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Teaching organisational change management for sustainability: designing and delivering a course at the University of Leeds to better prepare future sustainability change agents

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ABSTRACT

A number of universities worldwide have created new courses and degrees or modified existing ones, as a response to the increasing interest by companies to hire sustainability literate graduates. However, many of such courses have been developed with a focus on 'hard' technocentric or managerial issues. The examples that have been published in academic journal have tended to be descriptive, and in only a limited number of cases have they been based on theories of teaching and learning. This paper presents the process of designing and delivering a new course on organisational change management for sustainability for the BA Environment and Business degree at the University of Leeds. The course was developed based on holism and a constructivist position to help deal with the complexities of sustainability and organisational change management. The course objective was to educate students as sustainability change agents by dealing with the complexities of sustainability and 'soft' issues in organisational change management. The process had three key elements: (1) the learning outcomes; (2) the course delivery; and (3) the course assessment (including feedback). During the process a number of challenges had to be overcome. The paper provides a more complete, systematic, robust, and focused approach to education for sustainable development, specifically on course design and delivery, by using theories of teaching and learning and linking the course aims, delivery, and assessment. The paper integrates education for sustainability development and corporate sustainability into a relatively new discipline, organisational change management for sustainability.

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1. Introduction

The recent shift in focus to corporations, particularly the larger ones, in the sustainability debate (Cannon, 1994; Elkington, 2002, 2005; Hart, 2000), has arisen because they are perceived to be responsible for many negative environmental and societal impacts (Dunphy et al., 2003; Hart, 2000). Nonetheless, corporations are also perceived as possessing the resources, technology, global reach, marketing skills, and, sometimes, the motivation to work towards more sustainable societies (DeSimone and Popoff, 2000;

Hart, 2000; Henriques and Richardson, 2005), as well as helping to change customer behaviour to make it more consistent with sustainability principles (DeSimone and Popoff, 2000).

Corporations and their leaders have increasingly recognised the relations and inter-dependences between the economic, environmental and social dimensions of their activities (C.E.C., 2001; Elkington, 2002), as well as their effects in the short-, long- and longer-term (Langer and Schön, 2003; Lozano, 2008). In this context, some companies have been demanding graduates who are sustainability literate (see Bradfield, 2009; Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2013; WBCSD, 2010). This emphasises the amply discussed importance of the links between industry and academia (see Arora et al., 1998; Carayannis et al., 2000; Etkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Leydesdorff, 2000) encompassing different academic disciplines.

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In parallel with, and frequently in response to, corporate efforts, an increasing number of higher education institutions (HEIs) have been incorporating and institutionalising sustainable development (SD) into their curricula, research, operations, outreach, and assessment and reporting, as well as engaging with all key stakeholders, both internal and external (see Cortese, 2003; Lozano, 2006; Velazquez et al., 2005).

One of the key areas of interest for sustainability in HEIs has been the incorporation of the concept into curricula at all levels, as well as stratagems to achieve this in practice (Boks and Diehl, 2006; Wemmenhove and de Groot, 2001). Within this context, a key focus of attention has been students learning how their decisions and actions affect the environment and society (Lozano, 2010; Lozano and Peattie, 2009).

Five main approaches can be found for incorporating SD into higher education curricula:

1. Coverage of some environmental issues and material in an existing course or courses (Davis et al., 2003; Thomas, 2004);
2. A specific SD course (Abdul-Wahab et al., 2003; Boks and Diehl, 2006; Cortese, 2003; Kamp, 2006);
3. SD intertwined as a concept in regular disciplinary courses, tailored to the nature of each specific course (Abdul-Wahab et al., 2003; Ceulemans and De Prins, 2010; Kamp, 2006; Peet et al., 2004; Thomas, 2004);
4. SD as a possibility for specialisation within the framework of each faculty (Kamp, 2006); and
5. SD as an undergraduate or post-graduate program (Lozano and Lozano, 2014).

Incorporating some material or creating a stand-alone introductory SD course could appear as a relatively simple starting point for institutions. However, such steps tend to result in the students learning and studying for that particular course but not being able to integrate SD principles into their professional life (Boks and Diehl, 2006; Lourdel et al., 2005; Peet et al., 2004).

