


Decoupling Responsible Management Education: Why Business Schools May Not Walk Their Talk

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Andreas Rasche¹ and Dirk Ulrich Gilbert²

Abstract

This article examines under what conditions business schools may decouple the structural effects of their engagement in responsible management education from actual organizational practices. We argue that schools may be unable to match rising institutional pressures to publicly commit to responsible management education with their limited internal capacity for change. Our analysis proposes that decoupling is likely if schools (a) are exposed to resource stringency, (b) face overt or covert resistance against change processes, (c) are confronted with competing institutional pressures, and (d) perceive institutional demands as ambiguous. We discuss two implications of this proposition. On one hand, decoupling can cause dissonant legitimacy perceptions, leading to cynicism around responsible management education within business schools. On the other hand, a temporary inconsistency between talk and action may help schools to articulate future ambitions for responsible management education, which, over time, could inspire recoupling effects.

Keywords

responsible management education, corporate social responsibility, Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), decoupling

Introduction

Calls for more responsible management education have increased in recent years (Holland, 2009; Samuelson, 2011). Driven by discussions about whether and to what extent business schools contributed to the 2008–2009 financial crisis (Giacalone & Wargo, 2009) and to large-scale corporate accounting scandals (Klimek & Wenell, 2011), the discourse on responsible management education has gained traction. Most important, we have witnessed the emergence of numerous initiatives that problematize “traditional” management education by calling on business schools to adapt to new realities. Initiatives like the UN-backed Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI), and the Academy of Business in Society (ABIS) as well as accreditation agencies such as the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) have called on business schools to embed relevant discussions into their curricula and extracurricular activities. Faced with public criticism and the need to differentiate program offerings in a competitive market environment, many schools have committed to reform their practices (e.g., 554 schools signed onto PRME as of July 2014).

This increasing interest in and the institutionalization of responsible management education have led to a tension between, on one hand, corporate responsibility and related

areas that are no longer fringe topics and, on the other hand, their actual incorporation in the practice of business schools. A recent survey shows that over 70% of deans and more than 50% of faculty believe that relevant discussions have been fully integrated into their organizations (Academy of Business in Society [ABIS] & European Foundation for Management Development [EFMD], 2013, p. 17). Recent assessments of the practices of schools, however, identify numerous obstacles that seem to inhibit substantial organizational change. Rasche, Gilbert, and Schedel (2013) found that although business schools have added large numbers of courses on corporate responsibility to their curricula, around 75% of these courses remain electives that are detached from core disciplines such as finance and accounting. Solitander, Fougere, Sobczak, and Herlin (2012) argued that a variety of strategic, structural, and cultural barriers have to be overcome when integrating relevant content into the curriculum (see also Young & Nagpal, 2013). This tension between

¹Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

²University of Hamburg, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Andreas Rasche, CBS Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (cbsCSR), Copenhagen Business School, Porcelænshaven 18A, DK-2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark.
Email: ara.ikl@cbs.dk

schools' increased public commitment toward responsible management education and the difficulties surrounding implementation remains under-theorized to date.

Although existing scholarly work has increased our knowledge about changes in pedagogical methods (Shrivastava, 2010), course content (Kurland et al., 2010), and curriculum design (L. J. Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, & Carrier, 2007), we know surprisingly little about whether schools' commitment to responsible management education actually affects their core organizational practices. The aim of this article is to theoretically debate the extent to which business schools can translate their growing commitment into substantive implementation activities. We argue that responsible management education increasingly exposes schools to institutional pressures that can hardly be neglected (e.g., due to changing accreditation criteria). We further argue that while schools may respond to these pressures by modifying some of their formal structures (e.g., new policies and committees), there is a risk that *under certain conditions* they will decouple these structures from everyday organizational practices.

Our analysis explores these conditions and suggests that decoupling is likely to occur when (a) schools only have limited resources available, (b) there is resistance by powerful organizational actors, (c) schools face competing non-aligned institutional pressures, and when (d) organizational actors perceive institutional demands as ambiguous and hence believe that symbolic adoption will remain undiscovered. We discuss why decoupling is likely under these conditions by combining insights from organizational institutionalism (Zucker, 1987), the sociology of education (Coburn, 2004), and the scholarly debate on responsibility in management education (Swanson & Fisher, 2008). We are not claiming that *all* business schools decouple talk from action when it comes to responsible management education. Research indicates that organizations respond differently to similar institutional pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), for instance, because they vary in their need to appear rational and legitimate to outside audiences (Oliver, 1991). What we are claiming is that due to the organizational characteristics of business schools (e.g., protection of academic freedom) and the specific nature of institutional pressures surrounding responsible management education, there is a risk that some schools may decouple relevant structural effects. We carefully frame our argument as a series of propositions.

We believe that a discussion of whether, how, and why business schools may decouple responsible management education is timely. As of July 2014, 43 schools were delisted from the PRME initiative for failure to comply with the initiative's mandatory reporting requirements, while 9 schools decided to withdraw from the initiative (PRME, 2014a). This pattern shows that a number of schools seem to struggle in their attempt to align their organizational practices with responsible management education. Also, the

rather vague PRME reporting requirements contain no quality assurance mechanism, making it unclear how many schools are in reality committed to substantive implementation and how many hide behind general statements.

