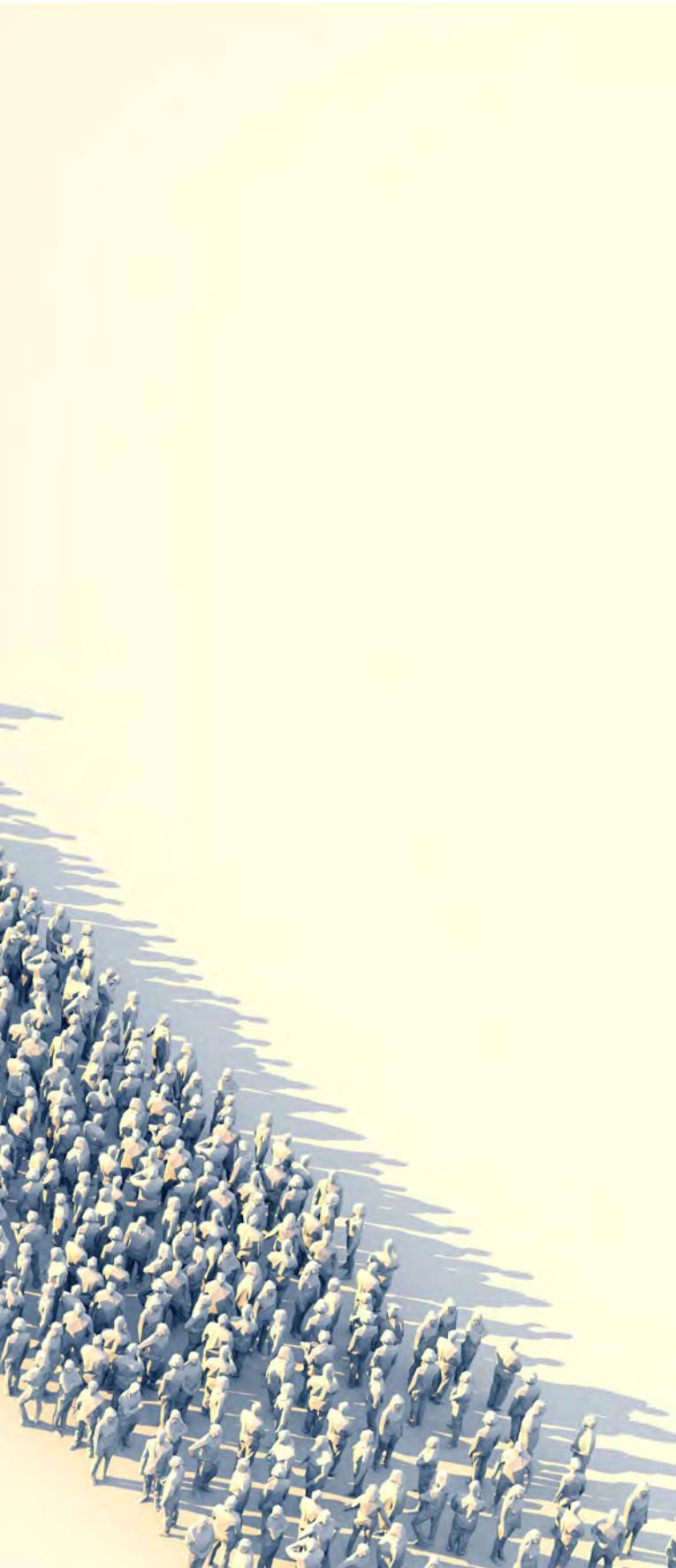


Are business schools talking the walk?

How well are business schools around the world communicating their sustainability commitment?
Lars Moratis and **Frans Melissen** investigate





