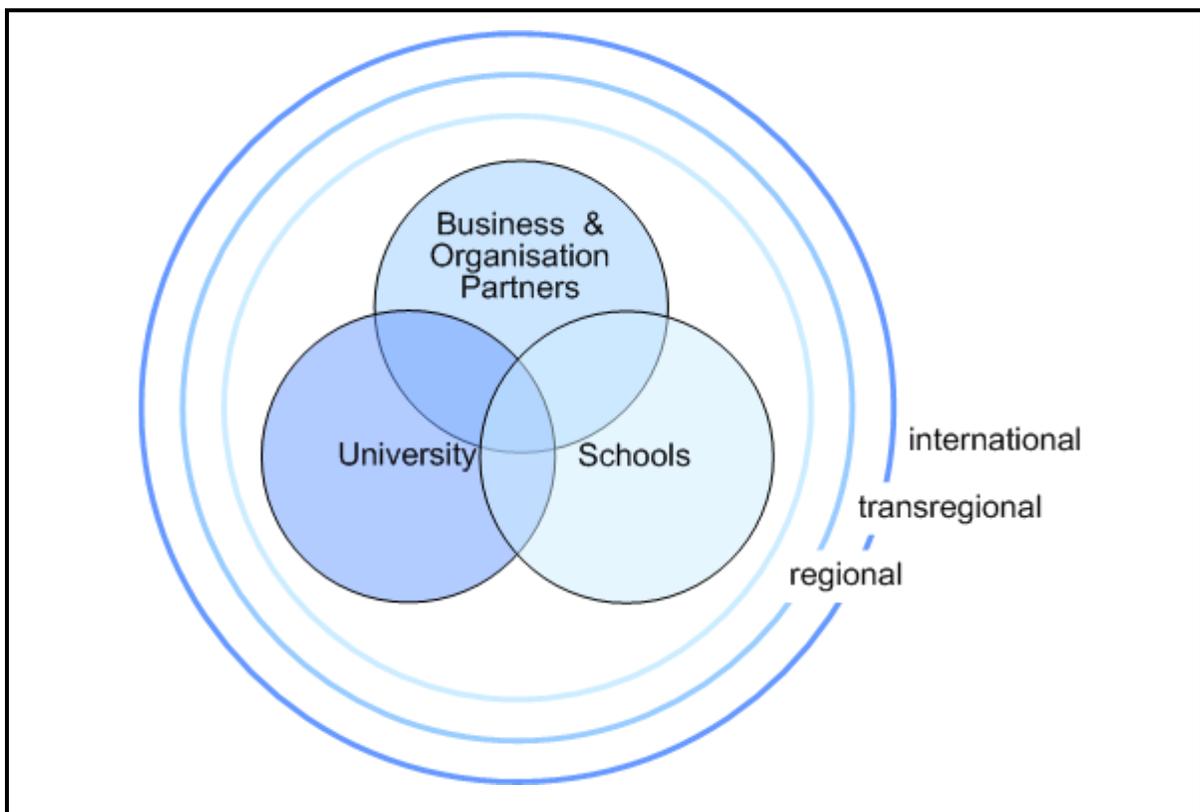
A closer look at the historical roots of the SIEC-ISBE reveals that the society did not start out as an organization primarily for teachers. This is evidenced by the fact that in addition to individuals, also companies, trade unions and other organizations are listed as categories of members in the society's constitution (Moore & Anderson & Carlock & Ristau, 2001). Founded in 1901, the society was designed to promote the border-crossing exchange of ideas between teachers and those responsible for business education in companies. Considering the long tradition of the SIEC-ISBE, starting at a time, when commercial subjects were not as established in secondary education as they are now, the current focus on teachers is a fairly recent development, which raises the question whether a move back to the roots might have its advantages. This is a question not easily answered as such a move would imply a profound reorientation of the currently rather teacher-centered activities of the society.

Both broad and narrow definitions of a target group have their pros and cons. Whereas a narrow definition allows for a concentration on core competencies, a broader definition generates more synergy effects. Perceived as an independent and integrative discipline with a transdisciplinary character, Business Education and Development is characterized by the interconnectedness of its partial disciplines, integrating economic science and pedagogics in a way that neither implies a mere addition of disciplines nor a hierarchical relationship between them (Aff, 2008). This means that neither business matters nor pedagogical issues can be looked at in isolation in the context of Business Education and Development. As those interdependencies suggest a high potential for synergy effects, a broad definition of the target group promises more benefits. It would be therefore desirable if members of the SIEC-ISBE indeed represented all areas in which Business Education and Development is applied – that is, schools, universities, administration and commercial enterprises, the latter area currently being underrepresented. SIEC-ISBE's apparent difficulties with regard to finding sponsors from affiliated businesses suggest a lack of appeal to this segment of the target group.

