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## **The PRME Curriculum Tree:**

A Framework for Responsible Management Education in Undergraduate Business Degree Programmes

### **Abstract**

This chapter introduces the PRME Curriculum Tree, a conceptual framework which seeks to provide a blueprint for business school curriculum design that integrates learning, teaching and assessment strategies that engage students of all disciplines with the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME), the UN Global Compact and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The framework is built on the premise that sustainability and responsible management topics can function to build a bridge across disciplines and integrate the business curriculum as a whole by promoting holistic understanding and systemic thinking. The key to the framework is that it seeks to integrate and complement existing curricular structures that have evolved within business schools over many years. As such business school academics can use the framework to inform the development of curriculum and approaches to teaching that promote responsible management education (RME).

### **Background**

Events such as the credit and banking crisis alongside global corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability concerns have led to questions as to the legitimacy and purpose of business in society. Many are now calling for a new approach, one that eschews the profit-oriented exploitative business practices of the past for a new model of 'responsible management'. Indeed, many business organisations are already moving beyond social and environmental compliance and fundamentally rethinking the role their business should play in light of broader societal changes (Barkemeyer, Holt, Preuss & Tsang, 2011). In addition to this, business leaders themselves are increasingly aware of the need to embrace the principles of sustainable development (Elkington, 1997; Porter & Kramer, 2006). There is then a recognition that far from a niche area of business, sustainability and sustainable development are considered global megatrends in the 21st Century, which results in profound implications for corporate interactions with society and the natural environment (KPMG, 2012). Despite the evolution of knowledge on responsible management, there is still the important question of how sustainable development is operationalised in a business context.

The acknowledgement, and increased awareness of sustainability and sustainable development from corporations and business support organisations, raises the question as to whether current management education is adequate to equip and develop future leaders with the requisite skills to meet these new demands (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014; Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011; Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2011; Weybrecht, 2010). Many business leaders are suggesting that business graduates lack knowledge in the area of sustainable business and responsible management (Jabbour, Sarkis, & Govindan, 2013; Peoples, 2009).

At the same time, evidence suggests that there is growing demand from business students for a more globalised curriculum and focus on CSR initiatives within management programmes (Haski-Leventhal, 2012; Leveson & Joiner, 2014). Whilst there are a growing number of publications discussing these issues (Cornuel & Hommel, 2012; Morsing & Rovira, 2011; Muff et al., 2013), the core of academic business teaching activities remains largely immune to the challenge of addressing broad societal concerns (Hommel, Painter-Morland, & Wang, 2013).

Some business schools are undertaking programmes to realign their curriculum, research and engagement activities around the core concept of responsible management and thus increase the range and depth of such topics. However, despite increasing interest in responsible management education (RME) driven by initiatives such as the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the United Nations (UN) Global Compact, deep and holistic integration of such issues into undergraduate business school curricula remains rare. Whilst there is emerging research and increased information as to how business schools are seeking to integrate, combine and synthesize certain elements of responsible management into business education (Kelley & Nahser, 2014), there is little research that seeks to develop more holistic, programme level, whole curriculum based approaches (Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, & Carrier, 2007; Doh & Tashman, 2012).

The PRME Curriculum Tree is a conceptual framework which sets out a blueprint for business school curriculum design that integrates learning, teaching and assessment strategies that engage students of all disciplines with the PRME and responsible management agenda. In this respect it speaks to PRME principle 1 'Purpose' by developing the capabilities of students to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy. The framework is built on the premise that sustainability and responsible management topics can build bridges across disciplines and integrate the business curriculum as a whole by promoting holistic understanding and systemic thinking addressing the criticism that most business school's curricula only address responsible management issues in isolation (Smith & Alexander, 2013). The framework seeks to operationalise and embed the six principles of PRME (purpose, values, methods, research, partnerships, and dialogue) and ten UN Global Compact principles articulated under the themes of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption into undergraduate business curricula. The key to the framework is that it seeks to integrate and complement existing curricular structures that have evolved within business schools over many years. The analogy of the tree is useful and it provides multiple metaphors for explaining the relationships between business and society, whilst allowing for the articulation of core concepts and addressing discipline specific issues.

### **The PRME Curriculum Tree**

The framework is broken down into four main levels which represent elements of the tree: roots, trunk, branches and leaves. The **roots** of the PRME Curriculum Tree represent grounding, impact, history and connectivity. The role of business in society can be articulated and critiqued along with the dominant shareholder value perspective held by many students arriving in a business school. They are exposed to a range of different perspectives and encouraged to think critically about the relationship between business and society. The prevailing context is *why* business exists, as well as *why* the challenges that society faces are relevant to business and the role of business in creating, but also solving these problems. Here PRME Principle 2 'Values' is demonstrated by incorporating values of global social responsibility into curricula.

