# Manchester Metropolitan University

Antoniadou, M (2019) In: Cases on Corporate Social Responsibility and Contemporary Issues in Organisations. IGI Global, pp. 110-130. ISBN 9781522577157

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**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** IGI Global

**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-7715-7.ch007

Please cite the published version

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# 'More than a University': the impact of CSR initiatives on business students' perceptions as future managers'

## ABSTRACT

*Given that research into attitudes to responsible management in education is still in its infancy, this chapter explored business students' experiences in relation to award-winning Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices of their University and mandatory curriculum on responsible management, based on the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME). Drawing on a qualitative study, focus groups were conducted with 107 students who were asked about their awareness, perceptions and impact of the ethical, environmental and social practices that their University implements. The findings suggested strong awareness and pride of its ethical standards, while many students' choice of University was influenced by their institution's sustainability practices. However, whilst students enjoy an immersive experience in CSR and ethics education, some doubted that this prepares them to face ethical quandaries in the real world. The chapter highlights a number of important orientations for the future development of university curriculum in relation to CSR.*

Keywords: Higher Education, CSR, responsible management education; PRME, UK

## INTRODUCTION

In light of the financial meltdown that begun in 2008 and the numerous corporate scandals, the loss of ethical and corporate values has enforced business managers and leaders to become aware that what they do has an impact on society and the environment. Universities now have a crucial role to play in optimising the way society is managed and in attaining the objective of ensuring major improvements in people's lives. However, as higher education is becoming a highly competitive industry and a diversified sector, it becomes important for universities to reinvent themselves in response to new challenges and opportunities. Today's strong universities stand out by their ability to follow their vision and to preserve their identity, even amid significant shifts on the global higher education market (e.g., the increased internationalisation, marketisation and deregulation of universities) (Burcea & Marinescu, 2011).

Facing increased competition, universities have now further realised the role of responsible management education and CSR, as a powerful source of competitive advantage (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The implementation of socially responsible initiatives by universities, depicts an improvement in the management of the institutions (Loureiro and Gonzalez 2012), thus serving as a catalyst for future professionals that leads to future changes worldwide. From this view, students' perceptions and experiences with regards to CSR represent a valuable input for universities, in order to develop sustainability and responsibility marketing strategies adapted to improve student satisfaction, attract new students and prevent student withdrawal (Vázquez & Lanero, 2016). This realisation has been reflected in the way that CSR and ethics are communicated and taught in business schools. Whilst sceptic perceptions of business education suggest that it is inadequate to take on the challenges facing future business managers (Ghoshal, 2005; Kashyap, Mir & Iyer, 2006; MacLellan & Dobson, 1997; Pfeffer 2005), numerous other scholars consider that it is necessary to give greater importance to ethical values and CSR policies in universities (Arlow, 1991; Bampton and & 2005; Block & Cwik 2007; Gaa & Thorne 2004). The main rationale behind such favourable arguments towards CSR-oriented values in universities, is that education is a key driver of students' moral and ethical development and that the students of today will become the top managers and policy makers of the future (Armstrong, Ketz & Owsen, 2003;

Williams, Agle & Gates, 2018). Business schools are faced with an increased responsibility to produce graduates who act in an ethical, transparent and responsible manner and instigate ethically acceptable operations when joining or creating a company (Cornelius et al. 2007; Pfeffer and Fong 2004; Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly & Mumford, 2009).

Having recognised that students need a more thorough understanding of CSR and business ethics, one of the largest modern UK HE institutions heavily relying on practical action to responsible management education is the Faculty of Business and Law of Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Met). Manchester Met aimed to differentiate itself and thus generate a competitive position through a combination of high quality responsible management education and social responsibility practices. In 2010, Manchester Met affirmed participation to the United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), a series of principles that encourage practical action to incorporate business ethics, environmental and sustainable development issues within curricula and student engagement activities. Since then, the Business School's mission has been to develop socially and environmentally responsible early-career professionals for successful careers in management. The Business School building exceeded the 'excellent' rating of the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) - the world's leading sustainability assessment method for master planning projects, infrastructure and buildings - and had been acknowledged through a number of awards, including No1 Greenest University by the People and Planet League. Other initiatives included the launch of the Sustainable and Ethical Enterprise Group, the recognition of the Centre for Enterprise as a Centre of Excellence by the Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs. As part of its commitment to PRME, Manchester Met initiated a series of lectures and dedicated modules (such as, 'Business Ethics and Sustainability' 'The Responsible Marketer', 'The Responsible Accountant' and 'Responsible Enterprise') delivered to all management undergraduates and postgraduates introducing them to Responsible Management, aiming to develop deeper understanding and appreciation of CSR. All of the Faculty's programmes, postgraduate and undergraduate, now have as one of their *compulsory* learning objectives an intention to make students aware of the importance of CSR, sustainability, and ethical issues in modern business practice – all drawing on the UN Global Compact and the PRME Initiative.

