

A new trajectory for management education

By Stephen Hickman



Whilst this is a unique collaboration in the sector between an MBA and a non-governmental organization (NGO), it is one of a succession of selective partnerships that WWF has formed with business in the last decade. The timing was also fortuitous, coming as it did when business education was being put under the microscope.

Relative to Business Schools, the WWF could be regarded as the new kid on the block in terms of management education. But the commercial arm of WWF International has become very experienced in delivering management training programmes such as OPL and 'Climate Savers' to corporations around the globe – in part through their excellent web-based learning environment the 'OPL Alumni platform'.

Jean-Paul Jeanrenaud, Corporate Relations Manager, at WWF International, asserts that companies doing 'less bad' is just not good enough: to stop ecosystem degradation requires a change of behaviour. With a reminder that 'unless we consume less, by 2035 we will need a second planet!' (Exhibit II), Jeanrenaud explains that the objective of the OPL programme is to help business leaders 'properly understand sustainability and be able to future – proof their business so that they can contribute to building a one planet economy'.

The NGOs successive engagements with business, and some initial involvement in masters level programmes with the Department of Geography at the University of Exeter, were the perfect preconditions for forming a collaborative development partnership with the Business School. The partnership is committed to promoting sustainable business and showing that conserving natural resources is entirely compatible with winning and maintaining customer value and confidence. As such, sustainable business will become the 'spine' of the new One Planet MBA.

Some would argue that the future of management education is at a tipping point. After the recent financial crises that are still affecting much of the world, many commentators looked to the 'breeding grounds' for those 'responsible' for the global disaster... namely the world's leading business schools. Whilst most fair-minded analysts agree that laying the blame at the door of the educators is unfair, the accusations have led to a re-evaluation of business education and the types of leaders that are being produced as a result of achieving the 'holy grail' of the MBA. Indeed, even the United Nations (UN) has declared an interest in the subject by forming the United Nations initiative for Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME). (Exhibit I)

The One Planet MBA

The University of Exeter Business School's response to the implementation of PRME has been to launch a completely new MBA programme from 2011. Through this new "One Planet MBA", Exeter will be one of the first Business Schools internationally to have sustainability embedded in the DNA of the MBA.

The One Planet MBA is being developed in collaboration with the WWF the world's leading conservation organisation. This isn't just a borrowing of the world famous panda to give the course some green credentials, the WWF has been at the forefront of embedding sustainable management principles for several years through its One Planet Leaders Programme (OPL).

The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)

The PRME initiative is a partnership of eight international co-convening organizations devoted to the worldwide promotion and improvement of higher education in business administration and management. The initiative can be regarded as a campaign designed to inspire responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally, by calling on business schools and management-related academic institutions to contribute to a more stable and inclusive global market and help build prosperous and thriving societies.

As institutions of higher education involved in the development of current and future managers, each PRME participant must declare their willingness to progress the implementation, within their respective institution, of the six PRME Principles. In the current academic environment, corporate responsibility and sustainability have entered but not yet become embedded in the mainstream of business-related education. The PRME are therefore a timely global call for business schools and universities worldwide to gradually adapt their curricula, research, teaching methodologies and institutional strategies to the new business challenges and opportunities.

Taking the Six Principles as a guiding framework, any institution which is willing to integrate corporate responsibility and sustainability in a gradual but systemic manner is welcome to join the initiative.

Principle 1

Purpose: To develop 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.

Principle 2

Values: To incorporate into our academic activities and curricula the values of global social responsibility as portrayed in international initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact.

Principle 3

Method: To create educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enables effective learning experiences for responsible leadership.

Principle 4

Research: To engage in conceptual and empirical research that advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of corporations in the creation of sustainable social, environmental and economic value.

Principle 5

Partnership: To interact with managers of business corporations to extend our knowledge of their challenges in meeting social and environmental responsibilities and to explore jointly effective approaches to meeting these challenges.

Principle 6

Dialogue: To facilitate and support dialog and debate among educators, business, government, consumers, media, civil society organizations and other interested groups and stakeholders on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability. *Source: www.unprme.org*

Towards planet minded leadership

Implementing the new programme with a backbone of what are popularly termed the three pillars of sustainability; environmental protection, social responsibility, and economic development is now being promoted as the distinctive features for University of Exeter MBA applicants. With nothing more than a smattering of marketing to date, the level of interest in the One Planet MBA has been quite phenomenal. Exeter however, prefers the term *Masters of Business Action* as the long form for representing its aspirations for the MBA graduates. The ambition is for MBA Graduates to emerge as planet minded leaders, with all the attributes required for the complex and challenging times ahead.

