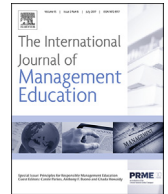




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From challenge to opportunity – Management education's crucial role in sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals – An overview and framework



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ABSTRACT

The following paper is an exploration of what management education needs to consider in order to play this role, one that not only embeds sustainability and responsible management throughout, but that plays a crucial and active role on a global stage in moving the SDGs forward.

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1. Introduction

The global community has been engaged in sustainable development for decades, even before the official definition of sustainable development, given to us by the now widely circulated Brundtland Definition, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” ([World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987](#)) Much of this work has happened behind the scenes, seemingly unrelated to the world of management education. However the latest push, in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a series of 17 goals with 168 related targets that the global community has set to reach by 2030, is different. Unlike its predecessors, including the Millennium Development Goals which expired at the end of 2015, the SDGs were developed through the largest international consultation ever with a range of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs and, importantly, business. There is a growing recognition that sustainability as a global issue needs a global response, hence all groups are, and need to be, engaged in making the goals a reality at the local, national, regional and international level.

Although governments and NGOs play a key role in advancing the goals, it is the business sector that will be instrumental in the success of the individual targets, through the way they operate, develop new business models, invest in communities, innovate, and collaborate. For companies, successful implementation of the SDGs will strengthen the enabling environment for doing business, minimizing risks while also providing a myriad of new opportunities ([Weybrecht, 2015](#)). As the CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman put it, “There is no business case for enduring poverty. We have the opportunity to unlock trillions of dollars through new markets, investments and innovation. But to do so, we must challenge our current practices and address poverty, inequality and environmental challenges. Every business will benefit from operating in a more equitable, resilient world if we achieve the SDGs.” ([Unilever.com, 2017](#))

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The business environment has changed significantly, in particular in the past couple of decades. As Walmart's CEO Lee Scott put it (already more than 10 years ago), "We thought we could sit in Bentonville, take care of customers, take care of associates, and the world would leave us alone. It doesn't work that way any more." (Grow, 2005) Perhaps the same can be said of business schools who are still, to a certain degree hiding undisturbed behind closed doors and who, despite being crucial in the implementation of the SDGs, have not yet been as engaged as they could, and need to be.¹ When we talk about the SDGs, and sustainability more generally, we don't usually talk about the currently undervalued role, and impact, of business schools in making that vision a reality. Management practices are pervasive. When we change the way employees, managers, CEOs and leaders think and act, this will lead to broader changes across industries around the world (Weybrecht, 2010). Every year hundreds of thousands of students graduate from business schools internationally, both from degree and non-degree programmes. They then go on to lead and influence virtually every type of organisation, and each and every one of them has the opportunity to impact what our future will, or will not look like. (Weybrecht 2012).² Business schools influence decisions made on a daily basis globally – whether it is through these graduates or through research, publications, books and frameworks developed and written by faculty. If organizations slowly fill up with individuals who apply the triple bottom line³ to how they do business, this would enable us to move forward with sustainability goals in a timely, as well as mutually beneficial way. Considering the number of business schools globally, this impact should not only be significant, but relatively rapid.

Sustainability provides a unique opportunity for management education, and should be seen as such. The broad nature of the term has been beneficial in so far as it provides an open platform to begin discussions, and schools have been free to explore the topic in a variety of ways. However, this flexibility is perhaps also the reason why sustainability has not yet taken the place it needs to within management education. Many approach sustainability as a broad topic, and fail to dive in deeper in order to explore the complexity of the issues, or the relevance of these issues to their work. Additionally, terms regularly used by management education such as ethics, CSR, responsible management and sustainability are being used to differentiate these issues from core business as usual, rather than recognising them as the glue that ties business together and drives it forward. They are used, wrongly, interchangeably. The sooner we can break down these terms into their individual parts, focus in on these and make them relevant for those concerned, the sooner we can move forward.

The SDGs present us with a common language around sustainable development, one being used by governments, NGOs, and business. Business schools have a responsibility to translate this important global plan into something that resonates with their community. This can then be used to mobilize support internally, to coordinate curriculum, research and operations on campus. But perhaps more importantly, they can also be used externally as a platform to engage stakeholders, and in particular business in a common set of goals and targets. The opportunity is there for business schools to use these terms to bring people, ideas and research together, not to separate them. But beyond having a positive impact through teaching and research, the SDGs provide another opportunity for business schools who are able and willing to engage; that of being a true driver and enabler of change.

The following paper is an exploration of what management education needs to consider in order to play this role, one that not only embeds sustainability and responsible management throughout, but that plays a crucial and active role on a global stage in moving the SDGs forward.

1.1. A four step framework⁴

Management education, despite being positioned to play a key role in the SDGs and take advantage of these opportunities, is generally speaking not doing so, at least not at the speed that one might have hoped or expected. Progress is being made but is not proving simple because of the underlying culture in and surrounding business schools, how they operate, what they teach, how they teach it, who they teach it to and what is expected of them. It isn't just the global community that doesn't necessarily recognize the important role that management education could play in moving the SDGs forward; perhaps management education itself does not fully recognise its role.

In order for schools to take advantage of this opportunity, and play this role, the following four steps, as shown in Fig. 1, set out a framework that can be used to not only reflect on where one is today, but set out where and how to move forward.

1.2. Step 1: setting the scene

There is much to be excited about when it comes to management education's current role in moving sustainability forward. This is in part thanks to a growing number of individual champions pioneering and developing new approaches at their schools, and a rapidly growing number of students not just supporting and starting but demanding sustainability

¹ Weybrecht (2015). Management Education and the Sustainable Development Goals – Get Engaged. AACSB International. Retrieved from <http://www.aacsb.edu/blog/2015/october/management-education-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-get-engaged>.

² Weybrecht (2012). How to Make Anything Sustainable. TedX Warwick. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0A9vnNff1I>.

³ First mentioned in Spreckley, F. (1981) Social Audit – A Management Tool for co-operative. Beechwood College. and then further expanded by Elkington, J. (1997) Cannibals with Forks: the Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business. Capstone Publishing.

⁴ Developed between 2005 and 2016 by the author and presented at various conferences and training sessions internationally.

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