The PRME initiative is essentially a learning platform, and the most solid project to inspire and champion responsible management education and research globally (Alcaraz, Marcinkowska & Thiruvattal, 2011). Although based on a voluntary basis, PRME's main premise is that it seeks to develop future leaders by giving them the insights, skills and competencies to deal with the complex challenges faced by business and society in the 21st century (Waddock, Rasche, Werhane & Unruh, 2010). Manchester Met has redefined the type of education on responsible leadership and sustainability by creating pedagogies and education approaches that create a deeper understanding on key sustainability-related issues and to learn from the real-world challenges of existing managers. PRME also focuses on working with diverse working groups on poverty and management education, human and labour studies, ecological sustainability, and sustainable leadership in the era of climate change. The six principles of PRME are shown in Figure 1.

Despite the magnitude of these unique practices that Manchester Met had initiated, there was a lack of empirical research into exploring students' attitudes toward these principles. More importantly, little research has yet been conducted into business students' perceptions of CSR (e.g. Alonso-Almeida, Fernández de Navarrete & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2015; Cowton & Cummins 2003, Lämsä, Vehkaperä, Puttonen & Pesonen, 2008), whilst no attempt has been made to explore business students' experience who are exposed to compulsory responsible management education. Even though many studies have reported an increased use of responsible principles, policies and techniques in different industries, there has been at the moment very little research reported on the application of CSR into educational institutions around the world with calls for a more intense attention in the higher education sector (e.g. Sánchez-Hernández & Mainardes, 2016; Vázquez, Aza & Lanero, 2016).

Given that research into attitudes to CSR in education is still considered to be in its infancy, this chapter aimed to shed light on a number of issues. The study's main aim was, therefore, twofold. Firstly, to illustrate

Manchester Met's overall CSR strategy as an example of best practice and secondly, to analyse awareness, perceptions and overall experience in relation to the CSR initiatives, amongst its business students. Drawing on a qualitative study, focus groups with 107 were conducted, seeking to explore awareness, perceptions and impact of the ethical, environmental and social practices of their University, as future business leaders.

Considering the strategic importance of this issue for research and practical aspects, as well as being a top-priority topic in European Union's business strategy (European Commission, 2014), this chapter has significant implications. It is hoped that Manchester Met's practice and sharing students' experience of this practice, as reflected in this chapter, will encourage more HE institutions to attempt to shape students' perceptions in CSR as future managers.

*Figure 1: Principles for Responsible Management Education (UN, 2018)*

## BACKGROUND: RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

CSR, generally defined as an organisation's discretionary involvement in practices that appear to further economic, societal, and environmental well-being (Kotler & Lee, 2005), has become an increasingly important issue for HE (Aber, Kelly & Malroy, 2009; Savitz & Weber, 2007), as more and more institutions engage in implementing sustainability programmes in their agenda and curricula (Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013; Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2004; MacVaugh & Norton, 2012). Business schools have been leading this implementation of socially responsible initiatives with the goal of educating future leaders, managers, and workers who will ultimately engage with environmental, social, and economic systems throughout their careers (Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013; Savitz & Weber, 2006; Stubbs & Schapper, 2011).

Interest in ethics education and in promoting ethical attitudes of business students who are likely to be future managers has been growing; yet research remains far from reaching a thorough investigation on a global scale (Borkowski & Ugras, 1992; Jennings, 2004; Teixeira, Ferreira, Correia & Lima, 2018). The rationale for this interest has mainly been the several corporate scandals that have occurred in the past few decades, making business schools around the world seriously contemplate on the role of business education in relation to such phenomena. The pathologies of the capitalistic system have resulted into a growing perception that business school education is inadequate to address the challenge of instilling ethical behaviour among future business professionals (Baetz & Sharp, 2004; Kashyap et al., 2006). In fact, many early scholars who criticised the inclusion of business ethics in University curricula have raised questions on the influence of ethics instruction on subsequent individual behaviour (Vogel, 1987), and on whether teaching morality actually makes business students more moral, since moral character is formed earlier in life with the home being the key to moral education (Kristol, 1987). Contrasting arguments suggest that Universities are not only educational services providers, but also shapers of identity with major responsibilities to the nation and to the wider world (Sullivan Mort, Weerawardena & Carnegie, 2003). Yet, although there are studies investigating the impact of social responsibility on corporations' operations, relatively few studies examined CSR practices in relation to HE institutions. Studies that have been conducted around the world and investigated student perceptions on CSR in general, have failed to focus on investigating students' views about CSR activities of their *own* HE institutions (e.g. Panwar, Hansen & Anderson, 2010; Sobczak, Debucquet & Havard, 2006). The impact that intense CSR-oriented education has on students' perceptions and experiences, remains a heavily under-explored research topic.

