

**INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO MBA PROGRAMS: A MULTIPLE
STAKEHOLDER APPROACH**

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Abstract

This paper reports on an action research project designed to integrate sustainability into the MBA program at an Australian university. We document the methodology and our results and identify the enabling factors and barriers to success. Importantly, like most sustainability change programs for the contemporary organisation, we found this initiative involved addressing the requirements of multiple stakeholders.

changing perspective on theory and practice of business sustainability that is not being taken up in business school curricula.¹

Our project addressed the question of how best to heighten awareness of sustainability and thus mainstream sustainability into existing MBA programs. We took action research to mean research that links participation, social action, and knowledge generation and which can promote social change through organizational learning – a process which requires researchers to critically reflect on project goals, methods and findings (Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy 1993) . Our research is linked to a key issue of debate in the academic literature on the methodology of developing sustainability curriculum in business schools. Is the meaningful integration of sustainability into business schools dependent upon the development which challenges the capitalist system of production as well as key assumptions of traditional management learning (Banerjee 2004; Springett 2005)? Or does success depend on the perceived relevance of the sustainability material to the existing business school criteria? Thomas (2005), for instance, has pointed out that if sustainability is to be integrated into managerial decision-making models then it must be perceived by students as legitimately addressing the goals of profit-making in the normalized business context. Or is successful integration dependent upon a context-specific approach, a reliance on systems-thinking skills, and stakeholder engagement as relevant issues and topics for skills development (Roome 2005)? In a sense these differing positions reflect different definitions of success – on the one hand, success is measured in terms of encouragement of ideological critique and reflexivity (eg Springett 2005), while on the other it is measured in terms of perceived legitimacy (eg Roome 2005; Thomas 2005).

In our project, we explore the possibility of bringing these definitions of success together by taking a multiple stakeholder approach that involves lecturers, tutors, course directors, industry

¹ We note for instance that the number of abstracts for refereed journal articles that refer to corporate social responsibility has increased by 280% since 2002, while the total number of refereed articles has increased by 120%.

Thus the project has two different but interrelated aspects: (1) the selection and production of a cluster of case studies of sustainable policies and practices in leading-edge Australian organizations and (2) an action research approach centering on learning how to influence MBA faculty to modify their subject matter and teaching/learning approaches to introduce the issue of sustainability to students and to demonstrate its contemporary relevance for managers.

The Action Research Approach:

Action research changes the nature of the traditional research done at universities which is primarily directed to the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. It creates a shift in emphasis to the active use of knowledge for instrumental and ethical purposes. Action Research methodology is appropriate for this research because it involves faculty and senior executives of corporations in an ongoing process in which they develop a sense of ownership of the outcomes. As far as faculty are concerned, they do not experience the process as an attempt to force them to adopt sustainability as part of their course content. Rather they are given control of the agenda and, in most cases, see that the resulting new course material is a substantial enrichment of their course. In particular, the material is developed in collaboration with them and under their direction and is designed to further the educational aims of the course and to provide up-to-date examples relevant to some its the key principles and concepts. This produces commitment to extend their own knowledge of sustainability principles because the new materials connect directly with their own professional interests.

In our project, we were able to establish collaborative relationships with ten subject coordinators and relevant faculty associated with these subjects. While each of these ten

Our key recommendation emerging from this needs analysis concerning curriculum development referred to the need for ‘the development of sustainability cases or cases requiring consideration of complex ethical dilemmas involving multiple stakeholders that are suitable for inclusion in capstone MBA subjects’ The other aspect of the needs analysis was to examine the extent to which Australian MBA programs currently include issues relating to sustainability. We referred to several reports which indicated that Australian MBA programs have been remarkably unresponsive to the emerging interest in sustainability of leading businesses in Australia and overseas. (Benn and Bubna-Litic 2003; Tilbury et al 2005).

As a result of the needs analysis, we were able to take our project forward with a better understanding of the range of student interest/disinterest in the general issue of sustainability, of teaching/learning approaches that were most likely to generate and maintain student interest and of subjects within the MBA curriculum that had already provided points of entry for the introduction of sustainability into MBA programs in Australia.

