

Innovative pedagogies for responsible management education: advancing the i5 framework and UKPSF across PRME business schools in the UK and Kazakhstan

Journal of
responsible
management
education

Received 29 April 2026
Revised 14 July 2026
Accepted 14 July 2026

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how the integration of the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Impactful Five (i5) framework and the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) can advance responsible management education in higher education. Drawing on PRME-affiliated universities in the UK and Kazakhstan, it examines how experiential, playful and innovative pedagogies influence student engagement, emotional climate and transformative learning. The purpose is to address gaps in translating responsible management education principles into teaching practice by developing an integrated pedagogical framework and scorecard that supports reflective, sustainability-oriented and context-sensitive educational approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a qualitative, comparative multi-site case study design across PRME-affiliated business schools in the UK and Kazakhstan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify patterns relating to experiential learning, emotional climate, inclusivity and student transformation. Analysis was guided by an integrated PRME i5 and UKPSF lens, enabling cross-context interpretation of pedagogical practices. Insights from the analysis informed the development of a conceptual scorecard for evaluating i5-aligned responsible management education practices.

Findings – Findings indicate that experiential and playful pedagogies support student engagement, motivation and positive emotional climates, while sustained learning outcomes depend on effective scaffolding and reflective integration. The study highlights the role of educators as facilitators of inclusive and psychologically supportive learning environments, with culturally responsive (“glocal”) adaptation shaping how i5 principles are enacted across UK and Kazakhstan contexts. The findings also identify challenges in operationalising the PRME i5 framework, including measurement complexity, institutional constraints and risks of superficial implementation. In response, the study develops a preliminary benchmarking scorecard to support i5–UKPSF alignment and responsible management education practice.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by its qualitative, interpretive design and focus on a relatively small number of PRME-affiliated institutions in the UK and Kazakhstan, which may limit transferability across wider institutional and disciplinary contexts. While the cross-country comparison provides contextual depth, further research across diverse higher education settings is required. Additionally, the proposed benchmarking scorecard remains conceptual and requires empirical validation. Despite these limitations, the study advances responsible management education by demonstrating how experiential pedagogies can be aligned with professional teaching standards and by identifying indicators that support the evaluation of student transformation.

Practical implications – The study offers practical insights for higher education institutions seeking to advance responsible management education through context-sensitive pedagogical innovation. Findings from UK and Kazakhstan PRME-affiliated institutions highlight the importance of adapting experiential and playful pedagogies to different cultural and institutional contexts. The study underscores the need for staff development that aligns PRME i5 principles with UKPSF professional standards while supporting inclusive and culturally responsive teaching. The proposed benchmarking scorecard provides a reflective tool for evaluating i5-aligned



Journal of responsible management
education
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2978-6609
DOI 10.1108/RME-04-2026-0006

practices, identifying areas for pedagogical enhancement and informing evidence-based approaches to student engagement and transformation.

Social implications – This study highlights the societal role of higher education in developing responsible, reflective and sustainability-oriented graduates. By demonstrating how PRME i5 principles can be embedded through experiential, inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, the study illustrates how learning environments can promote student agency, equity, participation and ethical awareness across diverse cultural contexts. Insights from UK and Kazakhstan institutions emphasise the importance of adapting pedagogical approaches to different educational experiences and expectations. Strengthening alignment between responsible management education and professional teaching standards can support graduates in addressing complex social, environmental and ethical challenges in global contexts.

Originality/value – This study advances responsible management education by developing an integrated pedagogical framework that connects the PRME i5 with the UKPSF across higher education contexts in the UK and Kazakhstan. Its originality lies in translating i5 principles into observable pedagogical dimensions through a comparative qualitative inquiry and developing a scorecard that enables structured evaluation of responsible management education practices. The study extends UKPSF discussions by incorporating sustainability, experiential, emotional, inclusive and culturally responsive dimensions of teaching practice. Its value lies in providing institutions with a context-sensitive approach for embedding responsible management education and supporting transformative student learning.

Keywords Responsible management education, Innovative pedagogies, Transformative learning, Experiential learning, Professional standards framework (PSF), Education for sustainable development

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Contemporary global challenges, including climate change, political polarisation, migration and social injustices, have created complex and interconnected crises that require collective responses. Despite growing recognition of these challenges within higher education, a persistent disconnect remains between sustainability-oriented curricula and the capabilities graduates need to demonstrate in practice. Employers continue to identify misalignment between the leadership competencies required for organisational transition and those demonstrated by new entrants ([Dörnyeyi and Ushioda, 2011](#)), highlighting the need for educational approaches that integrate personal development, ethical awareness and social responsibility ([Beddewela et al., 2017](#)). This challenge extends beyond a skills gap; it reflects a deeper pedagogical question concerning how responsibility, ethics and systems thinking can be meaningfully embedded within management education.

Individual learner motivation further complicates this landscape. As [Ushioda \(2016\)](#) argues, learning is shaped by situated social experiences, identity and context, suggesting that leadership development cannot be reduced to technical competence alone. Developing graduates capable of responsible decision-making requires pedagogical environments that encourage critical reflection, empathy and collaborative problem-solving ([Christensen et al., 2007](#); [Brundiers et al., 2021](#)). However, the ways in which such pedagogies can be systematically embedded, supported and evaluated across institutional frameworks remain underexplored.

In response to these challenges, the UN Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) introduced the Impactful Five (i5) framework, a collaborative initiative developed with business and social science institutions. Drawing on experiential and playful learning approaches inspired by the LEGO Foundation, the i5 framework integrates sustainable development principles into management education through five dimensions: Joyful, Meaningful, Social Interaction, Iteration and Active Engagement ([PRME, 2023](#)). While the framework is increasingly recognised as a transformative approach to learning, its implementation and evaluation across diverse institutional and cultural contexts remain insufficiently examined.