A heightened awareness of an urgent need for innovative solutions to environmental and resource problems of global dimensions.

The One Planet MBA is a beacon of what is happening elsewhere in the University, Exeter has a growing reputation as a centre of excellence for cross-disciplinary environmental/climate change research, including energy policy, climate change and sustainable futures, geopolitical development, human health and the environment. With a focus on climate prediction, adaptation and migration, and close liaison with the Met Office Hadley Centre, Exeter is fast becoming a hub for world-class climate change research. These cross-disciplinary initiatives have already significantly informed the MBA faculty about what content will need to be fused together to produce an MBA that marries the business of science and the science of business.

Exeter does not pretend to have all the answers to masters level management education, but critically it has moved beyond the dialogue of whether or not sustainability *should* be the catalyst for new business thinking, and has set in motion a process of curriculum consultation - sharing and learning ideas with academics from inside and outside the Business School.

The first cohort will graduate in 2012, but to shape a curriculum which needs to deliver true innovation and live up to its own hype, the Business School has selected and recruit-

Exhibit I

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Exhibit II

ed an 'Innovation Cohort' to collaboratively 'co-create' a One Planet curriculum.

The transition from the current programme to a One Planet MBA is being facilitated by the Business School's world-renowned *Centre for Leadership Studies* (CLS). CLS will impart leadership knowledge and skills for One Planet MBA participants and Faculty alike, offering a window onto leadership studies, development and practice in a sustainability context. CLS Director, Professor Jonathan Gosling underlines the role of CLS as internal *Transformational Leadership* consultants influencing the 'co-creation' process: 'The idea that planet minded leaders will step forward with the ability to relate to the rich diversity and bio-diversity of the planet and to do so in an action-orientated, collaborative and holistic way promises a very different MBA experience. The opportunity to participate in the Innovation Cohort is possibly unparalleled in management education.'

Because, unlike for example Marketing, or Finance the topic of Sustainability has no 'functional' champion *The Environment and*

Sustainability Institute (ESI), based at the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus, will be contracted-in as sustainability 'content custodians' to coordinate a one Planet MBA steering group.

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Again, this is all evidence that moulds can be broken and that the educators don't have all of the answers all of the time. Obviously, the new curriculum has to reflect the triage of challenges that tend to dominate content arguments about a definition of, and the need for sustainability. Critically, it must be relevant to business management and leadership in unusual times.

So, reflecting economic, environmental and socio-cultural factors is essential. But the real challenge now is to formulate exactly how this new programme is to be delivered into the MBA learning environment in a value-added way, to ensure that One Planet MBA graduates leave the programme with

the proprietary one planet leadership attributes that will cause them to make decisions that will have positive consequences for the planet in years to come.

As the University of Exeter see it, there is an alternative to launching the One Planet MBA; the School could continue to market and deliver an unchanged, already successful Association of MBA (AMBA) accredited provision. However, as awareness grows about the global challenges we face pretending that business curricula is not affected by sustainability concepts and paradigms is unjust, unsustainable, and will produce only unfulfilling management learning experiences. The University of Exeter, along with other leading Business Schools recognises the critical need to reorient and reconfigure business education – as the world warms the One Planet MBA is not an initiative that can be put on ice!



About the author

Stephen Hickman joined The University of Exeter Business School as a Teaching Fellow in October 2009, where he assumes interim responsibility for the Exeter MBA programme. Before coming to Exeter, Stephen was Deputy Head and Higher Education (HE) Manager with Falmouth Marine School, part of the Cornwall College Group, and was a Senior Lecturer in University of Greenwich Business School (2000-2007). Prior to moving into academia, Stephen benefited from various senior management experiences that afford compelling depth to his lectures in the application of theory to practice.

As part of the development of the new One Planet MBA and Exeter's membership of the UN PRME initiative, Stephen participated in the second annual conference, held in New York, which called on business leaders to better balance social and economic objectives and encouraged management education to prepare future leaders for this challenge.

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