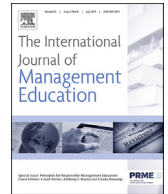




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'Think of the future': Managing educational change from students' perspectives of an undergraduate sustainable business programme



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how partnership with students can help sustainability educators with refining the living theory of their practice and improving the implementation of this practice in real world contexts. It draws from the case study of an undergraduate module within a UK Higher Education Institution committed to the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and that has sought to embody a shift towards more active, student-centred and problem-based pedagogical approaches. The module leaders aimed to draw out a more nuanced appreciation of the knowledge, skills, values, and attributes necessary for business and management graduates to contribute to more sustainable futures. We argue that whilst attempts to reform higher education in this direction are on the rise worldwide, there remains a relative lack of research into the students' perspectives of these Education for Sustainable Development initiatives. Drawing from the applied research work of Swanson and Chermack (2013) and Kim-Eng Lee and Mun Ling (2013), it is argued that robust strategies for listening to students provide a vital praxis lens through which the intended, enacted and lived curriculum can be refined and brought closer together by business school educators.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that today's business and management graduates need a form of education that helps them to realise their potential to make a positive contribution to the three pillars of sustainable development: social wellbeing, economic stability, and ecological integrity (Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, & Scherer, 2013; Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010). The Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) is the first large scale global reform initiative in pursuit of realising this sustainability mandate within Business Education (Forray & Leigh, 2012). Established in 2007 and coordinated by the United Nations, PRME provides six guiding principles to encourage business schools and universities to recognize their role as drivers of sustainable change and to adapt their curriculum, pedagogy and institutional strategies (www.prme.org). This directly impacts upon business and management educators, who by implication have a responsibility to incorporate sustainability into their practice and encourage the business mind-set shift towards more sustainable and ethical practices (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2015; Palthe, 2013; Wyness, Jones, & Klapper, 2015).

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In this paper, we focus upon the pedagogical challenge that is posed by PRME Principle 3 in its call to create educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences for responsible leadership (www.prme.org). Drawing from the framework of theory building in applied disciplines developed by Swanson and Chermack (2013) we share the findings from an implementation research project with students and academics in the Plymouth Business School (PBS) and the Centre for Sustainable Futures (CSF) at Plymouth University, in south-west England. This collaborative research project explores the process of refining the theoretical framing of effective practice in the light of student experience of its application within an innovative module in sustainable business. In so doing it presents the idea that students themselves can serve as vital catalysts for educational change and improvement.

2. Conceptualising education for sustainable development within business school education

Closer attention is now being paid to how innovations in teaching curricula and pedagogies can engender 'future-facing' graduates with attributes to meet 21st century challenges (Barrie, 2004, 2007; Cotton & Winter, 2010; Oliver, 2013; UNECE, 2012). Arguably, all graduates require critical and creative competencies, which promote resilience and innovation in the face of the manifold and global threats to well-being in both human and environmental terms (Sterling, Glasser, Rieckmann, & Warwick, 2017; United Nations, 2013).

With specific reference to business and management education, PRME has played a vital role in the growing recognition of the need for future business leaders who are responsible. This requires an awareness of sustainability issues and solutions and, optimally, a strong understanding of the challenges and rewards (financial and otherwise) of running businesses that have sustainable development at their heart (Prandi, Martell, & Lozano, 2015). The extent of this challenge has most recently been outlined by the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Future business leaders require a broad range of competencies and attributes to effectively contribute to society's transformation towards these goals through envisioning and realising more sustainable business practices.

As a direct result of the PRME initiative there is a growing body of practice, research and literature about the worldwide educational reform such a responsible business leaders mandate requires (Doh & Tashman, 2012; Sunley & Leigh, 2016). For example, 'The Inspirational Guide for the Implementation of PRME: placing sustainability at the heart of management education' features 63 case studies from 47 PRME signatory schools across 25 countries (Escudero, Albareda, Alcaraz, Weybrecht & Csuri, 2012). It reveals through real world examples the extent and range of responses across each of the 6 principles. Similarly, a UK and Ireland edition highlights a spectrum of responses with a trajectory towards more integrated and embedded pedagogical approaches (Murray, Baden, Cashian, Haynes, & Wersun, 2015).

Of particular interest to this paper are the implications of PRME Principle 3. This principle helps to support wholesale cultural, pedagogical, and epistemological shifts in programme provision. Importantly, this frames the challenge as not only being about introducing, increasing, and maintaining the presence of sustainability *content* within business and management education but also about shifting towards, more active, applied and student-centred *pedagogies* that foster skilled graduates with a strong responsibility value-set (Sunley & Leigh, 2016). In this way PRME is encouraging educators to consider applied learning theories such as Kolb's learning cycle with its recognition of the importance of pedagogies that enable active experimentation through for example project-based learning and service learning opportunities (Furray, Leigh, Goodnight, & Cycon, 2016). PRME compels business education to move beyond the narrow, but more common, focus on the environmental, legal, and ethical concerns of organisations (Starik, Rands, Marcus, & Clark, 2010), towards encompassing a more nuanced appreciation of the graduate skills, values, and attributes necessary to facilitate the shift towards a more sustainable and ethically responsible economy.

3. Operationalising ESD within a specific higher education setting

Sustainability can be built into two distinct arenas of learning in Higher Education – *designed* learning (through educational programmes) and *institutional* learning that is undertaken by those senior managers and policy-makers who are in the position to create the conditions necessary for change to take place (Sterling, Maxey, & Luna, 2013, p. 7). Effective (and lasting) educational change in academics' practice through curriculum content and pedagogy is reliant on the adequate depth and breadth of institutional learning that has taken place to date. Since the turn of the century, Plymouth University has undergone significant institutional learning, with the commensurate introduction of an integrated sustainability strategy providing a clear institutional steer.

In 2011, Plymouth Business School (PBS) began a systemic approach to introducing sustainability into its business education. A small interest group of staff launched numerous initiatives, including the creation of a non-credit bearing Certificate in Sustainable Business. The popularity of this course with business education students, coupled with increased ESD staff capacity through recruitment and specialised staff development, enabled PBS to lead the University in signing up to PRME in 2013. With the establishment of a sustainability curriculum development group PBS then decided to create a new elective ESD undergraduate credit-bearing module and it is this innovation that forms the focus of this paper.

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