In the context of universities, it might be advantageous to consider students of Business Education and Development separately, as future teachers, academics and business people are never so easily approached in such a high concentration as during the course of their studies. SIEC-ISBE should follow the example of banks, striving to encourage customer loyalty from a young age. Increasing public relations efforts targeted at students would be a fairly straightforward way to spread the word about existence of the SIEC-ISBE among people interested in Business Education and Development. Stories

of members who had already been able to look back on years of experience in their profession before encountering the name SIEC-ISBE for the first time should become the exception to the rule. This however requires the consistent implementation of an inclusive approach towards recruitment in contrast to more exclusive approaches favored by predominantly research-oriented networks such as the German DGfE (this is the German organization for research on educational science), where new members have to be vetted by existing members before being allowed to join.

Reinforcing the original broad definition of the target group, SIEC-ISBE's unique selling proposition becomes apparent: it is the multiperspectivity resulting from the different backgrounds of potential members. As multiperspectivity is basically inscribed in the DNA of a discipline mediating between the realms of business and pedagogics, a society dedicated to business education would be wasteful not to exploit this unique characteristic of its subject matter.



**Figure 1. SIEC-ISBE Unique Selling Proposition**

The benefits of **multiperspectivity** are bolstered by the society's international dimension. SIEC-ISBE does not only operate at the intersection of various domains of Business Education, but also at the intersection of different nations and cultures. Thus the dialogue of different perspectives becomes the guiding principle of the society. The ability to engage in such a dialogue represents a key qualification that holds intrinsic value, not only for the society as a whole but also for individual members.

### **Benefit Dimensions**

The first thing that usually comes to mind when thinking about the benefits of membership in a society is networking. The next step of the development project was to break down the general benefits of networking into more specific benefit dimensions and find criteria to measure them.

Well-known networks like fraternities or service clubs such as the Rotary Club owe much of their popularity to the positive impact they are said to have on their members' **career perspectives**. In the context of this analysis, career is mainly seen in connection with increased competence and personal growth. Career success in the conventional sense, associated with increased income and higher prestige, is a sensitive issue with regard to business teachers in secondary education as career perspectives are limited. On the one hand, career perspectives are rarely cited as a driving factor when choosing the teaching profession, often ranked after motivations such as *wish to teach*, *wish to deal with children* or *wish to play an educational role*. This suggests that teachers are predominantly intrinsically motivated (OECD, 2003). On the other hand, EU policies recommend the implementation of better career development for teachers as a way to make the profession more attractive for more career minded individuals. This objective can be accomplished by training and remunerating teachers for taking on middle-management responsibilities with regard to school organization and providing training opportunities connected to higher salaries for teachers who wish to acquire a specialized skill-set but do not want to go into administration (ETUCE, 2005). Career development for teachers is a topic that still leaves a lot to explore and provides a potential field of activities for a teacher-oriented organization such as the SIEC-ISBE, especially since a better interconnectedness of teacher education, induction and professional development is postulated as a key requirement for creating a more coherent learning and development system for teachers (OECD, 2004). The SIEC-ISBE with its multiperspectivity and interface-function is uniquely suited to cater to this particular need.

But while career promotion clearly is an aspect that should not be neglected when targeting teachers, it is unlikely to be the focus of their concerns. It is therefore particularly important to consider benefit dimension that go beyond mere career considerations. Networks like sports clubs and marching bands thrive without providing tangible career benefits after all. Yet members are motivated to devote considerable amounts of time and energy to these pursuits – not so much for the sake of rational self-interest, but for the pleasure of **social interaction** and the reinforcement of a self-image largely shaped by devotion to a shared activity. Commitment to a common goal makes people feel part of a community, which also strengthens their **identity**. Sharing expertise and experience related to a common area of interest increases the fun of engaging with the issue at hand.

Last but not least there is also the opportunity to improve your **intercultural competence** (including language skills) provided by the international dimension of the SIEC-ISBE. This special feature of the society allows members to obtain a key qualification relevant to business teachers, academics and business people alike, gaining more and more importance in a globalized economy, characterized by complex interconnectedness. As business experiences increasingly involve communication with people around the world, the potential for misunderstandings due to different cultural perspectives on issues such as authority, the nature of time or the value of words rises. In order to avoid these pitfalls and ensure successful and satisfying human encounters, the art of cross-

cultural communication has to become an integral part of business education (Davis & Ward & Woodland, 2010).