Research into students' perception of the concept of CSR around the world has illustrated a gradual development of a favourable perception of the subject in recent years (Wright & Bennett, 2011). Students have

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a growing concern about CSR, which was reflected in two surveys that the Aspen Institute Centre for Business Education, conducted over the years (2003, 2008). This programme (Aspen BSP), surveyed MBA students across 15 business schools about their attitudes towards the relationship between business and society. Findings showed an increasing favourable change in the students' perception of CSR between the earlier and the later survey (Aspen Institute 2003; 2008). Students in 2008 felt more prepared for managing values conflicts than those in the 2003 survey and that they were given more opportunities to practice ethical/responsible decision making as part of their MBA. Students in the later survey were also more likely to make a connection between good corporate citizenship and a stronger, healthier community, with students being more interested in finding work that offers the potential of making a contribution to society.

Studies around the world that investigated the effect of business courses on students' attitudes on CSR, revealed an overwhelming preference of students who valued the stakeholder model of the company more than the shareholder model. For example, a study on Finnish students exploring the influence of business education on students' attitudes found that these were more aware of other stakeholders, besides shareholders, compared to business students in the Aspen ISIB sample (Lämsä et al., 2008). Achua's study (2008) amongst American undergraduate business students examined their CSR orientation and their attitudes toward courses that exposed them to the concept of CSR, revealing that the vast majority of the students had a high CSR orientation and believed that companies' responsibility goes beyond an exclusive concern for their shareholders' interests. Of note, is that among students from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, women were found to be more sensitive to CSR issues than men, particularly in relation to environmental issues (Arlow, 1991; Hudson & Miller, 2005). Conversely, other studies (e.g. Brijlal 2011; Kolodinsky et al., 2010) found no differences in terms of gender or race between attitudes to CSR nor in the perception of the need for social responsibility between male and female students. Nevertheless, Wang and Juslin (2011), in their study among undergraduate students from Chinese universities, found that Chinese students have a neutral perception of CSR, showing that cultural aspects may be a key determinant for students' perceptions. A unique study into ethical judgement in tertiary education in Cyprus (Zopiatis & Krambia-Kapardis, 2008), investigated the violation of school regulations, selfishness, cheating, and computer ethics that describe students' ethical judgements in the academic environment, showing that students exhibit the lowest tolerance with ethical issues relevant with selfishness and highest with issues relevant with computer ethics; however, the study did not specifically analyse CSR perceptions.

Of importance is that a stream of studies showed that when business students are exposed to ethics via their University curriculum they appear to have significantly different perceptions of what should be the ideal linkages between organisational ethical practices and business outcomes (Luthar & Karri, 2005). Even small-scale ethics programmes into business school curriculum has been found to have positive effects on students, mostly on female students (Ritter, 2006). Contrary, other studies (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Boyce, 2008; Felton & Sims, 2005) note that students generally do not appear to apply what they learn in their business ethics, or sustainability courses to their subsequent professional lives. An explanation of this contradiction might be because CSR issues are typically addressed in stand-alone modules (i.e. electives), whereas mainstream business courses are still taught with a heavy emphasis on narrow business values (Rasche, 2010).

This intensive and compulsory exposure to responsible management in the curriculum is what Manchester Met attempted to achieve, in order to influence perceptions of an ideal ethical climate. Instituting an ethics curriculum and incorporating a range of CSR initiatives, Manchester Met Business School (BS) aimed at enhancing moral awareness and reasoning. Numerous accreditations are promulgated within the higher education and business school contexts and a number of these relate to, or have aspects that relate to, ethics, social responsibility and sustainability. For example, the Manchester Met BS has become a member of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) in 2016, an accreditation that presents ethical decision-making strategies and important ethical values to be taught to students for consideration in business decisions, clearly showing that business ethics *can* be learned and trained. Formerly, in 2010, Manchester Met BS had become an advanced member of the UN PRME initiative, with a view to establish a process of continuous improvement

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among institutions of management education and develop a new generation of business leaders capable of managing the complex challenges faced by business and society in the 21st century (www.unprme.org). Yet, since 2010, there was no attempt on an institutional (or national) level to empirically assess its impact on students' awareness, experience, and perceptions. Although there is evidence from extant literature indicating that PRME is based on the implicit assumption that management education works to promote change in understanding, attitudes, and practice among learners (Waddock et al., 2010) and that faculty members are a critical driver for implementing the PRME principles (e.g. Maloni, Smith & Napshin, 2012), there has been no attempt to empirically examine how students perceive such intense responsible management programs, particularly for schools pursuing an advanced, cross-disciplinary level of sustainability integration. In fact, the accreditation of business schools can play a role in fostering organisational change towards stakeholder engagement and engagement with social responsibility and sustainability issues (Blasco, 2011), but we know very little of how learners within business schools perceive such accreditations. As portrayed in more recent research (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 2013; Teixeira et al., 2018), social responsibility is a growing concern in business management, hence, becomes crucial to investigate the perceptions of today's students on this matter, who are the future's employees, employers, and entrepreneurs.

