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Educating change agents for sustainability – learnings from the first sustainability management master of business administration

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ABSTRACT

In recent years knowledge and capabilities to manage corporate sustainability have become a significant component of different career paths in companies, consultancies, and even in non-profit and public institutions. As an answer to this worldwide trend of a new profession ever more universities and business schools have taken the initiative to increase their teaching activities in corporate social responsibility and sustainability management. As most courses do not have a long track record and as only a limited number of management-oriented continuous education studies exists so far we still know little about how managers could be educated most effectively to become change agents for corporate sustainability. This paper examines a case study and provides insight into ten years of MBA education for sustainability management at the Centre for Sustainability Management, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany. Based on data from a recent alumni survey we analyze the corporate practice experiences of the first 85 successful MBA students and the medium term effects of the first master program in sustainability management. Based on the analysis we propose a competence matrix to structure basic components of postgraduate education in sustainability management. The paper unveils that extant research is needed to consider the practical experiences MBA graduates make when applying acquired knowledge and to link these insights to curriculum development.

1. Introduction

In recent years knowledge and capabilities to manage corporate sustainability has become an ever more significant component of different career paths: In addition to a growing demand from companies which are considered to be sustainability pioneers we observe an increasing interest in sustainability management experts from consultancies, financial service providers, non-profit, public institutions and multinational companies, most of them not having established a strong sustainability agenda so far (Deitche, 2010; Haanaes et al., 2012).

As an answer to this worldwide trend of a "flourishing profession" (Visser and Crane, 2010, 4) ever more universities and business schools have taken the initiative to increase their research and teaching activities in CSR and sustainability management for the last few years (Matten and Moon, 2004, 326; Wu et al., 2010). As most courses do not have a long track record and as only a limited number of management-oriented part-time studies exists so far we still know little about how managers could be educated most effectively to become change agents of corporate sustainability (for a discussion of the current knowledge see e.g. Grothe and Fröbel, 2010; Willard et al., 2010; Johnston, 2013). This is why the first MBA program which is completely focused on sustainability management and the results from an alumni survey of the first successful students are examined as case in point with regard to the study program, teaching contents, pedagogic approach and job profiles. The analysis is conducted in the view of the vision of educating 'change agents for sustainability'.

This paper provides insight into ten years of MBA education for sustainability management of the Centre for Sustainability Management at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany. We analyze empirically the medium term effects of the MBA program in sustainability management on the basis of the corporate practice experiences of the first 85 successful MBAs students: Have the students been enabled to cope with the multi-faceted sustainability challenges in corporate practice? Did they receive the right kind of knowledge, skills and motivation which practitioners need to make a difference in the world and move organizations and society towards more sustainability? Based on these experiences, which

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conclusions can be drawn for a conceptual framework, curricula and teaching methods to successfully educate future change agents for sustainability?

With this paper we aim at intensifying the exchange of experiences within the community of business schools which offer sustainability management education and provide some answers to key issues in the context of higher education for sustainability (Starik et al., 2010, 381). Based on a discussion of the aims and the conceptual framework of the MBA Sustainability Management and its aim to qualify corporate change agents for sustainability we present empirical findings from a recent alumni survey. The survey covered various topics including one special part to explore the themes of this paper.

Requirements of a new occupational field are analyzed as well as the motivation and career paths of sustainability managers, learner-friendly conditions and appropriate teaching methods for professional students in a blended learning concept.

The paper contributes to research in two ways: First, we propose a competence profile of a change agent for corporate sustainability. Based on a literature review and empirical findings from analyzing alumni survey data of the MBA Sustainability Management we suggest a competence matrix to structure basic components of higher education in sustainability management. Second, we discuss what can be concluded from the competence profile of a sustainability manager and the practical experiences of MBA graduates with respect to curriculum development, course content and the pedagogic approach.

2. Literature review

The need for including sustainability in professional practices (e.g. Boyle, 1999) and the central role of universities in educating responsible leaders (e.g. Osiemo, 2012; Raivio, 2011) and for the transition to sustainable societies (e.g. Corcoran and Wals, 2004; Ferrer-Balas et al., 2010; Palma et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2009) have been emphasized in an extant body of literature (see also Lozano-Garcia et al., 2006). Furthermore, the influential role of companies in the economy and society as well as for sustainable development (e.g. Schaltegger and Burritt, 2005) raise the question of how sustainability and CSR are considered in management education, particularly in qualified practice-oriented higher management education which addresses middle and top management.

