



## Challenges of Teaching Corporate Environmental Management in Brazil: The “5 Ls”

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### Abstract

Teaching corporate environmental management (CEM) is fundamental for the education of more responsible students. We analyzed the main challenges for CEM in Brazil from the viewpoint of teachers. Results indicate five types of barriers for teaching CEM, denoted here as the “5 Ls”, namely a lack of integration of other teachers in the teaching of CEM, a lack of acceptance of CEM as a subject by the peers teachers, a lack of focus on business while teaching CEM, a lack of CEM teaching materials appropriate for the realities of Brazil and a lack of interest among some students in CEM.

**Keywords:** *Corporate Environmental Management, Brazil, Education for Business, Environmental Management.*

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of training more responsible professionals to work in more sustainable organisations, which contributes towards sustainable development, has been widely discussed. While this logic appears flawless, there are various real-world challenges that make it difficult to train more responsible professionals. Various initiatives are emerging, such as the proposal by the United Nations (UN) known as Principles for a Responsible Management Education (PRME, 2010).

One of the essential components for training students in more responsible behaviour is teaching corporate environmental management (CEM). However, CEM teachers face various challenges that prevent this discipline from becoming more effective and developing more environmentally responsible professionals.

This article sheds light on the main challenges of teaching CEM in Brazil. The objective of the research is achieved by means of interviews performed with five renowned professors responsible for teaching CEM in undergraduate courses.

This article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents arguments on teaching CEM, and a brief characterisation of the research method is discussed in Section 3. The results are shown in Section 4, together with a discussion of the results (Section 5) and conclusions (Section 6).

### 2. Background

#### 2.1 The importance of teaching CEM

Several scholars have defended the teaching of CEM in undergraduate courses (Hasan, 1993; Smith, Hart & McCloskey, 1994; Rusinko, 2005). One of the defenders of this idea is Peoples (2009). Based on his experience as a project leader in organisational environmental management, this author formulates an explicative model on how the lack of knowledge on environmental management may compromise the inclusion of environmental management in the day-to-day of organisations. The main challenge for the inclusion of environmental management is the lack of knowledge on behalf of decision makers. Without knowledge on environmental management, decision makers enter into a cycle of doubt, confusion and lack of commitment to the environment. This encourages an avoidance of decisions on these matters and generates so-called "paralysis" with respect to the environmental management actions of the company. For the proponents of pro-environmental management, this process can result in frustration.

In this research, it is assumed that environmental education for businesses by means of CEM is a key component of the transition to a more sustainable society.

Environmental education is understood in this research in its broadest sense, as conceptualised in the Tblisi Declaration (UNESCO, 1978). Specifically, it is a required learning process for increasing knowledge on environmental questions, and it carries implications for the set of abilities and experiences required to solve environmental problems.

As asserted by Smith, Hart and McCloskey (1994), education on environmental management plays a central part in the aspiration to improve the quality of the environment, a concern that competes for the attention of managers who, at the end of the day, will define the direction of the organisation and define the magnitude of the environmental impact that the organisation will produce.

The need to foster the discipline of CEM and the constant improvement of its content has been encouraged by proposals such as PRME. One innovative initiative in this respect is the creation of a prize granted by the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business, which has the goal of honouring environmental management disciplines around the world. The prize is awarded annually, with professors already honoured from the Business Schools of the University of Michigan and Harvard University (University of South Carolina, 2009).

The prize also assesses the use of innovative didactic material in the classroom, which is relevant for didactic purposes according to the research of Cordano, Ellis and Scherer (2003). These authors develop a research experiment to check whether the use of didactic material related to environmental management will raise awareness among students taking a management course. The level of awareness regarding environmental matters was evaluated before students were exposed to didactic material on the environment as well as after being exposed to the didactic material. Statistical tests confirmed that contact by students in the sample (206 students) with environmental management material raised the awareness of students regarding the incorporation of environmental questions into managerial activities.