Addressing this gap in the literature, the overall aim of this study was to evaluate Manchester Met's responsible management and corporate responsibility strategy, as mainly dictated by the UN PRME principles, from the students' perspective. The specific objectives were: (i) to identify the level of awareness of Manchester Met's commitment to PRME amongst its business management students, (ii) to explore how the CSR principles of Manchester Met, as dictated by the UN PRME, and CSR practices are perceived by its business management students, and (ii) to investigate the impact of these principles among its students' attitudes and activities as current and/or future managers. The following section presents the initiatives that Manchester Met has initiated in the past decade, both in its business strategy as well as in its curriculum. After presentation of the university's practices, the study that aimed at evaluating business students' awareness, experience and perceptions is detailed.


## THE CURRENT STUDY

The Faculty of Business and Law at Manchester Metropolitan University affirmed commitment to Responsible Management Education and the six PRME principles in 2010. In 2012, the Business School moved into a £75 million teaching and research building, designed to utilise the environmental resources available on site and used a range of active and passive environmentally sustainable features, which include:
- A green roof comprising of 650m2 of biodiverse sedum blanket that provides a habitat for birds and bees, absorbs rainwater and pollution and provides a green space in the city.
- The cool slab concrete system uses ground water to heat and cool the building.
- The building uses a lot of natural light and energy efficient lighting. Lights are motion-activated and switch off automatically.
- Solar panels are installed on the roof and generate electricity for the building.
- Rainwater harvesting reduces demand on the mains supply.

Based on its Green impact, the building won two Green Gown 2012 Awards (UK and International) in the 'Continuous Improvement: Institutional Change' category. The University was named as the Greenest University in the UK, topping the 2013 People and Planet league table of 140 universities for environmental sustainability and performance, while it maintained a top three position since 2013 in the 'People and Planet' rating for its sustainable credential. Key awards and achievements are summarised in Table 1. Further, the University's commitment to Responsible Management Education and the six PRME principles is summarised in Figure 2.


*Table 1: CSR Awards and Achievements of Manchester Met*

| Best reuse project in 2017 | • Give it don't bin it campaign – CIWM |
| | • Sustainability Resource Award |
| | • 291 students certified as carbon literate, 14 students and 7 staff became trainer certified |
| Carbon Literate Union | The Union became the first carbon literate students' union in the world |
| Donations | 212 tonnes of unwanted items donated to charities |
| Gold standard | • Award Travel Choices Accreditation Scheme |
| | • 8.8% of staff cycle to work |
| | • 193 bicycles purchased through the Cycle to Work scheme |
| | • 52% of vehicle fleet is electric or low emission |
| | • 25.9% single person journeys to work |
| Fossil Free | • 6.8% of our electricity consumption from renewable and low carbon on-site generation |
| | • 185 tonnes of carbon emission saved annually by committing 9 energy efficiency projects through the Salix Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme |
| Recycling | • 48.6% reuse and recycling achieved |
| | • -34.3% carbon reduction achieved |
| Food | • Silver level - Food Made Good |
| | • Highly Commended - Green Gown Awards 2017 – MetMUnch student food network (Enterprise category) |
| | First UK university to achieve the new and more challenging standard of ISO14001: 2015 international environmental management system certified |
| | • Fairtrade University status maintained |
| | • Accredited NUS Responsible Future |

*Figure 2: Overview of the PRME activities by Manchester Met BS (2012-2017)*

## METHODS

Recent arguments (e.g. Bass & Milosevic, 2018; Cohen & Simnett, 2014) claim that despite its significant contribution thus far, qualitative research is underutilised for studying CSR. The vast majority of studies exploring student experiences on business education have been heavily relying on quantitative surveys (e.g. Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2004; Teixeira et al., 2018). Qualitative methodology was deemed as appropriate for this study as it sought to investigate how key informants perceive and understand CSR initiatives and their impact in their current and future professional development. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), the qualitative researcher is interested in *perspectives*. Thus, taking into account that this study's key objective was to reveal perceptions and thoughts of students in relation to CSR-initiatives of their institution, qualitative research provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can offer a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data (Goodyear, Barela, Jewiss & Usinger, 2014). At this juncture, the main goal was to elicit relevant perspectives by asking students, who are exposed to a mandatory CSR-based curriculum and multiple University initiatives, to talk about their perspectives from their experience in studying at Manchester Met.