Our propositions point to two implications. On one hand, decoupling can be seen as problematic, as it may cause discordant perceptions of legitimacy. While external audiences are willing to grant legitimacy based on decoupled formal structures, organizational insiders are more likely to react cynically if an inconsistency between talk and action is sustained over a longer period (MacLean & Behnam, 2010). Such cynicism can endanger occupational identities. On the other hand, the fact that schools publically communicate their ambitions can also produce positive organizational change, even if talk and action do not yet match. The reason for this effect is that aspirational talk can potentially alter the perceptions of organizational actors, allowing them to discover new solutions and enabling changes in values, beliefs, and identities (L. T. Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013). Such changes can help actors to rethink and redefine selected practices, particularly if the communicated aspirations create expectations among students or faculty that cannot be ignored in the long run.

The next section briefly introduces responsible management education as an increasingly institutionalized practice. The "Decoupling and organizational institutionalism" section discusses the theoretical background of the argument, presenting relevant thoughts on decoupling. The following section begins by showing in what ways business schools have been exposed to rising institutional pressures to adopt responsible management education and then discusses the conditions under which schools may respond to these pressures by decoupling formal structures from core organizational activities. The next section outlines the implications of our argument and the final section concludes by proposing an agenda for future empirical research.

Responsible Management Education

We use the term *responsible management education* as a descriptor for efforts aimed at embedding reflections about corporate responsibility (i.e., the social impact of businesses on society), environmental sustainability (i.e., the contribution of firms to a sustainable economy), and ethics (i.e., reflections about right and wrong in the context of business situations) into business schools' educational practices (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Godemann, Haertle, Herzig, & Moon, 2014). These practices are not limited to modifying the curriculum, but also include changes in research practices, pedagogies, organizational strategies, and extracurricular activities. The key motivation behind responsible management education is to *integrate* relevant discussions into business schools to move beyond a situation where the topic is only treated as an add-on. The PRME

(2014c) initiative recognizes that “in the current academic environment corporate responsibility and sustainability have entered but not yet become embedded into the mainstream of business-related education.” Responsible management education aims to “normalize” the discussion of responsibility, sustainability, and ethics within business schools, for instance, by integrating relevant topics into courses that have traditionally not addressed these areas.

Integrating responsibility, sustainability, and ethics into business schools seems both important and timely. An isolated treatment of these topics (e.g., in stand-alone courses) is unlikely to have much of a lasting impact on student learning experiences. Integration helps to contextualize issues and also signals importance (Dunfee & Robertson, 1988). Research also shows, however, that most of these topics are currently either tied to specifically designed stand-alone courses (L. J. Christensen et al., 2007) that are rarely part of the core curriculum (Navarro, 2008), or are embedded in management-related disciplines. Nicholson and DeMoss (2009) found that accounting and finance department coordinators attached much less importance to corporate responsibility than did management and marketing coordinators, while a survey by Hansen, Moosmayer, Bode, and Schrader (2007) revealed that academics with a background in accounting and finance attached the least relevance to responsible management.

The need to integrate relevant topics into the practices of business schools has been a long-standing concern (see, for example, Starik, Rands, Marcus, and Clark, 2010). The creation of coalitions such as GRLI, ABIS, and PRME, as well as increasing support by accreditation agencies, has helped to further institutionalize responsible management education, making it commonly accepted behavior and hence hard for business schools to ignore. This institutionalization is also backed by corporations who are under pressure to commit to and report on responsible business practices (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010). PRME emerged, for instance, out of a desire voiced by business leaders participating in the UN Global Compact to reform management education (Waddock, Rasche, Werhane, & Unruh, 2011).

Decoupling and Organizational Institutionalism

Organizational Institutionalism

Theoretical debates on decoupling emerged as part of the conceptual and empirical work being done on organizational institutionalism (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008). The main thesis underlying institutional theory is that organizations are affected by the institutional context in which they operate. This context consists of “common understandings of what is appropriate and, fundamentally, meaningful behavior” (Zucker, 1987, p. 105) and defines what is considered as

rational conduct. Institutionalized practices within this context reflect widely accepted behavior that is underpinned by certain normative and cognitive understandings. The resulting institutional pressures influence organizational practices, because organizations conform to this rationalized context to appear legitimate (Scott, 1995). Conformity to institutional pressures creates isomorphic behavior among organizations, that is, organizations become more alike because institutionalized practices are diffused throughout space and time. Institutional theorists suggest three mechanisms of isomorphic change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983): (a) coercive isomorphism (practices are adopted to avoid sanctions), (b) mimetic isomorphism (practices are adopted to imitate successful peers), and (c) normative isomorphism (practices are adopted because it is the right thing to do).

Organizations whose behavior is guided by institutionalized practices can be thought of as belonging to a common organizational field. Scott (1995) defines such fields as “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field” (p. 56). This definition emphasizes the relational component of fields, that is, fields (and the institutional demands that are embedded in them) are created *in* and *through* the interactions of organizations that together form a recognized area of institutional life (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Hoffman (1999) emphasized that fields also act as platforms for discussions around a common theme and that “[...] the field should be thought of as the center of common channels of dialogue and discussion [...] which bring together various field constituents with disparate purposes” (p. 352).

Following Hoffman’s (1999) understanding, responsible management education can be thought of as being part of the larger organizational field of management education. This field consists of a community of organizations, which, even though they may have different purposes, interact around a common theme. Relevant actors in this field include business schools, accreditation agencies, governmental regulators, student organizations (e.g., Net Impact), providers of rankings (e.g., *The Financial Times*), and professional networks (e.g., the GRLI). Although the network of relationships in this field structures the actions of schools, the field also contains a variety of competing and even contradictory institutional pressures. For instance, while rankings specify certain measures around which schools can be compared, responding to these measures can mean neglecting other demands put on business schools (Wedlin, 2007).