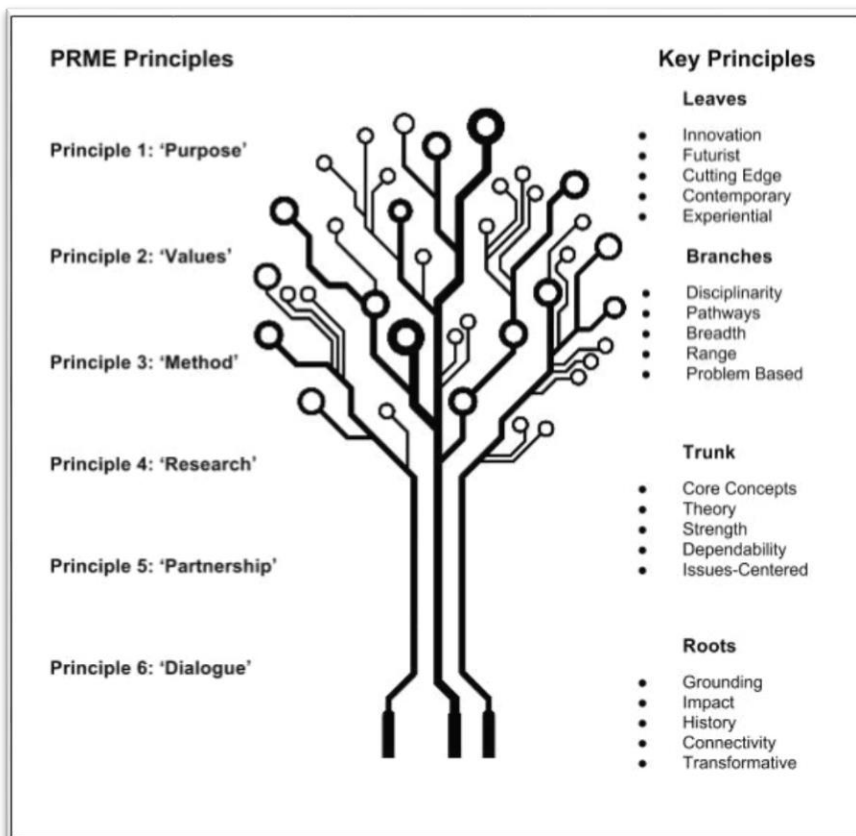
The **trunk** represents core concepts, theory, strength and dependability. Here the principles and norms of business can be examined and critiqued. The focus is on *what* business does, how it operates and the functional hard and soft skills that managers and leaders require day to day. Students are challenged to articulate *what* responsible management looks like across a range of

business and management job roles, functions and departments. For example, *what* is the role of the Human Resources (HR) Department of an organisation from a responsible management perspective? Here principles' 5 'Partnership' and 6 'Dialogue' of PRME can be demonstrated through schools' interaction with managers of businesses and other stakeholders to articulate real world challenges to students.

The **branches** of the tree allow for range and breadth, the exploration of multiple pathways, and discipline specific issues. Here the focus is on *how* do, and *how* should, business disciplines and functions deal with responsible management. For example, how are material sustainability risks identified, examined and addressed in business strategy or operations. Students are challenged to design strategic responses to a range of sustainability and societal challenges. Here PRME principle 4 'Research' can be used to convey contemporary approaches to meeting sustainability challenges.

Finally, the **leaves** of the tree represent innovation, new opportunities and future developments. Here the focus is on *where* are the opportunities for business and *where* should business be positioned in relation to society in the future. Students can be challenged to imagine new business models for sustainable development, responsible innovation pathways and social business that integrate with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Figure 1 depicts the PRME Curriculum Tree visually and the next sections describe the approach of each stage in more detail.

**Figure 1: The PRME Curriculum Tree**



## Roots of the Curriculum Tree

The roots of the PRME curriculum would be taught during the first year of undergraduate studies. Many schools use this first year to introduce students to the key elements of business and communicate core competencies. However, introduction to management courses can prove problematic for business school faculty, students and curriculum designers eager to include as broad a range of topics as possible. In many business programmes, Principles of Management or Introduction to Organisational Behaviour and Business Strategy courses are the only management classes that students complete in their undergraduate programme (Christopher, Laasch, & Roberts, 2016).

