

Business Schools and Responsible Management: A Long Road to Freedom

Guénola Nonnet*
Kerul Kassel**
Lucas Mejis***

Abstract

While Business Schools are criticized for failing to encourage responsible management, several schools are innovating towards such management for their own organization. This research has a closer look at the people involved in changing the practices at their school and campus (staff and faculty members). 17 interviews were conducted at eight European schools to understand how these responsible strategies and practices are welcomed inside Business Schools. Seven types of tensions were revealed; Priority of ROI, Bottom-up innovation (less impactful than top down innovations), Limited resources allocation, Lack of knowledge and competencies, Transversal issues touching all parts of the school, Limited commitment from the Top and Growing awareness facing denial. The tensions are introduced and described in details in this article.

Keywords: Business Schools (BS), Responsible Management (RM), Tensions

Introduction

This research is an exploratory research to understand how Business Schools actors involved in transforming their Business Schools towards Responsible Management are welcomed. This paper summarizes the main tensions encountered by these change agents within business schools (BS) who are working towards responsible management (RM). The actors described the difficulties they face in their mission to help develop a responsible strategy for their campus. Seven main tensions were listed and are further explained.

Business Schools and Responsible Management

The last decades have witnessed the growth of the BS⁵ although; the purpose of BS remains largely debated¹⁰. Various authors from different fields wonder about the main purpose of a BS:

“Throughout this explosive growth of the business school establishment, with these schools

transforming from the poor relations among universities faculties to the cash-generating engines of university expansion, profound questions were recurrently asked about what the essential purpose of business schools was, and what they hope to achieve⁴”.

These questions have become more urgent as became clear that “most of the senior executives involved at Enron, Arthur Anderson and World Com had MBAs from business schools¹⁵. In response the concept of RM is developed. For the purpose of our research we use the concept of *management responsible* as it is succinctly introduced in the French literature. In *Ethique et Responsabilité Sociale* (2010), Anne-Marie Fray and Richard Soparnot explain their view:

“We can define the responsible manager as a manager who is no longer irresponsible... open to his surroundings, a sense of citizenship, close to his co-workers but able to handle economic measures: in short, he has a

*International Visiting Professor Nova University HSBE Business School, FL USA

**Adjunct Faculty, School of Human & Organizational Development, Fielding Graduate University, California, USA

***Professor, Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University, The Netherlands

polymorphous profile, hence a complex one” (p. 127)ⁱ.

As RM is a cutting edge topic and as it can be perceived either as threatening or as a needed change that should be encouraged, some BS are very driven on responsible changes and others do struggle with it. According to Martell¹³, “if we want students to develop a social commitment, it is of the utmost importance that universities become living examples of this kind of actions”. As a direct consequence, the individuals in charge of responsible development or aiming at developing innovating education to encourage such management may face different tensions inside the school. These tensions are due to various factors that are further analysed below.

This leads to the question for this paper:

What are the tensions for Responsible Management change agents’ in their efforts towards introducing Responsible Management on campus?

Methodology and Data Analysis

As the issue of how RM change agents working at BS are perceived has very few echoes in literature, we have conducted an exploratory study adapted from the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory helps in creating new theories regarding empirical emerging phenomenon or may help to bring a new understanding to these phenomena⁸.

Our study began with visits to and interviews with individuals at eight European BS: five French members of the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles, two British and one Dutch school. The BS visited were selected based on *Financial Times* rankings which classifies BS annuallyⁱⁱ. Although the FT rankings are criticized for contributing to the current failure of BS by not supporting the creation of a culture of RM^{1,2} (Hazlehurst, 2011), the FT ratings have been used for previous research on ethics, CSR and Sustainability education³. We evaluated each school on the list to determine whether they had created a Master program fully focused on RM and we visited

the schools that presented an innovative curricula towards RM.

