1. What are the PRME and how did this initiative start? What is the main purpose?

The PRME are a global call to update the curriculum, research and teaching methods of business schools and other management-related academic institutions to the realities and social demands of the XXI, embedding in the education of future managers the values of sustainability and corporate responsibility.

The mission of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative is to inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally. The PRME are inspired by internationally accepted values such as the principles of the United Nations Global Compact. They seek to establish a process of continuous improvement among institutions of management education in order to develop a new generation of business leaders capable of managing the complex challenges faced by business and society in the 21st century. 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.

Being a good corporate citizen has never been more relevant than it is today. As the world faces serious economic, social, and environmental challenges, an increasing number of companies—from large multinationals to small and medium-size enterprises—are beginning to address these challenges strategically and in their day-to-day operations. There are promising trends indicating a premium for companies which proactively progress towards sustainability and social responsibility—by developing and implementing strategies that mitigate risks, stabilize the business environment, and seize previously untapped opportunities for value creation. A company’s ability to compete, gain trust and ensure long-term viability is today more clearly linked to responsible business behavior and accountability. This heralds new ways of doing business which benefit both the company and society.

As the corporate sector requires new solutions, knowledge and new holistic ways of thinking, management-related academic institutions, and in particular business schools, are uniquely positioned to address these needs:

• Through education, academia has a core role in shaping the skills, competencies and the decision-making capability of future business leaders.
• Through research, academia can develop means and frameworks for responsible business practices.
• Lastly, academia is a key actor in advocating the new values and ideas of responsible business.

Through these means and by serving as a positive example within their own operations, academic institutions have the potential to generate positive change on a large scale.

2. How many institutions are associated with this initiative? And how does that partnership works?

As of today (April 2, 2009) 224 institutions for all over the world, from the US to Europe, to the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific region. By the end of 2009 we think that the initiative will have grown to 350 participants, again with a balanced geographical spread of the initiative in particular with regard to Latin America, Asia, Middle East and Africa. In order to do that, we need participating business schools to act as advocates, and we need new alliances (regional, particularly in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

The partnership works through several platforms:

a) Public sharing of information on progress concerning PRME implementation: We are starting now the process of public reporting (or as we prefer to talk about it) of sharing information on progress as the best window of recognition of our efforts.

b) Learning: We work also through Working Groups in different areas, usually led by one or two business schools—our aim for this year is to start the flow of learning, by producing useful tools for implementation, based on good examples provided by participating schools.

c) Open business schools’ thought leadership to society: we should start landing from the abstract concept of sustainability to the specific issues it entails, through partnerships in issues where we lend our capacities to the resolution of pressing problems.

3. Do you believe Universities are now assuming ethics, sustainability and innovation as part of their studies?

The trend of corporate sustainability and responsibility has entered the classrooms but has not become part of the strategic core of management education.

Management-related academic institutions have already embarked on a long-term mission to adapt their roles as educators, researchers and advocates. Topics such as business ethics, business and society, environmental and sustainability studies or social entrepreneurship are increasingly being integrated into academic curricula. However, in most cases these issues are neither part of the core courses, nor have they been integrated as new basic values of more traditional subjects—from financial analysis and accounting to marketing, operations or human resources.

Given this reality, the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) are a timely global call for business schools to gradually adapt to the new business challenges and opportunities.

4. Do you notice a growing interest in this subject by students, teachers and Governments?

Yes, there is a growing interest by students on being well prepared to their future career, by having the vision, the technical tools and the skills required to serve a company that practices the core values of corporate
social responsibility. You can have a look at the results of the surveys done in this respect by two organizations that are co-convener of PRME, NetImpact and the Aspen Institute Business and Society Program (http://www.unprme.org/resource-docs/LizMawandRichLeimsider.pdf).

Concerning teachers, faculties in general are plural, and there are professors with a clear idea of these issues and others that do not see it for the moment. This is why PRME is meant as a gradual initiative, that usually takes off by a group of faculty with the support and commitment of the dean’s office and then, gradually, extends the need and practice of curriculum change…but that takes time and we think that is good that it takes time...change should not be enforced but demonstrated and voluntarily accepted by faculty members.

Concerning governments the trend is equally important and increasingly so...the last prove of this is the call for corporate social responsibility mentioned in the Leader's Statement of the G20 in its London Summit.

5. Bearing in mind the current economic crisis what role should Governments assume regarding Education?
To persist on high quality education is always important, but now more than ever.

6. Probably with responsible business and managers we weren’t in this financial crisis. Do you agree?
Yes, I agree. This is why in our statement in the Global Forum for responsible Business education which we held at the UN in December 2008 we say that the current global economic downturn has demonstrated the high degree of interconnection between capital markets and the real economy. In the midst of the most severe financial crisis of our lifetimes, we believe that the values of global social responsibility embedded in the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) have never been more important. PRME business schools can play a critical role as agents of change by renewing our commitment to the education of future leaders. It is critical that management-related academic institutions educate a new generation of corporate leaders committed to creating long-term value. The current crisis has reinforced our view that the long-term viability and success of business will depend on its capacity to manage environmental, social and governance concerns and to create sustainable value through innovation and new business models adapted to a changing global environment. This notion of corporate responsibility as a prerequisite to sustainable growth will require alignment of business strategies and operations with universal values and principles portrayed in international initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact. It will also necessitate higher levels of transparency and accountability to stakeholders. We are committed to placing these considerations at the core of curriculum development for management education.

7. Can we say there is a big gap between Europe and the USA regarding studies in sustainable business?
We are all learning and we are all opening the way and walking the talk.

8. What projects or activities are planned for the future?
Plenty, there are around 30 activities in different parts of the world planned for this year and led by different signatory institutions...but the most important activity is, without doubt that, in 2009, by the communication on progress made by all participants we learn from each other how to implement in our daily educational activities the principles of PRME.

by Manuel Escudero, Special Adviser to the United Nations Global Compact, Head PRME Secretariat.