As the purpose of the project was to investigate student awareness and experiences over the course of their studies, undergraduate and taught postgraduate students were targeted. In the research process, seven focus

groups were organised (six undergraduates, one postgraduate) with 107 students, representing an overall 25% of the overall student population of their dedicated Programmes. These consisted of between 10 and 17 students and comprised of 84 undergraduates (29 from Year 1, 30 from Year 2, 25 from Year 3) and 23 postgraduates, all from the Business School (BS) studying Business Management and MSc Management. Students' age ranged from 18 to 29 years old, with 58 males and 49 females. The selection of students was made from compulsory responsible management classes, such as Responsible Enterprise, Business Environment, and Business Ethics and Sustainability and the focus groups took place during class time. This meant that students in the sample had an understanding of the meaning of social responsibility, although not necessarily agree with its benefits. The discussion groups with students were designed to elicit rich, qualitative data providing insight into the social reality of the individuality of student experience.

Each focus group lasted between one and two hours. It was agreed that personal identities would not been revealed. Before posing any questions, students were told of the University's key achievements in relation to sustainability and were shown the PRME six principles as a picture (Figure 2); they were then asked to reveal whether they were aware of them. However, they were not asked to mention any specific initiatives involved in the six principles. The topics addressed in the discussions were guided by previous literature (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Teixeira et al., 2018). The structured interview protocol first asked general questions about perceived role of ethics and social responsibility in their education, followed by more specific probe questions. The general questions asked informants for their perceptions concerning overall social, environmental and ethical principles of management education. For example, students were asked whether their selection of University was guided by the University's sustainable and ethical accreditations and awards, whether they consider it important for a University to engage in such initiatives, and how their behaviours and motivations as current and/or future managers are influenced from engagement with PRME. Specific probe questions were also guided by previous conceptualisations. For example, students were asked to contrast their experience of being in a socially responsible University with something that is not, such as previous experiences of educational institutions. Uses of 'the contrast principle' are recommended methods in qualitative research and theory development (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). These probe questions were asked after the more general open-ended questions.

When new informants did not reveal new findings and interpretations were clear, sampling stopped (Benner, 1994). All participants agreed to audiotape the interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim, and provided the basis of analysis. Following each group session, debriefing and formal review of audio data was conducted to ensure the meanings of the discussions were commonly understood. A thematic analysis was used to find common themes that appeared within the focus groups, using six phases (Brown & Clarke, 2006). Phase one, involved the immersion into the research data and familiarisation, by carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts to search for meanings. Phase two involved the production of initial codes from the data. A code could be a word, a phrase, a sentence, or multiple sentences, which represented a distinct thought. These units were then organised into emergent themes, as part of Phase three, comprising thought units that were conceptually similar to each other and different from other thought units, and these emergent categories were given labels. For example, if a few participants said that they were highly appreciative of their University's commitment to community involvement, and others did not place an interest towards their University's socially responsible actions, both would be included in a category labelled 'favourable perceptions of CSR' and 'perceptions that challenged the importance of CSR' respectively. Phase four, involved the reviewing and refining of themes, to ensure that all candidate themes do not collapse to each other. Phase five is about identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about, and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures. Finally, phase six, involved the final analysis and write-up of the findings and discussion, with data extracts demonstrating the prevalence of each theme.

**FINDINGS**
Consistent with the study's objectives, the findings are presented in three themes concerning awareness, perceptions and impact of CSR initiatives and the principles of responsible management education (PRME). The findings of the study are summarised and integrated within the sections below.

**Awareness of CSR practices and of the UN PRME**

Initially, the students were asked to comment whether they know any key CSR-related achievements, if they have heard of the UN PRME, and whether they knew that they belonged to a signatory school. Out of the 107 students, only three (2.8%) expressed complete unawareness of the principles, and their University's commitment. The rest of the students showed awareness and enthusiasm about key achievements and that they were part of a signatory school, early indicating the social and ecological considerations these students had. Many students emphasised that this was amongst the first things that counted to their University selection, as they were impressed by the institutions awards and emphasis on ethical standards:

> *I still remember during Induction Week, when they showed us the six principles. It immediately created a sense of pride to be in a signatory Business School. I mean…just by looking at the Building and knowing there are bees and birds in our roof! I still can't believe it.* (Final Year, female, Focus group 5)