Introductory courses, however, are an essential component of RME, as in many cases they represent the first impression for students as to what business and management is and should be. They have been described as the foundation stones upon which undergraduate business education is built (Thompson, Purdy, & Fandt, 1997). In this respect, they play a central role in creating a vision as to what 'good' managerial behaviour is. Furthermore, research suggests that an introductory Business and Society course can significantly accelerate and improve the rate of moral development of some students (Boyd, 1981; Glenn, 1992). Despite this, not all business schools include such a course in the first year of their business and management programmes (Hope, 2016).

With this in mind there are a number of key theoretical perspectives that introductory courses need to communicate to aspiring business and management practitioners. Firstly, management education needs to go beyond communicating the functional components of business and management and encourage students to embed reflections on sustainability, responsibility and ethics (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). The focus should be on why business exists; what is its role in society; how does it interface with the wider world; and what are the main environmental issues that business leaders face. Here students can be introduced to the 10 principles of the UN Global Compact which are grouped under the themes of 'human rights', 'labour', 'environment' and 'anti-corruption'.

Courses can be designed to help students open up their understanding of the relationships between business and society through a focus on responsibility. Again, many business and management programmes introduce the concept of ethical behaviour through business ethics courses much later in the curriculum (Hope, 2016). Encouraging students to explore such questions and exposing them to a broad range of views and opinions as to the purpose and nature of business would help to break from the dominant paradigm that many business students believe holds true, i.e., that business is all about profit maximisation. Business and management practice does have underlying principles that tend to stay relatively constant and thus serve as foundations, or roots, to academic theory.

The roots of responsible management can be articulated in a number of ways and at different levels. Firstly, the main issues encountered by business from ethical, responsibility and sustainability perspectives are debated. Next, students can be introduced to the specific drivers of a company's responsible management activities both internal and external and how these change overtime and relate to strategy. Finally, the inhibitors, criticisms and challenges encountered in

responsible management can be introduced and provide context before students explore how these impact on specific business areas and functions.

### **Trunk of the Curriculum Tree**

The trunk of the PRME curriculum tree should be taught primarily in the second year of study. Students should now have the sufficient grounding as to the nature of business, but also the necessary critical view of business and management that enables them to bring a more open and free thinking perspective to their studies. This allows students to build upon the underlying principles of business articulated during the 'roots' stage of the curriculum tree whilst at the same time empowering them to debate, challenge and, where needed, refine and revise them. The focus at this stage is on the core functions and competencies of those functional business areas.

The core functional areas are those that are crucial to every business regardless of its size or speciality. These areas include human resources, finance and accounting, marketing, customer service, distribution and purchasing, administration and IT support. The focus here is on what business does across the range of business and management functions and what this means for responsible business and management. Whilst CSR practices are taught in many, if not most, business and management programmes and embraced by many corporations, the specific contributions of professions such as HR, operations management, accounting, and strategic management professionals have often been overlooked (Gond, Igalens, Swaen, & Akremi, 2011).

It is also at this stage that the roles of these core competencies are articulated and debated in relation to the principles of responsible management. Core competencies are the main strengths or the strategic advantages that business upholds. They represent the combination of pooled knowledge and technical capabilities that enable a business to become competitive (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Traditional core competences are communicated to students but also debated and critiqued in recognition of the view that responsible management necessitates competences distinct from those traditionally required (Laasch & Moosmayer, 2015). Whilst some core competences may be specific to a given discipline or functional area, it is likely that there are many which are generic and universally relevant.

Often, business schools create specific courses under titles such as 'sustainability', 'business ethics' or 'corporate social responsibility', however, there is an opportunity here to embed the key principles of ethics, responsibility and sustainability into existing courses whilst reminding students of the ways in which different functional areas of business interact. Once students have a deep theoretical and practical understanding of the functional areas of business organisations, there is a chance to specialise and develop a fuller understanding of what responsible management means from a disciplinary perspective. This understanding is facilitated in the next stage of the framework.

### **Branches of the Curriculum Tree**

Building on the trunk of the learning tree, the *branches* allow for range and breadth, the exploration of multiple pathways, and discipline specific issues. They also allow for a more explicit and hands-on approach to learning. This process would begin during the second year of study and be consolidated in the final year. Here the focus may be on how can and how should business disciplines and functions deal with responsible management issues. For example, how

are material sustainability risks identified, examined and addressed in Business Strategy or Operations? How do responsible HR issues differ from traditional perspectives of HR? How can marketing departments effectively communicate social and environmental business performance and develop responsible marketing strategies? During this stage in the PRME curriculum, students are challenged to design strategic responses to a range of sustainability and societal challenges and adopt a more hands-on, experiential approach to learning.