Decoupling: The Symbolic Adoption of Formal Structure

Conformity to institutional pressures can contradict the internal requirements of organizations. When this occurs, the

conformity of organizations to institutional pressures may only be ceremonial, that is, they decouple the formal structures that are adopted to conform to institutional demands from their day-to-day activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As organizations need to appear legitimate and rational (to gain social approval and secure their survival), they deploy such legitimating structures to meet institutional demands, but disconnect these structures from core practices (Oliver, 1991). In other words, the formal structure of organizations (e.g., official policies, programs, positions, and procedures) and the language (“talk”) that is used to describe these structures have a largely symbolic function.

MacLean and Behnam (2010) showed how an organization created positive legitimacy perceptions by symbolically adopting a compliance program. Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) discussed how organizations gained legitimacy from symbolically adopting total quality management, while Edelman, Petterson, Chambliss, and Erlanger (1991) demonstrated how an organization created visible symbols of compliance around institutional demands for affirmative action without changing its practices. Together, these studies give substance to Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) original proposition that external audiences are willing to grant legitimacy based on symbolic responses to institutional demands. Decoupling can help gain management support for decisions on reform because it acts as a mechanism that buffers internal routines that have developed over time against growing institutional pressures (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993). This enhances the flexibility of the organization while maintaining legitimacy with external constituents. We suggest that reforms promoted through responsible management education risk being affected by this kind of decoupling behavior.

Responsible Management Education and the Risk of Decoupling

We first argue that business schools are exposed to a variety of institutional pressures to adopt responsible management education. Based on this, we discuss how decoupling is likely to manifest itself within business schools. We then outline four conditions under which schools are likely to respond to such pressures by decoupling the structural effects of institutional demands from implementation practices.

Institutional Pressures for Responsible Management Education

Responsible management education as an emerging institutional context consists of various institutionalized practices (e.g., curriculum change and new pedagogies). These practices define what is commonly considered to reflect appropriate behavior. Schools cannot simply ignore the emergence of such demands, particularly if they want to be seen as legitimate actors. We apply the abovementioned distinction

between coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms of isomorphic change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to understand in what ways schools are increasingly exposed to institutional pressures.

Coercive pressure. Some organizations exert coercive pressure on business schools to embed responsible management education, for example, by implying that neglecting relevant practices would result in some form of sanction. Accreditation agencies can be considered as one important source of coercive pressure in the context of higher education (Caravella, 2011). For instance, although the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) does not prescribe specific courses, the latest accreditation criteria list ethics and social responsibility as areas in which the development of skills is required (AACSB, 2013, p. 30). The criteria also state that schools have to adopt policies and procedures to support and enforce ethical behavior by students (AACSB, 2013, p. 5). The most recent European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation guidelines even devote an entire chapter to responsible management education:

The School should have a clear understanding of its role as a “globally responsible citizen” and its contribution to ethics and sustainability. This understanding should be reflected in the School’s mission, strategy and activities. There should be evidence that the School’s contribution is reflected in its regular activities, covering education, research, interactions with businesses and managers, community outreach and its own operations. (European Foundation for Management Development [EFMD], 2013, p. 64)

EQUIS requires a separate strategy on responsible management education “listing the School’s formal commitments to ethics, responsibility, and sustainability (e.g., U.N. PRME)” (EFMD, 2013, p. 65). The Association of MBAs’ (AMBA) criteria for the accreditation of MBA programs also demand that students achieve a “significant understanding of the impact of sustainability, ethics and risk management on business decision and performance” (AMBA, 2013, p. 7). Although accreditation criteria are usually written in a flexible way, schools cannot fully ignore these expectations, especially because accreditations act as an important source of legitimacy (Durand & McGuire, 2005) and as some agencies have created a degree of dependence on the side of business schools (Wilson & McKiernan, 2011).

Mimetic pressure. Business schools also face mimetic pressure around responsible management education, that is, they model their commitment on what other schools have done in this area. Uncertainty is a key driver of such mimetic behavior. As responsible management education remains a rather vague concept, schools model their commitment on what changes other well-recognized players have implemented in

their programs and organization. For instance, prestigious schools such as INSEAD and the London Business School were among the first signatories of PRME. This legitimized the underlying agenda and made it attractive to new adopters. Furthermore, media coverage of curriculum updates at major business schools can cause other schools to feel that “doing nothing” may turn them into a bystander or even an outlier. Columbia Business School’s integration of ethics and responsible leadership was featured in *The Wall Street Journal* (Korn, 2011), while *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* discussed Wharton’s move toward embedding responsibility deeper into its revamped MBA program (Damast, 2010). Participant differentiation within relevant associations can also stimulate mimetic tendencies. PRME, for instance, established a “Champions Group” consisting of 31 signatory schools believed to be leaders in responsible management education (PRME, 2014b). As these schools are perceived as role models, it can be expected that other schools will consider them as a source of inspiration.

Normative pressure. A third source of institutional pressure is normative (Suchman, 1995), that is, responsible management education is considered to reflect a proper course of action. The organizational environment of business schools has signaled in a variety of ways that integrating ethics and responsibility into curricula is “the right thing to do.” First, student organizations, such as Net Impact, have acted as public advocates, arguing that schools are not doing enough to fully embed relevant topics. Judgments about the appropriateness of reforms are framed as being aligned with the value system of the majority of students (Net Impact & The Aspen Institute, 2011). Second, publications in trusted media outlets have called on schools to change their educational frameworks, often emphasizing the normative nature of reforms. Cossin (2011), for instance, argued in *The Financial Times* that business school education has “misled a generation of managers” and that by ignoring reforms, schools “run the risk of fatally damaging their credibility.” Finally, professional networks such as the GRLI and PRME develop norms that define what counts as desirable behavior (GRLI, 2014). Faculty champions from different schools are organized in such networks and carry these norms back into their organizations and try to act upon them (see case studies discussed by Solitander et al., 2012).