Prior research has examined sustainability and CSR in existing curricula and for curriculum development for undergraduate and bachelor (e.g. Jones et al., 2008; Lambrechts et al., 2012), graduate, master, and PhD-programs (e.g. Bergeå et al., 2006; for off-campus PhD programs Baas et al., 2000) as well as postgraduate and tertiary education (e.g. Naeem and Peach, 2011; Thomas, 2004).

Whereas some authors have investigated sustainability specific courses and programs (for a new business course e.g. Marshall and Harry, 2005; for eco-design in a doctoral program, see Bergeå et al., 2006) others dealt with the integration of sustainability into existing curricula (e.g. Bacon et al., 2011), regular courses (e.g. Boks and Diehl, 2006) and the curricula of a choice of universities (e.g. Savelyeva and McKenna, 2011). Lozano (2010) developed a tool to measure the integration and diffusion of sustainable development contents in the course curricula of a university.

In depth studies dealing with the integration of sustainability into curricula and the education of educators in cleaner production have been particularly conducted for engineering and broad interdisciplinary environmental programs (e.g. Segalas et al., 2010). Stubbs and Schapper (2011) discuss two approaches to management curriculum development and Rusinko (2010) proposes a matrix approach to integrating sustainability in business education.

More specifically, environmental topics important for CSR and corporate sustainability like cleaner production, energy efficiency, eco-design and design for the environment have been examined with regard to their integration into the curriculum. For example, Bergeå et al. (2006) investigate eco-design in PhD doctoral education, Vezzoli (2003) sustainable design in a polytechnic university, Fredriksson and Persson (2011) the integration of sustainability into operations management courses, Eagan and Streckewald (1997) the development of a short business course on design for the environment, and Desha and Hargroves (2010) the state of higher education in energy efficiency in Australian engineering curricula.

Further topics of sustainability oriented higher management education and educating responsible leaders of organizations include (e.g. Osiemo, 2012; Hazen et al., 2004; Shephard, 2008) topics of sustainable development, corporate sustainability, social responsibility, leadership, sustainable entrepreneurship, intertwining of teaching and research (i.e. research not just as a library experience) as well as soft-skill related approaches such as targeting affective learning outcomes, service learning, establishing a mentorship program, teaching with a sustainability mission of personal development and team building.

More specifically, the question what kind of competencies sustainability education should produce has become a core area of the education for sustainable development research (e.g. Barth et al., 2007; De Haan, 2006; Fadeeva and Mochizuki, 2010; Rieckmann, 2012). We will deal with this topic in more detail in Section 3.

The question of what pedagogic methods are particularly apt for sustainability and sustainable business courses and programs has been researched for a variety of approaches such as active learning (MacVaugh and Norton, 2012); action research as an approach to integrating sustainability into an MBA program (Benn and Dunphy, 2009), student praxis projects (e.g. Bacon et al., 2011; Rosenbloom and Cortes, 2008), collaborative concept maps to learn how theory can become practice (Miranda Correia and Infante-Malachias, 2010), affective learning (Shephard, 2008), transformative learning experiences (e.g. Bergeå et al., 2006), the consideration of boundary objects (Benn and Martin, 2010), real world learning experiences (Brundiers et al., 2010; Steiner and Posch, 2006), transdisciplinarity in sustainability education (e.g. Brundiers et al., 2010; Clark and Button, 2011), courses in collaboration with companies (e.g. Eagan and Streckewald, 1997) and e-learning (Oprean et al., 2011).

To create a good general learning environment for the understanding of sustainability problems and to enable students to better address sustainability, a change of academic and professional culture from educating highly specific and specialized knowledge and skills to re-educating students with regard to their existing knowledge has been proposed (e.g. Juárez-Nájera et al., 2006) and "new integrative, inter- and transdisciplinary epistemological approach" has been called for to create a "holistic perspective into a traditional undergraduate curriculum, which aims at specialization" (Miranda Correia and Infante-Malachias, 2010, 678).

The literature also discusses accompanying and supporting factors of integrating sustainability into the educational agenda and curriculum. These include developing and communicating a sustainability mission of the university (Djordjevic and Cotton, 2011; Osiemo, 2012), university declarations for sustainable development (Lozano et al., 2013), and a sustainable campus development (e.g. Kurland, 2011; Mitchell, 2011), including operational management issues like transport, purchasing, energy and waste management as important aspects which provide room for sustainability related experiences and credibility (e.g. Atherton and Giurco, 2011; Brinkhurst et al., 2011). Various authors analyzed institutional and systemic barriers to the integration of sustainability in higher