

A capabilities approach to curriculum design for developing responsible business professionalism

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The growing fluidity and dynamism of an increasingly globalised business world presents challenges for business education. One is the need to develop curricula that engender development of responsible business professionalism. We propose a multidimensional conceptual framework of responsible business professionalism that integrates education for business ethics with a broad array of people management skills. That framework brings together key elements of socially responsive professional education. It derives from the authors' action research applied to many large cohorts of postgraduate business students and moves beyond widely acknowledged employability skills to embrace more critical arguments for broader educational outcomes. These include systems thinking capabilities, contextual understanding and paradigmatic awareness, ethical decision making and a reflective self-awareness.

JEL Codes: A23, M14, M19

1. Introduction

Critics identify business education as a principal shaper of the 'whatever it takes' mindsets fostering corporate failures like those at Enron, Parmalat and WorldCom (Adler 2002; Ghoshal 2005; Khurana 2007) as well as the global financial crisis that erupted in 2007 (Fishman & Khurana 2008; Stiglitz 2009). As well, accepted ways of thinking face increasing challenge as globalization and advanced knowledge-based activities generate greater complexity, ambiguity and flux in business and organisational life. Shifts in regulatory and governance patterns also create heightened behavioural expectations facing managers and business professionals.

Policy makers, employer and professional associations and critics within business schools have called for educational approaches that help students meet these new challenges (Mintzberg 2004; Atwater, Kannan & Stephens 2008). A central concern is for the adoption of 'systems thinking' that recognises interconnections across business, political action and social change as well as likely intended and unintended consequences of managerial decision-making. For Giacalone (2007), developing the ability to reflect on contextual interconnections and question existing ways of thinking should be important parts of postgraduate business education. Others also argue for education to prioritise social responsibility and ethical thinking (Adler 2002; Swanson & Fisher 2008; Wilcox 2002), people skills (Kavanagh & Drennan 2008), and reflective self-awareness (Edwards, Ranson & Strain 2002; Wilcox, 2002).

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Nevertheless, substantial scepticism persists – among students and some academics – about the relevance of so-called ‘soft’ skills for more technically-oriented majors like accounting or finance (see also Frawley & Litchfield 2009, p.143). In responding, one should ask why people might see the human or social side of business as peripheral. Market-based institutions, with their associated values and worldviews, dominate many sectors of society (including higher education). Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton (2005) note the self-fulfilling nature of economic theories, and that assumptions like the dominance of self-interest and primacy of the market may override others. In business education, this discourages engagement with content perceived as outside business’ ‘core business’ (Ghoshal, Bartlett & Moran 1999). What then should shape curriculum that introduces these themes and questions in an integrated fashion for engaged student learning?

In answering that question, this article contributes through conceptual development that links research with teaching/learning; that is, it is not an empirical paper. It presents a new conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of responsible business professionalism that can shape curriculum to meet the above challenges. Use of the term ‘conceptual framework’ (henceforth framework) follows Shapira (2011, p. 1314) in that it ‘provides a structure to organize observations, and ... describes the structure in a clear and precise manner’ but, unlike theories and models, it does not make testable predictions. In this case, framework development came through action research on a large, semester-length postgraduate business subject that the authors designed, delivered and modified over a number of years. This involved processes of observation, feedback – formal and informal and from teaching team colleagues and students, critical reflection and interventions (Ghaye 2011; Noffke & Somekh 2009).

Section 2 presents the framework and briefly reviews literatures that influenced the framework’s conceptual development. Section 3 explains the authors’ engagement with the university subject in question, as a case study providing a dynamic site for action research. The Conclusion re-presents the article’s main contribution and its implications for professional practice in teaching/learning and related research.