Approach to faculty: We then felt prepared to take our action research further by informing faculty of the existence of the ARIES research project and our role in it and inviting their participation. We prepared and circulated an email to all faculty teaching in the MBA. This was followed by an unsolicited supporting letter from the Dean of the Graduate School of Business urging faculty to cooperate. As expected, we received few (2) responses to this communication. In our view, this did not mean that faculty members had not read the email or been influenced by it – we subsequently found in interviews with faculty that some had noted and remembered some of the content of the email but

The research team also developed a set of questions to use in interviewing faculty and a pro forma for recording responses. This covered: coordinator's teaching/academic background; coordinator's perspective and approach to sustainability; teaching objectives and learning outcomes; student needs; willingness to collaborate; specific criteria for cases; need, if any, for existing cases already in use by ourselves in our teaching, need for new cases; recommended lecturers; development into teaching material; completion timelines.

This approach was time consuming but, we believe, the only effective way to proceed. We were able to win support from a substantial number of relevant faculty members and have developed a detailed understanding of how sustainability can become an integral part of the core MBA.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Our major learnings from this process have been:

(1) curriculum development in MBA programs is a political process. Changes cannot be imposed – they can only be achieved by involving faculty in ongoing consultation based on a real appreciation of the place and value of any particular subject area in the MBA program as a whole and of the enthusiasms and motivations of individual faculty coordinating and/or teaching the subject area. There must be some benefit to the parties involved for them to spend the time and effort to bring about a change in the curriculum, even when substantial support is provided; (2) it is necessary to work at several levels simultaneously – interventions involved the Dean, Faculty members on the project and mature research assistants with both business and academic experience hired to work on specific parts of the project;

participation by a chemicals company in multiple stakeholder decision-making over the disposal of toxic wastes.

All case studies have involved negotiating access to each organization, identifying those executives whom we needed to interview to obtain relevant information, as had been requested by faculty during our faculty interviews, arranging interviews, conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, analysing the interviews and using them to develop a coherent case with a specific teaching purpose, discussing this with the relevant faculty members, getting sign off from the company, constructing accompanying teaching materials, testing those materials in classroom situations, involving faculty and students in evaluations of materials, and making subsequent revisions.

The teaching materials were developed to foster both task and process skills in MBA students. Specifically they have been designed to facilitate:

Critical and futures-based thinking in lecturers and students

Communication and dialogue concerning contestable sustainability issues

Innovative and practical change management skills and ideas necessary to promote sustainability

Acquisition of self development techniques (suitable for the continuous skill development of sustainability change agents) in both teachers and students

An example of how this process of engaging faculty and students proceeds is the core MBA subject Organisation Analysis and Design (OAD). This is the core course for the MBA completed by all MBA students at UTS and it uses Bolman and Deal's (1997) four frameworks as its theoretical orientation. The Carlton United Brewery (CUB) case was

seminar block, “Bringing it All Together”, where the students use the CUB case to synthesise all topics covered in the OAD course. This is a far better solution from our point of view than what we originally proposed because it represents a fuller integration of the new material into the whole course. While evaluation is not yet complete, a number of required changes to the subject of sustainability have been identified. There is a desire to see sustainability better integrated into OAD and the key suggestions are outlined below.

These suggestions are not prioritised and should be taken as a whole as they are all interrelated.

- Explicitly state that the sustainability component of the course is examinable.
- In the course reader provide relevant sustainability articles for OAD.
- Link the sustainability components to the stand-alone sustainability units but don't replicate the material.
- Rewrite the lecture material such that each frame of Bolman and Deal has a specific sustainability component.

MAJOR LEARNINGS AND REFLECTIONS

We found that we also had to have a value proposition to engage our industry collaborators. The basis of this was the positive contribution, made by its use in the classroom and in forthcoming publications, to the development of the reputation of the organisation and the executives carrying out the sustainability initiative. In addition the selection by academics of the organisation as the subject of a teaching case study was seen as an independent evaluation of the worth of the sustainability initiative.

CONCLUSION

There is a substantial variation in student attitudes to sustainability – and there is no one way to implement it or to look to as an aspiration for such a project as ours. Some students have already developed high levels of interest in the area and actively welcome confronting ideological challenges to accepted ways of practicing business and management learning – supporting Springett’s (2005) approach. On the other hand, supporting Thomas’ (2005) argument, other students have very traditional ideas of what an MBA is about and this makes it important to emphasise “the business case” for sustainability. Because so many of the students in MBA programs are from overseas and predominantly from Asian countries, it is important to use South-East Asian case examples of a length that can be covered within class time by ESL speakers. ‘How to’ cases that stress the importance of pragmatic skills are more appealing to pragmatic MBA students than ‘why’ cases that deal with theoretical or ideological issues. The design of teaching/learning materials must take these factors into account.