How Does Decoupling Manifest Itself?

Many schools have responded to these pressures by redesigning elements of their formal structure. Examples of such structural elements include, but are not limited to, policies that frame a school’s commitment and engagement, formalized programs (e.g., for curriculum change or faculty training), and new governance structures (e.g., faculty committees). A recent survey by ABIS and EFMD (2013)

revealed that the majority of schools address responsible management education in their governance bodies (e.g., the academic board) and that a variety of schools claim to consider criteria related to responsible management education within their human resources policies (e.g., during performance evaluations). These structural elements are often reflected in the talk that schools produce around responsible management education (e.g., on their websites and in public reports; see Godemann, Herzig, Moon, and Powell, 2011).

We argue that there is a risk that under certain conditions schools may decouple these structural effects from their organizational practices. Such decoupling can manifest itself in a variety of ways. First, schools can decouple by *not redesigning their curriculum substantially*. While responsible management education aims at integration across the whole curriculum, schools that decouple favor an uneven distribution of relevant content across disciplines. A recent survey by ABIS and EFMD (2013) found that disciplines like leadership and strategy accommodate most responsible management content, while integration in more technical disciplines such as accounting, finance, and economics remains low. Such uneven distribution sends hidden signals to students, faculty, and administrators about the importance of relevant discussions in selected disciplines. This uneven distribution, however, is also not especially surprising. Disciplines such as finance and accounting work with a different set of assumptions (e.g., profit maximization and opportunistic behavior; J. M. Evans, Trevino, & Weaver, 2006) and hence lack the conceptual resources to justify sub-optimal investments, which in some cases are necessary to create responsible conduct (Crane, Palazzo, Spence, & Matten, 2014). Also, education in finance and accounting is often of a vocational nature, preparing students for specific corporate jobs with a pre-defined profile, while management education aims at developing a broader set of skills and capabilities.

Schools may also try to put relevant topics primarily into electives, thereby avoiding integration into the core curriculum. Rasche et al. (2013) found that even though the overall number of courses with responsible management content has been increasing in recent years, the vast majority of these courses are electives. Creating electives is likely to face less resistance by faculty, as the established curriculum of a program remains unchanged. Electives are also cheaper to run, as fewer students participate in them (e.g., lowering assessment costs). But electives may not help much in the attempt to integrate relevant content into the curriculum, as they suffer from a self-selection bias (i.e., they are chosen by students who already have a high interest) and hence remain limited in terms of their reach (Bell, Connerley, & Cocchiara, 2009).

Second, schools can also decouple by tolerating that planned changes to the curriculum are not embedded into actual *classroom practices*. Even if schools manage to modify their official curriculum (e.g., by revamping courses),

these changes are mostly manifested in course syllabi. Not everything written in a syllabus, however, necessarily impacts educational practices in the classroom, as instructors may decouple parts of the syllabus from actual teaching practice. Although such behavior has not yet been studied in business schools, researchers have observed it in other educational contexts (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Relevant studies show that the autonomy of instructors and their resistance against planned organizational changes are the main drivers of such decoupling behavior. As business school faculty have high degrees of autonomy (Gross-Schaefer, 2010) and resistance against responsible management education is well-documented (Beggs & Dean, 2007), it is not unlikely that some faculty may decide to decouple their classroom practices from officially approved curriculum changes.

Finally, schools can also decouple by avoiding the integration of responsible management education into their *organizational culture*. What is implicitly included in educational experiences may carry messages that are inconsistent with what is formally taught about responsible management. Blasco (2012) calls this implicit dimension the “hidden curriculum” as it covers practices that send tacit messages to students about what counts as responsible conduct. Schools often send such messages by collaborating with certain firms or endorsers, by “living” responsibility through their own practices (e.g., offering Fairtrade products) and by asking students during course evaluations to reflect on whether a course has discussed responsibility issues. Schools that decouple responsible management education will neglect the role of the hidden curriculum, thus ignoring what kinds of signals about appropriate conduct are sent to students in more subtle ways.

Framing decoupling as an either/or decision may be misleading, as the avoidance of institutional pressures is just one possible response strategy (Oliver, 1991). There clearly is a spectrum within the tendency to decouple. Some schools may decide to completely decouple responsible management education (e.g., those delisted from PRME; PRME, 2014b), while others may decide to balance different institutional pressures by partially responding to all of them. Practically speaking, it is likely that schools decouple selected parts of their commitment, focusing on those aspects where changes to organizational practices can be achieved without much difficulty. When discussing the decoupled nature of responsible management education, we refer to those schools that (a) completely disregard substantive implementation or (b) look for quick wins (e.g., establishing electives) without truly integrating responsible management education into the organization.

What Conditions Decoupling of Responsible Management Education?