Playful learning within this context draws on experiential and game-based pedagogies ([Salen and Zimmerman, 2004](#); [Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011](#)) and aligns with the LEGO Foundation's learning through play framework ([LEGO Foundation, 2018](#)), which emphasises

engagement, iteration and psychological safety in learning environments. These principles also resonate with socio-cultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and constructivist approaches to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), which conceptualise learning as an active and socially mediated process rather than passive knowledge transmission.

Alongside innovative pedagogies, institutional frameworks play an important role in shaping teaching practice. The United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) provides a widely adopted structure for teaching excellence, professional development and pedagogical accountability in higher education (Hibbert and Semler, 2015). However, it has been critiqued for privileging procedural alignment and staff development over demonstrable student transformation (Gibbs, 2010; Locke, 2014). More broadly, research on higher education governance highlights how professional standards frameworks (PSFs) can prioritise auditability and compliance over deeper pedagogical transformation (Trowler, 2014; Tight, 2019). Furthermore, the limited explicit integration of sustainability and responsible management education within such frameworks raises questions about their alignment with emerging global education priorities.

This study is positioned at the intersection of these two frameworks. It responds to the need for pedagogical models that connect experiential learning with institutional accountability structures within responsible management education. Specifically, it examines how playful learning approaches embedded within the i5 framework can be operationalised alongside UKPSF standards across culturally distinct higher education contexts.

Accordingly, this research explores four questions: How can playful learning methodologies be effectively integrated into business school curricula to enhance leadership development? What dimensions constitute the i5 framework across different institutional contexts? What factors enable or constrain the implementation of playful learning pedagogies in higher education institutions? How can the outcomes of such approaches be evaluated in relation to student engagement and responsible leadership development?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the development of more integrated and context-sensitive approaches to responsible management education. It responds to the limited empirical understanding of how experiential sustainability-oriented frameworks and PSFs interact in practice across international higher education settings.

The analysis of i5 pedagogy across the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan provides a valuable opportunity to examine its cross-cultural applicability. While these contexts differ historically, culturally and institutionally, both represent increasingly multicultural higher education environments. Examining how i5-aligned pedagogies are interpreted, adapted and embedded within these settings generates insights into how responsible management education approaches may be translated across diverse institutional contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Experiential learning, sustainability education and responsible management*

Experiential and problem-based pedagogies are increasingly recognised as important mechanisms for advancing sustainability-oriented education. DiVito *et al.* (2022) highlight the role of action-oriented learning in developing student agency and engagement with real-world challenges, while Van Nguyen *et al.* (2024) demonstrate how problem-based learning can support the integration of sustainable development goals (SDGs) within higher education curricula. Similarly, Lim *et al.* (2022) argue that business schools require pedagogical and institutional innovation to remain relevant within rapidly changing socio-economic environments, particularly through embedding sustainability within core curricula.

Simulation-based and game-based approaches have also been identified as effective strategies for engaging students with complex sustainability challenges (Almaki *et al.*, 2023). Recent cross-cultural research suggests that playful learning can help instil a sense of agency,

curiosity, meaning-making and positive emotional engagement (Mardell *et al.*, 2016; Solis *et al.*, 2019, 2021). Such approaches have gained renewed attention following the COVID-19 pandemic (Mukhopadhyay, 2022), with Johnson and Salter (2022) arguing that playful, inclusive and empathetic pedagogies can support student recovery, engagement and belonging.

The value of experiential approaches is also reinforced by research emphasising the importance of cross-cultural competencies when addressing complex and systemic challenges. Effective problem framing and problem solving require collaborative processes that incorporate diverse perspectives (Guthrie and Callahan, 2016). These approaches are grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which conceptualises learning as a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. Game-based learning research similarly demonstrates the potential of simulation environments to enhance intrinsic motivation and systems thinking (Gee, 2007; Plass *et al.*, 2015).

Although existing literature demonstrates the potential of innovative pedagogies, less attention has been given to how such approaches can be systematically implemented, evaluated and sustained across institutional contexts. This challenge is particularly relevant for leadership development, where experiential sustainability pedagogies must move beyond curriculum innovation towards measurable transformation in student capabilities and behaviours (Wals and Benavot, 2017). While Palermo *et al.* (2023) highlight the importance of institutional strategies for embedding SDGs within higher education, questions remain regarding how pedagogical innovation can be aligned with professional standards and quality frameworks.

2.2 PRME's Impactful Five framework

The PRME i5 framework was developed through collaboration between PRME and the LEGO Foundation's research on learning through play, with the aim of enhancing responsible management education through experiential learning, sustainability integration and institutional change (PRME, 2021). The framework incorporates five institutional pillars: Inspiration, Innovation, Implementation, Impact and Integration. These support the embedding of responsible management principles within business education.

While conceptually influential, i5 remains underexplored empirically, particularly regarding how its principles are enacted across different institutional and cultural contexts. The framework aligns strongly with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), which emphasises shifts in learners' frames of reference through critical reflection and experience. However, limited research has examined how playful learning approaches translate across diverse higher education environments, particularly beyond Western institutional settings.

Alongside its institutional pillars, i5 identifies five experiential dimensions: Joyful, Meaningful, Social Interaction, Iteration and Active Engagement. Together, they describe the qualities of learning experiences that support engagement and deeper learning. These dimensions align with affective and constructivist learning theories, as well as positive psychology perspectives emphasising emotional engagement, motivation and persistence in learning (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, empirical evidence regarding their interaction, measurement and consistency across contexts remains limited.

This limitation is particularly significant given cross-cultural education research suggesting that pedagogical frameworks developed within particular cultural contexts may not translate uniformly across institutional environments (Hofstede, 2001; Marginson, 2014). Comparative investigation is therefore required to understand how i5-informed pedagogies are interpreted, adapted and embedded across diverse higher education settings.

2.3 UK professional standards framework

The UKPSF, revised by [Advance HE \(2023\)](#), provides a nationally and internationally recognised benchmark for teaching quality and academic professional development ([Turner et al., 2013](#); [Advance HE, 2023](#)). It defines professional values, areas of activity and core knowledge that underpin teaching excellence in higher education. The 2023 revision further strengthens the framework by placing greater emphasis on inclusivity, flexibility, student partnership, context-sensitive practice and the impact of teaching, reflecting the evolving landscape of higher education and professional learning.

