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Schools find big issues repay study

By Sarah Murray for edition of octovber 31st
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It might seem odd, at a prestigious awards ceremony attended by top business school deans and senior corporate executives, to predict the event's demise. This, however, was what one of the winners of this year's Beyond Grey Pinstripes awards did.

"My hope is that 10 years from now, we'll no longer need this award," declared C.K. Prahalad, professor of corporate strategy and international business at Michigan University's business school. He was winner of the Lifetime Achievement award in the Faculty Pioneers section of the biennial ranking of business

schools that highlights MBA programmes and faculty which incorporate social and environmental issues into research projects and curriculums. Prof Prahalad looks forward to a world in which drawing attention to leading business schools in this area will be unnecessary, since programmes incorporating social and environmental issues will be the norm rather than the exception.

This year's Beyond Grey Pinstripes survey provides some evidence that his hope will be realised, demonstrating a sharp rise in the number of institutions attempting to prepare students to address social and environmental issues in business practices.

However, those behind the report also believe that there is more work to be done in integrating these issues into core courses by schools that are not included in the ranking.

The report – produced by the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the business and society programme at the Aspen Institute – found that the number of schools requiring students to take one or more courses in ethics, corporate social responsibility, sustainability or business and society rose to 54 per cent in 2005, up from 45 per cent in 2003 and 34 per cent in 2001.

"We certainly see important trend lines towards more innovation within the curriculum – both in the core course and in the electives – and this is responding to some of the new realities and pressures schools are feeling from the business environment," says Judith Samuelson, founder and executive director of the Aspen Institute's business and society programme.

"If you cast back to 1998, when we first started doing this, the changes are quite remarkable," she says. "The number of courses is going up, the enthusiasm of students is not abating and the schools are responding to the demand from students."

At some of the schools, more traditional topics such as environmental management are giving way to innovative programmes that respond to the recent recognition by many businesses that the private sector can help alleviate poverty while also making money.

"It's looking at water scarcity or climate change not as cost centres but turning these things on their head and creating opportunities for growth," says Meghan Chapple, who runs the WRI's business education sustainable enterprise programme.

Research is also an important part of the picture, such as an initiative at the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University – spearheaded by the school's Centre for Sustainable Global Enterprise – that is investigating the "commercialisation of clean technology in the base of the pyramid".

However, the survey revealed that progress remains limited in integrating social and environmental material into required courses such as accounting, finance, marketing, operations and strategy.

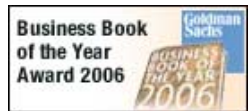
And the top-ranked schools were well ahead of others. The survey found that students at the top 30 schools were exposed to social and environmental issues in about 25 per cent of their core coursework, compared with just 8 per cent in the remaining schools.

"If we saw as much debate and innovation at all the business schools as in the top 30

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and some of the others, we'd be in a very different place," says Nancy McGaw, deputy director of the Aspen Institute's business and society programme.

Part of the challenge lies in persuading busy faculty to take on the extra work and pack new material into curriculums that they believe are already crowded.

For Robert Joss, dean of the Graduate School of Business at Stanford – which was top of the schools ranked – this makes it all the more important for schools to support staff such as Stanford's Erica Plambeck, associate professor of operations, information and technology, who was recognised this year as a rising star in the Faculty Pioneers section of the awards.

"The really critical ingredient is faculty support," says Prof Joss. "The students have a natural passion for this but the key to keeping it strong is giving faculty the time or a case study writer so they can make the changes in the curriculum. The best thing we can do is to help those who are motivated and then to shine a light on it."

Another obstacle is that academic research remains limited in its acceptance by mainstream journals. The Beyond Grey Pinstripes report found that in 2003 and 2004, only 4 per cent of the faculty at the surveyed schools published research on issues of sustainability in leading peer-reviewed management journals.

"That doesn't mean we're not seeing more articles and investigations carried out," says Ms Samuelson. "But . . . this is still work that's hard to get published."

Despite such gaps, however, two less scientific measurements are giving those behind the survey reason for optimism. First, the awards include an increasing number of non-US schools. Three of the top five ranked schools are based outside the US and 12 of the top 30 are non-US schools.

Second, there is evidence of the increasing seriousness with which business schools take the Beyond Grey Pinstripes awards. Eleven deans attended this year's event in New York compared with five at the previous awards ceremony and almost 100 schools took the time to submit detailed reports on their coursework and research for the voluntary survey.

"This is the most demanding survey we undertake in terms of the materials and information we need to supply," says Dezső Horváth, dean of Canada's Schulich School of Business. He stresses, however, that it is important to participate because "in the next decade or two [sustainability] will be one of the biggest challenges for business. And the sooner business schools start training students to understand this, the sooner the turnaround will happen in the corporate world".

THE 30 SCHOOLS THAT MADE THE RANKING

Top MBA programmes that incorporate social and environmental issues.

1. Stanford, Palo Alto, US
2. ESADE, Barcelona, Spain
3. York (Schulich), Toronto, Canada
4. ITESM, Monterrey, Mexico
5. Notre Dame (Mendoza), South Bend, US
6. George Washington, Washington DC, US
7. Michigan (Ross), Ann Arbor, US
8. North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler), Chapel Hill, US
9. Cornell (Johnson), Ithaca, US
10. Wake Forest (Babcock), Winston-Salem, US
11. UC Berkeley (Haas), US
12. Nottingham, UK
13. Virginia (Darden), Charlottesville, US
14. Western Ontario (Ivey), London, Canada
15. Boston College, Boston, US
16. Erasmus, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
17. Colorado (Leeds), Boulder, US

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18. New Mexico (Anderson), Albuquerque, US
19. Asian Institute of Management (SyCip), Makati, Philippines
20. Portland State, Portland, US
21. Yale, New Haven, US
22. McGill, Montreal, Canada
23. Case Western (Weatherhead), Cleveland, US
24. Insead, Fontainebleau, France
25. Calgary, Canada
26. Jyväskylä, Finland
27. Navarra (IESE), Barcelona, Spain
28. Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, US
29. Minnesota (Carlson), Minneapolis, US
30. Georgetown (McDonough), Washington, DC, US

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