

Responsible management education after the pandemic: on systemic crises, introspection, and not going back to normal

As already indicated in a previous special issue on responsible (management) education in the *Journal of Global Responsibility*, our world has changed and “how to make profit” can no longer be the (only) key focus area of companies and organizations or of business schools and management education (Lodorfos *et al.*, 2020). The state of our planet and society requires more attention for business ethics and social responsibility as well as a shift in the worldview of current and future leaders (Giacalone and Thompson, 2017). Obviously, management education has a key role to play in the latter and realizing such a shift requires us to reflect on the roles and responsibilities of management education and act on those reflections.

This is not the first time such reflections and actions are called for. Around the turn of the century, high-profile corporate scandals, the subsequent financial system’s meltdown and the economic crises that followed from that, together with ever-increasing awareness of the devastating impacts of business on our planet and society, have already led to the critical scrutiny of the role of business schools in those crises (Burchell *et al.*, 2014; Kurucz *et al.*, 2008). Ever since business schools have tried to integrate the topics of business ethics and sustainability into management education curricula, thereby broadly acknowledging the need for companies to recognize and operate within planetary boundaries and support (the safeguarding of) societal foundations (Raworth, 2017; Rockström *et al.*, 2009). Unfortunately, fully aligning management education with the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) and Agenda 2030, and its operationalization in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015), has so far proved a slow and problematic process. To put it bluntly, thus far “the initiatives taken within the management education community to contribute to this agenda [...] actually represent rather basic ways of integrating sustainability into management education that neither acknowledge the complexities of sustainable development nor recognize the full learning potential offered by the SDGs” (Moratis and Melissen, 2021, p. 1). For instance, management education curricula still pay surprisingly little attention to the trade-offs, tensions and paradoxes incorporated in the SDGs and the contradictory goals represented by and interdependencies between the ecological, social and economic realms that together shape the concept of sustainable development (Hickel, 2014; Hahn *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, attention for two other key perspectives to bolster responsible management education (RME) – i.e. the fact that realizing the SDGs implies engaging in systemic activism and that embracing the SDGs comes with emotional affect (Moratis and Melissen, 2021) – is scarce at best.

Meanwhile, at the time this special issue is published, we find ourselves in the second year of yet another acute crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic. As indicated by Tufano (2020), this pandemic represents just one element of the set of systemic challenges that we currently confront; severe economic weakness, heightened inequality, racial injustice and a climate emergency representing some of the other elements. Even though the details of the specific causes of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus among the human population need further investigation, it is becoming increasingly clear that all of these challenges, like the SDGs, are very much



related. In fact, they are systemic in the sense that they represent symptoms of a set of deeper, more fundamental problems.

According to Tufano, these systemic challenges create a level of upheaval similar to Second World War. We should therefore learn lessons from how business schools responded to that situation in relation to figuring out how to respond to today's predicaments. It is important to note here though that there is also a crucial difference between the two situations. Whereas it would be unreasonable to blame business schools for (causing) Second World War, it would be equally unreasonable to see business schools and management education as innocent bystanders of the current set of systemic challenges. Despite various phases of introspection over the years and accompanying pledges to adopt the sustainability agenda, management education today still plays a crucial role in promoting a culture of consumption and the widespread instrumental use of the concept of sustainable development and the SDGs by (mostly) interpreting them as a new source of corporate profit, market opportunities, innovation and economic prosperity (Crane *et al.*, 2014; Weybrecht, 2017, 2020) rather than as the impetus for the systemic change that is needed to resolve these challenges, including a thorough reflection on the ultimate function of business schools in our society (Kurucz *et al.*, 2008; Moratis and Melissen, 2021).

Therefore, we fully agree with Tufano that the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, as well as its interdependencies with the wider set of systemic challenges we currently confront, present an opportunity to push forward longstanding institutional change, also, and maybe especially, in the management education community. Let us not waste the current crisis by a focus on trying to go "back to normal," but use it as a force for much-needed change.

