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Climate Change Management Learning and Education in a Climate-contested World: Why Accreditation Bodies Can Act as Support and Shield

Introduction

The Paris Agreement's 1.5°C pathway is slipping, and current trajectories imply climate warming well into the future. However, the broader political and informational environment is moving in the opposite direction. For instance, climate information can be downplayed or removed from official public channels, and key regulatory foundations contested (Friedman, 2025; Osaka, 2025), illustrating how political shifts can directly affect the visibility and legitimacy of environmental regulation. Europe is no exception; in practice, ambitions have recently been scaled back for two cornerstone pillars of corporate climate governance, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (Dey et al., 2025).

This climate backlash is now directly affecting business schools and, by extension, their accreditation processes and institutions. In France, for instance, a right-leaning thinktank has recently accused business schools of being "hotbeds of radical ecology" for introducing tools such as the Sulitest, the Climate Fresk, and climate-related content in core management curricula (Daury-Fauveau, 2025). Accreditations and rankings are explicitly named as levers behind this alleged drift (pp. 19–20).

COMPLIANCE

In a climate-contested world, the question is no longer whether business schools can showcase initiatives but whether the ecosystem can sustain climate-competent education under political pressure and performative compliance.

This is precisely why the role of accreditors is more important than ever. While over the past two decades, accreditation has increasingly defined what counts as excellence, relevance, and credibility in higher education (Cornuel, 2025), this article argues that accreditors have a distinctive and key role to play in sustaining and implementing a genuine climate change and planetary agenda by setting clear and robust standards in an increasingly climate-contested world.

RME Helped, but RME is No Longer Enough

Responsible Management Education (RME) has historically played a crucial role in embedding ethics, sustainability, and stakeholder thinking into business school curricula (Laasch, 2024). In many ways, this progress was enabled and often accelerated by accrediting bodies and third-party quality systems, whose frameworks elevated responsibility from an optional commitment to a mainstream expectation.

As RME diffused across institutions, however, it also became increasingly aligned with prevailing institutional logics compatible with 'business as usual', a neo-liberal hidden curriculum, and business primacy above other considerations (Blasco, 2020 – Figure 1). Ultimately, it largely stopped short of questioning deeper systemic drivers such as infinite growth, extractivism, or anthropocentrism. Therefore, what is needed is not simply more responsibility but a deeper shift in how management education understands its role in a climate-disrupting world.

Beyond It: The Emergence of Climate Change Management Learning & Education

Meanwhile, management learning and education research on climate change and planetary disruption has been surprisingly thin and heavily constrained by responsible/sustainability framing. Our systematic review (1990–2025) identified only 22 relevant articles, however it also revealed something more important: an emerging shift, which we call Climate Change Management Learning & Education (CCMLE – Pastier & Serhal, 2025). It offers an analytical framework that helps clarify what changes when climate change and planetary disruption are taken seriously as defining conditions for management education and learning (Figure 1).

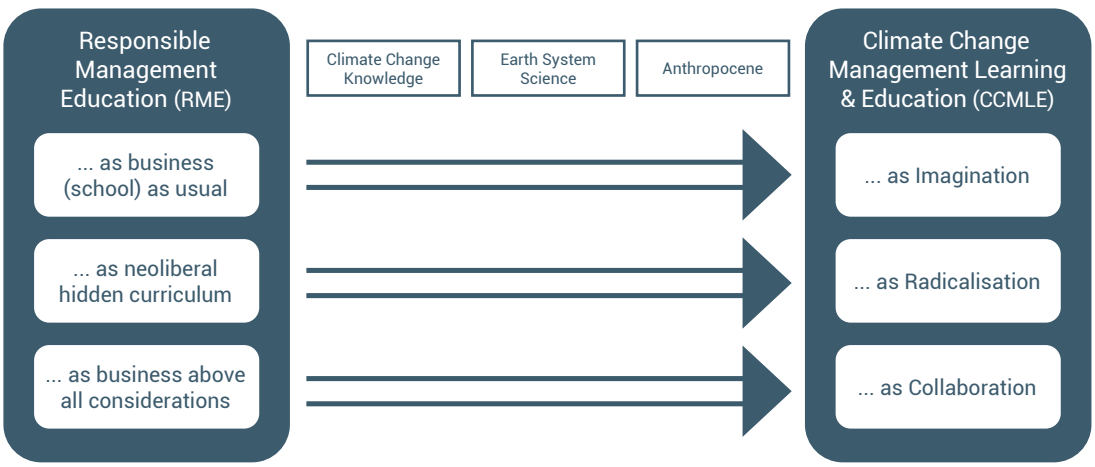
Emerging CCMLE literature suggests a progression in the framing of climate disruption in management education. At a foundational level, it strengthens climate literacy (science, policy, mitigation/adaptation) but often leaves core managerial assumptions intact. The second frame draws on Earth system science, positioning the organisation as embedded in a destabilising planet shaped by interdependence, feedback loops, planetary boundaries, and non-linear risk. A third, more transformative frame situates MLE in the Anthropocene, treating climate change as a socio-political rupture that reopens the question of what management is for under the planetary limits.