> *Ok don't ask me what they are, but I know we are committed to the principles. Our tutors won't stop mentioning it, plus it's in our exams. We have compulsory exam questions on sustainability, we have guest speakers who mention it, plus it's impossible to miss the obsession on CSR in the Business School!* (First Year, male, Focus Group 1)

> *My mate and I came to the Open Day and they talked to us about the curriculum and how the program is different from other ones. I still remember that we returned home thinking "okay this is where I want to study. With the bees on our roof, and the solar panels, and the ethical stuff in the modules". We did a quiz in the Visit Day too on ethical issues and we realised how much corruption is around us, so being in a UN-accredited university matters. It'd be embarrassing not to be aware of it* (First Year, male, Focus Group 2)

It was noteworthy that many students across all levels made referral to the concept of stakeholder theory and of key scholars in the field (examples were Edward Freeman and John Elkington) to show their awareness. They showed understanding and appreciation of the stakeholder values, claiming that their education and way of studying makes them realise that *'investment in CSR is perhaps the most important aspect of a properly managed company'* (Second Year, female, Focus Group 4).

The three students, who showed unaware of the PRME commitment, were further asked about the University's CSR strategy. They all claimed to know that their programme has a strong emphasis on CSR theoretical models and projects, yet the six principles is something that they ignored. However, they were fully aware of the institution's Green Impact award. As one of them said '*I had no idea, but it now makes sense why all our modules are ecologically and CSR-oriented'.*

**Perceptions towards responsible education and corporate responsibility**

Students were also asked about their interest and overall experience in being involved in a signatory university that heavily invests in sustainable, ethical and social initiatives. They recognised that their awareness on CSR has tremendously been enhanced and that responsible management is now part of their favourite modules. The overall discussions revealed that students from all levels shared a true interest in social responsibility. They have placed significant emphasis on the benefits in relation to employability as most of them recognised that "*we need to be thoroughly informed about ethical matters*", and that "*employers will look for this in our CV and portfolio*". They referred to their modules, field trips, guest speakers, case studies, group projects, panel and symposium activities as exemplars of best practices and characterised them as 'a *useful approach to social responsibility integration into the educational environment'.* One postgraduate female student considered this emphasis on responsible management as '*the right and proper way for education'*, while another female student

from the same group said that '*the way in which responsibility issues are integrated into teaching gives the course some prestige and priority.*'

A postgraduate student even characterised the University's practices as '*meaningful*' and claimed that with responsibility issues being high on the agenda, her education needs to be aligned with this. Another student, said:

> *I feel like I'm being prepared to become a corporate citizen. It's great and I'm really enjoying it. Making CSR a core element in my education is excellent for us and for the business community. I want an ethical world and I expect that my education is aligned with it to help us improve environmental, social, and economic literacy of business*' (Second Year, Female, Group 4)

The discussion on exposure to ethics education raised some concerns to a few groups. Students in the first year group had an intense debate when they were asked their opinion about responsible education and CSR. When some students became cynical and doubted the need of being ethical leaders, they claimed that some people manage to '*get away with it and become rich by paying to keep governments' mouth shut*'. They also raised concerns of whether they will be able to resist to ethical dilemmas in the future to survive the competitive agenda of the markets. As one student said:

> *Okay I get it why ethics are important. But look what happened to Tesco and Volkswagen. They are now richer despite the scandals. So sometimes, I wonder if it is worth it. We are been taught that CSR is expensive and yet most companies are unethical.* (First year, male, Group 2)

Likewise, a postgraduate student in Group 7, shared concerns that '*there are some real ethical dilemmas in the real world and I I'm afraid that morality can't win at the end, even if you throw all the ethics modules of the world'*. It was then, that a female postgraduate student referred to her working experience and saw that her current manager is acting unethically by '*cooking the books'* but he remains successful.

Other students from Groups 2 and 7, stressed the ethical dilemmas associated with particular professions, such as accountants and CEOs, and admitted that in some cases CSR is '*problematic*, '*costly'* and '*unsure it pays off'*. The question on whether they think that education in the past decades actually had such an emphasis on business ethics, made these students reflect and re-consider. As a first year student said:

> *I doubt that Volkswagen's CEO has studied ethical theories, models. Now, we are more exposed to such rationalities which involve moral and political choices. I guess if they had a PRME-aligned education would challenge their assumptions about what constitutes good and bad business practice'* (First year, male, Group 2)

Many times students referred to Professional Development Week, as an opportunity to boost their business skills and also referred to the multiple stories, examples and representations that their tutors use to represent success and failure, role models and antiheroes in ways that makes them being alert. All seven focus groups ended with a realisation that the course delivery and other initiatives were positively perceived. Their overall perception was that moral learning '*really matters'*, and although it requires persistently challenging students' assumptions about what it means, the business students are conscious of its importance.