2. Literature Review and Framework Development

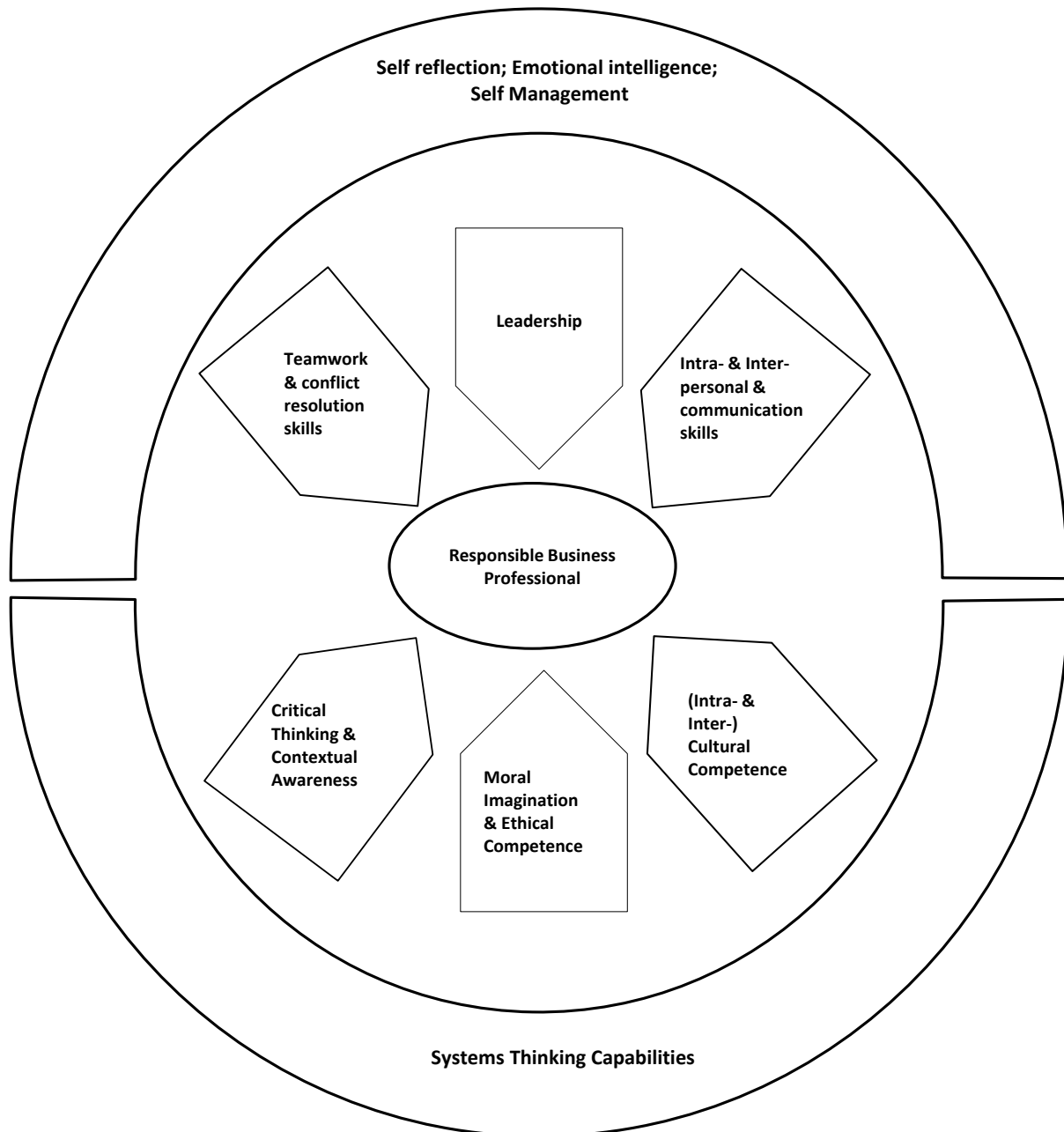
A recent report (Precision 2007) confirmed that Australia’s business schools (or commerce faculties) are adopting explicit ‘employability skills’ frameworks and embedding those skills among graduate attributes. Specific skill areas address communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, planning, self-management, learning and technology. Their development is framed in terms of job-readiness or strengthened business school-industry links. While this has merit and broadens business programs, it remains restrictive in vision and content. Employability skills frameworks typically ignore broader perspectives and conflate employer (or business) interests with societal interests (Sheldon & Thornthwaite 2006). Often absent are important attributes like social responsibility and ethical competence.

