



SE Features

HD Australia dragging the chain on sustainability - MBA CHOICES - SPECIAL REPORT

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Schools must lead the way to get this `vital' message across, writes Brendan O'Keefe

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THE teaching of sustainability in Australian business schools needs to be infused into curriculums to broaden its take-up for the good of the environment, society and the economy, a leading proponent of the discipline says. The study of sustainability is available in many MBA programs in Australia but only as an elective and take-up is small, says Daniella Tilbury, director of the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability.

TD The MBA sector is responding to what is happening in business and industry, says Tilbury, a professor at Sydney's Macquarie University.

"The sustainability agenda is gaining ground in the business sector," she says.

"But where it is [taught], you have to elect to do it, and very few students elect to do it because at that stage not many realise how important it is and what the relevance might be for business and industry."

If the discipline were "mainstreamed" across the curriculum, as it is in many leading UK and US business schools, students would pick up elements of it throughout their education.

That way, "regardless of what subject you do when you leave the MBA, you will have a certain level of skills in it", Tilbury says.

US and UK schools absorb sustainability not just in the curriculum but also in the way the schools are managed.

"They are passing hidden messages to students saying, `this is really important'," she says.

By infusing the discipline, schools can avoid the problem of merely having a course called sustainability ... "because then it's that thing that you either specialise in or you don't".

"If you infuse it across the different subjects, whatever you're studying you're looking at the implications of sustainability for particular components of your course," Tilbury says.

A federal Government-funded project, titled "education about and for sustainability in Australian business schools", is trying to find the best practice in Australia and overseas.

It looked at 37 business schools in Australia and found that 19 did not include sustainability in core or elective subjects of their MBA programs.

About two-thirds had elective subjects and were rated acceptable.

Three were rated good for offering "core and elective subjects which include education about and for

sustainability".

None of the 19 were considered to be at the leading edge for delivery of an MBA where a "considerable number" of elective or core subjects related to sustainability.

There was little or no attention to sustainability in short courses.

The top business schools in Australia say there is a lack of demand for a sustainability component in the MBA.

Tilbury says those that are looking at including it are wary.

"They are saying `we would be happy to work on this and invest time and money, but what if students don't choose to do it?'"

ARIES is trying to increase demand by bringing industry into the curriculum and by placing students in industry to gain first-hand experience of how sustainable practices can help business.

It wants to move away from schools teaching education about sustainability to teaching for sustainability.

In the former, "students understand what it is" but in the latter case they "take away the skills to go into an organisation and bring about change", Tilbury says.

ARIES' definition of sustainability takes an international view: it is about quality of life, including ecological, environmental, social and economic concerns.

The Australian view focuses on ecological sustainability.

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ART Table Map

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