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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

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PRME Impact for Real: Student Views on Sustainable and Responsible Education – Three Business Schools; Past, Present and Future

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The Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) agenda from the United Nations (UN) and related sustainability initiatives, require universities to integrate sustainable and responsible management into their programmes and institutions. Consequently, PRME informs the curriculum (Morsing 2021; Eustachio et al., 2024), organisational structures (Russo, Wheeldon, Shrestha, and Saratchandra, 2023), and reporting mechanisms (Abdelgaffar, 2021; Hauser, 2019). Although these initiatives are important, the direct perspectives of students – their ideas that construct meaning for students as potential leaders and managers - tend to be overlooked (Høgda, et al., 2021). Indeed, we have a limited understanding of how the agenda is valued by past, present and future students. This submission elevates the focus on students as critical stakeholders, integral to the PRME agenda and future custodians of organisations. A detailed focus on student's experiences and ideas will aid further understanding of the ideas that transpire from responsible management education.

Universities are under significant pressure to act meaningfully and lead the change they wish to see in society. PRME serves as a framework to help universities achieve sustainability goals. However, PRME has faced criticism for being overly challenging and complicated to implement (Boodhoo & Parumasur, 2017; Duffy, 2024). Further, like most accreditations, PRME is aimed at institutions as opposed to students, and even university reporting of student experience is filtered through their institutions (Eustachio, et al, 2024).

Marcon and Sehnem (2024) advocate for students being taught sustainability and responsibility in education, however, student voice has not always been sought (Abdelgaffar, 2021). Consequently, we know little about their nuanced perceptions of sustainable education; their need for sustainable education and critically how they construct ideas of themselves as future leaders and managers (Høgda, et al., 2021). Granular understanding of student's ideas has the capacity to help universities collaborate with students to refine curriculums, structures and reporting to bolster responsible management education.

Where universities profess to be applied with a focus on the future impact of alumni as leaders and managers, a lack of focus on students as critical stakeholders is problematic. In essence, PRME is only a process without the meaningful support of stakeholders that diffuse ideas into the fabric of organisations.

Cripps and Smith (2024) advocate for the benefits of a sustainability mindset and the role that business schools have in achieving this outcome. The PRME initiative (2021) calls for greater impetuosity in instilling the values of ethics and social responsibility and contributing to the development of future ethical leaders. However, DuPuis & Ball (2013) argue that the term 'sustainability' entered public discourse, it continues to escape meaning and definition.

This can be a source of frustration for students and learners who are used to being taught facts and absolute truths (Alexander, Winters, Loughlin, & Grossnickle, 2012). Understanding sustainability as a construct is complex. Subject to ongoing debate; it can *"be approached from different levels of reference, in time, space and from environmental, social and economic perspectives"* (Zaman and Goschin, 2010, p6).

In this vein, ideas matter reflecting the values, morals and principles that shape thinking and meaning (Weir 1992). The importance of ideas is explained by Mertha (2011, p.24):

Asserting that ideas do not matter would mean that shifting ideals about science, religion, democracy, slavery, colonization, gender, race, and homosexuality to pick just a few salient examples [...] have not appreciably affected how people act.

Schmidt (2008, 2010) argues that ideas take centre stage in shaping institutional contexts and practice. By tracing the evolution of ideas across time, ideas which may not be perceptible or captured can be illuminated (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Zaman and Gosschin's (2010) argument is therefore central to the focus of this research to reveal the perspective of present and future students, accounting for the importance of meaning in time, as well as from environmental, social and economic dimensions.

By exploring students' values relative to social, economic and environmental sustainability at a granular level, our work aims to facilitate understanding of personal ideas simultaneously helping students construct and notice their personal orientation as well as providing nuanced insight to institutions about the efficacy of the PRME agenda.

We propose listening to student voices for real, capturing detailed accounts of student's experience(s) of responsible management education in business schools as well as their ideas about the perceived and real impact on their careers.