17 semi-guided interviews were conducted with a number of individuals involved at the BS to help transform its strategy and curricula towards RM. Generally; we received a very positive feedback from all our respondents. 14 interviews were face to face and 3 others were conducted on the phone. The analysis and results of this research are based on primary data (interviews). The interviews were between 30 to 120 minutes in length and were conducted from September 2011 until March 2013 with professors involved in responsible and sustainable management. Interviews were as well conducted with administration staff such as directors of sustainability or Chief Sustainability Officer, as well. Four additional interviews were conducted between November 2012 and March 2013 (see Figure 1).

These interviews varied according to the respondent. The type of questions asked during the interviews are summarized in Figure 2:

We designed a coding grid as the results presented obvious tensions faced by the actors innovating in RM within the BS. We verified our results with most of our contacts after the codification process. During the entire study we continued to receive information from some individuals involved via BS Facebook accounts, LinkedIn group sharing, and emails.

A discrepancy became apparent: the strategies and actions developed to integrate RM did not always fit the BS’ main strategy. To focus on the practices, we used the Green Plan Outline “the Green Plan is designed to indicate objectives for each establishment, along with points that can progressively be implemented [...]”ⁱⁱⁱ developed by Responsible Campus in France as a tool to compare each school’s RM strategy regarding two topics: Strategy & Governance and Environmental Management.¹

In analysing our interviews, we noticed that each individual involved in RM describes some tensions

ⁱAuthor translation : « on peut définir le manager responsable comme un manager qui n’est plus irresponsable... ouvert sur le monde extérieur, citoyen, proche de ses collaborateurs, mais qui gère également des mesures économiques : autant dire que son profil est polymorphe et par là-même complexe »

ⁱⁱ<http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/>

ⁱⁱⁱ<http://www.campusresponsables.com/page-7824/presentation-campus-responsables.html>

Respondents	Role	School	Time	Date
1	Pr.BSM – Climate Chair	Dutch BS/Uni.	60mn	Oct. 2011
2	Pr. Master co-founder	UK BS	90mn	Sep. 2011
3	Sustainability Programme Coordinator	UK BS	30mn	Jan. 2012
4	Pr. Campus Sustainability Officer	Dutch BS/Uni.	90mn	Oct. 2010
5	Sustainability Director	UK BS	60mn	Jan. 2012
6	Chief Sustainability Officer	UK BS	90mn	Jan. 2012
7	CSR Director	French BS	50mn	Jan. 2012
8	Master founder Professor alternative Management	French BS	120mn	Mar. 2012
9	Master Co-Director sustainable management	French BS	2 x 120mn	Sep. 2011 Mar. 2012
10	Assistant Professor Sustainable Management	Dutch BS/ University	2 x 120mn	Apr. 2011 October 2011
11	Master Programme Chair Coordinator	Dutch BS/ University	90mn	Oct. 2011
12	Master co-founder Director	School of Management/ University	90mn	Sep. 2011
13	Sustainability Quality director	French Engineer School	60mn	Mar. 2013
14	CSR Ethics HR Director	French BS	60mn	Dec. 2012
15	Sustainability Director	French Uni. (business & engineering)	50mn	Nov. 2012
16	Sustainability Quality Director	French Engineer School	65mn	Jan. 2013
17	MBA Programme Coordinator	Dutch BS	30mn	Oct. 2011

Figure 1: Grid Summarizing 17 Interviews.

regarding their missions. The following section identifies these tensions.

