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# The International Journal of Management Education

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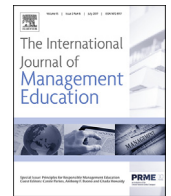
# Embedding responsible management education — Staff, student and institutional perspectives

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## A R T I C L E   I N F O

## A B S T R A C T

There is a resurgence in responsible management education, with business schools' considering its adoption as vital for business courses. Nevertheless, initiating institution-wide changes for responsible management education is an inherently complex activity in business schools, requiring not only revisions in their curriculum, but also sustained faculty and institutional support. This paper explores this complexity in one UK business school, a signatory to the Principles of Responsible Management Education, who have commenced a programme of change in RME. Based on primary data obtained from two workshops with the business schools' faculty, a student survey and a systematic analysis of the curriculum of four undergraduate degrees and two post-graduate degrees, we find that misalignment between faculty skills and institutional bureaucracy, together with an inconsistent focus on responsible management across the curriculum raises key challenges for its adoption. We extend the premise that significant change *in* RME, requires fundamental changes of a business school's own ethos of *what* responsibility means to itself.

## 1. Introduction

The importance of 'responsible management education' (RME) was revived after the financial crisis of 2007/2008. Business schools in particular were, yet again, accused of educating and developing business executives devoid of ethical values and an understanding of business responsibility (Rasche & Escudero, 2009). Management education was found to be inadequate for the needs of a corporatist world (Prinsloo, Beukes, & De Jongh, 2006).

There has been a rapid and at times exponential growth of business schools, specifically those in the United Kingdom (UK) over the past few decades (Wilson & McKiernan, 2011), with most being considered to be significant sources of revenue or 'cash cows' for UK Universities (Starkey, Hatchuel, & Tempest, 2004). For instance, in 2013/2014 15% of all UK graduates came from a business and administrative based discipline; approximately 1.7 million students (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015). Some scholars have raised questions about the fundamentals of business schools, with most arguing that these are built upon a traditional organisation centred worldview, which assigns centrality to business as a pivotal element for the success of society (Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone & Thompson, 2006; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004), thereby propagating the argument that 'profit' is the mainstay of business, as it is required to sustain society itself (Blasco, 2012; Samuelson, 2006). Parallel to this

argument, other scholars have found evidence indicative of a deficiency in discussions of ethics, sustainability and responsibility of business in their endeavour to make these profits, at least in the UK business school context (Matten & Moon, 2004; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015).

A predominant approach through which the discussion of ethics, sustainability and responsibility *of* business can be integrated into business school education is through their curriculum. Researchers have identified varying approaches for doing so, ranging from the adoption of specialist degree courses (often found at the post-graduate level) or by offering standalone modules/subjects or the elective module adoption approach (See Matten & Moon, 2004; Schimmel, Nicholls, Hair, & Ragland, 2013). The use of a more 'interdisciplinary approach' whereby 'responsibility' is focused upon and integrated across all traditional business management subject areas, such as marketing, economics, finance etc., has been proposed by Matten and Moon (2004), although recent research has highlighted the difficulties of implementing such an approach (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011). Other critics have also argued that overloading RME across a business school's curriculum can dilute its effectiveness with students (Sharland, Fiedler, & Menon, 2013) and at times even become a barrier for the teaching of other topics (Exter, Grayson, & Maher, 2013). Extant research shows that while there is an increasing focus, in general across business schools, in the adoption of RME, the majority of this is through elective modules/subjects, detached from the core curriculum of business schools, thereby reflective of a "bolt on" approach towards RME (Louw, 2015).

From the perspective of UK Business Schools, we argue that RME should also focus on the research and enterprise activities, if a holistic student experience of business responsibility is to be delivered. In relation to research, the objective would be to change the focus of business school research towards RME, for example, research centres can support standalone and/or collaborative work around areas of sustainability, ethics and business responsibility. Potentially such an approach will not only help to further develop RME within the higher education environment but could also contribute towards enabling research-informed teaching and improving the overall research profile of business schools. The RME topic also lends itself quite well towards the creation of 'impactful' research (Smith, Ward, & House, 2011; Waddock, 2006). Enterprise on the other hand would require business schools to engage and promote additional activities, consisting of for example, staff and/or student led sustainability societies, volunteering programmes (McCallum, Schmid, & Price, 2013) and making stronger connections to areas related to the 'green agenda' of UK Universities, such as recycling, waste management schemes and sustainable procurement (Plewa, Conduit, Quester, & Johnson, 2014).

In this paper we focus on addressing two main research objectives: First, to identify faculty and student views of RME, specifically to identify factors which could impact upon its adoption within a business school and second, to examine the deficiencies of the present curriculum within the selected business school in relation to RME. We argue that in order for a business school to implement significant change *in* RME, not only do they have to manage key impact factors, but make systemic curriculum revisions supported by fundamental changes in their own ethos of *what* responsibility means to the business school itself.

## 2. Responsible management education and business schools

### 2.1. Responsible management education

Defining Responsible Management Education (RME), requires one to recognise that not only does it associate itself with other related concepts such as Education for Sustainable Development and Business Ethics Education (Matten & Moon, 2008), but its manifestation within business schools' curriculum is proliferated with many different programme labels. This was evidenced by Matten and Moon (2004) who found over 40 different programme labels for RME across business schools in Europe with over 25% of these programmes using 'sustainable development' and 16% selecting 'corporate social responsibility'. It seems therefore that in 'adopting' RME, business schools' tend to integrate synonymous and associated concepts, such as CSR, Business Ethics and Sustainability amongst others (Acevedo & Johnson, 2013).

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is defined by UNESCO[1] as "a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities" (UNESCO., 2009, p. 17), and by Jones, Trier, and Richards (2008; 342) as "an approach to learning that enhances the capacity to cope with the uncertainties inherent in a complex world that is facing unprecedented challenges". Collectively ESD emphasises the importance of refocusing business education, upon the wider sustainable development challenges evident at a global level.

Business Ethics Education, in contrast as defined by Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, and Carrier (2007; 348) comprises of "the business corporation's ethical role in society and its role in minimizing the destruction to, and maximizing the preservation of, resources for future generations". Thus, one can argue that to a greater extent Business Ethics perpetuates the need for business schools to educate and develop capabilities of students so that they can make ethical, sustainable and responsible decisions in the corporate world, thereby contributing to a sustainable future.

While acknowledging that there are fundamental assimilative characteristics across the above-mentioned definitions, we define RME as "any teaching, research or enterprise activities in the areas of ethics, sustainability and responsible corporate practices, which business schools engage with in order to develop a more responsible strategic focus". Our definition is supported by Haski-Leventhal, Pournader, and McKinnon (2015) and Rasche and Gilbert (2015), who collectively argue for the

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[1] The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.