Summary

In this dissertation, I describe and evaluate the ethos of business students in the Netherlands. With the notion of ‘ethos’ I refer to a set of habits that have become part of our mentality and determine how we see the world, relate to it, and learn to speak about it. I dub the overall approach of this research a ‘moral ethology’. It begins with an investigation of the current business student ethos in the Netherlands, both from an empirical and a historical perspective. Subsequently, I show how focusing on ethos enables us to rethink the moral formation of business students. This research is interdisciplinary in nature and combines ethical-philosophical, sociological, educational, and historical lines of reasoning. Such an encompassing approach is in line with recent trends in applied ethics and social practice theory in general. Still, the focus on ‘ethos’ makes it relatively original. It requires us to be empirically informed and nonetheless enables normative conclusions, for instance, by showing the hiatus and contradictions within the current business student ethos and developing conceptual improvements that can help deal with these issues.

The research is divided into three parts: Part I offers a description of the contested business school ethos. I use the adjective ‘contested’ because literature on business schools is critical of the functioning of business schools and the academic legitimacy of these institutions. My qualitative empirical investigation offers a more fine-grained picture than the literature, although the overall impression of business schools remains worrisome nonetheless. The main problem seems to be that business school graduates are not ready to face the challenges our economy is facing, such as financialization, managerialism and the infinite economic-growth ideal. Their ethos only prepares them to be as efficient and productive as possible. If students are to face the challenges our economy is facing, they should learn to fundamentally reflect on the economy and society. At the same time, business schools themselves are also part of the economy and society – with their focus on consumers, shareholder value, and so on – and we can only understand them if we analyze them considering this context. If we do so, we find that the current business student ethos is part of the larger history of modernity in which a certain understanding of market-economies and individual-abstract morality have become dominant. Part II sets out to describe this larger history that business schools belong to. In Part III, I turn from description to evaluation, as I analyze and amend the fundamental concepts of the business student ethos. This means developing a socially and morally adequate understanding of management, corporations, and markets, as well as developing ideas about what it would require instilling
in business students habits that correspond with these ideas. MacIntyre, Hegel and Aristotle are my main discussion partners here. In the remainder of this summary, I describe the content of these three parts more elaborately.

**Part 1: The contested business school ethos**

Chapter 2 takes inventory of the current state of the academic debate on business schools. The tenor is mainly critical, and scholars agree that most current business schools do not offer enough courses in the personal ethical direction to make a significant impact. There is, however, reason to be optimistic about the future: All discussed authors offer constructive ideas and suggestions for new directions for business schools. They argue, to mention two important examples, for a more differentiated concept of knowledge and teaching a business model that is less shareholder-focused. They also see potential for active identity-formation and envision universities ‘professionalizing’ business students by making them more ethically aware.

Chapter 3 presents the results of a Q-study on the current business student ethos, encompassing 20 interviews and 43 Q-respondents at three Dutch universities. The Q-study identifies five types of ethos, grouped into two distinguishing main types of which the other three types of ethos are combinations or extremes. I named these main types the ethos of the Do-Good Managers and that of the Market-Managers. Students who adhere to the ethos of the Do-Good Managers recognize the need for business values such as money-making and efficiency but are also aware of the function of business in society as a mechanism that enables us to work together to achieve shared goals. Students who adhere to the ethos of the Market-Managers, lack this societal awareness, and have a high appreciation for strict business values, such as profit and efficiency. The existence of the ethos of Market-Managers is odd, considering the amount of attention paid in programs of business studies to corporate social responsibility, social entrepreneurship, and business ethics – all subjects one would expect to teach the importance of the social responsibility and moral evaluation of business-decisions. This underscores insights from the secondary literature (cf. Chapter 2) that such fundamental courses are not enough to make an impact. They seem to be a rather isolated part of the curriculum that does not reach all students.

