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Imagining a Place for Sustainability Management: An Early Career Call for Action

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LET US IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT...

Imagine business schools at the forefront of today's social-ecological challenges, filled with respected experts who are frequently called upon to contribute to public discussions on climate, biodiversity, and mass migration.

Imagine business graduates who can lead organizations towards carbon neutrality, understand and address complex systemic ecological risks, and create new business plans with competitors and other stakeholders to respect human rights and planetary boundaries.

Pressing sustainability challenges require us to bring this imagination to life. The world trembles and burns from the destabilizing impacts of global warming. In the first few months of 2022 alone, floods have severely affected countries on every continent, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, South Africa, Brazil, Ecuador, and Madagascar. Temperatures have reached 49 degrees Celsius in India and 40 in England. Wildfires have ravaged California, Afghanistan, and Australia, and mudslides have caused mass destruction in Brazil. Europe has experienced its worst drought in 500 years. These challenges are rooted in complex interrelations between social, economic, and ecological systems, and overcoming them requires interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge in all areas.

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We argue that management scholars and graduates have the potential to meaningfully contribute to these conversations, but structural barriers in business schools inhibit interdisciplinary work connecting social, economic, and ecological systems. Despite progress in integrating sustainability concerns into the different management fields and the growing number of management publications and courses on sustainability, management scholars remain disconnected from interdisciplinary discussions on how to address climate change, companies struggle to find managers with the skills needed to solve social-ecological challenges, and these challenges keep worsening.

We are writing this essay because we, as early-career researchers (ECRs), are imagining and creating a path to combine our management expertise with other fields. We want to share our ambitions with you: We envision a future in which management scholars combine their understanding of organizations with knowledge of ecosystems and their relation to economic and social systems; a future in which faculty evaluation recognizes the impact of research and teaching on practice; and a future that rewards collaboration with practitioners and scholars outside the social sciences and publications in interdisciplinary academic journals. *You may say we are dreamers, but we are not the only ones.* We are members and founders of two communities, the Sustainability PhD Community^[1] and the Impact Scholar Community,^[2] which bring together hundreds of ECRs who share this vision.

We envision the creation of a sustainability management field that bridges the social and natural sciences and complements existing management fields. This sustainability management field will study and teach how to manage organizations with a full understanding of social-ecological system dynamics and the opportunities and constraints afforded by those dynamics. A sustainability management field will include dedicated departments, research groups, and educational programs fully located in business schools and supporting interdisciplinary collaboration. The field will match the scale and scope of today's social-ecological challenges.

In the remainder of this essay, we describe structural barriers in business schools that hinder management scholars, especially ECRs like us, from researching and teaching the urgent sustainability challenges of our time. We explain the different roles ECRs and business school leaders can play in eliminating these barriers, and we invite you to participate in this effort. Together, we can bring to life this imagined, renewed business school equipped to understand and solve sustainability challenges.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Increasingly, management decisions require an understanding of the complex interrelations between social and ecological systems. Managers need to understand these dynamics. Achieving net zero emissions by 2050 demands profound upheavals in business models and interactions with stakeholders. To develop feasible plans for achieving net zero emissions, decision-makers must have technical and scientific expertise, including knowledge on carbon cycles, tensions between biodiversity and CO₂ reduction, and land-use externalities. As business schools train future and current leaders, it is clear that knowledge production at the intersection of the social and natural sciences should be part of business schools, not

just interdisciplinary university departments. Yet management studies remain focused on human behaviour and the social sciences and are separated from the ecological knowledge of the natural sciences. It follows that business schools are struggling to incorporate the interdisciplinary knowledge needed to understand and solve social-ecological challenges.

Management scholarship has made progress in integrating sustainability into existing management fields. For instance, eight prominent European business schools launched the Business Schools for Climate Leadership Initiative to help business practitioners contribute to solving the climate crisis. The Network for Business Sustainability at Ivey Business School coordinates work among almost 200 business sustainability research centres around the world. Finance colleagues look at Environmental, Social, and Governance screening and impact investing, strategy colleagues grapple with how to compete sustainably against non-sustainable rivals, marketing scholars examine how to position and sell green products, and supply chain and international business colleagues study emission tracking and disclosure techniques. These positive developments have brought aspects of sustainability knowledge into management.

Yet, these approaches use sustainability as a context in which to apply existing theories of established management fields. As a result, these discussions are somewhat limited to the assumptions, audience, research questions, and methods relevant to each field, hindering the development of comprehensive theories of sustainability management. Building such theories requires engaging in the interdisciplinary discussions on how to survive and prosper within planetary boundaries taking place in leading scientific journals and decision-making bodies. We need to extend our focus and be open to new topics that straddle the social and natural sciences, audiences that involve practitioners and non-social scientists, and new methodologies, such as integrated assessment models, that account for both social and ecological factors. Integrating sustainability into each management field is not enough to position management scholars as relevant contributors to interdisciplinary scientific conversations, fuelling the perception, outside the management field, that business schools are not legitimate producers of research that matters (Bothello and Roulet, 2019).

