



UN PRME & emerging economies

Business schools from emerging economies need to embrace UN PRME, argues **Umesh Mukhi**, and suggests some ways they could do it

One of the most important questions asked among management educators in the last five years has been "how can business schools change their practices?" The United Nations Principle for Responsible Education (UN PRME) initiative addresses this question directly.

However, though UN PRME has approximately 470 signatories one of its major concerns is the low number of participants from emerging economies. (Asia has 51 signatories. Africa and the Middle East have 31. Latin America has 64. Eastern Europe has 46. This compares with Western Europe with 157 and North America with 108.)

Internationally, management education has recently been mainly criticised for its supposed over-emphasis on an economic and financial approach at the cost of stakeholder concerns. In this context, do business schools from emerging economies (BSEE) have a major role in shaping the management education scenario of the 21st century?

While management educators have been concerned with a number of different issues related to emerging economies, the issue of emerging economies themselves embracing responsible management education through UN PRME principles has hardly been raised.

157

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31

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The scenario

Since its inception management education has been dominated by the North American culture. The institutional structure and curriculum in business schools are very closely tied to the North American context. Standardised education models and curricula have resulted in graduates grasping the same theories and principles of doing business without questioning and reflecting on issues related to social, cultural and political trends at national and international level.

Given the fact that there is a surge in demand for management education in emerging economies and that it is normal for schools to focus on standardised ways of teaching, recruiting and running the institution, they have little time to reflect on emerging paradigms. As a consequence, BSEE tend to forget that by losing this reflection they are possibly missing a substantial competitive advantage. Many schools from developed economies capitalise on the UN PRME framework by taking up voluntary initiatives. BSEE, on the other hand, are lost in oblivion in the race to impart regular management education.

Why?

But, still, why should BSEE embrace PRME?

The answer to this lies in the self-interest of business schools if they realise the potential contribution they can make. Today we see emerging economies shaping the scenario of existing business practices and reinforcing new global trends. BSEE have a huge potential to exploit this phenomenon and use their national context to reinforce new management education trends.

Responsible management education is not only limited to environment issues. It extends its horizons to human rights, labour rights, issues related to corruption and many existing socio-political issues. Among BSEE there is a category of schools that has an inbuilt capacity to spearhead responsible management education. And they can extend their foresight to focus on the issues mentioned above.

In a recent article in *Global Focus* ("What does business want from business schools? Vol 6 Issue 3) Sir Richard Lambert suggested that the answer would be graduates with skills to deal with sustainability issues, diversity management, market uncertainty and changing governments. Emerging economies and BSEE can capitalise by imparting such skill sets because these conditions tend to exist naturally in their national context.

For example, at a recent conference addressing CSR, a panel discussion focused on CSR trends in emerging economies. During the discussion one of the panellists talked about CSR in an Indian context. He explained that CSR in India was actually two concepts.

The first concept of CSR was naturally a part of the way of life in India, where people lived in harmony with nature.

The second concept of CSR is a western school of thought based on social philanthropy and community engagement.

As a result, the first concept of CSR hardly finds a place in the curriculum compared to the second. This lack of effort to emphasise the first concept results in losing a mass of knowledge that exists in the national context. This comes at the cost of depriving the international community of the ability to explore the implications of new knowledge.

How?

So how can BSEE embrace UN PRME and lead the change? My research related to business schools suggests that leading schools are just that because of three unique abilities:

Confidence

Leading schools have confidence in their resources and capabilities. Faculty empowerment for research and pedagogy is always at the heart of such schools. In any new initiative to be undertaken they have confidence in their organisational capabilities to open up towards experimentation in research, pedagogy and strategy.

Innovation

Innovation in a school towards new research and partnerships, in pedagogy and challenging existing trends is a mindset. Good schools are exceptionally reflexive to external environments and act innovatively. While other business schools are tied up in the world of ranking and competition, foresight and innovativeness allow leading business school to focus on their resource and capabilities to pursue thought leadership for the future.



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Co-operation

Leading schools are known for high levels of co-operation among their trusted network of stakeholders. Co-operation is a unique capability of a school to traverse the national context and interplay with international actors towards achieving a determined goal. As stakeholder management in itself is an art, BSEE need to have a broader vision of partnerships through which they can widen their horizons. For example, UN PRME signatories can co-operate with UN Global Compact Local Networks and business schools in the region.

These factors are tacit and are intertwined with the internal organisational structure and culture of a business school. Not all BSEE are equipped with these factors and therefore we see lack of commitment in their approach. If BSEE are to lead trends they have to apply these factors to their daily approach and challenge existing ideas.

The Opportunity

BSEE have a huge role to play in facilitating knowledge transfer and enhancing experiential learning by initiating new projects at faculty level. Using UN PRME as a facilitator between networks, BSEE can benefit from a plethora of partnerships. BSEE should take into account novel partnerships with stakeholders available at local, national and global level; they all want to collaborate with BSEE in some way or another.

Schools may often use UN PRME for branding purposes but it also provides a comprehensive learning platform for dialogue and for networking for tangible purposes. It is up to schools to use the UN PRME platform to initiate new projects and work collaboratively with schools from developed economies. We hear about strategic partnerships between schools from developed and developing regions but often they are limited to exchange programmes.



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What?

The question which BSEE very often raise is what is the outcome of such initiatives? As mentioned before, it is up to business schools to decide what kind of output they expect. Of course doubts may also include whether such initiatives are profitable or not.

If BSEE are well equipped with the three capabilities detailed above they can contribute significantly to the existing scenario. If a school wants to lead more on the research aspect of sustainable development, it can do so by research co-operation and projects under UN PRME. If the target is to develop strong ethical skills sets among executives it can co-operate with top trainers and mentors in the field of responsible management.

BSEE should first establish confidence in their capabilities; they should realise that they cannot be followers any more. Only after identifying their unique capabilities can business schools ramp up their efforts in a particular direction. This will result in developing the unique identity of each school.

Individual BSEE may take minor steps but collectively at a global level they can contribute to a change in mindset. Individual efforts are always appreciated but collective efforts from BSEE from all spheres would ultimately create change in the mindset of existing practices and promote thought leadership. This, by default, is the first and foremost responsibility of business schools.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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