BS' Strategy and Responsible Initiatives: Emerging Tensions

RM change agents within BS face various tensions inside their institutions, with degrees of difficulty in implementing changes towards more responsibility

or sustainability. These tensions occur for various reasons¹⁴:

- ✓ Priority of ROI,
- ✓ Bottom-up innovation (less impactful than top down innovations),
- ✓ Limited resources allocation,
- ✓ Lack of knowledge and competencies,
- ✓ Transversal issues touching all parts of the school,

Questions about the strategy of the school towards responsible management:

Respondent: *Profile of the respondent, time allocated to the mission, formal job position & motivations for current responsible management mission,*

School: *History of the school, founders,*

Main Strategy: *School vision, school experience, main school's strategy, importance given to rankings & accreditations, financial funding, main decision makers, importance of the board, importance of the dean's profile,*

Education: *Education innovation towards responsible management and initiators,*

Needs & Practices: *Changes needed on the campus, good practices,*

HR: *Recruitment process for job position towards responsible management,*

Stakeholders: *Level of the board's support, level of the dean's support, students' interest, students' implication, suppliers flexibility, student's background, number of graduating students/year, organization chart at school, importance given to diversity in the recruitment.*

Responsible Strategy: *Responsible campus evaluation, resources allocated, press release and press impact, networking importance, specific strategy developed to enhance responsible management at the campus, school reputation.*

Figure 2: Interviews Questions about the School Strategy and RM.

- ✓ Limited commitment from the Top,
- ✓ Growing awareness facing denial.

1. Priority of ROI

Most of the interviewees mentioned the importance of generating revenues for the BS and that RM does not fit well in that framework. The actors explained the impact of the financial crisis on their work and how the recession has had a negative impact on the interests in RM. A book written by J. Marshall, G. Coleman and P. Reason (2011) about one of the visited schools illustrates the importance given to the current financial issues:

"Not every attempt to make a change will work. For a start the recession has made it harder to rouse interest in sustainability. There is a lot of concern that with the economic challenges we are facing, some people do not know what to do about sustainability and there has been some waning of interest. Well established initiatives will probably survive but 'diminishing passion' may make it more difficult to maintain new ones¹²".

A professor explained how school X expects him to bring higher revenues than potentially made by

teaching RM. To balance the revenues made by teaching RM this professor dedicates 40% of his activity to more general leadership programs and strategic engagement initiatives that pays better. As such, the ROI is highly scrutinized and BS have been willing to teach topics that pay instead of topics that are meaningful but less financially lucrative:

"My interest is how primarily senior executives engage in sustainability and how they translate that into action. Be that personal or organizational actions some sort. So that would be where I would like to spend all of my time but at the moment I would probably spend 60% in it and 40% is more just working with more general leadership programs and strategic engagement initiatives [...] I guess in our BS, there are 2 things, maybe probably 3 things: the recession environment has made it difficult to develop offers for people about sustainable management [...] so, what gets rewarded at business schools are things like strategy and writing books that are very much related to performance shareholders value paradigms. So if you want \$7000 a day you do strategy, if you want to earn \$1000 a day,

you do sustainability. There is pressure within a business school to do more strategy and less sustainability because one is rewarded a lot more and is actually easier to sell as well. So that's 40% help sustain the 60% and one day it will shift. If I was 100% in sustainability I either wouldn't be bringing the revenue our Business School want or I would be burning myself out" (I.5).

An interviewee from another school explained to us the pressure they were facing concerning the amount of students attending a Master for RM and the university's main strategy:

"We are facing a real issue with the Master we offer on responsible issues. The university threaten us that they might close it because we don't have enough participants according to their quota our master is not viable and if we have less than 30 participants next year they will close the Master as they find it too costly" (I.10).

When we asked about the motivations of the students, the answer was that most of the students still take a Master of Business or a MBA for personal interests linked to career, increasing their financial revenues but it seems as well that more and more students do pay attention to responsible issues:

"Most of the people want to pursue a MBA because they want to change their career, for example someone who has an engineering background and who wants to be in a financial area, private equity or venture capital, they will take financial electives, that's where their interest is but I noticed that there is more students interested in sustainability and also who try to make it work as well in corporate and business, in their career" (I.17).