## Selected Recommendations

In a next step of the development project, measures were specified to increase the attractiveness of the various benefit dimensions for each target segment. The scope of this article only allows for an exemplary illustration of some of these suggested courses of action. The following suggestions apply to all target segments.

One benefit that should provide a strong incentive for all people involved with Business Education and Development to consider membership in the SIEC-ISBE is active **participation in the public discourse** on educational policies, as it offers them an opportunity to creatively design their own working environment. The SIEC-ISBE could provide an ideal platform for stimulating and moderating the debate on educational issues, while guaranteeing an appropriate **level of discourse** – another criterion highly relevant in this context. Creating a **moderated online forum** to promote debate on educational issues could be one measure to enhance this particular benefit dimension.

While the face-to-face interaction between members during transregional and international conferences is certainly invaluable in fostering the sense of community and social exchange that constitutes the *raison d'être* of a network such as the SIEC-ISBE, it is also often limited to special occasions, as members' limited financial and temporal resources force them to choose which conference to attend. Measures to enhance the social benefit dimension by increasing the **frequency of interaction** among members include **increased activity on the national and regional levels**, which are more easily reconciled with limited travel budgets and providing a **virtual space for interaction** that is not subject to temporal and spatial constraints.

The SIEC-ISBE webpage could be an instrument to accommodate such a virtual community, but in order to fulfill this function its design would have to be adjusted to the requirements of web 2.0, allowing for a more uncomplicated integration of user-generated content and promoting more interaction among users. Here again, the installation of a moderated forum on educational issues would be beneficial. Other upgrades such as a searchable **user-database with user-profiles** could also significantly increase the utility of SIEC-ISBE's virtual home and open new communication channels.

The most important step however is the switch from the traditional fairly elitist, exclusive membership policy (at least in the European chapters) to a **more inclusive approach**. This switch has already been affected in places, but there is still a certain lack of awareness of the radical change of direction it actually constitutes. One step towards embracing the new inclusive membership policy would be **increased efforts to target students** and include them in the society's activities, for instance by promoting cooperation with international student's associations such as AISEC<sup>1</sup>.

Increased inclusiveness could also be achieved by lowering the threshold for attending conferences and giving presentations at conferences (currently you have to be a member in order to get this opportunity; opening the call for papers to non-members

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<sup>1</sup> Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales.

might be an attractive incentive for people who are interested in contributing their expertise but on the fence about membership, would enrich the subject related part of the conference program and would also increase public awareness of the society's existence). At the moment, participation in an SIEC-ISBE conference requires significant investment of money and time from members. A conference program with strictly subject-related elements spread over a couple of days interspersed with ample opportunities for socializing doubtlessly has its benefits, but there are also considerable opportunity costs: the organic interweaving of formal and informal networking opportunities also makes the conference more time consuming and expensive. The importance of socializing is not to be underestimated, but there is a certain tradeoff between the intangible but crucial benefits of networking provided by the less formal, less subject related elements of the conference and time and cost-efficiency. Restructuring the conference schedule, for instance by concentrating the subject-related conference elements on the first two or three days and reserving the last two days for socializing, would offer members two modes of participation: a conference extended version and a conference light version at a lower price. This would allow members to consider this particular trade-off for themselves and make their own choices accordingly. This might also make conferences more attractive to members from the domain of tertiary education, as they often operate on a tight schedule.

## **Conclusion**

The main challenge faced by the SIEC-ISBE can be seen in low membership numbers. Certain measures such as the implementation and moderation of an online-forum require a considerable investment of time and energy as well as the assignment of responsibilities among members. Some of the measures suggested are therefore difficult to implement with the available resources – especially when it comes to synergy effects resulting from the integration of various areas of Business Education and Development, as the current membership structure of many national chapters does not yet reflect the desired multiperspectivity required to realize the society's full potential. Those recommendations are therefore intended as a long-term vision.

Measures that can be tackled immediately include upgrading the webpage in order to make it a regular feature in members' online routines (since the start of the project the scope of the content made available by the webpage of the Austrian chapter has been incrementally extended to include information on presentations held at most recent conferences) and increased activity and heightened visibility with regard to the public discourse on educational issues.

To conclude, all future measures to increase the attractiveness of SIEC-ISBE should be aimed at the same goal: to enhance the various benefits gained through the multiperspectivity of the organization – benefits that cannot be provided to the same extent by organizations with a more narrowly defined target group and therefore represent a unique selling proposition. Many of these potential benefits are already inherent in the design of the network, but lie idle at the moment – the prime objective should be bring them to light and let them shine.

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