We propose that decoupling is likely to occur when (a) schools only have limited resources available, (b) there is

resistance by powerful organizational actors, (c) schools face competing non-aligned institutional pressures, and when (d) organizational actors perceive ambiguous institutional demands. Two of these conditions (i.e., resource stringency and resistance) are internally focused and relate to features that characterize at least some business schools, while the other two conditions (i.e., competing and ambiguous institutional demands) are externally oriented and relate to the characteristics of the organizational field in which schools are embedded. Each of the four conditions frames a specific context in which decoupling is *more likely* to be found. This is not to say that business schools will always decouple under these conditions; much depends on how an organization frames responsible management education in its own context. The four conditions were extracted by contrasting the literature that discusses predictors for decoupling in general (e.g., Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Westphal & Zajac, 1998, 2001) with existing empirical studies on how business schools approach responsible management education (e.g., Beggs & Dean, 2007; J. M. Evans et al., 2006; Perry & Win, 2013; Young & Nagpal, 2013).

Decoupling as a response to resource stringency. Based on Meyer and Rowan's (1977) seminal work, research has argued that decoupling often occurs because of a perceived conflict between institutional pressures and internal efficiency demands (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). This perspective holds some relevance in the context of our argument, as a substantive implementation of responsible management education requires resources that can cause a conflict between institutional pressures and resource availability. Making changes in existing courses or adding new ones requires time (e.g., to assess and redesign the curriculum) and expertise (e.g., in terms of developing faculty), both of which involve financial and non-financial resource commitments. Of course, the costs associated with change processes depend on the scale, scope, and time horizon of the process itself. While the cost of quick fixes, like adding an elective to an existing program, may be limited, the costs of substantive cross-disciplinary integration of responsible management across courses and programs can be expected to be high (e.g., because such a process requires more active steering through faculty committees; see, for example, Young & Nagpal, 2013). Furthermore, full-range integration is likely to require questioning the messages implicitly contained in educational experiences and often passed on unconsciously to students (e.g., the worth of business functions) and aligning these experiences with the values promoted through responsible management education (e.g., seeing management more holistically). Such alignment reflects a process of cultural change that deserves much management attention and hence resources (Ottewill, McKenzie, & Jean, 2005).

Faced with a tightening of government funds and increased competition for third-party funding, many schools

have to cover these implementation costs in a challenging financial environment. Governments have reduced funding for higher education on a per student basis in a number of countries as competition for societal financial resources is tight (Fethke & Policano, 2013; Peters & Thomas, 2011). Although alternative funding models are emerging (e.g., tuition fees and executive education), at least some schools are likely to face problems in bearing the full cost of integration, especially considering that developing curricular and extracurricular activities is an ongoing task and not a one-off activity. Schools may try to resolve this tension by symbolically adopting responsible management education.

Decoupling as a response to resistance. Prior research has emphasized that the existence of power dynamics can stimulate decoupling behavior. Westphal and Zajac (2001) found that organizations decoupled formal structures from core activities when influential actors had no interest in implementation. Such power dynamics influence whether or not business schools symbolically adopt relevant structural elements. Although the majority of deans publicly support responsible management education (F. J. Evans & Weiss, 2008), their influence on the curriculum remains limited. The faculty-governed nature of business schools (Mortimer & Sathre, 2010), the importance ascribed to academic freedom (Gross-Schaefer, 2010), and the inertia created by the tenure system (Dowd & Kaplan, 2005) are structural features of business schools that limit the influence of deans. The tenure system, for example, can act as an obstacle to change, as tenured faculty feel little pressure to rework course materials (Murray, 2013). Premeaux's (2012) interview study showed that faculty widely agreed that tenure leads to a situation in which teaching is not afforded enough attention. Furthermore, few professors want to be told by others what and how they are supposed to teach, especially considering that courses are already packed with content teachers consider to be important (Alsop, 2006).

These structural features show that business schools depend to a large extent on a change model in which actors *themselves* have to see the need for change and to act in reflexive ways (Antonacopoulou, 2010). This type of change, however, is hard to implement due to existing prejudices that include, for example, widespread claims that responsible management cannot be taught and that teaching such topics has no lasting impact. F. J. Evans and Weiss (2008) showed that 34% of deans identified faculty resistance as an obstacle to further integration of discussions around corporate responsibility into the curriculum (see also the survey by ABIS & EFMD, 2013). Beggs and Dean (2007) concluded from an interview study that most faculty members did not believe that teaching responsibility and ethics would help to avoid situations like the series of corporate accounting scandals that occurred in 2000-2001. Another study showed that faculty members often resist change, because they believe that

relevant discussions are sufficiently covered elsewhere in the curriculum (Lund & Dean, 2006). Hence, business schools may avoid substantive integration to minimize disputes and conflicts among faculty members. Resistance can also occur because some faculty members may believe that there is an inconsistency between what responsible management demands from students and what firms require of them on the career path. Wrongdoing in corporations is often deeply embedded in existing values and shaped by the immediate social context (Palmer, 2012) and hence difficult to avoid.

Whether or not faculty will resist will also depend on their own vested interests. On one hand, these interests can be material. Some faculty may resist responsible management education because they feel that it does not support their own agenda, for example, for upcoming promotion decisions or building ties with industry. Vested interests, on the contrary, can also relate to how academics understand their own professional identity. What makes a "proper" business school professor? Professors who see themselves as guarantors of shareholder returns may view debates around corporate responsibilities from a more skeptical perspective than professors who view themselves as intellectuals contributing to the well-being of society.