Simultaneously, this time the war *is* ours. This time, changing course cannot go without profound introspection and rigorous action based on the outcomes of that introspection. This introspection cannot but include a profound reflection on the ideological underpinnings of our socioeconomic system, the need to pursue policies for economic restructuring based on sustainability principles. By implication, such reflections cannot but include reflections on the roles and responsibilities of business schools and management education in reproducing these underpinnings and changing these policies to truly deliver on their promise to provide RME.

In this special issue, various authors therefore explore developments in the field of RME against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic – including its relation to other elements in the set of systemic challenges we confront – through a variety of lenses. The collection of papers presented here, which includes original empirical articles, essays and a teaching brief, explores challenging and sometimes inconvenient questions as well as possible answers and opportunities to further the RME agenda, and accelerate its implementation, to *not* waste this acute crisis.

Specific topics addressed in the special issue

Francesca Pucciarelli and Andreas Kaplan explore the opportunities of a transition to a hybrid-teaching model and how such educational reconfiguration might lead to more sustainable management education, also after the current pandemic. Through reviewing state-of-the-art literature and secondary data, combined with in-depth interviews with stakeholders within the context of a specific case study, this paper maps the opportunities and challenges of the transition to a hybrid approach and its implications for the development of RME, for instance, by using this transition as a catalyst for upskilling disadvantaged adults who have lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, the

authors reflect on the fact that the transition to hybrid teaching in the management education community shows that many business schools are, in fact, able to embrace radical change, during and spurred on by an emergency situation. As such, this transition could point to important lessons in relation to how to use the current set of systemic challenges confronting society as a wake-up call for business schools to rethink their role in society, what and how they teach and how they contribute to the advancement of responsible management beyond the borders of education.

In their teaching brief, Sherwin Husseinifard, Lennart Corleissen and Lucas Meijs indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced (their) students' motivation to fight societal problems and take on related challenges, also as part of their formal education. Their paper highlights the I DO project as an example of how developing service-learning projects and embedding them in the curriculum could strengthen the curriculum by adding more practical experiences while simultaneously assisting noneducational organizations through volunteering. As such, this paper highlights that students need not be sent abroad to support international development, that this support can be extremely valuable to development organizations that play a pivotal role in sustainability initiatives across the globe, and that a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can actually serve as increased motivation for such projects, rather than present an obstacle. Finally, the authors identify a number of lessons learned as reference points for further development of the I DO project and similar projects at other business schools, also after the pandemic.

Lovaso Ramboarisata's essay on post-pandemic management education further explores the role of management education after the pandemic and makes the point that the COVID-19 crisis should motivate business schools and scholars to reflect on their interpretation of RME. In fact, she argues that the current crisis should not just lead to technopedagogical and strategic changes and development, but should also result in a narrative change. Through reflecting on the organization climate and professorial roles, employer responsibility and the entrepreneurial narrative, this essay concludes that the ongoing pandemic should create momentum for the management education community to extend and enrich its RME activities by favoring critical studies, encouraging imagination and embarking on systemic activism (cf. [Moratis and Melissen, 2020](#)). As such, it presents an urgent call to use the current crisis to halt neoliberalization of universities and corporatization of business schools and not wait to do so until after the pandemic.

Uma Gupta and Sam Cooper start their paper by confirming that COVID-19 has changed everything, especially in relation to topics at the core of RME and the SDGs, including our views on these topics. They conclude that business educators therefore face several social, economic, moral and technological questions with respect to a revised and expanded role of business schools in educating post-COVID leaders who are committed to sustainability and focused on societal impact. They also conclude that RME can be a powerful pathway to provide answers to those questions, but also one that is not for the faint-hearted. To assist in implementing and improving RME-driven management education, Gupta and Cooper therefore present an integrated framework of the United Nations (UN) and the American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business (AACSB) principles of RME, as well as a categorization of the 17 SDGs into four core purposes and an articulation of the benefits of clear and consistent messaging that aligns with the vision and mission of the institution.