While UKPSF has contributed significantly to the professionalisation of teaching, scholars have questioned whether standards-based approaches sufficiently capture deeper forms of student transformation and learning development ([Gibbs, 2010](#); [Locke, 2014](#)). Broader higher education governance literature also highlights tensions between professional standards, institutional accountability and academic identity, particularly within audit-oriented cultures ([Trowler, 2014](#); [Shore and Wright, 2015](#)).

The relationship between professional standards and pedagogical innovation has become increasingly important within accountability regimes such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), where concerns have emerged regarding compliance-driven approaches to teaching quality ([Perryman, 2006](#)). This creates a tension between consistency and innovation: while professional frameworks provide structure and accountability, they may not fully capture transformative, experiential and values-driven pedagogies.

Although the [Advance HE UKPSF 2023](#) represents an important evolution by recognising inclusive, collaborative and context-responsive teaching, it does not explicitly operationalise sustainability, ethical education or responsible management learning. This remains significant considering UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda ([UNESCO, 2017](#)), which calls for the systemic integration of sustainability competencies across higher education. It is within this space that the PRME i5 framework offers a complementary perspective, foregrounding the experiential, relational and values-based dimensions of learning that are central to responsible management education.

2.4 Synthesising i5 and UKPSF: towards integrated responsible pedagogies

Although both i5 and UKPSF aim to enhance educational quality, they operate through different underlying logics. i5 prioritises experiential transformation, emotional engagement and sustainability-oriented learning, whereas UKPSF emphasises professional consistency, accountability and recognised teaching standards.

This creates three unresolved tensions. First, measurement versus experience: UKPSF emphasises observable teaching practices, while i5 focuses on experiential and affective dimensions of learning that are more difficult to quantify. Second, standardisation versus innovation: UKPSF supports consistency across institutions, whereas i5 encourages experimentation and contextual adaptation. Third, compliance versus transformation: UKPSF aligns with institutional accountability mechanisms, while i5 seeks bigger changes in learner identity, engagement and responsibility. These tensions reflect broader debates in higher education between performative accountability and transformative educational practice ([Biesta, 2010](#)).

Despite growing interest in both frameworks, empirical research examining their interaction remains limited. Three key gaps emerge: first, the absence of empirical studies exploring how i5 and UKPSF can be integrated in practice; second, limited cross-cultural analysis of experiential sustainability pedagogies; and third, the lack of operational frameworks capable of linking innovative pedagogical approaches with institutional standards and evaluative mechanisms. This is also an area where this study contributes to.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and strategy

Qualitative research approaches are widely used in business studies due to their ability to provide rich insights into complex phenomena, capturing human experiences, behaviours and motivations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). They are particularly suited to exploring emerging or ambiguous issues, allowing theoretical insights to develop from participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Their flexibility and depth facilitate understanding of participants' beliefs, emotions and interactions, revealing nuances that structured surveys or experimental approaches may overlook (Bryman, 2016). Common qualitative methods include interviews, focus groups, observations and thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2013).

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-site case study design across three universities in the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan to explore innovative pedagogical practices, including playful and experiential learning, and their influence on student engagement and learning experiences. This also enabled comparative exploration of pedagogical practices across different institutional and cultural contexts. The selection of universities was guided by both comparability and contextual diversity. The two UK institutions operate within the same national higher education system and follow quality assurance agency (QAA) frameworks and curriculum guidelines. In contrast, the university in Kazakhstan, working on TNE model, represents a different educational and cultural setting. As a private university with international students and staff, multilingual learning environments and English as one of the languages of instruction alongside Kazakh and Russian, it provides a valuable comparative context. Academics within the institution are actively engaged in international research collaborations and partnerships.

Kazakhstan's decision to join the Bologna Process in 2010 has contributed positively to the alignment of its higher education system with European structures, despite ongoing challenges related to harmonisation (Amirbekova *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, the Kazakh university shares similarities with UK institutions in terms of internationalisation and pedagogical development, while simultaneously offering a distinct cultural context. This combination strengthens the comparative depth of the study.

A multiple case study design was selected to enable cross-contextual examination of pedagogical implementation across culturally and institutionally distinct higher education environments, consistent with interpretivist qualitative inquiry. Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure participation from students who had direct experience of i5-informed pedagogical approaches. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Students were invited to participate voluntarily, and participation was not linked to academic assessment or evaluation.

The cross-cultural dimension represents a central element of the research design. Drawing on Hofstede's (2011) work, cultural dimensions are understood as contextual lenses describing tendencies within societies rather than deterministic explanations of individual behaviour. Accordingly, this study does not seek to attribute participant experiences solely to national culture but rather examines how i5-informed pedagogies are interpreted and adapted within different institutional environments. By exploring experiences across the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan, the study contributes to understanding how culturally responsive teaching approaches can move beyond simplistic assumptions about national differences.

Overall, the qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of how innovative pedagogical strategies contribute to responsible management and leadership education. It also provides the foundation for developing a practice-oriented model to support teaching quality, student engagement and preparedness for complex global challenges. The comparative case study approach was therefore selected not to achieve statistical generalisation but to generate contextual understanding of how i5-informed pedagogies are experienced, interpreted and operationalised across diverse higher education environments.

3.1.1 Sampling and participants. The research involved participants across three institutions, focussing on experiences of implementing i5-informed pedagogical approaches within higher education settings.

At University X, 22 postgraduate students enrolled on the International and Business Management programme were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The limited response rate is acknowledged as a limitation of the study and reflects voluntary participation constraints rather than systematic sampling decisions. No follow-up recruitment was undertaken, in accordance with ethical approval conditions.

Participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, key themes explored and expectations regarding participation. Students were invited to participate during an informal meeting organised after module assessments had been completed and marks released. Ten students attended the meeting, including course representatives, and six students subsequently agreed to participate.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and incorporated both predetermined and open-ended questions, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences of the i5 dimensions. Data analysis and coding occurred concurrently with data collection. Initial thematic saturation was observed during the coding of the fifth interview transcript, with a sixth interview conducted to confirm whether additional themes emerged.