Recognising the crucial role of Institutions of Higher Education for the success of the development of more sustainable development, the UN launched the program entitled "UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development" in December of 2002. The decade in question extends from 2005 to 2014, and the project emphasises the indispensable role of the educational sector in achieving sustainable development mainly aimed at improving social and environmental conditions.

The main objectives of the Decade are to (a) facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences among participants in the educational system; (b) encourage the

quality of teaching on topics related to sustainable development; (c) help countries achieve the main objectives of more sustainable development; and (d) provide support for the educational reform initiatives in favour of sustainable development (DESD-UN, 2005).

## 2.2 Barriers to teaching CEM

Although there may be a consensus on the importance of teaching CEM, several barriers, some direct and others indirect, impede this process. Taking a broad perspective to focus on the concept of sustainability, Leal Filho (2000) performed in-depth interviews with 40 with Deans and Vice-Deans from European universities. The author systematised the main barriers to the creation, diffusion and adoption of the principles of sustainability in these universities:

- Sustainability is an extremely abstract concept, and it lacks a clear relationship with traditional university disciplines.
- Sustainability is a broad term, which does not have a clear relationship with specific university activities.
- The university does not possess qualified employees and specialists in sustainability to adequately address this matter.
- The university does not possess the financial resources to invest in sustainability.
- Sustainability is viewed as a topic for environmentalists.

Rohweder (2004) asserts that there are two main barriers to the effective insertion of CEM instruction.

- A personal approach that focuses on the teaching of a few professors. The inclusion of environmental management in the activities of colleges tends to depend on the personal effort of a given professor who is interested in the topic. Thus, there is a so-called individual and personalised effect of the inclusion of environmental management in business schools. In other words, the inclusion of environmental management generally occurs by means of an approach centred on a few professors who are self-motivated with respect to the cause of environmental quality.
- Territorial behaviour and thinking. The majority of instructors who are not part of the environmental management field have treated it as a secondary field, defending their own knowledge "territory" and thus making a transversal approach to environmental management difficult. This precludes its inclusion in the coursework of other disciplines.

Next, we present the method that was used to identify the main barriers to the teaching of CEM according to the perception of CEM professors in Brazil.

## 3. Research Method

The main purpose of this research is to identify the perception of professors from Brazil in relation to the main barriers to the teaching of CEM. We use qualitative research based on interviews that intentionally focused on well-known professors of CEM. Five CEM professors were chosen, some of whom are active in the top universities in Brazil. The respondents are called "A, B, C, D and E" to guarantee anonymity. The professors were interviewed and responded in a relatively free form to the following questions.

- What is the current importance of CEM education in Brazil as compared with the past?
- What are the main barriers to CEM education?
- How do you evaluate the institutional support for CEM education?

The interviews were performed during 2010.

#### 4. Results

The respondents were unanimous in reporting that CEM education in Brazil began in the middle of the 1990s. At first, the main barrier was the legitimacy of CEM education to their peers. According to one of the responses, “currently, the reality for CEM education is much better than it was 20 years ago [...] when no one knew what CEM was [...] and when some professors believed that it was not a topic for a business school” (Respondent A). Similarly, Respondent B stated that, “I participated in a meeting on the environmental management system of the university [...] when a professor of another college in the sciences field asked me what I knew about the environment.”

The creation of undergraduate CEM curricula has come to pass in the schools in which respondents B, C, D and E work. According to Respondent A, “it was easy to create the CEM discipline at the graduate level, yet for undergraduates, it is not so easy. [...] the existing CEM field is elective and is still being tested. [...] I hope that the other professors are convinced that CEM is important and that the topic becomes mandatory”.

In addition to institutional challenges, there is a challenge in relation to the content that is taught for CEM. According to Respondent C, “for more than a decade, CEM was taught as part of environmental sciences. [...] There was no relation at all to the business field [...] the previous professor did not make this connection”. Respondent D asserted that “one of the main challenges is associating business with environmental topics. [...] this is something that is lost on some initiatives for CEM education.”