One example may be the move towards sustainable supply chain management as over the last few decades there has been growing pressure on business to give further attention to environmental and resource implications of the products and services that they offer (Kleindorfer, Singhal, & Wassenhove, 2005). This has led to a corresponding need for the revision of the operations management curriculum in business schools and professional training courses to include sustainable operations management and business development among other responsible management topics (Gunasekaran & Ngai, 2012). Similarly, strategic management also has a part to play in the responsible management of organisations. Many companies lack a strategic approach to CSR and tend to follow unsystematic procedures resulting in reduced operational efficiency (Hahn, 2012). Sustainable and responsible strategic management involves a set of processes and strategies such as strategy formation, strategic analysis and strategy implementation that are economically, socially and environmentally focussed (W. E. Stead & Stead, 2013).

At this stage, there is a danger that students will form a silo mentality as many discipline-specific courses and the teaching materials that accompany them tend to focus on discipline specific issues (Dyllick, 2015). Furthermore, many ethics, responsibility and sustainability textbooks tend to take a rather generic focus. Some more recent business and management textbooks, however, are attempting to articulate what responsible business and management look like from a functional perspective. For example Laasch & Conway's *Principles of Responsible Management* (2014) offers a view of responsible management from a practice and functional area perspective whilst integrating the different disciplines into a holistic fashion. The branches of the curriculum tree allow students to specialise in a specific area and gain a more in-depth understanding of ethics, responsibility and sustainability within and across business functions. The next step is to allow students to explore contemporary issues and co-envision the future of business from a responsibility perspective.

### **Leaves of the Curriculum Tree**

The way in which we do business is changing rapidly and this represents a challenge for future managers and leaders in understanding the behaviours and competences required to create a fairer society and more responsible business practices. Here, it is important to introduce students to contemporary issues in business and management, to current innovations, new opportunities and future prospects. The focus is on *where* are the opportunities for business and *where* will business sit in relation to society in the future. With the solid foundations in place, business schools and curriculum designers can explore new topics and introduce students to innovations in responsible business. This is important as it has been recognised that the fields of corporate responsibility, CSR and sustainability are not static, but rather evolving constantly driven mainly by businesses seeking to meet the changing needs of the market and society (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). Students can be challenged to imagine new business models for sustainable development, responsible innovation pathways and social business.

Such innovations may include the shift away from a 'linear' production and consumption model towards a 'circular' one based on the re-use, sharing of, and re-manufacture of resources, and waste reduction or energy recovery techniques. Another area is the development of responsible business models, ones that turn to a service-based model of provision which enables customers to cut the cost of ownership that can arise from depreciation, operation and maintenance of capital assets. For example, new consumer models such as car clubs or peer-to-peer leasing enable customers to extract value from under-utilised assets (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013). These topics could be offered in elective courses that students could choose based on their interest or field of specialisation. The leaves analogy serves to demonstrate the unpredictability of business and management practice and enable curriculum designers to introduce students to novel perspectives leading to an understanding of the need to cope with uncertainty and change.

### **The role of pedagogy**

When considering any curriculum development activities such as the PRME Curriculum Tree, thought must be given to the role of pedagogy in delivering learning and teaching content. Here PRME principle 3 'Method' is considered through the creation of educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences for responsible leadership. It has been suggested that there are three critical levers for change in RME: transformative learning, issue-centred or problem-based learning, and reflective practice and experiential learning (Baden & Parkes, 2013; Muff, 2013).

Transformative learning seeks to expand limited or problematic terms of reference into perspectives that provoke exploration into more future-orientated, holistic and responsible solutions (Erhard, Jensen, & Granger, 2013). For example, many undergraduate students begin introductory management courses with some experiential understanding of management as a practice (Wright & Gilmore, 2012). They may have been previously involved in paid employment or will have interacted with organisations in some way as consumers, students or participants in a group of some kind. Due to these experiences many students approach management as a common-sense practice, something that people just 'do' (Whetten, 2007). In truth, management is a practice informed by theory and as Wright and Gilmore (2012) suggest, the realisation of this can prove transformative for first-year undergraduate students.

Issue-centred or problem-based learning requires a transdisciplinary, holistic, systems-orientated approach to problems and is orientated around issues rather than subjects. Here is the interconnectivity of social, economic and environmental problems that is stressed in order to develop students' abilities to lead on complex decision-making processes typical of ethical, responsible and sustainability issues (Muff, 2013). Such problems and issues are clearly articulated and addressed by the UN Global Compact principles and the SDG's giving further weight to the argument for their integration into business and management education. Reflective practice and experiential learning provides students with practical, experiential learning accompanied by guided reflection which enables them to learn from their experiences (Dyllick, 2015). As such is it important to recognise the role of different pedagogical approaches in enabling students to gain a balanced understanding of social, economic and environmental challenges.