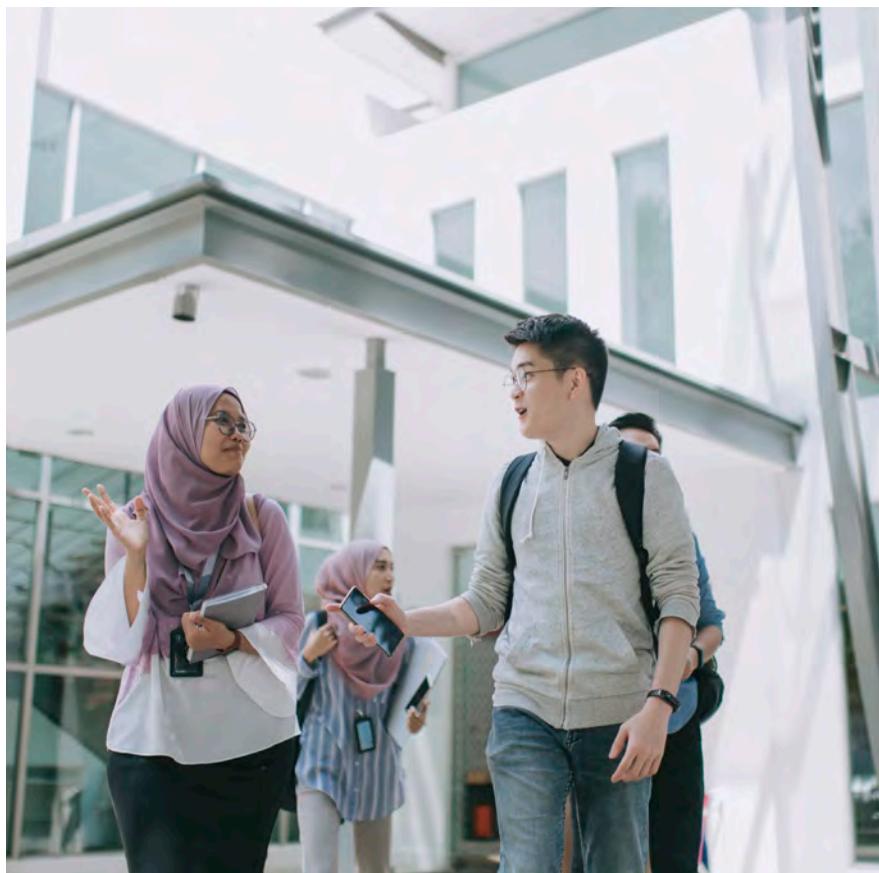
Calls for Responsible Management Education (RME) have burgeoned in recent years. Through a rich palette of RME initiatives, many business schools have engaged with sustainability-related topics in their management education programmes. Acknowledging that management students are seeking “purpose over profit”, business schools have started pivoting towards responsible capitalism, addressing sustainability as a business case and driver of product and business model innovation, studying sustainability impacts as risk drivers, and embracing topics such as impact investing (e.g., <https://www.ft.com/reports/responsible-business-education>). Both the societal and business relevance of addressing climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are evident. However, as Audencia Business School’s André Sobczak writes, addressing the SDGs is still an all but mainstream practice in RME, ‘as it is being implemented in a only few isolated places, and even then it is often poorly co-ordinated.’ Business schools are ‘therefore not yet meeting the high expectations of students, business and civil society with regards to social and environmental emergencies’ (<https://www.ft.com/content/f6b68846-e9bd-11e9-a240-3b065ef5fc55>). If the contents of articles published by business school faculty on the SDGs provides some proxy for underlying research and teaching, work by Rotterdam School of Management’s Wilfred Mijnhardt suggests that the SDGs in general, and climate

change-related topics in particular, are still a fringe topic (<https://www.ft.com/content/6b499b5b-76fc-4fee-9684-f8055e52c46e>). At the same time, and beyond the integration of sustainability into their curricula, business schools are urged to practice what they preach through, for instance, developing green campuses, creating healthy workplaces, divesting from fossil fuel-laden portfolios and pension plans, and improving community relations (<https://www.ft.com/content/004906f6-e444-11e9-b112-9624ec9edc59>).

Whether for the purpose of attracting much-needed attention to action for tackling the world's sustainability problems and the role of business in this, for capitalising on business schools' existing sustainability efforts to attract students, or to spur the integration of sustainability into educational programmes and research activities, it is vitally important that businesses communicate their sustainability commitments to their stakeholders.

But are they?

In the period 2020-2021 we embarked on a simple, straightforward study to obtain some baseline results about the extent to which business schools worldwide are communicating their sustainability commitments. Our data were derived from the websites of signatories of the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). More specifically, we looked at the homepage of signatories' websites, the content of dean's messages, part(s) of the websites that include business schools' vision/mission statements, and, if available, any dedicated menu items on sustainability. Data were collected based on the presence of the following 'content labels': Climate change, Sustainability/sustainable development, Sustainable business, Sustainable Development Goals, Ethics/ethical values, and Responsible/sustainable leadership. (It should be noted that the content labels were interpreted somewhat



more broadly than the actual labels suggest. For instance, mentions of a 'changing climate' or 'decarbonisation' were classified under the label 'climate change', mentions of 'corporate social responsibility' and 'social entrepreneurship' were classified under 'sustainable business', and mentions of 'social and ecological challenges' under sustainability/sustainable development.) The data were collected by visually inspecting the websites of a total of 680 PRME signatories from Africa (28), Asia (132), Australia (35), Europe (297), North America (152), and Latin America (36).