However, regarding knowledge, the Q-study does not confirm the claim present in the secondary literature (cf. Chapter 2) that students have a one-sided belief in scientific or academic business thinking and that they have little ethical awareness. I find that some do and some do not. Even so, the results are coherent with a subtler line of argument in this literature: that
business education, by assuming a value-neutral educational strategy, fails to acknowledge the fact that instillation of values takes place nonetheless. Regarding business, many students acquire a rich notion of business in which it is a function of society, yet many others commit to shareholder capitalism. Business schools do not address this issue; rather, they present the values inherent in business in an objectified way. The implicit message is that students themselves should choose which model they want to believe in, for teachers only introduce the ‘facts’ and the different and conflicting ways one can analyze them. The results of the Q-study seem to suggest that students, worryingly, are not taught how to properly make this kind of judgment. In fact, students seem largely unable to elaborate on their notion of business and remain unaware of the existing debate about business. Students lack a meta-perspective on business, thus even those students that *prima facie* engage in social and moral considerations in relation to business, find it hard to speak about work from a perspective beyond ‘profit’ or ‘do-as-asked’. The tool-box of business students is filled with tools for market-management – be efficient, get things done, make money, work in tasks, etc. – but offers few skills required for social and moral reflection and action. The study of business does not necessarily make students less social and moral, but it does not actively cultivate an overall ethical (or: professional) notion of management either.

At the same time, business studies pay much attention to theories and models that are supposed to be value-neutral but are, in fact, normative. Students, for instance, learn to see themselves as managers in large corporations. This is not necessarily what teachers want them to think, but it is the hidden curriculum students pick up from textbooks, lectures, and the all-round experience of studying business (cf. Chapter 3, and 5.2). Students learn to identify with managerial positions that see the ‘bigger picture’ in the form of balance sheets. They learn to perceive themselves as problem-solvers that get things done and help define tasks for others. The literature on business studies suggests a strong hierarchal and financial mind-set but the Q-research – in contrast – suggests a fundamental interest in communication and the vision of other people. This is good news, for it makes students more attentive than much theory suggests, but I do note that we need to shape and cultivate communication, for instance, on topics such as disagreement, the meaningfulness and ‘internal goods’ of work, to which I return below. Another normative aspect of the business student ethos is that corporations and markets are perceived in a neutral way, which makes it hard for students to understand the shadow sides of our economy – such as managerialism, financialization and ecological problems – and find inspiration, knowledge, and tools to improve this situation.
Chapter 3 concludes the first line of thought: The Q-research offers a clear idea of the various types of business school ethos identified. Its results are compared to the secondary literature. The inconsistencies and lacunas in the current Dutch business school ethos are articulated. Part II addresses the history and cultural background of these schools.

Part 2: Origins of the contested business school ethos
Chapter 4 offers a historical analysis of business schools. I distinguish three phases in this history. (1) The practical and engaged ethos, 1900-1960. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, schools began to adopt a vocational and practical focus. Until the late 1960-1970s, these studies not only aimed to imbue their students with a set of academic theories, they also hoped to teach skills and to instill in them a sense of duty-bound artisanship. This changed, however, not only in the Netherlands, but world-wide: (2) The scientific ethos, 1960-1990. Business studies reoriented towards a strictly scientific self-understanding. Management lost its professional identity. Its focus became self-referential: business was good for business, and its relation to the outer-world became secondary and, in the case of some sectors, such as finance, petrol-industry, and food, almost non-existent. Universities mirrored and indirectly legitimized this development in business. (3) The money and consumer ethos, 1990-present. Eventually, business schools entered a phase in which the consumer and especially the shareholder became focal interests in curricula. Science was still important, as was the idea of creating future professional managers, but money became the central point of interest. How can we interpret this development? Locke (1989) emphasizes the loosening of theory from real-world business and Khurana (2007) emphasizes the loosening between market thinking and societal engagement. Both interpretations are convincing and I add a third dimension, namely the replacement of Rhinelandic with Anglo-Saxon thinking in business schools.