Faculty resistance is also driven by how doctoral programs in business schools are run. While doctoral programs put much emphasis on training candidates in theory development and relevant methodologies (mostly because the status of schools is based on research productivity; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), there is usually little focus on pedagogical development and pedagogical knowledge. Edwards, Bexley, and Richardson (2011) found that only 20% of doctoral students participate in training for university teaching, while Johnston, Milkman, and McCoy (2012) showed that only 31% of marketing faculty had received relevant formal teaching training. Doctoral programs often signal to future faculty that teaching is a by-product of academic life and that "good teachers are born, not made" (Brightman & Nargundkar, 2013, p. 299). This plays against a willingness to engage in the kind of discussions necessary for integrating responsible management education.

Even if there is no open resistance toward curriculum change, faculty can still oppose unwanted adjustments in more covert ways. Curriculum change usually focuses on redesigning syllabi and modifying the structure of programs, mostly because such changes can be documented and reported. But teachers can often afford to disregard such explicit changes, leaving their existing classroom practices unaffected (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Coburn (2004), for instance, found that teachers assessed changes in instructional policies through the lens of their own pre-existing beliefs and practices and, based on this, decided whether to implement them in practice. As academics enjoy a high degree of freedom (e.g., due to tenure policies) and as enforcing compliance with curriculum change via control mechanisms is

difficult, covert resistance can encourage decoupling as a response strategy.

Decoupling as a response to multiple field-level pressures. Decoupling may be driven not only by features that characterize some business schools (e.g., lack of resources) but also by the characteristics of the organizational field in which institutional pressures are embedded. Prior research has shown that organizations symbolically adopt formal structures when fields contain multiple institutional pressures (Ruef & Scott, 1998). Organizations respond to such pressures by conforming to selected demands via substantive implementation, while decoupling the structural effects of other demands. The embeddedness of responsible management education into the field of management education exposes schools to such multiple pressures, making it hard to respond simultaneously to all requirements.

While some actors pressure schools to buy into responsible management education, other actors do not acknowledge this agenda. The case of business school rankings by major media outlets (e.g., *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, *Forbes*) is particularly interesting. Although the demands created by ranking criteria do not contradict responsible management education per se, none of these rankings contain explicit criteria for the performance of schools in this area. This creates a situation in which institutional pressures are not aligned. As responding to both types of pressures requires financial and non-financial commitments, some schools may experience a situation in which rankings and responsible management education compete for scarce resources. Rankings are known to significantly influence business school policy-making, impacting admissions, hiring, and also donations (Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2008). Playing the ranking game (Corley & Gioia, 2000) often requires investments, especially in those areas highlighted by the underlying criteria. *The Financial Times* ranking, for example, is largely based on salary percentage increase, creating incentives to invest in placement and career services.

Because the reputational effects of rankings are significant, as they are often seen as a valid signal of quality and positional status (Wedlin, 2007), schools may strategically invest in activities to align themselves with ranking criteria, while trying to decouple the structural effects of responsible management education, whose adoption would generate comparatively lower reputational effects. Although specialized rankings such as the *Global Green MBA* exist, their effects on a school's overall reputation remain limited. Organizations' reactivity to rankings depends on rankings' dissemination and perceived credibility (Espeland & Sauder, 2007), both of which are not highly developed for rankings focusing exclusively on responsible management education. In fact, the Aspen Institute's *Beyond Grey Pinstripes* ranking, which assessed the integration of social, environmental, and ethical content into curricula by schools, was suspended

after a number of top business schools pulled out (Di Meglio, 2012).

Decoupling as a response to perceived ambiguous institutional demands. Organizations symbolically adopt structures if the institutional demands they face are perceived as ambiguous. Edelman (1992), for instance, found that "broad and ambiguous principles [...] give organizations wide latitude to construct the meaning of compliance" (p. 1532). Her analysis of the adoption of affirmative action policies showed that the ambiguity of the underlying rules motivated organizations to implement policies in ways that are minimally disruptive to the status quo. If institutional demands are framed through ambiguous language, adopters lack distinct guidance on implementation and retain a high degree of interpretive flexibility (George, Chattopadhyay, Sitkin, & Barden, 2006). This flexibility can be used in different ways. While some organizations will use it to adapt implementation processes to their own context, others will use this flexibility to decouple.

The institutional pressures originating from responsible management education contain a high level of ambiguity and hence may be perceived as vague by those in charge of implementation. For instance, schools that sign on to PRME commit to creating "educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences for responsible leadership" and developing "the capabilities of students to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy" (PRME, 2014b). While PRME emphasizes that this vagueness is deliberate, as the initiative does not regulate schools' activities, it is also clear that signatories can hide inaction behind such general requirements. Interestingly, schools seem to react to such equivocal requirements with ambiguity. An assessment of the Sharing Information on Progress reports, which are required from PRME signatories, revealed that "many reports appear to be rather vague in specifying their educational framework" (Godemann et al., 2011, p. 23).

Accreditation agencies have similar vague requirements. For instance, AACSB's (2013) recently adopted Accreditation Standards offer schools a great deal of flexibility as they do not require any specific courses, but state that the contents of programs need to "include generally accepted sets of learning experiences" (AACSB, 2013, p. 30). Although this flexible approach is consistent with AACSB's general strategy of mission-driven accreditation (Romero, 2008), it also opens the door for approaches to responsible management education that remain limited in scope and scale. It is sobering that AACSB sticks to the curricular flexibility approach considering the limitations of this perspective. In an open letter to AACSB, Windsor (2002) argued that this kind of approach is likely to undermine responsible management education as the inclusion/exclusion of courses becomes a matter of

faculty discussion and hence depends on whether a sufficient number of instructors support the adoption of relevant content. The ambiguous nature of institutional demands makes the talk on responsible management education in schools relatively cheap; that is, it is possible to make rather broad public commitments while hiding limited action or even inaction behind general requirements.