Alongside these principles, the way in which students' learning and understanding are assessed is an important consideration. An institution's assessment practices are a reflection of its values and its assessment practices should further the aims and purposes of the higher education institution (Astin, 2012). It follows that a business school committed to RME should practice responsible assessment and evaluation practices and that responsible management knowledge, skills and competencies are assessed alongside more traditional business learning and built into formal learning outcomes. Responsible management can be treated like every other learning outcome in that it is the responsibility of the business school itself to ensure as many students as possible meet the outcome (Vendemia & Kos, 2013). Building on the notion of transformative, issue-centred, and reflective practice-focussed learning, where possible assessments should provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in a practical, holistic and innovative manner, such as producing strategy or consultancy reports focussing on real-world problems.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

Many opportunities and challenges are encountered when attempting to redesign undergraduate business curricula to incorporate principles of RME. The PRME Curriculum Tree has been conceived as a vehicle through which to exploit these opportunities whilst overcoming the challenges. One opportunity is that the incorporation of RME closes the gap that some business academics and practitioners have suggested exists in what business students are taught and what they experience when they begin work in industry (David, David & David, 2011). Alongside this is the criticism that traditional business and management curricula revolves almost exclusively around established principles (Binks, 2016).

The PRME Curriculum Tree's roots, trunk, branches and leaves framework ensures that core principles are taught to establish the theoretical grounding necessary for academic study whilst allowing for specialisation, flexibility and innovation in the latter stages. Opportunities also arise from the introduction of pedagogical techniques that are more disposed to the teaching of ethics, responsibility and sustainability topics. The use of transformative, issue- or problem-based learning can bring opportunities for students to work with social entrepreneurs and responsible business professionals through experiential learning programmes, which can provide students with inspirational role models and positive social learning opportunities (Baden & Parkes, 2013). From a societal perspective, business and management schools can play a transformational role by educating (present and future) decision makers, leaders and entrepreneurs in ethics, responsibility and sustainability (R. Lozano, Lozano, Mulder, Huisingsh, & Waas, 2013).

The challenges that arise when seeking to re-orientate business and management education around the principles of responsible management are both practical and ideological. Space in the business school curriculum is already limited and creating more space for responsible management topics and subjects can be problematic (Reynolds & Dang, 2015). The PRME Curriculum Tree does not necessarily require the inclusion of new topics or subjects into business school programmes, rather it is attempting to provide a framework through which to incorporate key principles into existing courses. In this respect, it is more of a philosophy than an agenda. Many business schools also face the challenge of not having sufficient expertise in the areas of ethics, responsibly and sustainability issues. It is here that the PRME Curriculum Tree can assist in providing a framework that faculty can use as a starting point through which to begin embedding responsible management within their programmes and courses.

## Conclusions

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a need to re-orientate mainstream business education to incorporate the principles of responsible management and to better reflect societal trends as well as changing industry priorities. Whilst many business schools are seeking to embed ethics, responsibility and sustainability into their undergraduate curricula, many still have a long way to go. One of the barriers to the integration of the PRME principles across management programmes is the lack of a common framework through which to do so. The result is that each institution adopts its own approach to the problem which takes time and resources that are often scarce. It also makes it difficult for the academy at large to ensure that best practices are followed and replicated across the sector. The PRME Curriculum Tree has been designed to articulate an integrated framework for developing RME in business schools and other higher education institutions. It is not meant to be prescriptive in terms of what should or should not be included in business and management curricula, but rather to provide some core principles that may be considered at different stages of study. In doing so, it can be used as a vehicle through which to encourage debate among management educators and curriculum designers. It can also provide a framework for helping faculty across disciplines coordinate, strategize and plan for effective integration of RME into the business and management curricula.

Whilst primarily focussed here on undergraduate education, the overall philosophy of the Curriculum Tree is also highly relevant and applicable for other segments of management education such as postgraduate, executive development and doctoral studies. In addition to this the Tree metaphor provides also a useful platform and tool for enhancing external dialogue and partnerships between schools and businesses and other stakeholders, on the new role of business in society, sustainable development, responsible management and the advancement of the SDGs.

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## **Biography**

Dr Alex Hope is Senior Lecturer in Business Ethics at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. He undertakes teaching, research and consultancy on responsible business, sustainable development, CSR, energy policy and business ethics. He is co-convenor of the Responsible Business research group and leads the school's Responsible Management Education project.