The gap between management studies and the natural sciences leaves management journals and scholars largely absent from climate change discussions (Wohlgezogen et al., 2020), and the natural sciences are absent from conversations about management and organizations (Whiteman et al., 2013). Management scholars and natural scientists do not often attend the same conferences, cite each other's work, or collaborate to propose effective solutions to social-ecological challenges. This year's Group for Research on Organizations and the Natural Environment (GRONEN) conference illustrates the problem. We were invited to hold an end-of-conference plenary on the question 'Should sustainability management be a field?' At the outset, we asked more than 100 participants if they had heard conference attendees discussing the recently published Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report presenting the latest scientific knowledge on the causes of and solutions to climate change. Not a single person raised their hand. In other words, at a premier conference on management studies and sustainability, participants were not aware of or talking about an invaluable guide to how organizations and economic sectors can decarbonize and adapt to climate change. A report that is ubiquitous in the

natural sciences, policy, and business communities was absent from a major management conference on sustainability.

As we have experienced through our research and teaching, the gap between management studies and the natural sciences leads management scholars, business students, and managers to propose sustainability solutions that do not incorporate critical ecological knowledge about the reality of ecosystem structure and function. Anchoring sustainability conversations in existing fields such as business ethics leads us to focus on the *why* of sustainable practices. We pay less attention to the *how*, such as necessary orders of magnitude, ecosystem dynamics, or temporal and material constraints. This leaves business schools unable to adequately prepare future managers and decision-makers to solve grand challenges. Companies such as Forética, Grant Thornton, PwC, and Deloitte are struggling to find employees with the sustainability skills needed to manage in today's world of sustainability challenges.^[3] Similarly, the natural sciences often propose technically sound solutions that encounter implementation obstacles of a purely organizational nature, such as the difficulty of creating viable business models or managing opposition from key stakeholders, as in the case of carbon capturing technologies. These barriers might appear surmountable to management-savvy readers. Therefore, both management and natural sciences fields will benefit from more collaboration within a field of sustainability management.

WHAT EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS CAN AND CANNOT DO

If you have become convinced of the importance of bridging the gap between the natural and social sciences and the key role that management can play in this area, we have good news for you: Hundreds of ECRs in management share this ambition and are ready to challenge themselves to learn topics and methods beyond management studies. We ECRs are perhaps less institutionalized in existing management fields and are at a career stage in which we have to choose which topics to study, which conversations to participate in, and which communities to contribute to. Our experiences in the Impact Scholar Community and the Sustainability PhD Community tell us that many scholars share deep concerns about the state of ecosystems on which our civilization depends and the impact that management teaching and research can (and should) have on their preservation. Mirroring the rise and growth of young citizen movements like Fridays for Future, these communities have reached hundreds of members in just a couple of years and continue to grow, reflecting the increasing commitment of management ECRs to work on the world's grand challenges.

At the same time, we experience structural limitations of management academia that hinder our efforts to have an impact through our work. Acquiring and employing the skills needed to bridge the gap with the natural sciences seems impossible. We feel constrained to publish in a few journals on a small number of sustainability-related phenomena. ECRs who work on interdisciplinary sustainability topics feel punished and excluded for working across disciplinary boundaries, despite such work potentially having higher impact (Fini et al., 2022). We feel compelled to fit into long-running management discussions and contribute to established theories in existing fields. Many of these theories were proposed

when today's social-ecological challenges were the exclusive purview of doomsday movies. We believe some of these theories have gaps that can be improved only through interdisciplinary sustainability management research. Yet we share the experience that our efforts to participate in interdisciplinary conversations and engage with practice are undervalued by promotion and tenure committees.

At conferences and panels, we receive dispiriting advice from established scholars. A scholar on a career panel at a management conference focused on sustainability advised two of us to avoid presenting ourselves as sustainability management scholars. Instead, we were told to position ourselves as working in an existing management field and studying sustainability as a context relevant to that field. A scholar at a junior faculty consortium advised one of us to wait for tenure before bridging the natural and management sciences. Though other academics have criticized these statements, it seems that building a solid academic reputation requires ECRs to play within the rules of existing management fields. Yet these rules prevent us from incorporating the interdisciplinary knowledge needed to make an impact on the world's grand challenges. As a result, management scholarship struggles to understand these phenomena. And we ECRs who aim at contributing to solving social-ecological challenges feel we must constantly balance contradictions in our sense of self, our professional identities, and our missions as sustainability management scholars.