Implications: Decoupling as Danger and Opportunity

The Dangers of Decoupling: Discordant Perceptions of Legitimacy

When business schools decouple responsible management education for longer periods of time, they are likely to create a situation in which organizational members stop taking relevant claims particularly seriously. This gives rise to discordant perceptions of legitimacy, that is, a mismatch between the legitimacy perceptions held by external audiences and those held by organizational insiders (MacLean & Behnam, 2010). While decoupling allows schools to project an image that is acceptable to external audiences (e.g., accreditation agencies), the legitimacy perceptions of organizational insiders are likely to differ. Insiders have access to more detailed information about whether and how responsible management education affects organizational practices, and hence they are better able to judge whether formal structures serve a ceremonial function or not. If responsible management education is decoupled, insiders will perceive it as an activity that lacks impact and, based on this, develop negative legitimacy perceptions of a school's commitment to responsible management education.

The existence of such discordant perceptions can lead to a rather cynical treatment of responsible management education. Cynicism can be expressed in different ways, for instance, by secretly voicing statements of disbelief or by being suspicious toward the acts of management (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Organizational members can experience cynicism as a challenge, especially if they hold strong personal values related to responsible management education. Prior research has shown that a sustained deep sense of cynicism can lead to a loss of occupational identity, because organizational roles are harder to enact (Corley & Gioia, 2004; MacLean & Behnam, 2010). As responsible management education is often promoted through "internal champions" (Solitander et al., 2012) who lead implementation efforts, the existence of discordant perceptions of legitimacy and the resulting cynicism can threaten the occupational identity of these individuals. Cording, Harrison, Hoskisson, and Jonsen (2014) even showed that a lack of organizational authenticity (i.e., a lack of consistency between espoused values and realized practices) can lower productivity as it undercuts an organization's trustworthiness.

The Possibility of Recoupling: Responsible Management Education as Aspirational Talk

While decoupling can be perceived as dysfunctional, it is also possible to argue that the expression of high ambitions for responsible management education can stimulate organizational change and, in the long run, lead to improvements, even when such ambitions are not yet fully reflected in organizational practices. L. T. Christensen et al. (2013), who have outlined this argument with regard to firms' corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies, suggested that the CSR communication of firms is often aspirational (i.e., not a perfect reflection of what they actually do). While this can lead to decoupling, it is also possible that the talk about such aspirations helps to articulate values, beliefs, identities, and frameworks for decision making that then become embedded in the organization. This is not to say that firms (or business schools) emerge as responsible actors simply by articulating their aspirations. But the expression of high ambitions can help to explore what kind of organization they want to become, inspiring people to enact relevant change processes. Talk about an organization's commitments can have consequences for how the organization understands itself and its environment and may, under certain conditions (see below), lead to substantive changes to organizational practices. Such a perspective assumes that communication *is* action (i.e., language has performative effects and can, to a certain degree, shape reality; see Weick, 1979).

Viewing the commitment of schools to responsible management education as aspirational talk puts a different perspective on decoupling. A mismatch between formal structures and organizational practices may only reflect a temporary state of affairs (see also Hallett, 2010). As schools talk about these structures (e.g., their policies and change initiatives) and thereby express their ambitions, they articulate a desired future for the organization. Such articulations can initiate incremental change processes, slowly altering behavioral expectations and the school's identity. These effects, in turn, can lead to modifications in some of the underlying conditions of decoupling, for instance, the importance ascribed to competing institutional demands may change. Of course, it would be naive to assume that such effects will automatically occur once a school starts talking about its ambitions. When a school engages in aspirational talk to deliberately mislead its stakeholders (e.g., if it lies about its true intentions), it is unlikely that the communication of aspirations initiates social change. In such cases, people are more likely to react with cynicism and negative legitimacy perceptions (see above).

Whether the aspirational talk of schools can unfold recoupling effects depends to some degree on the context in which aspirations are expressed (see also L. T. Christensen et al., 2013; Taylor & Cooren, 1997). For instance, aspirations stated during a public speech by the dean are more likely to

create performative effects, as the public nature of such expressions and the social status of a dean create expectations by different stakeholder groups (e.g., students, alumni, faculty). Research shows that such public expressions of ambitions at least have the potential to initiate change processes, as (a) stakeholders are more likely to hold organizations accountable for their promises and (b) organizational members start to rethink their role in the organization and their underlying values and beliefs (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012). Of course, it is difficult to predict specific outcomes and there certainly is no guarantee that publicly expressed aspirations about responsible management education become embedded in organizational practices. However, as some business schools' talk on responsible management is public (e.g., expressed in publicly available PRME reports or also on their websites), a continuous mismatch between talk and practice may be hard to sustain in the long run. In the end, the existence of recoupling effects will depend on the strategic choices that actors in business schools are ready to make.

Decoupling and Recoupling: The Role of Strategic Choice

The existence of sustained decoupling (paired with discordant perceptions of legitimacy) and the possibility of recoupling (through aspirational talk) are mutually exclusive. As actors within business schools have a degree of strategic choice when charting the future of the organization (Wilson & McKiernan, 2011), the existence of decoupling/recoupling will depend, to a degree, on the choices they make (e.g., regarding new core courses and available financial and non-financial resources). Whether or not such choices are made depends on organizational characteristics as well as the characteristics of relevant actors. For instance, schools that have a large number of faculty who are critical in their ranks are more likely to resist decoupling and also may be quick to hold senior management accountable to extensive public commitments. We can also expect that schools with a strong religious affiliation will pay more attention to responsible management than other schools. Such schools are likely to frame institutional demands as being connected to a self-conscious tradition of theological reflection (J. M. Evans et al., 2006).