Some examples of the incorporation of SD into higher education curricula have been published in academic journals. For example, Vann et al. (2006) discussed the development of an e-learning introductory course on sustainability, basing the content on environmental ethics, ecology, and environmental economics. Stubbs and Schapper (2011) developed two courses on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability as part of a business curriculum in Australia. Pappas et al. (2013) applied Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives to a six-course design curriculum to develop an engineering programme. MacVaugh and Norton (2012) explored the use of active learning methods for addressing the legitimacy and practicability of an introductory course on sustainability into business. Matten and Moon (2004) assessed the state of CSR education in Europe, where they highlighted the levels and types of programmes available, the teaching methods, and the main developments in CSR research by business school faculties and PhD students. Hesselbarth and Schaltegger (2013) carried out an alumni survey to explore the corporate sustainability practice experiences of their MBA graduates, where they found that more research is needed on the topic and that this needs to be linked to curriculum development. These examples show that the efforts have comprised course development, programme coverage, application of theories of teaching and learning, and the results of sustainability education. As it can be seen from the examples, many of these have focused on 'hard' technocentric or managerial issues. In most cases the papers have been descriptive, with a limited number of cases being based on theories of teaching and learning, e.g. Pappas et al. (2013).

Using education to pursue sustainability has presented a number of conceptual and practical challenges, especially as the typical

university curriculum has been generally organised into highly specialised areas of knowledge represented by individual disciplines (Cortese, 2003; Costanza, 1991; Orr, 1992; van Weenen, 2000), which conflict with the holistic basis of sustainability (Lovelock, 2007). This is especially critical when designing a new course where the topic is relatively under-researched.

This paper presents the process of developing a new, integrative course focussing on organisational change management for sustainability (OCMS) for the BA Environment and Business at the University of Leeds. The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of organisational change management for corporate sustainability; Section 3 presents the context for developing the new course; Section 4 discusses the design of the course (divided into learning outcomes, course delivery, and course assessment); Section 5 presents the discussion; and Section 6 offers the conclusions.

2. A brief discussion on organisational change management for corporate sustainability

For Dyllick and Hockerts (2002, p. 131) Corporate Sustainability (CS)¹ is: "...meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities, etc.), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well". Linnenluecke et al. (2009) emphasised that in order to make real progress a company's CS should encompass a holistic perspective. Lozano (2013) postulated that CS is a journey for companies as they iteratively seek to adjust and improve their internal activities, structure, and management, and how they engage with and empower stakeholders (including the environment) to more effectively contribute to sustainable societies.

A number of tools and approaches have been developed that go beyond legal compliance to help companies become more sustainability orientated (see Daily and Huang, 2001; Dunphy et al., 2003; Robert et al., 2002). However, the majority of CS efforts described in the literature focus on integrating the economic and environmental dimensions (e.g. Atkinson, 2000; Costanza, 1991; Lozano, 2012; Reinhardt, 2004), and they have concentrated principally on 'hard' technocentric issues, such as reducing impacts, or improving efficiencies and effectiveness (Lozano, 2012), often for individual processes or firms (Korhonen, 2003).

In spite of company efforts and the tools available, relatively few organisations have successfully incorporated and institutionalised sustainability into their systems and cultures (Doppelt, 2003a; Hussey et al., 2001; Siebenhüner and Arnold, 2007). The companies that have engaged in sustainability have done so mainly through upper management levels' initiatives (Siebenhüner and Arnold, 2007), where companies have been, generally, treated as 'black boxes', seldom accounting for intra-organisational differences (Küpers, 2011; Linnenluecke et al., 2009), and addressing their organisational systems tangentially (Lozano, 2012).

In recent years, a new body of literature has appeared that has focused on the social and psychological obstacles faced within companies (Hoffman and Henn, 2008). The authors in this field have proposed the use of change theory to better address 'soft' issues (such as values, visions, philosophies, policies, employee empowerment, and change management practices) (Doppelt,

¹ Several discussions have evolved on the role of CSR for companies to contribute to sustainability; however, CSR is limited by: too many definitions and interpretations (sometimes confusing and at other times contradictory); being, in many cases, equated to philanthropy; and being perceived, usually, as referring only to the social dimension (Lozano, 2009).

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