For us ECRs, sustainability is not just a job but a way to address existential challenges for our future, challenges with devastating material impacts already underway. We are driven by a desire to create meaningful and impactful knowledge on these issues. But we see significant obstacles to our desired work and career paths. More importantly, these obstacles hinder the field's progress in understanding and teaching sustainability management and, as such, meaningful change. We have seen ECR colleagues pursuing academic careers outside business schools or leaving academia altogether, deeming management scholarship and teaching irrelevant to the issues that matter. This shows us that we need structural change in business schools. We need to push, cajole, needle, rebel, agitate, and reject 'business academia as usual'.

THE WAY FORWARD: ENVISIONING A FIELD OF SUSTAINABILITY MANAGEMENT

We envision a series of institutional and structural changes in business schools leading to the creation of a sustainability management field. This field will support disseminating interdisciplinary sustainability knowledge on social-ecological systems, integrate this knowledge into business school classrooms, and increase the impact of sustainability management research and teaching on practice.

Our vision is inspired by a few institutions, with which we had the opportunity to collaborate, that are already paving the way for creating a sustainability management field. These include the Center for Circular Economy at the University of Padova, the Erb Institute at the University of Michigan, and the Sustainable Futures sub-department at the University of Exeter Business School. These institutions investigate viable solutions to global social-ecological challenges and have faculties, programs, budgets, and research

lines. They operate across disciplines. Faculty work closely with colleagues in engineering, natural sciences, and other social sciences, supported by dedicated interdisciplinary grant funding like the Horizon Europe program.

The creation of a new academic field requires differentiation, mobilization, and legitimacy (Hambrick and Chen, 2008). Sustainability management differentiates itself because it focuses on interdisciplinary research questions that treat sustainability as an outcome and a goal in its own right, blending management studies with concepts and methods from the natural sciences. A sustainability management field will promote rather than discourage interdisciplinary collaborations by including courses designed around sustainability skills in high demand by employers, dedicating budgets for sustainability management research, using hiring and promotion criteria that value the impact of research and teaching on practice, and rewarding publications in interdisciplinary journals.

New fields also involve mobilization. We ECRs are playing a role in this regard. This essay is part of our ongoing commitment to mobilize business school leaders to create the new field by organizing professional development workshops and plenaries at major management conferences and using social networks such as Twitter to raise awareness within the broader academic community. Another aspect of mobilization involves our efforts to bring other disciplines into management studies. Like many of our ECR peers, we seek to collaborate with scholars in other disciplines, attend interdisciplinary conferences, publish in non-management journals, and invite non-management scholars to publish in management journals, even though we are aware that this hurts our career progression.

The third element of a new field – legitimacy – is the one that requires the most help from business school leadership. We call upon business school leadership to make the structural changes we have recommended and prove to an external audience that management scholars have important things to say about social-ecological challenges. Although sustainability in business schools is relatively new, there is a highly qualified pool of sustainable management talents that can spearhead this new field. The structure of business schools must be changed to support this work and encourage scholars in other disciplines to view us as legitimate colleagues in the sustainability space.

Our call to create a sustainability management field complements the important work underway to integrate sustainability concepts into existing management fields. As we debated during the GRONEN plenary, sustainability is part of every academic discipline. Existing management fields each have important points to make to understand social-ecological challenges within their respective domains. However, this approach alone is not enough to understand and teach sustainability management. We need a separate field of sustainability management to study and teach the topics that do not fit into existing fields, connect management with the natural sciences through interdisciplinary collaborations, and train future and current decision-makers to understand ecological dynamics as required by employers. This sustainability management field is a necessary complement to the integration of sustainability into existing fields and should not replace it.

DEAR DEANS, EDITORS, DEPARTMENT HEADS, FUNDERS, AND PROFESSORS

We know you have been discussing the fact that business schools need to do more in understanding and solving social-ecological challenges. We sustainability management ECRs are eager to contribute to these efforts. We call on you to support the future imagined in this essay. You have the power to change the structure of business schools to encourage and reward interdisciplinary collaborations and efforts to solve grand challenges. Let us sit down together not just to imagine but also to build business schools that are able to provide solutions to the social-ecological challenges of our time.

NOTES

- [1] The Sustainability PhD Community is an online community connecting doctoral students from around the world whose interests lie at the intersection of organizations and the natural environment: <https://one.aom.org/working-groups/sustainability-phd-community>.
- [2] The Impact Scholar Community is a community for early-career research scholars who want to connect research to impact: <https://www.impactscholarcommunity.com/>.
- [3] Business Schools Respond to a Flood of Interest in E.S.G., 15 November 2021, by Jenny Gross. Retrieved from <https://www.acre.com/blog/2021/11/business-schools-respond-to-a-flood-of-interest-in-csg>.

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