2. Bottom-up Innovations

Most of the incentives encountered at BS and created to encourage RM are bottom-up. These innovations aim at developing awareness about social and environmental issues and are developed

by professors who believe that the students should learn differently. These professors usually have concerns about the impact of mainstream management and want to increase awareness within their schools, to offer the opportunity to reflect on the current issues and to think out of the box. Most of the time, their institutional upper hierarchy does not encourage them: *"No one has ever encouraged us to create the Master, it's pure bottom-up!" (I. 8)*

As the different master programs try to reach as many students as possible and fill up their quota, the creation of a new master program can receive a cold welcome and even pressure from others within the BS. The Responsible Management master co-founders can end up facing peer pressure from the other master programs: *"There were pressures from another masters, they were afraid that we would end up competing against them. There were, as well, strong pressures at the Board level to forbid our opening. Our start was rather difficult" (I.8).*

When the board is not convinced of the importance of creating such a new program, then (as previously discussed) very few resources will be dedicated and the founder won't receive any recognition from their upper hierarchy: *"There was no dedicated time for us to allow to the Master, no recognition. It was absolutely not top-down. They just considered that we would spend 20 hours to this Master [...] the first years I used to spend 1/3 of my time on it" (I.5).*

As different faculty members expressed it, they felt quite some pressure on their shoulders and were afraid of not having enough students attending their course or their Master. They worried that they would not be allowed to open the course or the Master: *"I knew that if there would be only 10 students, there would be pressure" (I.1).*

3. Limited Commitment from the Top

A top-down strategy seems to be quite effective in deploying a RM strategy within BS. This can as be a challenge when there is change in the board, when the dean leaves⁶: *"Back then a Dean took over these matters with great care, he had built up a committee dedicated to sustainable development. The day that he left, everything faded away" (I.5).*

Another interviewee explained a similar situation:

"My previous dean advised me to pay attention to these types of projects. He retired 6 months after our schools merged [...] he was quite open-minded although a bit skeptical but he knew that (RM) issues would only increase. The individuals who took over after him did not share the same motivation [...] a survey in the 2012 L'étudiant (Magazine) shows talked about School Y, their RM mission totally relies on the dean, everything relies on the dean" (I.13).

When the board's priorities are not informed by sustainability and responsibility then it is more difficult for a single individual to influence the school's supplier: *"We wanted to have organic lunch during our meetings and then the caterer refused" (I.4).* Another interviewee explained the absence of RM strategy: *"I believe there is worse than us. I do not see us as a role model. We do not have a real strategy for sustainability [...] I would say there is no real support from our dean. There are many initiatives inside the school but at the board and the dean, I do not know, I'm not aware of any support." (I.7).*

As the main strategy of the school is not clearly committed to RM, the pioneers have concerns about the board's support in the long term. This is especially the case regarding the role of the dean: *"and if we would have a new dean, we would then need to motivate the new dean towards the same vision" (I.15).*

A number of interviewees considered the dean's commitment crucial:

"It is vital to make the deans aware!!! The schools are far away from anything that we could imagine...[W]hen a dean is motivated, everything can change very quickly and the priorities can be settled. I have seen places where nothing would happen because the dean did not feel concerned" (I.16).

Another direct consequence of the absence of formal strategy regarding RM is a lack of formalisation. Indeed, there are many individuals that do actively work on RM, greening the campus, creating several social dimensions such as equal treatment, diversity,

positive discrimination but they rarely have a formal and explicit job position that integrated these matters. Most of the time, they do it and eventually at some point it will appear in their job description and title, but this will come after years and for some of them it will never be mentioned, they just do it on top of the formal tasks expected in their job profile.

"We do not have directors of sustainability in the business schools, except when the people self-proclaimed themselves as such. I went to our dean and I asked to have a job description including it. At the BS we do have motivated people but the deans do not do the necessary efforts. They do not give the means to help developing it. People do not realize. My job description was created only a year ago" (I.16).