Across the literature, three recurring pillars give this shift its transformative force, and mark a clear departure from the limits of RME (Figure 1).

- Imagination: Expands curricular space beyond 'business as usual', bringing post-growth, regenerative, and alternative economic models into what is considered legitimate management knowledge, yet increasingly relevant to real-world challenges.
- Radicalisation: Makes the 'hidden curriculum' discussable (neoliberalism, shareholder primacy, extractivism), so learners interrogate dominant paradigms rather than simply learning to operate within them.
- Collaboration: Treats climate disruption as a transdisciplinary, societal challenge, requiring dialogue across disciplines and with scientists, policymakers, communities, and civil society, not management education alone.

Together, these pillars point to a redefinition of the purpose of management education and the central role of accreditors in it.

Figure 1. Toward a Climate Change Management Learning and Education (Pastier & Serhal, 2025)



Why Accreditors are the Leverage Point and the Shield

A key constraint is that business schools rarely control the ecosystem conditions required for this shift (Edwards et al., 2021). Even committed deans, programme directors, and educators face structural constraints such as competitive markets, rankings, faculty incentive systems, employer expectations, and political scrutiny. Without ecosystem alignment, the CCMLE remains fragmented, marginal, and slow.

Accreditation operates as an invisible hand in management education: it is rarely directive and yet is deeply consequential. By defining what counts as quality, relevance, and legitimacy, accreditation frameworks shape institutional priorities, often long before explicit strategic decisions are made through the standards, incentives, and signals embedded in evaluation processes.

Accreditors now face a second mandate: the need for protection. When climate education becomes a political target, framed as ideology, 'radicalism', or an externally imposed agenda, schools look for institutional cover. Global Focus Magazine has already engaged with the question of climate scepticism, evidence, and academic responsibility, drawing a clear line between academic and science-based debate and misinformation (Figge & Thorpe, 2024). Accreditors can extend this line into quality assurance by protecting evidence-based climate education as part of academic integrity and societal relevance.

PLANETARY CRISIS

This is not about adding another checklist item. It is about reframing what 'quality' means in an era of planetary shift.

Far from the accusation of 'radical ecology' ideology, this dual mission is imperative. If business schools and management learning and education are to remain relevant in a future that, even under the IPCC's most optimistic projections, will reshape our societies, unsettle long-held certainties, and transform MLE in the medium term (IPCC, 2023). Accreditation has been the invisible hand of business education; it can become a steadier hand, not by prescribing curricula, but by raising the floor, clarifying expectations, and enforcing credibility. Such a mission is not merely an ethical or moral consideration; it raises the question of what is relevant to teach in a world already transformed by an accelerating planetary disruption.

However, this opportunity is significant. Accreditors possess the legitimacy, infrastructure, and reach to act as powerful levers for transformation. The literature points to several concrete avenues through which accreditation frameworks could better align with CCMLE principles.

- **Make climate a first-order criterion, not a sub-theme within impact and social responsibility frameworks**

Guide schools to treat climate disruption as a strategic condition shaping mission, governance, resource allocation, performance metrics and programme portfolios, rather than as an optional 'sustainability activity', ultimately including ecological literacy, institutional footprint, and contributions to climate justice.

- **Shift from inputs to outcomes: expect assurance of climate competence**

Move beyond 'we offer courses' towards 'graduates can demonstrate capabilities': systemic and transdisciplinary thinking, climate-risk and resilience reasoning, mitigation and adaptation decision-making, climate forecasting and backcasting, and imagination capabilities with CCMLE.

- **Audit integration, not electives**

Require proof of integration in core curricula and foundational disciplines, not isolated add-ons. Ask for evidence that climate is meaningfully embedded across finance, strategy, operations, marketing, HR, and accounting, rather than being outsourced to a single elective, champion, or centre.

- **Build anti-greenwashing 'red flags' into reviews**

Flag misalignment between branding and curriculum, partnerships that contradict stated purpose, and 'impact-washing' collaborations. Recognise partnerships that genuinely strengthen climate-relevant learning, research, and practice while scrutinising extractive or reputational arrangements.

- **Enable sustained faculty capability development and cross-disciplinary literacy**

CCMLE needs educators who can work competently with Earth system science concepts and contested socio-political questions, not as specialists in climate and natural science, but as informed conveners.

- **Treat internationalisation under planetary limits as a quality issue**

Reframe mobility, travel, and global programmes for students and faculty as a design challenge rather than a taboo. Quality assurance should consider footprint, alternatives (hybrid, regional hubs, longer stays), and educational coherence, rather than assuming 'more travel' automatically equals 'greater internationalism' and 'improved quality'.

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A final word: The choice accreditors cannot avoid

In a climate-contested world, the question is no longer whether business schools can showcase initiatives but whether the ecosystem can sustain climate-competent education under political pressure and performative compliance. Accreditors are already central actors, uniquely positioned to act as both support and shields.

The next step is pragmatic: translating these principles into review questions, evidence expectations, and peer learning among schools.

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