

A promise of good behaviour

'I will strive to act with honesty and integrity . . . I will respect the rights and dignity of all people . . . I will strive to create sustainable prosperity worldwide'

Thunderbird Professional Oath of Honor

Support for the MBA oath is growing internationally as students and managers pledge to act ethically, writes **Della Bradshaw**

It was just a year ago, in a splash of worldwide publicity, that students graduating from the Harvard MBA programme decided to nail their colours to the mast and declare that they would uphold ethical standards in business.

Their avowals, which took the form of the MBA oath, came as a direct result of the economic crisis, during which MBAs in general – and some more prominent ones in particular – stood accused of all the ills in the business world.

But a year later, as the global economy begins to recover, jobs for MBA graduates are more plentiful and a more measured view of business education has returned, the popularity of the oath at Harvard seems to have waned. In 2009, 44 per cent of the class signed the oath; in 2010 this figure fell to 33 per cent.

But although the headline figures have diminished, there are clear signs that oaths are gaining traction inter-

nationally, with MBA students and managers alike taking the pledge. And although none of the other top US business schools – such as Stanford, Chicago or Wharton – has promoted the oath, a scan of the more than 3,000 signatories on the MBA Oath website reveals that individuals from many of the top business schools have signed the pledge.

In the UK the first MBA Oath chapter is at Strathclyde Business School in Glasgow and in this, its inaugural year, about 30 per cent of the class of 75 have signed the pledge. Why some students sign and others do not is difficult to determine, says Michael Cooper, the instigator of the chapter at Strathclyde, where more than 90 per cent of the students are from outside the UK.

One reason, he believes, is that some students from Asia view it as a case of “westerners telling the rest of the world what to do”. There are also concerns that business practices in some countries may preclude local managers from behaving in ways set down in the oath. “Some people say: ‘I admire the oath but I don’t think I can sign up to it. It wouldn’t work in my country.’”

Two further concerns are that there is no sanction for those who break the pledge and that some of the commitments – to the environment for example – have left-leaning tendencies. Peter Escher, one of the founders of the oath at Harvard, defends the wording. “This was not intended to be a political oath. The environment has a legitimate claim on any organisation,” he says.

To try to kickstart discussions around ethics and sustainability, Angel Cabrera, president of Thunderbird in Arizona, instigated the concept of an oath at the school in 2005. Prof Cabrera describes himself as an “activist” in the MBA oath field and with Harvard’s Rakesh Khurana and Nitin Nohria – Prof Nohria will be Harvard’s next dean – was instrumen-

tal in developing the oath project.

“We need to treat management as a profession. This is one way, but only one way, to do this. It’s not a panacea or complete solution.” He sees it as having real value within the business school community. “It changes the conversation. It puts pressure on us to rethink the curriculum.” Otherwise, he says, “You can go through an entire MBA programme without being told that corruption or bribing is not acceptable.”

Prof Cabrera argues that managers who sign the oath will still be fallible. “It does not mean these people are going out to get a 100 per cent score.” Mr Cooper agrees. “I think a lot of people see the oath as something in black and white. For me it is a set of principles to work towards.”

At the Ivey school at the University of Western Ontario, it was the protection of the reputation of the school, after the Enron and Worldcomm scandals, that swayed alumni into instigating a pledge in 2004. “It’s a reminder of the commitment they are making to the school and their fellow alumni,” says Kelly Cole, director of advancement.

While motivations for setting up an oath chapter vary, so do the oaths themselves.

At Thunderbird the oath, recited at the commencement ceremony, comprises eight lines. At Harvard and Ivey they are more fulsome. Some are more proactive. The Young Global Leader’s Pledge at the Global Compact of the World Economic Forum, for example, requires participants to engage proactively in corporate social responsibility; other oaths are more cautious.

Prof Cabrera says that there was discussion when the oath programme was set up to try to standardise the wordings, but “bringing them all together was very hard to do”.