4. Limited Resources & Lack of Knowledge/Competencies

The data indicates that the professors and directors of RM often struggle to receive the necessary resources to achieve their missions. There are multiple reasons for that, one of which is that RM is rarely part of the school's strategy and that no or few resources are dedicated to it. Another reason is that working on responsibility, sustainability, ethics is not considered as technical and a scientific as other areas, such as accounting. As a consequence, the board does not feel the need to recruit using a specific profile tailored to the role, nor to allocate resources for the person assigned to the role for training and development, to learn about RM as it is perceived as an intuitive task: *"It is not perceived as technique. Maybe it is due to the fact that it is more social, about the society, more human and one thinks that we can just learn it easily" (I.14).*

As we asked a person working on greening the campus their perception of the degree of board eagerness to invest resources in RM strategies, we were told that the CSR person is actually not only working on RM for the campus but is responsible for a variety of missions and cannot dedicate herself fully to RM:

"Our CSR person is also working on, for example, the merger between 3 universities (medicine social, technique engineering and

business), and on collaborations. It's a mixed function, so even her position is not a full time position, although she is on board level" (I.4).

Overwork and stress experienced by those in RM roles, due to juggling multiple roles, was a point made by some interviewees.

"They hired a CSR person but she didn't have a sustainability background and there was a lot of focus on voluntary, community work and the attention went away from greening the campus to that! And she had a breakdown, overworked" (I.4).

Quite often the professors who are innovating and creating such curricula will lack resources and have to fight to get the necessary people and resources: *"Second fight: we fought to get an administrative assistant" (I.8).* They feel that they are lacking resources at the school level and as well a lack of engagement at a broader level: *"The school was not ready to have one person fully dedicated to RM" (I.3).*

5. Transversal Issues

A few interviewees mentioned the aspect of transversal strategy while talking about their RM strategy. From their description, we understand *transversal issues* as issues that touch to all/several departments and several topics and disciplines. According to the interviewees, there is a need for all relevant individuals on campus to adopt work together and share across disciplines. RM is about logistics and suppliers; about Human Resources and the way people are managed, about equal treatment for men and women, equal opportunities for disabled workers. It is as well about teaching the students a better way to approach strategy and management, and about adapting the way business administration is taught. It concerns all stakeholders of the business school, as well, and this alone is a significant challenge. It seems to never be easy to make everyone aware of what is happening *"We do have various small incentives on the campus but the problem is that no one realizes what is actually going on. We have a communication issue" (I.7).*

The fact that RM covers all departments and topics makes it difficult for one person to reach all the

stakeholders, it forces the person in charge of RM to adapt to each stakeholder, to get to know them and to find the right words to motivate them to evolve: *"They do share a little bit but we have the feeling that everyone works in their own separate area. We lack a transversal approach" (I.13).*

Several interviewees mentioned the need to come out of the department to join forces, dialog together and build a shared vision:

"I think people are realising that there is a need to come out of the department and there is a need to become very much part of the culture but nobody knows how. So you see a lot of rhetoric, yet we should integrate it" (I.6).

Directors of sustainability who are not always faculty members at the school expressed difficulties in persuading the professors to attend to these topics:

"I sent a very open invitation to people who are interested to meet regularly to talk about sustainability and it was just the same people who turned up every time. They weren't really the people here who would benefit more from engaging in that type of thing. They already knew everything. [Y]ou know academics and they're often specialists and do not want to do new things" (I.5).

6. Growing Awareness, Facing Denial

Some interviewees explained how some individuals inside the school try to make them feel irrelevant by denying their competencies in bringing such transformational changes for RM: *"From times to times I received very violent feedbacks from acknowledged faculties: 'you do not have the competencies'. I answered that I was not questioning their competencies and that I had some competencies about risk management [...] (After two years) I don't receive this answer: 'I'm not here for this anymore!'" (I.16).*

Many individuals involved in RM are often entangled in their difficulty to take action, preventing them from creating their own legitimacy: *"the true legitimacy turns true when you build a list of projects,*

actions, initiatives – Here in our school, there are too few” (I.13).