The six interview participants included four females and two males, aged between 22 and 29, representing diverse academic and professional backgrounds.

At University Y, two focus groups were conducted with undergraduate students: one alumni group and one current student cohort, both of whom had experienced teaching approaches aligned with the i5 framework. Each one-hour session encouraged open discussion around the five i5 dimensions. The first focus group consisted of four students, while the second included eight students. Participants were aged between 18 and 22 and included eight females and four males, who shared examples of i5-informed pedagogical experiences.

At University Z, 22 postgraduate students enrolled on the International and Business Management programme were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The group consisted of 16 males and six females aged between 25 and 37, and they all participated.

The variation in sample sizes across institutions reflects differences in cohort size, programme structures and voluntary participation rates rather than an intention to achieve statistical balance. The study therefore follows a purposive sampling logic appropriate for qualitative inquiry rather than seeking representativeness. Sample adequacy was assessed through thematic saturation, with data collection continuing until no substantially new themes emerged within each institutional dataset.

The participatory nature of the focus groups and interviews also supports a more collaborative approach to qualitative research. Participants were engaged not simply as sources of data but as contributors whose experiences informed understanding of pedagogical implementation and institutional practice. This aligns with approaches emphasising co-creation and the challenging of traditional researcher-participant power relationships (Knott *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data, valued for its flexibility across diverse research contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process involves systematic engagement with the data, beginning with familiarisation, followed by the generation of initial codes that capture meaningful segments of information. Coding may be descriptive, summarising explicit content or interpretative, identifying deeper patterns and meanings within participant experiences (Saldaña, 2016).

Following initial coding, related codes are collated into potential themes, which are subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research

questions. Themes are then defined and named, before being integrated into a broader analytical narrative supported by relevant data extracts (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

This study conducted thematic analysis both manually and iteratively, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Analysis involved repeated engagement with the data, moving between familiarisation, initial coding, theme development and refinement. An inductive coding approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed through a predetermined analytical framework.

The iterative nature of qualitative coding enabled continuous refinement of emerging interpretations. Descriptive, interpretative and focused coding approaches supported the development of a nuanced understanding of student experiences, particularly in relation to innovative pedagogies, engagement and responsible management education (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is particularly appropriate for educational research examining complex experiences, where learning processes involve cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions (Guest et al., 2012).

Given the single-researcher design, formal inter-coder reliability testing was not undertaken. Analytical rigour was supported through iterative coding cycles, reflexive memo writing and repeated cross-checking of themes against the original dataset. These processes supported consistency, transparency and reflexivity throughout the analysis.

3.3 Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was initially obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the Principal Investigator's institution, University Z. Additional ethical approvals were subsequently secured from the participating institutions prior to commencement of data collection.

All participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, key themes explored, expectations regarding participation and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without providing justification.

All interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed. While quotations presented in the paper are paraphrased rather than reproduced verbatim, care was taken to ensure that they accurately reflected the meanings and nuances expressed by participants.

Particular attention was given to potential power asymmetries arising from the involvement of students within teaching contexts. At all the participating universities, data collection took place after the completion of the semester and following the publication of assessment results, reducing the possibility that students would feel pressured to participate or that participation could influence academic outcomes.

All data were anonymised during transcription and securely stored using encrypted institutional systems. Data management procedures followed GDPR requirements and relevant institutional data protection policies.

The ethical approach adopted in this study also reflects the participatory nature of the research design. Rather than positioning students solely as subjects of investigation, participants were recognised as contributors whose experiences provided important insights into pedagogical implementation and transformation. This aligns with approaches that emphasise collaborative knowledge production and the co-creation of research outcomes (Knott et al., 2022).

4. Findings and analysis

4.1 Overview of coding structure and thematic development

The analysis followed a systematic process of coding and abstraction, moving from first-order codes based on participant expressions, through second-order conceptual groupings, to higher-

order themes aligned with the PRME i5 framework. This approach enabled the identification of common patterns across institutions while retaining contextual depth. Importantly, the i5 framework was not used as a confirmatory coding structure; rather, it served as an interpretive scaffold through which student experiences were critically examined.

Across the dataset, five dominant themes emerged: Joyful learning, Meaningful learning, Social Interaction, Iteration and Active Engagement. However, these dimensions were not experienced independently. Instead, they were interconnected and occasionally in tension, particularly where engagement practices intersected with issues of inclusion, assessment pressures and pedagogical design.

4.1.1 Joyful learning: engaging activities and emotional engagement. Joyful learning emerged strongly through students' experiences of interactive and play-based pedagogies, particularly LEGO exercises, simulations and competitive activities. These approaches were consistently associated with positive emotions, increased engagement and greater participation.

One student reflected: *"I had joy during the LEGO exercise, and also creating a lesson by ourselves."*

This suggests that joy was not experienced simply as enjoyment or entertainment but was connected to learner agency and opportunities for co-creation, reflecting constructivist approaches to learning.

Similarly, competitive activities were frequently described as motivating: *"Everything that brings competitiveness to class, I somehow felt the joy of competing."*

However, competition also revealed a potential pedagogical tension. While it enhanced engagement for some learners, it could unintentionally privilege more confident or extroverted students, highlighting the need to consider inclusion when designing emotionally engaging learning environments.

A further dimension of joyful learning related to progressive challenge and moments of cognitive breakthrough: *"The more I interacted with it, the more I liked it, and it gave me the AHA moment!"*

This indicates that joy emerged not from reduced complexity but from supported cognitive challenge, where learners experienced satisfaction through exploration, struggle and eventual understanding.

Instructor behaviour also emerged as a significant influence: *"The teacher's methods of engaging everyone . . . makes the class joyful."*

This highlights that joyful learning is not an inherent feature of an activity itself but a relational outcome shaped by pedagogical design, facilitation style and classroom climate.

