



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme

Responsible management education: Mapping the field in the context of the SDGs



Meredith Storey*, Sheila Killian, Philip O'Regan

Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, Castletroy, Limerick, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 November 2016

Received in revised form 17 February 2017

Accepted 24 February 2017

Keywords:

Sustainable development goals

Bourdieu

Responsible management education

PRME

UN

Ethics

Responsibility

Education

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the field of Responsible Management Education (RME) in the context of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), situating the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (UN PRME) in relation to a range of associated initiatives and organisations using a light, Bourdieusian theoretical framing. The emergence of the SDGs as a frame or *doxa* for RME and the role of UN PRME as an agent in this field is explored in the context of the literature on how business schools have delivered on sustainability and responsibility imperatives. The field of RME is partially mapped, loosely categorising actors and initiatives as membership or affiliation networks, teaching and learning initiatives and student-centred or student-led groups. Their differing aspirations are discussed, and tentative conclusions are drawn on the extent to which the SDGs are acting as a unifying paradigm, and on the future roles that UN PRME may play in the field.

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1. Introduction

In a time of rising inequalities, climate change, and a range of major societal challenges, a crucial challenge facing education is how best to equip citizens, scholars and leaders to implement meaningful change and avert future crises. Responsible Management Education (RME) overtly seeks to address this imperative in business schools. Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* is often seen as the unwritten rules of the game in a field such as this, the shared and perhaps unarticulated understanding of how the field operates which in turn coordinates action among the various actors; "*the undisputed, pre-reflexive, naive, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field*" (Bourdieu (1990:68)). However, the field of RME is diverse, with a wide range of actors not all of whom share a common view on either the purpose of education in this regard, the best way to implement change or the underlying goal of the field. Bourdieu would argue that at any given time, agents in a field are either trying to uphold or overthrow the *doxa*, depending on their alignment with the current status quo and the levels and types of capitals that they can deploy within the field (Bourdieu, 1990). Currently, a frame emerging as a key element of the dominant *doxa* is Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These were launched in 2015 to trigger action in areas such as human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption (UN Global Compact, 2016), extending and replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In overtly seeking to engage actors to deliver quantifiable results (Sachs, 2012), the SDGs give a new prominence to private business as a driver of change. They prioritise the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Meredith.Storey@ul.ie (M. Storey), Sheila.Killian@ul.ie (S. Killian), Philip.Oregan@ul.ie (P. O'Regan).

financial power and reach of private business as a significant driver of Agenda 2030, perhaps more important than the regulatory power of government. This implicitly acknowledges and thereby embeds the power of corporate entities relative to that of the state as an element of the field's *doxa*, and in Bourdieusian terms, suggests that this emerging *doxa* tends to prioritise economic capital relative to symbolic or cultural capital. More subtly for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) including business schools, it elevates the contribution made by providing suitable graduates to take up positions in private business.

In this paper, we explore and partially map the field of RME, categorising the actors on the field according to their primary mode of action and engagement. We situate the United Nations-sponsored Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative (UN PRME) within that field, finding it to be a dominant actor which holds considerable symbolic capital which could be deployed to greater effect as a unifying element in what can be a fluid and crowded space. We see the SDGs and Agenda 2030 emerging as a *doxa* with broad traction within the field. A range of agents are adapting their work to this *doxa* and while this is not entirely unproblematic, we find that it may have the potential to simplify the process of engagement by HEIs new to RME, and enable the field as a whole to make a greater contribution to social good.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section two briefly reviews literature on the contribution of HEIs and business schools in particular to RME, outlines the SDGs in the context of Agenda 2030 and suggests a way in which it can be embedded across the curriculum. Section three partially maps the field, focusing initially on UN PRME and introducing a range of other initiatives and actors under three broad headings: membership or affiliation organisations; teaching and learning initiatives; and student-centred or student-led groups. The respective ambitions and goals of each category are discussed, intending to understand their relationship and attitude to the shared *doxa*. Finally, in Section 4, the potential of the field is discussed, with a particular focus on the potential of UN PRME as a catalysing agent which could facilitate a pluralistic understanding of the field of RME.

2. RME and the Sustainable Development Goals

A range of studies have examined the evolving purpose of business (Smit, 2013), the growing emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Visser, Matten, Pohl, & Tolhurst, 2007) and how it is reported (Shabana, Buchholtz, & Carroll, 2016) and the rapid change in the way in which the place and behaviour of organisations in society is understood (Mele, 2008). The SDG element of the *doxa* of RME would suggest that a key challenge for business school engaging in RME is to prepare students to engage with and drive this changing context. A stream of literature responds to this by focusing on the impact of graduates on their employers, with an implicit assumption that most of these employers are in private sector, for-profit businesses. One body of work seeks to bridge the gap between what employers require from graduates and what business schools seek to deliver. For example, Azevedo, Apfelthaler, and Hurst (2012) proposes a conceptual framework to measure employer needs related to job performance and career development, in terms of competencies which might be developed in business schools, including influence, teamwork, analytical skills, time management, leadership, foresight, presentation and communication competencies. Several studies aim to identify the kinds of competencies employers look for in employees related to decision making (Shanahan & Hyman, 2003), or specific professions through the multi-dimensional ethics scale (McMahon & Harvey, 2006; Reidenbach & Robin, 1990, 1991). Leadership development is a key theme in the literature: Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan (2006) consider the implementation of transformational leadership theory highlighting CSR practices amongst chief executive officers (CEOs); Hind, Wilson, and Lenssen (2009) explore competencies and highlighting the necessary "reflexive ability"; and Crossan, Mazutis, and Seijts (2013) integrating virtues values, character strengths and ethical decision making to strengthen an organisation's ethical decision making. Much of the leadership education work focuses on character (McCrae & Costa, 1992; Russell and Gregory Stone, 2002) and virtue (Murphy, 1999; Chun, 2005 *Virtue Ethics scale*). Many of the competencies and themes considered important for sustainable professionals or moral development derive from the early work of philosophers, including the tensions suggested through stoicism and epicureanism (Zeller, 1892); the way of truth and the way of opinion (Parmenides, 2003); self-interest and social-interest (Hobbes, 2003); logic and experience (Kant, 2002); reason-will and desires-inclination (Weber, 1949); individual action and societal benefit (Smith, 2009).

Graduate attributes, ethically based or otherwise, remain challenging to measure, and there is also an untested assumption that employers have a good understanding of the qualities they will need in new hires. Notably, business graduates go on to play key roles not only in private business, but also in civil society and public policy, so it is important that the outcomes of RME address the diversity of their future needs, and not simply focus on the characteristics required by private business. While there can be general agreement around the SDGs as a global frame for societal challenges, there is far less unanimity on how exactly business education should best respond. A body of work calls for the integration of ethics and values all across the curriculum in business schools. Smit (2013) suggests a new management education paradigm is required to engage with responsible leadership, through development with issues of ethics theories in management; responsible leadership develops at the managerial level and integration of ethics and responsibility to curriculum design. This echoes Ghoshal (2005) who argues that business and management research has a negative impact on the practice of management, generating a curriculum largely composed of management theories which have no inherent moral basis. Wolfe and Werhane (2010) argue this requires a change in mindset within business schools. Setó-Pamies and Papaioikonomou (2016) stresses the importance of HEIs as multi-level learning networks, where formal curriculum subject matter can usefully be supplemented with an integration of ethics, CSR and sustainability topics. This integration may function to develop the moral imagination of students and graduates (Fougère, Solitander, & Young, 2014). Kleymann and Tapie (2010) suggest the importance of educating

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