The individuals we met explained how far they have increased their awareness regarding social and environmental issues throughout their mission towards RM. As the rest of a BS’ stakeholders rarely have the same knowledge, they do not share this sense of urgency in embedding RM in the school’s practices and curriculum. The agents expressed self-questioning towards a certain lack of understanding or even denial or refusal to act upon the issues:

“Very rapidly I asked myself if I was not doing some politics (while I did not want to end up doing so). This is the challenge, one rapidly realizes that it is not just about some knowledge and a quantitative learning goal as we do it in a typical course but here it is hard to remain neutral and to tell them ‘this is going on, period!’ It is possible, for example, to give facts and say that some issues are linked to these topics, but rapidly such questions will arise: ‘but is this really proven?’ and they ask me so I have to tell them things which in a way can be called beliefs since literature disagrees about certain issues” (I.15).

Innovative professors and staff reported consistent resistance to changes to existing curriculum, bolstered mainly due to the satisfactory results of the school’s mainstream teaching: *“at the MBA level, there are no courses offered about sustainable management or CSR. According to me, they do not wish to have anything new” (I.7).*

Some interviewees explained how they have given up communicating on these issues as they feel they are facing too much scepticism: *“I do not communicate much. I never eat with my colleagues. There are too many colleagues that are sceptical about sustainable development and the climate” (I.13).*

As presented in the previous sections, the interviewees (staff or faculty members) who work towards greening the campus and/or creating new curriculum to encourage RM do face a number of tensions. These tensions are due to a lack of alignment between the main organizational strategy and the more

localized strategy developed towards responsible management. Figure 3 provides an overview of the tensions encountered by the actors.

Discussion: BS’ primary strategies and RM

During the interviews, the agents involved in promoting change toward RM expressed their struggle with the primary strategy of their BS. As they explained that their schools compete against each other to be rated as a top BS, we conducted additional research aimed at understanding the influences on the strategies employed by business schools, and which “scale” they use to compare themselves to other business schools. Below, we will discuss why this level of competition may be a barrier to establishing a responsible campus.

As RM agents explained in the interviews, one of the important criteria to be a top BS in the FT’ ranking is the *value for money*. This criterion evaluates the alumni salary three years after graduation against course costs. The length of the course is also taken into consideration⁴. As the ranking evaluates the placement success and the number of students

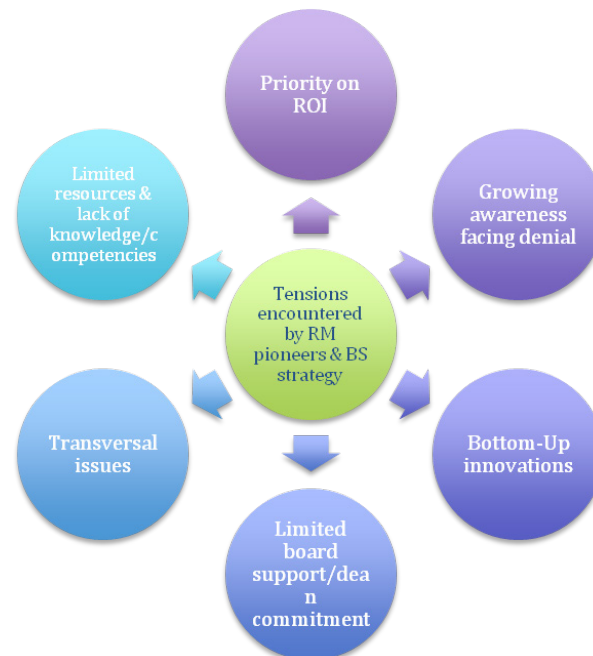


Figure 3: Tensions Encountered by RM Pioneers & BS Strategy.