With this historical development in mind, we can identify some traditional motives in the current business student ethos. The self-perception of students as future managers is an old idea. In fact, it is more compatible with early business thinking than with the current literature. Today, the focus of business studies is more on markets and finance, and less on bureaucratic organization. Still, students apparently remain attracted to the archetypical type of job we call management (or the flexible variant, consultancy). The focus on science and therewith the premium on rigor rather than relevance is an invention that came after the 1960s but is already visible in the work of Fredrick Taylor. Thus, the one-sided focus on science is less innovative than one might
expect, whereas the current call for more plural forms of knowledge by business scholars is. This call also brings us back to the beginnings of business schools, in which there was more academic plurality. To make such a (re)turn in the current business school environment would also mean the (re)discovery of some business authors, such as Henri Fayol, who might replace Taylor in the canon, as well as a further development of certain tools, such as SWOT, which might complete strictly analytic thinking to a much higher degree than is currently the case.

Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of the changing business schools ethos against the background of the process of modernization. The analysis of MacIntyre is leading in this interpretation. His work helps analyze the relation between modern science, modern ethics, and the rise of the culture of ‘bureaucratic individualism’. I demonstrate that the problems business schools face can be understood as examples of the issues MacIntyre identifies in modernity, especially the role of rationalization and marketization and the inability to integrate ethics into these two major forces in modern society. Business schools reflect the process of modernization in the presumption that the world of business can be studied and organized in a decontextualized manner, without knowledge of its specific domains, with a distanced, balance-sheet perspective on people. This strategy of abstraction is mirrored in the history of ethics that also became segregated from the values of society and narrowly focused on abstract individuals instead of the mores of occupations. MacIntyre argues convincing that management has received much élan in our modern-emotivistic society; it is by far the biggest study program in the Netherlands. Following MacIntyre, it is no coincidence that it is typical for the Dutch business student ethos to mainly consider managerial or consultancy work as work. Artisanship and entrepreneurship are less en vogue with business students than bureaucratic functions in large-scale corporations such as KPMG or Unilever. MacIntyre also argues that managers embody the scientific ambition of a value-free morality. We already concluded that implicit values are prevalent in the business student ethos and MacIntyre helps articulate them. He shows that we risk perceiving management as an amoral, technical job. I nuance this depiction of management, although it does prove to be a heuristic perspective that helps articulate what is necessary for developing an ethical understanding of management.

Chapter 5, the second circle of argumentation closes. It has become clear that the problems in the business school ethos are related to a specific and contested history of modernization. From a moral ethological framework, I stipulate an alternative route to articulate elementary concepts of business education in Part III.
Part 3: Towards an enriched business school ethos
The third and final part offers further scrutiny of questions I regard as fundamental to the business student ethos: What is the purpose of business? How is business related to society and the government? These two questions – regarding business and its relation to society – bring forth a third ethological question: (3) How can we develop a good and knowledgeable personal ethos? The arguments take the shape of a discussion with some classic authors in business ethics and philosophy in general.

Chapter 6 reconstructs and adjusts the alternative framework MacIntyre offers to understand corporations as embedded in the larger contexts of what he calls ‘practices’. This framework helps identify corporations in an ethical way and offers a different idea of management in terms of balancing internal and external goods. MacIntyre’s concept of ‘practice’ enables us to have a professional understanding of work and business, but it also has disadvantages. Macintyre is overly critical of the effects of marketization. In the work of MacIntyre, (1) institutions in general are only a ‘necessary evil’ in structuring society. Moreover, (2) the value of individual deliberation is eclipsed by his emphasis on community over individual life.