A more holistic, socially responsive approach would address the concerns of critics. We therefore propose a framework (see Figure 1) conceptualising essential capabilities for responsible business professionalism. Copious literatures separately address education for business ethics (Wilcox 1999; Khurana 2007; Swanson &

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Fisher, 2008) and for people management skills (Mintzberg 2004; Yorke & Harvey 2005; Gentry, Harris, Baker and Leslie 2008). The framework introduced here (Figure 1) breaks new ground by conceptually integrating those two areas: moral reasoning and business ethics; and people management competencies. It comprises knowledge and skills in crucial areas of business education: leadership, teamwork, interpersonal and communication skills, cultural competence, moral imagination and ethical thinking, contextual awareness and critical thinking. Holding them together are two broad capability schemes: systems thinking; and self-reflection.

Figure 1: Responsible Business Professionalism: Component Capabilities



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This approach goes beyond existing 'employability skills' approaches by extending and contextualising students' knowledge and skills. In fact, the subject, from within which the authors developed this new framework, provides both content-based and experiential learning of responsible business professionalism and its component capabilities. The framework makes important additions to common conceptions of graduate attributes (Precision 2007) beyond the critical and systems-thinking and self-reflection capabilities: contextual awareness; ethical decision-making; and cultural competence. It suggests a broader array of emotional intelligence components, extending the self-management skills contained in employability skills frameworks.

Systems thinking (Senge 1990; Atwater, Kannan & Stephens 2008) provides the first overarching scheme. We argue for holistically linking it to the second, *self-reflection*, and other components of *emotional intelligence* (Goleman 1995). Thus, systems thinking capabilities would comprise:

1. *Paradigmatic awareness*. Harrison, Leitch and Chia (2007, p.333) describe this as a 'loosening up of dominant paradigms of thought' entailing the 'intellectual agility needed to reframe, re-perceive and re-prioritize'. This must necessarily include meta-awareness of dominant economic systems of meaning and pervasive assumptions of 'rational economic man' associated with the institutions of global capitalism (Friedland & Alford 1991);
2. *Contextual awareness*. This should include familiarity with multiple levels of context, from the globalised economy, through national, organisational, group and individual elements of a business graduate's context;
3. Awareness of *causal interconnectedness and consequence*. This would include intended and unintended consequences of business actions and decisions.

A capacity for reflective awareness in each of these areas underpins effective problem-solving and analytical capabilities. As Figure 1 indicates, business professionals can build on this capacity as they develop their capabilities in critical thinking, moral imagination and ethical reasoning and inter-cultural competence.

The second overarching scheme complements these 'big-picture' capabilities. It relates to students' own evolving sense of who they are and who they might be as business professionals. Self-reflection and emotional intelligence capabilities involve development of, among others: self-awareness; self-regulation; other-awareness and empathy; and intra- and inter-personal skills (Goleman 1995). Evidence of these capabilities includes characteristics such as self-confidence, openness to change, integrity, sensitivity and leadership.

While professional capabilities schemes address gaps in much business education, it takes more to encourage a broader approach to professional practice among business graduates. Educators need to confront the notion that development of such capabilities is peripheral to the 'real' work of business, a perceptual bias that explains many students' reluctance to embrace deeper learning in these areas. By adopting explicit legitimisation strategies, educators can re-shape students' understanding regarding the place and role of this learning. For instance,

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conventional business education does not necessarily include critical examination of prevailing preoccupations with 'shareholder value' and short-term thinking.