The findings align with existing literature suggesting that playful and interactive approaches can enhance learner motivation and engagement (Cronqvist, 2024), while also supporting the view that playful pedagogy can be intellectually demanding, emotionally engaging and meaningful for both learners and educators (James, 2022).

The data also suggest that learner characteristics, classroom dynamics and facilitation approaches influence how joyful learning is experienced. A further consideration concerns sustainability: the continuation of joyful learning may depend on individual instructors or specific activities rather than being embedded within broader curriculum structures. Therefore, joyful learning represents both an important driver of engagement and a pedagogical space requiring careful attention to inclusion, consistency and institutional support.

4.1.2 Meaningful learning: relevance, identity and pedagogical alignment. Meaningful learning was strongly associated with students' ability to connect academic content to personal goals, professional aspirations and lived experience.

Students emphasised relevance as a key motivational factor: *"Interest in the topic, combined with thorough preparation, motivates active participation."*

This indicates that engagement is not purely emotional but also instrumentally rational, shaped by perceived future value.

A key dimension of meaning emerged through peer diversity and complementary skill recognition: *“Everyone has different skills . . . it can be so helpful to have people complement your skills.”*

This reflects a shift from individualised learning towards distributed cognition within group learning systems.

However, the data also reveal an important pedagogical dependency: meaningfulness is heavily instructor-mediated: *“The teacher was able to connect with a student with special needs in their language.”*

This highlights not only inclusivity but also the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, suggesting that meaningful learning is contingent on educator adaptability and empathy.

At the same time, openness in classroom culture was repeatedly emphasised: *“In marketing, there is no wrong answer, and the tutor has created a culture of openness.”*

While this supports psychological safety, it also raises a critical question: whether “openness” is discipline-dependent rather than systematically embedded across curricula.

From a theoretical perspective, findings strongly align with constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011), where learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment must cohere. However, the data suggest that alignment is often perceived rather than systematically guaranteed, depending on individual teaching practice.

Overall, meaningful learning emerges not as a curriculum feature but as a negotiated outcome between content relevance, pedagogy and student identity formation.

4.1.3 Social interaction: collaborative learning and power dynamics. Social interaction was consistently identified as a core mechanism for learning development, particularly through group work, peer discussion and cross-cultural exchange.

A dominant theme was learning through communication: *“The more you communicate, the more you get confident and gain more knowledge.”*

This reflects a Vygotskian view of learning as socially mediated; however, the data also reveal uneven participation structures within group learning environments.

While collaboration was valued, it was not uniformly experienced. Some students described initial discomfort in diverse groups: *“I had many preconceived notions . . . but later realised it was easy to interact.”*

This suggests that collaboration requires structured social onboarding, rather than being assumed as a natural outcome of group work.

Teacher influence was central: *“The teacher’s attitude and class dynamics influence willingness to engage”*, and this positions the instructor as a social architect, not merely a facilitator of content delivery.

However, this introduces a scalability issue: social learning quality becomes dependent on individual teaching capacity, which may vary significantly across institutions.

Feedback also emerged as a critical mechanism: *“Formative feedback . . . tells us where we have gone wrong.”*

Yet the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on delivery but on dialogic engagement, suggesting that feedback systems should be understood as interactive learning infrastructures rather than assessment tools.

Overall, social interaction is best understood as a structured but fragile pedagogical system, highly sensitive to facilitation quality and group dynamics.

4.1.4 Iteration: feedback loops and learning development. Iteration emerged as a defining feature of learning progression, particularly through formative feedback, revision cycles and reflective practice.

Students highlighted the value of iterative learning: *“We were allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.”*

This reflects a shift from performance-based learning to process-oriented epistemologies of education.

Formative feedback was central: *“Feedback . . . keeps us on the right track.”*

However, the data also reveal a structural contradiction: while iteration promotes learning, it may also generate assessment dependency when overly structured by tutors: “*The tutor made things quite easy by breaking down the assessment*”. This suggests a tension between scaffolding and learner autonomy, where excessive guidance may reduce opportunities for productive struggle.

The role of collaboration within iteration was also significant: “*The more you communicate, the more you gain knowledge*.” This indicates that iteration is not purely individual but also collective and dialogic, reinforcing peer learning as part of feedback cycles.

From a theoretical perspective, findings align with Black and Wiliam’s (1998) formative assessment theory, where feedback is positioned as a driver of learning improvement. However, the data suggest that effectiveness depends on whether feedback is experienced as developmental or procedural.

Iteration therefore operates as both a learning accelerator and a potential compliance mechanism, depending on pedagogical design.

4.1.5 Active engagement: agency, inclusion and learning conditions. Active engagement emerged as a cross-cutting theme influencing all other dimensions of learning. It was closely linked to classroom atmosphere, relational trust and perceived emotional safety.

Students consistently associated integrative environments with better learning: “*I’m motivated when I feel that I’m well prepared, and I can cooperate with my opinions*.” However, this relationship is not universal; active engagement is unevenly distributed across student identities and learning preferences.

Teacher–student relationships were particularly influential: “*My interest depends on the teacher*”. “*The attitude of the teacher towards students also provoke or not that involvement, that engagement*”. This highlights the importance of relational pedagogy, where emotional intelligence becomes a core teaching competence.

However, inclusivity remains a challenge. Some students may experience discomfort in interactive settings. This introduces a critical limitation: active engagement is not automatically produced by innovative learning methods; it is contingent on inclusive design.

Interactive activities were seen as energising but also potentially exclusionary: “*Students are more engaged in these sessions*”. Yet engagement does not necessarily equate to inclusion, particularly for quieter or less confident learners.

Importantly, the interaction between joy, iteration and feedback can create dual effects. While they enhance motivation, they may also produce anxiety if perceived as continuous evaluation rather than developmental support (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

The findings therefore suggest that active engagement functions as a foundational condition for learning rather than an outcome, shaping how all other pedagogical dimensions are experienced.