The results of our study are rather sobering:

- Just six business schools (0.9%) in the database mention the SDGs or depict the SDG logo on the homepage of their websites; of which five are from Europe. Overall, 5.8% of all schools display SDG-related information elsewhere on their website.





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- While not exclusively accessible from the homepage, less than one in five (18.6%) business schools appear to have a dedicated menu (sub)item on sustainability on their website. Australian and European schools top the list with a little above one in four schools having such an menu item on their website (25.7% and 26.4% respectively for the two regions).
- Only 1.3% of business schools in our database mention climate change on the homepage of their website. A little over one in ten schools (11.2%) mention sustainability/sustainable development. Even business interpretations of these topics (i.e., sustainable business and responsible/sustainable leadership) have low mentions (all under 10.0%).
- For the dean's messages each of the content labels scores lower than for the homepage, with the labels of climate change (two mentions) and the SDGs (no mentions) at the bottom of the list. There was less difference when it came to the content labels ethical values and responsible/sustainable leadership which were more frequently mentioned by deans (12.0% and 15.4% respectively).
- Looking at the vision/mission statements of business schools, there seems to be a similar pattern for the content labels climate change, sustainable business, and the SDGs. However, the content labels responsible/sustainable leadership (27.5%), sustainability (26.0%), and ethical values (25.3%) are mentioned much more frequently in business schools' vision/mission statements.

- Some geographical differences can be observed: no African business school in our database mentions climate change, sustainable business, or the SDGs. Also, schools from Australia (31.4%), Latin America (30.5%), and Europe (30.3%) mention sustainability/sustainable development considerably more than schools from Africa (17.9%), Asia (16.7%), and North America (6.6%). Four European business schools are the only ones to mention climate change in their vision/mission statements.

So, where do these results leave us? Even though our study represents an approximation of what is going on in the business school community, we think it sheds light on a pervasive problem and poses serious cause for concern. The overall story that emerges from our findings is that business schools communicate little about their sustainability commitments. Especially when it comes to the content labels climate change and the SDGs – the former presenting the most urgent societal challenge and the latter being a primary reference point for interpreting sustainability – business schools appear to be silent. Even worse, these disappointing results may actually be somewhat on the optimistic side given that our database only included UN PRME signatories – business schools that have deliberately chosen to embrace these principles and that may therefore be expected to demonstrate a larger willingness or inclination to communicate their sustainability commitments.

Communication, including online communication, is an indication of what organisations find important and which qualities or priorities they want to signal to the world in order to establish, correct, or develop an image of themselves. This should enable both internal and external stakeholders of business schools to make informed choices about how they want to relate to them. Although this does not only pertain to prospective, current, and former students, a business school's sustainability commitments have become an important factor in this relationship. Signalling organisational



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qualities and priorities is an important role and value of communication since it can inspire others to do the same. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it should be noted that communication has other functions, too, including a so-called constitutive function, aiding and spurring the desired direction in which the organisation want to develop. For business schools, this means that, beyond communicating their sustainability commitments, communication can actually support them in the process of operationalising and implementing the RME agenda and becoming a more sustainable organisation. As such, through internal and external communication, realising this agenda on an organisational level may well be accelerated.

The overarching question that inevitably arises is: why is this? This question, in turn, gives rise to several inconvenient questions.

Why are business schools hardly communicating their sustainability commitments? How do they expect their stakeholders, in particular students, to recognise their sustainability commitments? Should we conclude that business schools do not think communicating these commitments is important? Do they doubt that the societal challenges that the world is confronted with – and which business undeniably has a central responsibility in both creating and solving – appeal to management students? Are business schools hesitant to emphasise these commitments because they think this can discourage students from choosing their school? Are schools failing to recognise the importance of these societal challenges, the role of business in these, and, most importantly, the role of management education itself? And are they walking the (limited) talk, or do their sustainability commitments lead to more action than their communication suggests?

Obviously, our study only provides data that point in a certain direction and more research is needed to start formulating answers to these questions. Until then, we think that these questions should be front and centre in any discussion about the role of business schools in spurring sustainable development. In the end, against the background of creating a better world and inspiring others to join that effort, talking the walk is equally important as walking the talk – let alone the fact that business schools should talk the talk well.

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About the Authors

Lars Moratis and Frans Melissen are the holders of the Chair in Management Education for Sustainability, a joint initiative by Antwerp Management School and Breda University of Applied Sciences.