All of this presents significant barriers to deeper learning. To challenge these barriers requires explicitly naming and framing sets of logics, values and worldviews and asking questions about alternatives. One alternative institution still valued by society is that of the profession. It provides a different set of norms and frames of thinking to those of the market. By encouraging business students to adopt an identity or notion of 'self' that includes seeing themselves as 'professionals', educators can open programs and curricula to broader approaches aimed at developing responsible business professionals. In the next section we discuss our recent experience in combining content, skills and learning processes to overcome those perceptual biases among students and to encourage their engagement with this curriculum.

3. The Case: A Postgraduate Business Professional Skills Subject

In 2003, our university's (then) Faculty of Commerce and Economics undertook a comprehensive review of its Master of Commerce (MCom), a program with an outstanding reputation for developing technical skills in more quantitatively-oriented areas of business practice – a focus reflected in its compulsory core subjects. The review investigated trends among leading business schools internationally and sought feedback and advice from employers and professional associations and the Faculty's alumni, students and academics. The review uncovered widespread criticism that graduates lacked requisite knowledge and skills relevant for people management and ethical reasoning.

In response, the Dean assigned two of the authors (one as convenor) to a team to design an MCom core subject: *Business Communication, Ethics and Practice (BCEP)*. The third joined, from *BCEP*'s inaugural semester in 2005, in teaching and in the action research over successive semesters. Through content, teaching strategies and assessment, the subject explicitly combined areas of study not typically integrated – by design – elsewhere. These include: learning theory, emotional intelligence, intra-personal awareness, interpersonal communication, perception and perceptual biases, inter-cultural awareness, organisational communication, negotiation, group dynamics and teamwork, moral awareness, systems thinking, ethical reasoning and leadership, professional practice.

Table 1 indicates how *BCEP*'s learning outcomes relate to our faculty's graduate attributes. Since its launch, *BCEP* has run two semesters each year plus the occasional summer session. Semester 1 cohorts are larger – about 350 students; Semester 2 usually has some 220. Particularly as leaders of larger teaching teams, the authors taught across most semesters until the end of 2009, having introduced succession planning prior to leaving.

BCEP is a compulsory subject intended for MCom students' first semester. Students come to *BCEP* with a variety of opinions as to its relevance, particularly where the content of their specialisation appears distant from it. One challenge is to influence them to see *BCEP* as relevant to their needs as current and future practitioners, and to motivate them to engage with ideas and frames of thinking that might run counter to those with which they were familiar. The aim is to deliver a subject that fosters

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students' sense of mastery of these professional skills, life-long learning and self-awareness.

Table 1: Subject Learning Objectives and Faculty Graduate Attributes

BCEP Subject Learning Outcomes	Faculty Graduate Attributes*					
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
a. Understand your own academic, professional and learning expectations as well as those of the university and employers						X
b. Critically analyse communication processes and identify strategies and techniques to improve the effectiveness of these processes	X	X			X	
c. Develop your self-awareness and interpersonal skills		X				X
d. Communicate more effectively in an academic or a business context		X				X
e. Apply skills in communicating more effectively in groups and teams		X	X			
f. Analyse interpersonal conflict situations more effectively	X		X			
g. Understand some of the main negotiation strategies for managing conflict			X			X
h. Appreciate cultural differences in communication and develop strategies for improving intercultural communication		X		X	X	
i. Identify the ethical dimensions of business practices	X					X
j. Distinguish and be able to apply different frameworks through which ethical issues may be considered	X				X	
k. Identify the various stakeholders in organisations & evaluate potential conflicts between people's multiple roles.	X			X		X
l. Appreciate the interconnections between ethics, leadership and professional practice.			X	X	X	X

* Faculty Graduate Attributes: 1. Critical thinking and problem solving; 2. Communication; 3. Teamwork and leadership; 4. Social and global perspectives; 5. In-depth engagement with relevant disciplinary knowledge; 6. Professional skills

BCEP begins with the part it plays in developing professional capabilities, exposing students to debates on the role of business schools. In doing this, the subject raises the profile it gives to the need for self-awareness, reflective and critical analysis and ethical behaviour, alongside interpersonal competencies. The aim is to nurture students' paradigmatic awareness and understanding of broader business contexts. This dialogue continues throughout the subject. In fact, in the first two weeks, students complete self-directed exercises encouraging them to reflect on some of the central premises in these debates through their own experiences. This fosters in them an understanding, as adult learners, of why they are doing *BCEP*, how it

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meshes with their own experiences and aspirations, and how it can contribute to their professional development.