4.2 Mapping findings to the PRME i5 framework: empirical alignment and theoretical tensions

While the PRME i5 framework offers a structured articulation of impactful and experiential learning, the empirical findings suggest that its application in practice is uneven, relationally dependent and sometimes internally contradictory. Rather than confirming the framework as a fully realised pedagogical model, the data reveal i5 as a partially enacted and context-sensitive interpretive lens. This section therefore critically examines how each i5 dimension is both supported and complicated by the findings.

4.2.1 Joyful learning: from pedagogical design to relationship production. The i5 framework positions “joy” as an intrinsic property of learning design, associated with engagement, playfulness and motivation. However, the findings suggest that joy is not embedded in activities themselves but is instead co-produced through pedagogy, social dynamics and instructor behaviour.

This challenges a core assumption of i5: that joyful learning can be reliably engineered through structured playful methods. While LEGO-based tasks and competitive activities generated enthusiasm, the data also revealed variability in student experiences, particularly where competition created exclusionary dynamics. Joy, therefore, is not universally distributed but unevenly experienced, depending on learner identity, confidence and group structure.

Joy in i5 should be reframed as a relational and contingent outcome rather than a pedagogical design feature.

4.2.2 Meaningful learning: alignment without guarantee. The i5 framework defines meaningful learning as relevance-driven and connected to real-world contexts. The findings partially support this, particularly where students linked learning to career goals and personal identity formation.

However, a critical tension emerges: Meaningfulness is not automatically produced through curriculum design but depends heavily on teacher mediation, cultural responsiveness and disciplinary framing. For example, instructor ability to connect with diverse learners significantly shaped perceived relevance. This suggests that meaningful learning is less about content selection and more about interpretive translation of content into student experience.

i5 overemphasises structural relevance and under-theorises the role of educator interpretive agency in producing meaning.

4.2.3 Social interaction: collaboration as a structured inequality space. The i5 framework positions social interaction as inherently positive and developmental. The findings confirm that collaboration enhances confidence, communication and learning depth.

However, they also reveal a critical limitation: Social interaction is not inherently equitable; it is shaped by group hierarchies, participation asymmetries and cultural assumptions. While students valued group work, some experienced dominance effects where louder voices shaped outcomes. Additionally, initial discomfort in diverse groups indicates that interaction requires intentional scaffolding rather than assumption of organic collaboration.

i5 conceptualises social interaction as a pedagogical asset but under-theorises it as a power-laden social structure requiring active governance.

4.2.4 Iteration: feedback as developmental process or institutional control. The i5 framework frames iteration as continuous improvement through feedback loops, reflection and revision. The findings strongly support the importance of formative feedback in enhancing learning outcomes.

However, two competing interpretations emerge: iteration as empowerment (learning from mistakes, reflective growth) and iteration as structural guidance (assessment alignment, controlled progression). In some cases, strong scaffolding reduced opportunities for autonomous exploration, suggesting that iteration can shift from developmental learning into managed performance calibration.

i5 assumes iteration is inherently empowering, but findings show it can also function as a disciplinary structure shaping how learning is performed rather than explored.

4.2.5 Active engagement: the educator as a facilitator or as a performer. The i5 framework treats active engagements as both an outcome of positive learning experiences and a condition for an effective educational process. The findings confirm that supportive environments, respectful relationships and active engagement enhance learning.

However, active engagement is shown to be changing and context dependent. Interactive and feedback-rich environments can simultaneously support engagement and generate anxiety, particularly where assessment pressure is implicit. Additionally, not all students experience interactive pedagogies equally positively, suggesting that proactivity and active engagement are unevenly distributed across learner profiles.

i5 over-generalises active engagement as a stable outcome, whereas findings show it is a dynamic emotional equilibrium shaped by pedagogy, identity and group dynamics.

4.2.5.1 Integrative insight: i5 as an aspirational rather than fully operational framework. Across all five dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges: The i5 framework functions more

effectively as an aspirational pedagogical philosophy than as a consistently operationalised classroom reality. The findings suggest three core tensions: design versus experience gap (what is planned vs. what is felt); uniformity versus variability gap (framework assumes consistency; data show diversity); structure versus agency tension (institutional design vs. educator/student interpretation). This does not constitute a rejection of i5; rather, the data reframe it as a negotiated educational ecosystem in which outcomes depend less on framework fidelity and more on local pedagogical enactment. These findings are synthesised in Table 1, which maps the five i5 dimensions to observable pedagogical indicators, student experience signals and their alignment with the UKPSF framework.

5. Discussion

5.1 The role of educators: pedagogical agency and emotional framing

The effectiveness of joyful and meaningful learning environments depends significantly on educators' teaching styles, relational practices and pedagogical intentions. This aligns with the UKPSF, which emphasises professional values, inclusive learning design and reflective teaching practice. Findings from the PRME i5 framework and previous literature demonstrate

Table 1. Mapping findings to the i5 and UKPSF frameworks

i5 dimension	Observable pedagogical indicators	Student experience signals	UKPSF alignment	Evaluation focus
Joyful	Use of playful methods (e.g. LEGO Serious Play, simulations, gamified tasks), emotionally positive delivery style	Engagement, laughter, enthusiasm, “aha moments”, enjoyment of participation	V1, V2 (respect for learners, inclusive practice), A2 (teach/support learning)	Emotional engagement + intrinsic motivation
Meaningful	Real-world case integration, career-linked tasks, authentic assessment design	Perceived relevance, motivation to prepare, connection to future identity	A1, A3, K1–K2 (subject + pedagogy knowledge)	Cognitive engagement + perceived relevance
Social Interaction	Structured group work, peer dialogue, co-creation tasks, inclusive facilitation	Confidence building, peer learning, cross-cultural exchange	A4, V3 (respect for diversity), K4 (learning environment)	Quality of collaboration + participation equity
Iteration	Formative feedback cycles, revision opportunities, draft-based learning	Learning from mistakes, reduced anxiety, improvement over time	A3, K5 (assessment/feedback literacy)	Learning progression + feedback responsiveness
Active engagement	Supportive tone, teacher empathy, classroom climate design	Confidence, belonging, reduced fear, emotional safety	V1, V2, V3 (ethics, respect, inclusivity)	Emotional safety + learner resilience

Source(s): Author's own work

that educators who actively cultivate supportive, playful and dialogic environments can enhance students' motivation, engagement and academic performance ([Johnson and Salter, 2022](#); [Cronqvist, 2024](#)).