In addition, the lack of didactic material for CEM education became clear during the interviews. According to Respondent E, “one of the main problems is the lack of teaching case studies aimed at CEM education.” Respondent C confirmed this viewpoint; “The major challenge is showing students that CEM can directly influence the performance of the company, [...] yet much of the available didactic material is superficial and does not show a relationship between environmental management and the performance of the company in an explicit manner.”

Another difficulty that was indicated is the lack of material addressing the current situation in Brazilian. “For example, a large American NGO has developed many teaching case studies for CEM available on its web page. [...] The initiative is good, but it is not widely used in Brazil. [...] Many students have a low ability to read texts in English, and these cases are presented in the English language” (Respondent E).

Another barrier that was identified is related to the behaviour of students and their expectations in relation to the field of environmental management. According to Respondent C, “I perceived that the students did not value the CEM field [...] because it was seen as a discipline of little relevance for future decision makers. [...] When I began to show the best environmental management practices and the opportunities for green jobs, the students became more interested in CEM”. Respondent D adds that, “the fault does not lie with the students. [...] They spend

four or five years hearing that they have to maximise profits. [...] Then a professor of CEM comes along and says that they have to think about the environment and sustainability. [...] The problem is that the topic of CEM is not treated appropriately in the disciplines included in undergraduate coursework.”

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results presented above, CEM education is provoking changes in undergraduate courses, and it is becoming consolidated as a teaching area. This finding supports the assertions of some authors that recommend this type of instruction (Hasan, 1993; Smith, Hart & McCloskey, 1994; Rusinko, 2005).

However, this movement has encountered some barriers as follows.

- A lack of integration of CEM education with other disciplines, resulting in the isolation of CEM professors. The five interviewed professors mentioned being the only CEM professors at the undergraduate level, noting that many of the advances that have been obtained depended on individual and voluntary initiatives.
- A lack of acceptance of CEM education by peers. There is evidence of some difficulty regarding institutional support provided for CEM education and regarding the recognition of this area as essential for the formation of environmentally conscious decision makers. Therefore, there exists a barrier related to legitimacy.
- A lack of a business focus for CEM education, mainly in the recent past. CEM is seen as part of the environmental sciences and disconnected from the business world, which tends to make the topic of CEM of secondary importance for students.
- A lack of appropriate didactic material. There is a lack of didactic material showing best practices and successful case studies of CEM in actual Brazilian companies.
- A lack of appreciation of CEM by some students. This barrier is generated as a result of all of the other difficulties presented up until now. This results in the perception that CEM is not as important for decision makers in the business setting.

Thus, the barriers for CEM education listed by Rohweder (2004) (namely, territorial behaviour and thinking as well as the personal approach that focuses on the teaching of a few professors) were confirmed in this research. However, three new barriers were identified, namely, the weak business focus of CEM education; a lack of adequate didactic material focusing on Brazilian reality; and the lack of appreciation for CEM by some students.

The identification of these three new barriers allows for an expansion of the existing theory. The five identified barriers may be called the “5 “Ls.”

## 6. Final Remarks

The objective of this research was to use interviews to identify the main barriers to CEM education in undergraduate courses in Brazil. For this purpose, five professors in the field were selected.

The results indicate five types of barriers for teaching CEM, denoted here as the “5 Ls”, namely a lack of integration of other teachers in the teaching of CEM, a lack of

acceptance of CEM as a subject by the peers teachers, a lack of focus on business while teaching CEM, a lack of CEM teaching materials appropriate for the realities of Brazil and a lack of interest among some students in CEM, making it a secondary discipline.

Overcoming these barriers requires the institutionalisation of CEM as a legitimate educational and research area in Brazilian universities, a clear relationship between CEM education and businesses and real case studies of how CEM has improved business performance.

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