Subject Design

We designed *BCEP* to be interdisciplinary. Design and delivery synergistically integrate component areas of responsible business professionalism too often kept separated in business schools – business communication, ethics, organisational behaviour and critical thinking. Integration of various components occurs horizontally – across each week’s topic area – and vertically – across formal topics. All aspects of subject design and delivery act as vehicles for this integration: the preparatory student material we have written, formal lectures, weekly workshops and assessment. Our rationale is that, in daily business and organisational life, professionals do not encounter these challenges as discrete topics but as varying bundles of factors or challenges. Integrating them, as we do in *BCEP*, makes the whole experience more meaningful and authentic for students and teachers. For example, when students practise negotiation skills in a workshop simulation, they do a simulation that also challenges their moral imagination, and requires application of self-awareness, other-awareness, problem-solving and communication skills.

In developing and teaching *BCEP*, we recognised the need for a dynamic and relevant curriculum, and so we seek to engage students – through contentious topics and by embedding contemporary business debates into readings, lectures, workshops and assessment. This broadens students’ awareness of relevant business concerns, raises the level of debate and discussion among students and, ultimately, fosters their capacity for different ‘ways of seeing’ as business professionals.

Central to *BCEP* is its reinforcement of what ‘professionalism’ in business might mean. In this sense, professional practice implies going beyond mastering a body of knowledge to critiquing and extending existing knowledge. It involves a commitment to ideals that transcend self-interest and to high ethical and technical standards (Khurana & Nohria 2008). By comparing notions of business professionalism with more formalised professional practices in medicine or engineering, we can demonstrate to students the importance of core professional values alongside a commitment to the public good *as well as* to one’s clients or shareholders. This reminds students that business practice may call on us to make decisions when faced with technical or ethical uncertainty and that development of skills in both of the two key capabilities schemes can provide us with support.

Approach to Teaching and Learning

BCEP student cohorts include great diversity in disciplinary background, previous learning and employment experience, assumed knowledge and country of origin. In addition, student exposure to professional experience or even to regular employment varies greatly. Students can have quite different expectations of tertiary education and their engagement with it. In particular, many feel reticent about the explicitly interpersonal and self-reflective engagement necessary for learning in a subject such as *BCEP*. These factors have posed particular challenges for our approach to teaching and learning both within and outside the classroom.

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As mentioned, students, especially those from technically-based specialisations, can enter *BCEP* as unwilling 'conscripts'. In response, we developed teaching and learning strategies that help to make the subject meaningful and exciting for students, to make it 'live' for them, by synthesising theoretical knowledge with practical skill development. Student evaluations and other feedback, immediate and at some remove, indicate that those strategies proved very effective.

We specifically developed weekly experiential workshops to engage students in all their diversity. For many students, these are their first learning opportunities of this kind, particularly if they come from cultures or disciplines that do not encourage classroom interaction, critical thinking and active student engagement. The workshops provide learning experiences that develop both systems thinking, and self-reflection and emotional intelligence capabilities. Through use of structured exercises, students learn project management, planning, feedback, teamwork, oral presentation and analytical skills that they can readily apply outside *BCEP*. Thinking tools such as fishbone diagrams, causal loops, and exercises in double-loop learning appear alongside self-reflection exercises, role plays, and other elements of experiential learning. Over the course of the semester, we remind students that they are all potential business leaders, and that their development of these capabilities will underpin their own professional business practice.

