

SOAPBOX

June 11, 2012 12:12 am



Schools need to champion a sustainability mindset

By Anthony Buono, Jean-Christophe Carteron and Matthew Gitsham

This week is the 20th anniversary of the UN's 1992 Rio earth summit. More than 300 leaders from the world's business schools will convene in Rio de Janeiro as the third global forum of the Principles for Responsible Management Education kicks off the Rio+20 conference on sustainable development.

Rio+20 will bring together world leaders to make decisions that could lead to a healthier, more equitable and prosperous world for all. In time this could lead to the adoption of an economic model – sustainable development – that focuses on building prosperity for the medium and long term.

It is significant that business schools are opening this gathering. At the first Rio summit, business leaders were at the margins and business schools were nowhere to be seen. But it is now the norm for business leaders to play a central role in creating the future we want alongside political and civil society leaders.

In a UN report produced for Rio+20 – Leadership in a Rapidly Changing World – it is the chairs and chief executives of some of the world's most influential businesses who are calling for business schools to accelerate this change. They are urging schools to develop business leaders who are motivated and equipped to put global challenges at the heart of how they create value.

Business schools have moved from the fringes to centre stage: accelerating the shift in the mindset of managers is one of the most influential interventions that can be made in the transition to a global society that has sustainable development as its economic model. This is why Ban Ki-moon, UN secretary-general, and corporate signatories to the UN Global Compact led the call to create PRME in 2007.



On one level, the news is encouraging. A guide produced for Rio+20 illustrates the changes taking place in business schools across the globe. Many institutions are changing curricula, refocusing pedagogy and research and reorienting campus operations, aided by increasingly visible sustainability initiatives. Yet, while these changes are promising, we need to do much more. Business schools must recognise that creating a generation of professionals who understand the critical importance of sustainable practice needs to be at the core of all that we do.

The dialogue at Rio+20 will build further consensus on the path business schools must follow in the next decade. Many faculty members are already embracing this challenge, acting as change agents within their institutions, but many are not.

We need to engage systematically with our colleagues to help motivate and equip them to embrace this vision in their teaching and research, whatever their subject specialisation.

And we need senior figures in business schools to understand and champion why this is important and to lead the cultural shift required to reach this goal.

But although change will come from within, business schools need help from others.

Governments need to support this cultural change through the incentives embedded in funding frameworks for higher education.

Business leaders need to give an even louder voice to their demands for a different kind of business graduate and make this clear in the way they recruit MBAs and purchase executive education.

And accrediting bodies and rankings providers – the AACSB, EQUIS, the Association of MBAs, BusinessWeek and the Financial Times – need to support business schools by assessing how schools are developing this generation of business leaders and placing this measure at the heart of their work.

Now is the time for us to work for the future that we want.

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