Also, the relative size of single departments within a business school can influence decisions. Larger departments typically provide necessary resources to the entire organization as well as other subunits and hence possess more power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). But actors from different departments are likely to differ in their views on the importance of responsible management education, mostly because fields vary in their theoretical assumptions (J. M. Evans et al., 2006). Faculty in departments where rational and self-interested behavior forms the theoretical basis of scholarship (e.g., economics and finance) are less likely to view responsible management

as an important part of a school's educational framework. Thus, schools whose economics and finance departments are particularly powerful may be prepared to tolerate sustained decoupling behavior. By contrast, schools whose management and marketing departments are relatively large will be more inclined to favor responsible management education and thus push the organization toward recoupling. The bottom line of these considerations is that decoupling and recoupling are influenced by the strategic choices of organizational actors and that these choices depend, to a degree, on the characteristics and related agency of relevant actors.

Conclusion and Further Research

This article suggests that there is a risk that business schools will decouple the formal structures they are developing around responsible management education from their organizational practices. Our analysis shows that (a) schools are increasingly exposed to coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional pressures to adopt formal structures around responsible management education and that (b) under certain conditions they are likely to decouple these structures from implementation activities. Such reflections are important and timely. Discussing whether schools walk their talk helps us to better understand the necessary conditions for changing educational practices. While there is currently widespread agreement that we need more responsible management education (Kell & Haertle, 2011), much less is known about the conditions under which implementation occurs.

Our analysis points to several new directions for research in this area. First, the theoretical propositions presented in this article need to be supported or rejected by empirical research. Such research would compare data on how responsible management education shapes the structural elements of schools (e.g., their policies) with data on the organizational practices that are important for integration (e.g., changes to curriculum design). Although it is alluring to use syllabi to observe changes in course content (see, for example, Rasche et al., 2013), in-depth qualitative data (e.g., via observations) may be better suited for this purpose, as prior research has emphasized that teachers enjoy high degrees of autonomy when acting in the classroom (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Research would also need to more closely investigate the role of the "hidden curriculum" (see above), as the implicit messages that a school sends to its students may be as important as the more visible, explicit changes.

Second, future research needs to look into the four observed conditions for decoupling. Empirical research has to discuss what mediates a school's engagement in decoupling under these conditions. The interaction among different conditions seems to be particularly interesting. For instance, the existence of competing institutional demands combined with resource stringency may increase the likelihood of decoupling. Conceptual research can also discuss the

relevance of other conditions. While we identified two organizational variables (i.e., resource stringency and resistance) and two field-level variables (i.e., competing and ambiguous demands), there is no need to believe that this is a conclusive list. For instance, decoupling can also result from an organization's desire to create a powerful brand image (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). As business schools operate in a competitive market environment, the development of a distinct brand image seems to be increasing in importance and may drive decoupling in selected cases (Pitt, Berthon, Spyropoulou, & Page, 2006).

Finally, it is important to better understand how the links between business schools and the corporate world influence decoupling. While surveys usually show that graduates are eloquent about the need for responsible management (Net Impact & The Aspen Institute, 2011), it is at this stage difficult to judge whether corporations, and especially firms in sensitive sectors (e.g., banks), are particularly keen on recruiting graduates who have gained specific knowledge in this field. Although firms usually support broad statements in favor of responsible management education (Waddock et al., 2011), we do not yet know how far they are in fact prepared to adjust their recruitment practices. Schools may find it harder to decouple if firms that recruit their graduates and often also act as donors take this discussion seriously.

What will the future hold for responsible management education? We believe that a school's prestige and its position in the organizational field will influence its strategy toward responsible management education. Schools with high prestige and a central position in the field are likely to face more legitimacy expectations (as they are subject to public scrutiny) and hence can be expected to devote a large amount of attention to responsible management education. Top schools, however, may follow a more implicit strategy by approaching relevant changes without joining highly visible initiatives such as PRME, GRLI, or ABIS, which usually have low entry barriers and thus attract heterogeneous participants. This aspect does not fit well with the need top schools have to differentiate themselves, especially as negative legitimacy spillovers may occur. By contrast, schools with lower levels of prestige can be expected to follow a more explicit strategy toward responsible management education by joining the abovementioned initiatives and publicly reporting on implementation progress. Such an explicit strategy also allows these schools to further differentiate their program offerings.

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Author Biographies

Andreas Rasche is professor of business in society at the Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) and research director of the CBS World-Class Research Environment on "Governing Responsible Business." He holds a PhD (Dr.rer.pol.) from European Business School, Germany, and a habilitation (Dr.habil.) from Helmut-Schmidt University, Hamburg. His research focuses on corporate responsibility standards (particularly the UN Global Compact), the political role of corporations in transnational governance, and the governance of global supply networks. More information is available at <http://www.arasche.com>.

Dirk Ulrich Gilbert is a professor of business ethics at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He received his PhD from Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University in Frankfurt (Germany) and held positions at the University of New South Wales (Sydney, Australia) and the University of Nuremberg (Germany). His most recent research focuses on management education, international accountability standards, and deliberative democracy. He published in internationally acclaimed journals such as *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Business & Society*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Management International Review*, and *the Journal of Business Ethics*.