Silvia Bruzzone's paper moves beyond existing guidelines and frameworks by considering how posthumanism could offer a better way to reframe RME. In doing so, she reflects on how discussions on responsibility, sustainability and ethics in management education could be reconfigured to better face the anthropogenic challenges we confront. Step by step, this paper travels across disciplinary boundaries – from gender studies to

organization and education studies – to show how posthumanism could assist in reconfiguring each of the terms that together shape RME. By doing so, this discussion highlights how the management education community could and should move from conceiving sustainability as a “matter of fact,” or even a “matter of concern,” to treating it as a “matter of care” and an ethical commitment. She also explains how this transition requires decolonization of education and teaching methods. Finally, this paper presents a research agenda as the starting point to further explore how posthumanist lenses could assist in further reconfiguration of RME by considering the current pandemic as an expression of anthropogenic dynamics.

Geri Mason and Al Rosenbloom’s paper advocates explicit attention for poverty in reconfiguring RME. They call for paying attention to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the social fault lines between low-income and upper-income individuals and, for the first time since 1990, has reversed gains in global poverty reduction. Therefore, this paper proposes changes to RME curricula that can develop graduates with both a more informed, complex understanding of poverty and an expanded view of the actions firms can take to engage the poor through business practices. As the authors point out, in doing so, it is important to realize that poverty is a multidimensional concept that encompasses much more than a person’s income; it also relates to a person’s freedoms and capabilities. This broader interpretation and understanding of the concept of poverty is needed to steer business leaders away from solely focusing on the consumption capabilities of the poor, because that will be far from sufficient to actually alleviate poverty during and after the pandemic, especially given poverty’s intricate links to the wider set of systemic challenges that confronts society. To ensure this broader interpretation and understanding among current and future business leaders, this paper suggests and explains how RME should integrate poverty as a threshold concept on which students’ cognitive frames are built.

Finally, Matthias Falkenstein, Ulrich Hommel and Annie Snelson-Powell’s essay reflects on the question whether the COVID-19 crisis will ultimately serve as an accelerator or demolisher of the RME agenda. Their discussion highlights not only how the pandemic leads to opportunities to reconfigure and reposition RME within the management education community, especially based on increased attention to topics addressed in the RME and wider sustainability agenda, but also how it can lead to market pressures that impose new constraints on business schools. The authors express and explain their concerns about the pandemic actually putting more emphasis on skills and knowledge that contradict the RME agenda. As such, this essay highlights, once again, that RME might not yet be as firmly rooted as a core organizational and educational theme in business schools as one might expect, or at least hope, based on previous phases of critical scrutiny and introspection, such as those highlighted earlier in this Guest Editorial. It therefore also calls for expanding ways in which RME is made quantifiable and linking RME initiatives and activities more explicitly to the SDGs, and it proposes implications for external validation frameworks to ensure better embeddedness of RME in management education and business schools’ DNA.

Conclusion

Together, these seven papers present a rich palette of perspectives on RME in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, including its relation to the wider set of systemic challenges that confront us and the urgency to fully implement the sustainability agenda represented by the PRME and the SDGs. They constitute a timely and persuasive warning

to all of us to not go “back to normal” and identify the risks of backsliding that come with a crisis such as the current pandemic. Simultaneously, they offer clear reference points and guidance for actual introspection by business schools, thereby making it perfectly clear that such introspection cannot ignore the (role of the) ideological underpinnings of our socioeconomic system and business schools’ role in continuing to put markets first, at the expense of planet and people.

As already indicated, the COVID-19 pandemic is neither just one element of a wider set of systemic challenges nor is this crisis the first one that calls for profound reflection and action by the management education community. It is of pivotal importance for current and future generations that we realize that the war *is* ours – and that we respond accordingly.

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