## Impact of responsible education as current and/or future managers

The focus group discussions also involved questions on whether the intense responsible management curricula actually work to bring change in their understanding, attitudes, and practice amongst these students. There was strong agreement among the focus groups regarding the beneficial impact of a CSR-curriculum. The final year students, showed the greatest enthusiasm on social responsibility teaching, with many commenting that their

exposure to CSR-based curriculum has changed their own way of living. One student mentioned that it is compulsory for their consultancy project to have a CSR manager role and how this role transformed his way of life:

> *I am the CSR manager for our Young Enterprise project this year and I found myself researching sustainable ways of creating a product and promoting the product. It's the best job I've ever had in my life. I even now get angry when I see my family not recycling and I get really upset when I see my flatmates wasting so much food. This is how my idea of a food waste app started.* (Final Year, Male, Group 6)

The rationale behind final years' enthusiasm is merely due to their conscious choice of majoring in responsible education. Students in the final year, have the option of selecting from a range of business ethics modules, which intensify even more their exposure towards responsible education. Likewise, the compulsory module in Year 2, Responsible Enterprise, is built upon the PRME principles, which gives them 24 teaching weeks of knowledge of social responsibility concepts and skills to practice within their chosen profession.

Postgraduate students claimed to be more cynical with certain companies after their learning challenged their own habits of mind and points of view. The postgraduate students further referred to a business school field trip component, during which the student's program exposed them to a socially responsible company. They all claimed that such company offered them examples of ethical and socially responsible behaviour, making them more eager to be ethical themselves and to seek employment in this company, upon their graduation. It was typical when one of them highlighted how the triple-bottom line is now becoming his dissertation topic and his interest in CSR has made him want to pursue to a PhD, so that he can expand his knowledge '*and actually make an impact to the field*'.

Many undergraduate students from all levels spoke about actively engaging in volunteering work, and seeking employment only in companies that display ethical values. Exhibiting greater ethical sensitivity was also evident:

> *I'm now more cynical with some ads I see. I was very naïve two-years ago thinking that Apple was ethical. Bankruptcies, scandals and corruption have changed my perceptions about certain companies. I don't think now I would want to work for a company that is unethical* (Second Year, Female, Group 4)

When a group of final year students won an award for their enterprise project, they commented that during the competition they saw how other universities did not place an emphasis on CSR issues, which they thought gave them the win. It was typical that their attitudes towards responsible education changed their way of thinking:

> *I am now more grateful to my University, I am now happier and committed as a student and I know I can make an impact as a manager in the future. Ethical-legal practices as well as philanthropic practices will be my priority. I remember being irritated that I had to look five minutes to find the university's bins, I was so lazy to even bother buying something healthy to eat, but now it's unconceivable not to!* (Final year, Male, Group 6)

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provided empirical findings to understand students' perceptions on CSR activities of their university and the impact upon their studies and future as managers. Considering that University is a good experience of education, its efficacy can be measured by evaluating its impact on students (Petruzzellis et al. 2006). This approach is consistent with an organisation market-oriented to satisfy students (DeShields et al. 2005) which has implications for other universities on a wider scale. Incorporating intense CSR initiatives and responsible

management education in the curriculum, appears to be an appropriate strategy for universities (especially business schools) to implement and to address the problems in the higher education marketplace. In this sense, our findings suggest that CSR, has an important role in promoting student satisfaction and intellectual development, given the overall perceptions that CSR and responsible management modules had an effect on student satisfaction and has met their expectations as future managers.

This study showed that the majority of students showed strong awareness and displayed positive attitudes and perceptions toward sustainability and CSR initiatives of their University. At the same time, they showed that their education had beneficial impact in both their perceptions and in their way of lives, as they referred several times to values, such as quality of life, environmental management, welfare and animal protection, meaning that there are high social perceptions related to CSR practices and responsible education. The findings confirm what is reported in the literature that CSR is increasingly recognised as important to students, with increasing and positive benefits to them (Lämsä et al., 2008 Luthar & Karri, 2005); yet this study did not find any differences in awareness, perceptions or impact between genders as other studies found (Ritter, 2006).

It was noteworthy, however, that many students raised concerns that despite the intense exposure to responsible management education and engagement with the PRME principles, it may not be sufficient when considering the fierce competition in the real world. Therefore, a major challenge for responsible management education is to train business students to think beyond their own self-interest, to resist profit-oriented ideals and be persistent in their moral values. Exposure to active learning and to project involvement – rather than just abstract curricula – is more likely to produce students who resist, collaborate, survive and thrive in the workplace, as already suggested by other studies (e.g. MacVaugh & Norton, 2012; Roehl, Reddy & Shannon, 2013).