⁴<http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/rsm-erasmus-university/masters-in-management-2012#masters-in-management-2012>

employed at three months post-graduation, there is significant pressure put on staff and faculty members to make sure that the students will start a successful career immediately after finishing their education. This stress has the effect of creating standardized students educational profiles to fit a firm's hiring requirements: finance, consultancy, accounting, and general management.

There is less demand for RM managers as it is a new field, so business schools are less willing to invest resources in RM education as these students may end up with a lower weighted salary. An article in Forbes recently reported that responsible management pays less than other business departments: "Some professors as well as business and non-profit professionals say CSR jobs may come with lower salaries¹⁷". Focusing on RM may also bring lower value for money rank, lower career rank, lower placement success, and fewer students employed at three months post-graduation, as it often takes longer than three months for such students to find a job position that suits their profile and their values.

Figure 4 illustrates how the BS rankings influence schools' primary strategy and shows how it can create some tensions between the RM strategy versus the BS' primary strategy.

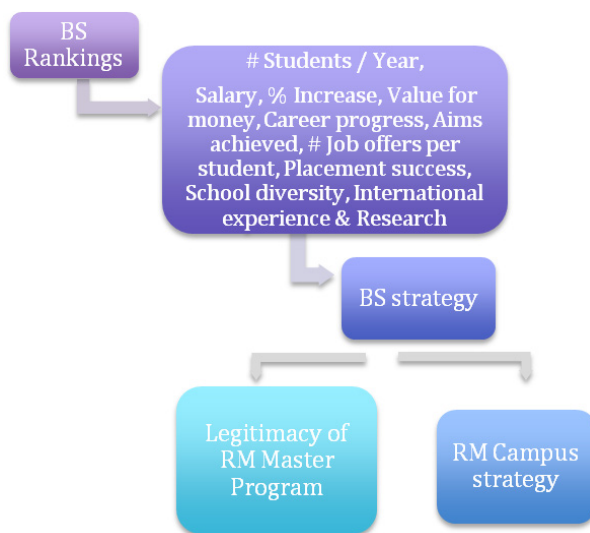


Figure 4: Business Schools' Strategy towards Rankings and Impacts.

As explained above, as the BS strongly value the FT rankings and are competing using their standard, they are not encouraged to differentiate themselves, to innovate in their educational approach, or to take the chance that their students will take a longer time to start their career in an innovative area such as RM as this does not fit the alumni career progress criteria. The substantial emphasis placed on alumni career progress can result in these schools strategically avoiding offering cutting edge courses that are less known or less requested by businesses but which could benefit them.

Conclusion & Further Research

Our interviews show that individuals involved in RM changes face various tensions inside their BS. In not a single instance was it reported to be easy for them to implement changes towards more responsibility or sustainability on their campus or in their curriculum and programmatic offerings. We identified seven types of tensions: priority of ROI; bottom-up innovation (less effective than top down innovations); limited resources allocated, and as a direct consequence a lack of knowledge and competencies; transversal issues touching all parts of the school and all stakeholders; a limited commitment from the top and as well growing awareness coupled with denial.

Through this analysis, our attention was directed to the rankings phenomenon. In our discussion we introduced the impact of a school's ranking on their strategy. Our results show that the most well-regarded ranking worldwide may be in contradiction with the needed changes towards RM. This poses a warning and dilemma to new developing business schools. On the one hand to become a global player BS have to play the ranking game. But on the other hand, in order to not prepare for the past (new) business schools must help the rankers to develop a new set of criteria to incorporate Responsible Management concepts, practices and courses.

As to the limitations of this research, during our study we were not able to directly interview the dean/CEO/director of the visited schools. This limits our understanding of the BS strategy. Additionally,

the use of grounded theory may not result in as detailed understanding of all the data and the potential results as other possible methods of analysis. Over time, additional results may emerge from additional analysis.

Further research could be conducted to better understand the priorities of the BS. Deans could be interviewed to evaluate their interest in supporting incremental strategic innovations towards RM.

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