Acta non verba [Deeds, not words]: A phronetic, multi-stakeholder approach toward transformative and sustainable business education

For all of us, *what we do, how we think and behave*, makes a difference to the kind of world we have and that world we want (Contu, 2019, p.6)

Introduction, Rationale & Central Research Question:

Transforming our world, the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is ambitious. Realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 targets established by world leaders to reduce inequalities, combat climate change and improve overall quality of life, requires multi-stakeholder initiatives that advance collaborative and creative solutions to global progress challenges (UN, 2015). In education, the 2030 Agenda calls on academic institutions to use resourceful methodological and pedagogical approaches to transform their research and teaching in support of these SDGs (see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015)

Business education, in particular, is seen as critical in preparing future leaders to make responsible and sustainable decisions that promote progress on the SDGs among the global community, since business graduates go on to play key roles not only in private business, but also in civil society and public policy (Storey et al, 2017). Yet, despite a growing interest in sustainability across business, management and organizational research (Cullen 2017; Parboteeah et al. 2012; Christensen et al. 2007), and a growing trend toward the inclusion of sustainability-related courses in many business schools (Dickson et al. 2013; Samuelson 2013; Stoner and Wankel 2009), business education has been accused of failing to develop students as the responsible thinkers and practical problem-solvers that the 2030 Agenda requires.

Prado et al (2019), for example, argue that the teaching of sustainable development needs to push business students to address the ethical problem of deciding what rules and codes of conduct a society should develop to frame human actions aimed at increasing economic well-being, while also sustaining the natural environment. Business educators, however, are often criticized for ignoring matters relating to judgment, ethics, and morality (Waddock 2016). Indeed, Ghoshal (2005, p.75) claims that business schools have "propagated ideologically inspired amoral theories which have actively freed their students from any sense of (ethical and moral) responsibility". Moreover, the business school curriculum is increasingly disregarded as overly reliant on theories of abstract rationality and value neutrality, narrowly focused on didactic instruction, and lacking in relevance to the practicalities of 21st century organizing (e.g. Adizes, 2013, Millar & Price, 2018). Consequently, there have been numerous calls for business education (e.g. Wolfe and

Werhane 2010) to move toward a critical thinking approach that centres on practical wisdom, the ability to think and act in relation to values; what Aristotle called *phronesis.*

The basic tenet of *phronetic* research is that practical examples are typically more effective vehicles of communication than are discussions of theory (Flyvbjerg 2001; 2006). Aristotle was explicit in his regard of *phronesis* as the most important of the three intellectual virtues: *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techne* (technical knowledge and skills) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). *Phronesis* is the activity by which scientific and instrumental rationality is balanced by value-rationality; such balancing is crucial to the viability of any organization – from the family to a business to the state.

Repositioning business schools as catalysts for positive societal change with a *phronetic* orientation therefore requires progress on the curriculum and pedagogy involved in the teaching of sustainable development. Teaching resources in this field are, however, still relatively new, and it is unclear if and how, they are helping to reinforce the sustainability dimension in business courses (Aragon-Correa et al. 2017). Bridgman, Cummings and McLaughlin (2016) suggest that one potentially fruitful avenue which would allow business schools to build their credibility as expert and relatively independent observers of the role of business in society, is to "revisit" and "reimagine" the case method for sustainable development.

The case method is a discussion-based teaching tool that requires the active involvement of students, who analyze and debate-specific management situations (cases) and generate solutions or recommendations to address the issues at stake (Mesny, 2013). The case method was pioneered by Harvard Business School, where the analysis of cases is the primary mode of teaching and learning, and case development is a major focus of research.

The case method is now considered the most effective instructional strategy for developing critical thinking among business students (e.g. Reficco and Jaen 2015), and has been embraced by the curriculum in many business schools.

That being said, problems persist in fully adopting the case method to promote sustainable attitudes and behaviour among business students. First, the cases utilized in case method teaching have been criticized for encouraging narrow, functionalist understandings of business, rather than holistic thinking (Podolny, 2009); excluding the voice of women, the poor (Kweder, 2014); and labor (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007); and neglecting the interests and influence of multiple stakeholders in society (Bridgman, 2010; Starkey & Tempest, 2009). Second, little research exists on case method learning experiences of business students with regard to their engagement with principles of sustainability, or on how educators can use case teaching materials more effectively to promote sustainable and responsible decision-making (Cullen 2017; Starik et al. 2010). Third, business educators still rely almost exclusively on lectures to teach sustainable development (Aragon-Correa et al. 2017).

Thus, the purpose of our proposed project is to address these concerns. Drawing on the case method, our aim is to move beyond rhetoric toward meaningful action on the 2030 Agenda, and advance a *phronetic*, multi-stakeholder approach toward transformative and sustainable business education. The **central research question** of this proposed project is:

Does the case method, utilizing teaching cases anchored specifically in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs), influence sustainable attitudes and organizational decision-making behaviour among business students?

Project Plan

Drawing on the Case Method, our aim is to move beyond rhetoric toward meaningful action on the 2030 Agenda, and advance a phronetic, multi-stakeholder approach toward transformative and sustainable business education. The objectives of Acta non Verba are to:

1. Write, publish and disseminate a novel set of interdisciplinary, research-led and technology-enhanced teaching cases for use in business education in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which: are anchored in the UN Sustainable Development Goals; are specifically designed to promote responsible and sustainable attitudes and behaviours; and centre on B Corps

2. Empirically evaluate the impact of these teachings cases on the sustainable attitudes and decision-making behaviour among business students– those who will enter the workforce as organizational decision-makers across all industries, at multiple levels.

Our project will comprise two key stages to address our aim and objectives, as follows:

Stage 1: In collaboration with B Corps, we will create teaching cases through multi-phase, semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders. The cases will then be published as technology-enhanced teaching cases online through an Acta non Verba learning portal; working in collaboration with a learning technologist, each of our cases will be accompanied

by a teaching-note as guidance for educators, as well as interactive supporting materials for students.

Stage 2: Business students across graduate programs taught by our project team will be recruited to participate in a two-stage research study. Participants will complete an online survey at two points in time; first, at the beginning of classes with the project team, and second, on completion of classes with the project team which draw on the newly developed teaching cases. The purpose of this two-stage study is to examine whether the Case Method of instruction, utilising teaching cases focused on multi-stakeholder and multidisciplinary business issues related to the SDGs, has an influence on sustainable attitudes and organisational decision-making behaviour among business students in higher education in Ireland.

Dissemination Impact Plan

1. Form a communication and dissemination team who will analyse our potential beneficiaries (audiences) and anticipate their questions

2. Produce a detailed Acta non Verba project website and learning portal

3. Seek out dialogue with local and international stakeholders and arrange briefing sessions and dialogue panels

4. Publish our teaching cases and promote our learning portal at academic and industry conferences and events

5. Engage the media

6. Write and submit our research findings to top-tier academic journals, as well as academic

and industry conferences and events

7. Write and disseminate our Acta non Verba final report and associated policy
brief

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