This research has important implications for HE scholars, policy makers and businesses. As shown in this study's findings, students as future employees, employers, leaders, entrepreneurs and as consumers highly evaluate CSR programs. Especially students from younger generations, as the ones who participated in the study, come from a generation that is more engaged in philanthropic causes and is more likely to research the issues a company supports and the extent to which the company contributes (Hollender & Breen, 2010; Williams et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that the opinions and experiences of this generation are taken into consideration, as they will soon become the future workforce. Engaging in communication with the young generation (ie. millennials, generation Y) will help to develop a co-constructed dialogue, to ensure that compulsory, and not optional, responsible education is embedded in all HE institutions. Given that students of this study mentioned several concerns about unethical business practiced, it is also suggested that companies ought to listen to their voices. For example, businesses like Volkswagen, that have been heavily criticised for corporate misconduct, are already showing the beginning of this trend, that when a company is lying or hiding information from its consumers, its reputation and performance are affected almost immediately. The students participants also referred to their consumer roles, therefore, as companies will have to open up, become more flexible and transparent.

Transformation paths towards a more sustainable curriculum and project-based assessments have the potential to shape perceptions and practice of current and future students, via the dissemination of sustainable manufacture and consumption patterns (Roehl et al., 2013; Strayer, 2012). Indeed, young people are potentially very significant agents of change (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015), and it is particularly vital to understand and proactively anticipate how the sustainable and ethical attitudes of students will grow and how their ethical, responsible and sustainable behaviour will evolve.


## CONCLUSIONS

We began this research with the question on how business students who are part of an award-winning CSR institution experience and perceive their mandatory curriculum on responsible management education. These

findings are depicted in Figure 3.The findings of the thematic analysis discussed above align with previous research into students' perception of CSR (e.g. Wright & Bennett, 2011; Aspen Institute 2002; 2007) which shows an influence towards the development of a more positive perception of the subject and its values in recent years. Students in this study attached significant importance to CSR on an academic level, a fact indicated through their awareness and voluntary involvement degree in specific activities related to the concept.

*Figure 3: Summary of three themes*

The broad themes we identified (awareness, perceptions, impact), based on an award-winning institutional example, serve to expand and refine our understanding of CSR-based education. For example, we learned that our informants showed highly appreciative of what could be considered as the stakeholder theory and acknowledged that they aim to become ethical leaders, by also contrasting current practices in their workplaces. The students of this study appeared as aware (in their vast majority) and gave insights of how their institution and their education impacted their habits, way of living and perceptions of ethical leadership.

In addition, although the study did not aim to explore variables such as age, gender, academic degree and professional experience of each student, the thematic analysis did not present significant differences in the perceptions that each student has about CSR.

In what concerns limitations of the study, the number of students involved is one important constraint, as it is the fact that the focus groups did not consider demographic factors, which limits the generalisation of the findings. Yet, consistent with qualitative research guidelines (Brown & Clarke, 2006), we emphasised the richness of the qualitative accounts over quantity of data, and on the illumination of the participants' 'worlds'. The findings were developed from the narratives of a diverse group of participants, ranging in age, gender, countries of origin, and experiences of work and life, that allowed us to gain the essence of CSR-oriented education, in the context as they experienced it. Thus, the identified themes are shared by a diverse sample and may be recognisable to and, thus, transferable to other students from other institutions beyond this study with similar experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Without precluding the possibility that there are other ways in which CSR-oriented education is experienced, the systematic analysis of collective themes across a diverse sample until saturation was reached contributes to the trustworthiness of the data and that the findings will be broadly recognised by other business students. Consequently, future research might include a more extensive and heterogeneous sample, extending to other HE institutions with similar practices and students of different ages and areas, in order to better understand the experiences of these students, as suggested in this chapter, and whether they would lead to different conclusions.

Our findings conclude that using the example of Manchester Metropolitan University, business schools can make someone to be aware of ethical values and can help them to act ethically, and can expose them to important ideas in relation to responsible management education. Business schools can also help students be aware there are social expectations facing businesses, and indeed all organisations. It is this sort of teaching that challenges the shareholder-centric paradigm and should characterise a lot of business school curriculum.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**CSR:** The concept that businesses have an obligation to pursue those policies, make those decisions, or follow those lines of actions which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of the society.

**UN PRME:** Principles of Responsible Management Education which consists of six principles, aligned with global social responsibility values such as those espoused by the United Nations' Global Compact. It provides a platform for exchanging ideas and learning among institutions that integrate social and environmental issues into research and teaching

**Responsible Management Education:** develop courses and programs based on the UN's six principles.