However, the data also indicate that these effects are uneven and highly dependent on individual educators, raising concerns about consistency across programmes and institutions. Pedagogical quality is therefore not simply a function of curriculum design but is mediated through teaching identities, pedagogical confidence and institutional support structures.

The cross-cultural findings further highlight the importance of contextual adaptation. In Kazakhstan, where classrooms are characterised by high levels of cultural diversity, greater emphasis on specific i5 dimensions appeared to support implementation, particularly Making Learning Meaningful, Facilitating Active Engagement and Developing Supportive Social Interaction. This aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of contextualised playful learning approaches in Central Asia ([Díaz-Soloaga and Storey, 2023](#)). In contrast, the UK context reflected a different pattern of implementation, suggesting that i5 is most effective when interpreted through local institutional and learner needs rather than applied uniformly.

5.2 Engagement, play and the limits of “joyful learning”

Engaging activities such as games, LEGO-based exercises and simulations generated increased motivation and emotional energy within classroom environments ([Johnson and Salter, 2022](#)). However, a critical question concerns whether these experiences translate into sustained learning development or remain episodic moments of enjoyment.

The findings reveal a dual tension: while playful learning can stimulate immediate engagement, it may also risk separating enjoyment from deeper conceptual understanding if activities are not appropriately scaffolded. This aligns with experiential learning theory, which argues that experience alone does not constitute learning; meaningful development occurs through reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation ([Dewey, 1938](#); [Kolb, 1984](#)).

Without such integration, “joy” risks becoming performative rather than developmental. Therefore, the value of joyful learning lies not simply in creating positive emotions but in designing learning environments where engagement supports critical reflection and deeper understanding. [Aga \(2023\)](#) shows that as the educators transitioned to active learning spaces, they had to navigate multiple challenges – engaging students, building student relations and developing teaching strategies. Inability to manage led to reduced tutor motivation that affected student learning. Therefore, for any successful implementation – professional development, mentoring and institutional support are key.

5.3 Inclusivity and the double-edged nature of competition

The findings demonstrate that competition can increase energy, participation and motivation but may also generate exclusion or anxiety among students who are less confident or less competitively oriented. This highlights a key limitation of many active learning designs: engagement is often assumed to be universally beneficial, despite being socially and psychologically differentiated.

From an inclusive pedagogy perspective, competitive structures must therefore be intentionally designed rather than considered neutral learning mechanisms. The UKPSF could strengthen its guidance by placing greater emphasis on equitable participation design within collaborative and competitive pedagogies.

5.4 Scaffolding, feedback and developmental learning cycles

A significant finding from the study is the importance of scaffolding and iterative feedback in supporting student progression. This aligns with Vygotskian learning theory ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)) and reinforces the role of structured guidance in enabling learners to progress within their zone of proximal development.

However, the findings also reveal variation in how feedback is experienced, particularly regarding its depth, timeliness and developmental orientation. Where feedback is formative and dialogic, students report increased confidence and conceptual clarity. Conversely, when feedback becomes overly directive or assessment-driven, learning risks being reduced to compliance rather than exploration.

These findings reinforce the importance of iteration within the i5 framework, highlighting that developmental learning requires sustained cycles of experimentation, reflection and improvement.

5.5 Cultural contexts, emotional climate and “glocal” pedagogy

The study reinforces the importance of cultural, institutional and demographic contexts in shaping learning experiences. The concept of “glocal” (Mukhopadhyay and Mukhopadhyay, 2021a, b) is particularly relevant, capturing how global educational frameworks are interpreted and adapted within local contexts.

Although the overarching i5 dimensions emerged across all institutional sites, their expression varied. Students in Kazakhstan placed greater emphasis on relational support, confidence-building and structured guidance, whereas UK participants more frequently highlighted autonomy, critical discussion and competitive engagement. These differences suggest that playful and experiential pedagogies are interpreted through distinct cultural and educational expectations.

Consequently, pedagogical frameworks cannot assume universality of implementation. Both i5 and UKPSF depend on local interpretation, institutional culture and educator capability to achieve meaningful transformation. The challenge is therefore not simply adoption of global frameworks but their thoughtful adaptation within specific learning environments.

5.6 Emergent i5 Pedagogical Impact Scorecard

A key contribution of this study is the development of an interpretive synthesis tool designed to consolidate the experiential dimensions of the i5 framework into a structured mechanism for pedagogical reflection.

Rather than functioning as a measurement instrument, the scorecard provides a conceptual bridge between experiential student insights and institutional teaching frameworks. It connects qualitative evidence of learning experiences with pedagogical design principles, supporting reflection and continuous enhancement. The resulting scorecard is presented in Table 2, which synthesises the empirical indicators, interpretive meanings and potential pedagogical risks associated with each i5 dimension.

5.6.1 Interpretive function of the scorecard. The scorecard should not be interpreted as an evaluative metric in a positivist sense but as a reflective pedagogical mapping tool. It enables educators and institutions to identify imbalances across the five dimensions, reflect on experiential teaching quality, connect student narratives with curriculum design and support iterative enhancement of pedagogical practice.

A central insight emerging from this synthesis is that joy and meaning are often achieved in practice, whereas iteration and well-being appear more structurally fragile and unevenly embedded across contexts. This suggests that pedagogical innovation may currently prioritise visible engagement over sustained developmental learning cycles.

5.6.2 Linking UKPSF and institutional practice. The scorecard extends the UKPSF by introducing an experiential dimension that foregrounds (A) emotional engagement, (B) learning sustainability, (C) relational pedagogy and (D) iterative development. It therefore functions as a complementary diagnostic lens rather than a replacement framework, supporting reflective alignment between teaching practice and student experience.