Chapter 7 turns to Hegel to develop a line of argument that goes beyond the restrictions of MacIntyre’s argument. Hegel offers a fundamental understanding of the relation between individuals in terms of reciprocal ‘recognition’. This perspective helps us come to an ethological understanding of both society and economy. Furthermore, Hegel helps analyze the market as the domain in which modern individuals can realize the good life. Business students seem to presume a market-view of the economy and society at large, but Hegel helps to alternatively see the market embedded in mores and society, within the confines of the state. In this view, markets are mechanisms that help realize the good life (which is at odds with MacIntyre’s ideas, which idealize pre-market communities) and it is also at odds with a thin ‘freedom’ perspective in which markets are a priori understood as fostering individual freedom, which is not always the case. Moreover, Hegel helps address the need for a general state perspective on the role of academic (business) education as an alternative to the current market perspective, in which we risk seeing students as consumers of knowledge, instead of people becoming educated citizens that learn to understand the common good prevalent in our institutions and economy.

Chapter 8 focuses on the personal side of the business student ethos and asks what kind of knowledge business students should cultivate. It commences with a reconstruction of ethos in the works of Aristotle. He emphasizes the need for moral identity formation and the role of practical wisdom. Chapter 8 continues with an analysis of practical knowledge and judgment with
the help of, among others, Polanyi, Schön and Heidegger. It closes with an elaboration on moral formation – or: Bildung – with reference to the work of Taylor, Frankfurt, and Nussbaum. Taken together, these parts of Chapter 8 offer a broader understanding of what moral, discretionary and phronetic judgments mean and therewith contribute to a broader understanding of knowledge for an alternative business student ethos. With this line of thought, we have developed a more constructive understanding of intuitive personal ethical judgment than MacIntyre is able to.

At the end of Part III, the third circle closes: the concept of ethos is fleshed out and applied to relevant concepts for business studies. In a concluding section, the overall argument is recapitulated and concretized. I present some building blocks for an alternative blueprint for business school education in the Netherlands:

• **Relate business education to specific business domains.** Business schools need to realign with concrete domains of production, consumption, and trade. Much of the real-world of business – its traditions, sectors, histories, and current dilemmas – is represented poorly in current curricula. This omission is the result of the undervaluation of plural forms of knowledge in business schools and overvaluation of (a specifically modern, decontextualized form of) science.

• **Develop an idea of professional managerial judgment.** I recommend there be more attention for the cultivation of typical ways in which a business graduate thinks and acts in business education. My suggestion is that this cultivation lies more in the tradition of applied models, such as BCG, SWOT, and case-studies, than in strictly scientific theories. If the idea of the typical business ethos – the way graduates think, relate to the world and themselves – is more cultivated, one could also expect business programs to gain consistency. Professional schools in law and medicine seem ahead in this regard and might be able to provide best practices. Although a business graduate is not a professional in the classic sense, business schools should compare themselves more to those institutions than to, say, economics or sociology, as they do now.

• **Situate ethics in society and its history and practices.** A student of business has to be able to think ethically – in a constructive way – about consumption, work, and the economy at large. Modern (analytic) ethics focuses on abstraction and individuals and could find much more relevance in practices of the real-world, analogue to care ethics. The problem with the (continental) tradition, which I consider MacIntyre to be part of, is that it tends to be overly critical regarding business. We are in need of new approaches in ethical reasoning.
and I think applied models – such as *Giving Voice to Values* – are promising. In such models, the focus should not only be on what we think is morally good, but also on rationalizations that legitimize amoral behavior. Such models can be enriched with other philosophical concepts developed in this research, such as ‘internal/external goods,’ ‘recognition,’ ‘market-state-nexus’ and ‘practical thinking.’

- *Balance Anglo-Saxon and Rhinelandic business ideas.* This research signals a large enthusiasm for Anglo-Saxon business theory and models, without consideration of the overall context of the Anglo-Saxon world. This leads to a situation in which students are insufficiently equipped to deal with the context and values of the economic reality in which they will come to work after graduation. Especially regarding marketization, financial markets and the role of management, the Rhinelandic model could make business schools more down-to-earth.