Proposed methodological approach

Choosing appropriate research approaches is challenging, there is no one perfect way. In light of illuminating the sustainability mindsets of students as highlighted by Cripps and Smith (2024) we turn to methods founded on the construction of ideas that framing attitudes and values towards sustainability that ultimately orient students' organisational and professional practice (Avelar, Michell, & Sandes-Guimarães, 2025). They are a formal feature of annual reviews, supporting action learning, shaping or refining personal and organisational practice in solving problems responding to opportunities and aligning with organisational goals. By articulating ideas through reflection, individuals can understand the way they seek to contribute to practice. In sharing reflections, institutional actors can surface the values to explore and understand how agendas land, collaborating to energise, develop and refine creative thinking and emancipatory practice.

Developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a vehicle for organisational change, Appreciative Inquiry (API) explicitly adopts a strengths-based approach. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of social constructionism it seeks to catalyse action and change through reflective practice that challenge self-limiting beliefs (Duncan and Ridly-Duff 2014). API draws on participants experiences but also their capacity to consider the *'best of what if'*

essentially creating affirmation and purpose around change (Arnold et al., 2022). For responsible management education, this is congruent with learner centred pedagogies (Sotiriou, 2021) and agency and translates agendas into meaningful experiences for student's past, present and future.

From this understanding of ideas, we propose to undertake an exploration to reveal students and alumni articulation of their ideas of environmental, social and economic sustainability. The study takes participants from three HE institutions across the UK, express a commitment to support the applied and practical significance of learning. Of the three, two are PRME Signatories, the third is working towards this and runs several programmes focusing on sustainable, ethical and responsible business management. This difference in institutional status was seen as a useful way to gain insight into the significance of PRME as well as other responsible management agendas that orient students' ideas. Though each of the business schools from which participants are drawn share a similar organisational ethos that foregrounds practical learning, the communities they service differ significantly. The first is located in a post-industrial city where employment now coalesces around the private sector and particularly in financial services, the second is configured around industry, the service sector and SMEs. Finally, the third has a strong maritime heritage with a thriving innovation ecosystem. The span of institutions furthers how differing locations or using Zaman and Goschin (2010) focus on space to explore the implications of wider institutional ideas.

We argue that PRME alone cannot shape student attitudes but that social construction orients students towards economic, social, and environmental sustainability. In this research, the process of reflective discussion guided by API can elevate this orientation. An affirmative topic is key in framing the responses to reflective questions. Another part of the rationale to base research questions on affirmative methodologies is the impact of dealing with challenging topics. Some scholars argue that it is critical in helping people review approaches and priorities in work life.

Questions focus attention on specific directions enabling actors to see things from alternative perspectives (Smith, 2022). By reflecting and articulating events that inspire or overcoming challenges, deeply held values can be surfaced. API helps to build resilience, trust, new ideas, and creativity (Boyzatis & Jack, 2018). Such traits and values are seen to be critical in responding to wicked problems associated with ethical and responsible management and leadership.

Through self-directed reflection, we plan to capture and thematically analyse ideas that past, present and students articulate. Reflective guides (Kadi-Hanifi, et al, 2014) will be issued to assist students in following what is described in API as the 4D cycle. First, this involves 'Discovery' recording the problems, issues and opportunities related to sustainability. Second reflection around 'Discovery' generates insight into the best of their practice, personally or via organisations that are positive exemplars of sustainability. Thirdly, participants are encouraged to 'Dream', articulating ideal futures for themselves and where relevant to students, the organisations they are part of. The fourth D, 'Design', considers what and how individuals can deliver sustainability; ideal futures and how they can be delivered. The Fifth D, 'Destiny' engages thinking about state strong ideas can be enhanced and their wider benefit and capacity for change.

In sum, the method designed on the principles of API create impact from the premise that 'words create worlds' (Boyzatis and Jack, 2018). In essence, learning about learning vis-a-vis environmental, social and economic sustainability can promote collaboration across institutions and helps students realise how their knowledge of the area can enable them to respond to complex problems (Arnold et al., 2022).

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