BCEP encourages students to take risks in developing their communication skills and moral reasoning – by providing learning environments that are both safe and accepting, and places for open debate and critical thinking. Many students tell us that they are inspired to engage to a degree beyond what they would have previously imagined possible. Students are also encouraged to reflect on and debate how cultural or other – for example, disciplinary – differences create particular perceptions and cognitions that may be inaccurate. This approach to grounding reflective learning in practice parallels that of Gosling and Mintzberg (2006).

The quality of students' work indicates our success in engaging them. So do the results of university-administered subject evaluations. These show students to be overwhelmingly satisfied (increasing to 97% by the end of 2008) with *BCEP*. Importantly, students reported that their *interest in the subject area increased* through studying *BCEP* (up to 92%, well above the faculty average of 84%). Students report, overwhelmingly, that they are challenged and energised by developing their self-awareness and related skills. Their feedback also indicates that in developing greater interpersonal and inter-cultural capabilities through, they feel more motivated to learn from students from different backgrounds. University teaching awards provided further positive feedback.

Our design of assessment reinforces and reflects *BCEP's* learning objectives and Faculty Graduate Attributes (see Table 1). To reinforce the learning potential of assessment tasks and foster students' deeper learning, we explain the purpose and logic behind the design of those tasks. Much assessment is case or problem-based and calls on students to synthesise, integrate and apply concepts and skills developed through readings, lectures and workshops.

For example, one major assessment task, a team-based project, responds explicitly to contemporary debates about the role of business in society. It requires students to demonstrate systems thinking capabilities. At the same time, it encourages students

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to address core professional skills like the development of effective teamwork, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, and emotional intelligence. In small teams, students undertake guided case study analysis of a very current corporate controversy – ‘living’ cases which change each semester. Each project team independently explores one of a number of sets of ethical, cultural and communication concerns we set them. Team members thus practice skills in an integrated manner (Goltz et al. 1997). Use of a critical incident methodology allows us to take advantage of its dramatic strengths for student learning. Project work also encourages purposive investigation of relevant issues, with students conducting independent research.

BCEP links the teamwork learning involved in this project to teaching/learning on teamwork. Students are required to engage in team planning and allocation of duties early in the semester via use of planning tools like Gantt charts linked to these allocations. This encourages students to deal with the significant, albeit often unrecognised, challenges to constructive teamwork that *BCEP* makes explicit in its presentation of teamwork theory. It also encourages informal leadership and peer mentoring within teams.

Students quickly become aware and appreciative of improvements in their non-verbal communication, oral presentation skills and active listening. Sometimes this includes greater self-awareness. Yet, it seems that some of the most important learning from our approach to teaching responsible professionalism may not be immediately apparent to students. A sense of greater mastery in areas like teamwork come more gradually, and mostly in response to substantial teamwork activities. Awareness of deeper learning regarding moral awareness, ethical reasoning and inter-cultural competence may become apparent even later.

4. Conclusion

This article outlines an approach to the development of capabilities central for responsible business professionalism. A first challenge was to make *BCEP* and its learning appear relevant to those students initially sceptical about learning the human side of business. We did this by explaining *BCEP*'s design within debates about the purpose, form and content of business education. A second was to make the subject as authentic and realistic as possible for student learning to encourage maximum student engagement and learning. In response, we adopted a holistic, interdisciplinary approach integrating knowledge, skills and values-based debates into problem-based and experiential learning. This goes beyond ‘adding-on’ discrete elements to traditional curricula. Instead, integration of our framework through the whole subject (learning outcomes, materials, workshops and assessment) brings home to students the more nuanced, complex but also interesting challenges they will face as business professionals.

Our conceptual framework allows for diffusion and further elaboration through experimentation and action research. The additional areas of focus – from people management and applied business ethics – are crucial and timely. A more profoundly original contribution is the framework's use of two capability schemes. These promote self-reflexive engagement and conceptual integration of learning across differing themes, knowledge areas, skills, contexts and intellectual traditions.

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The next stage is for researchers to use the proposed framework for model development and testing.

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