While the Advance HE PSF 2023 has strengthened its emphasis on inclusivity, effectiveness, context and student-centred practice, the findings suggest that experiential quality and relational learning remain less explicitly articulated than within the i5 framework.

Table 2. i5 Pedagogical impact scorecard

i5 dimension	Empirical indicators from study	Interpretive meaning	Pedagogical risk
Joyful	LEGO tasks, games, humour, engagement spikes	Emotional activation and curiosity	Engagement without deep learning
Meaningful	Career links, relevance, applied learning	Cognitive alignment with student purpose	Disconnection from real-world relevance
Social interaction	Group work, peer dialogue, collaboration	Knowledge co-construction through interaction	Social exclusion or dominance effects
Iteration	Formative feedback, revision cycles	Learning as developmental process	Static, exam-driven learning culture
Active engagement	Psychological safety, confidence, support	Emotional sustainability of learning	Anxiety, disengagement, withdrawal
Source(s): Author's own work			

5.6.3 Linking PRME i5 framework evolution. Within the context of the PRME i5 framework, the scorecard highlights an important theoretical implication: i5 is most effective when operationalised as an experiential continuum rather than a set of discrete institutional pillars. This shifts attention from compliance-oriented adoption towards pedagogical embodiment, where responsible management education is realised through everyday classroom practices and educator–student interactions.

6. Contributions and conclusion

The UKPSF and the UN PRME i5 framework both seek to enhance teaching quality in higher education; however, the findings of this study suggest that their relationship extends beyond simple alignment. Rather than functioning as parallel frameworks, i5 highlights both the strengths and limitations of UKPSF in capturing experiential, emotional and relational dimensions of learning.

A key contribution of this study is demonstrating that engaging, playful and experiential pedagogies can enhance student motivation and participation, while also showing that these effects are neither automatic nor uniform. Instead, they are mediated by educator behaviour, classroom culture and student positionality. This extends constructivist perspectives (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978) by highlighting that learning is not only actively constructed through experience but also co-created through affective and relational interactions.

The findings further emphasise the central role of educators as pedagogical designers and relational facilitators. While UKPSF recognises teaching responsibilities and professional practice, this study highlights the importance of more explicitly acknowledging the relational labour involved in effective teaching, including emotional facilitation, inclusivity management and adaptive communication. The i5 framework reinforces this perspective by demonstrating that learning environments are shaped not only by activity design but by how educators interpret, facilitate and adapt those activities in practice.

A further contribution concerns the evaluation of educational impact. The findings suggest that existing frameworks provide limited insight into how student transformation is experienced, sustained and interpreted over time. While UKPSF emphasises professional teaching standards and i5 foregrounds learning impact, neither fully captures the dynamic, contextual and uneven nature of student development within real classroom environments. This study therefore calls for broader approaches to evaluating educational quality that move beyond procedural indicators towards longitudinal, affective and experiential dimensions of learning.

Importantly, this study advances the argument that ESD provides a potential bridging logic between UKPSF and i5. By integrating sustainability-oriented, experiential and socially engaged learning approaches, institutions can better align pedagogical practice with complex

global challenges (Lozano *et al.*, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). However, the findings caution against treating such integration as a compliance exercise; meaningful implementation requires deeper pedagogical transformation.

Rather than challenging the *Advance HE PSF* (2023), this study argues that the i5 framework complements its renewed emphasis on impact, inclusivity and context by providing a more explicit pedagogical lens through which experiential, relational and responsible management learning can be enacted and reflected upon.

The study also contributes to understanding the contextual nature of experiential pedagogy. The findings demonstrate that playful and experiential approaches are not culturally neutral but are interpreted and enacted differently across institutional and national contexts. Consequently, global pedagogical frameworks require contextual adaptation rather than uniform implementation.

Overall, this study argues that pedagogical frameworks do not directly produce learning outcomes; rather, they create conditions through which educators and students can co-create meaningful learning experiences. This shifts attention from framework design alone towards pedagogical enactment, highlighting the importance of relational, emotional and contextual dimensions of teaching and learning. The proposed i5 Pedagogical Impact Scorecard contributes to this agenda by offering a reflective mechanism through which experiential dimensions of learning can connect to institutional teaching frameworks.

6.1 Implications for educators and academic leadership teams

The study highlights the critical role educators play in translating pedagogical frameworks into meaningful learning experiences. By embedding authentic challenges related to sustainable and responsible leadership, educators can create more inclusive and purposeful learning environments. However, such approaches require intentional scaffolding, allowing learners the freedom to experiment, make mistakes, reflect and develop through iterative learning processes.

At an institutional level, effective i5 implementation requires more than isolated classroom innovation. Senior leadership teams should consider embedding experiential and responsible management pedagogies within broader education strategies, supporting educator development and creating conditions for sustained pedagogical transformation. Over time, such approaches could contribute to further evolution of professional teaching frameworks such as UKPSF by incorporating stronger recognition of experiential, relational and sustainability-oriented dimensions of learning.

6.2 Limitations and future research

As with all qualitative case study research, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the study design. The purposive sample across three institutions was selected to generate rich, contextually grounded insights into the implementation of i5-informed pedagogies rather than statistical generalisation. While this supports analytical depth, future research could examine the transferability of these findings across a broader range of institutional and geographical contexts.

Although the study adopts a comparative multi-site design, its primary focus is on developing an interpretive understanding of participants' experiences rather than undertaking a systematic cross-cultural comparison. Similarly, data analysis was conducted by the lead researcher using iterative coding, reflexive memoing and repeated theme refinement to enhance analytical rigour.

Future research could build on this work through longitudinal studies exploring how experiential pedagogies influence student transformation over time, as well as larger comparative studies examining the implementation of playful learning across different institutional, disciplinary and cultural settings. Further validation of the proposed i5

Pedagogical Impact Scorecard would also strengthen understanding of its wider applicability as a reflective tool for pedagogical development.

Taken together, the integration of i5 and UKPSF should be viewed not as a technical alignment exercise but as an opportunity to reimagine higher education as a dynamic, relational and experientially grounded system of learning.

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