



Business schools are out of touch

Brendan O'Keefe

BUSINESS schools are out of touch with reality and operate in a social and environmental vacuum when it comes to educating students about sustainable development, a leading scholar in the field says.

University of Hong Kong corporate environmental governance program director Richard Welford says business schools should be the leaders but are instead lagging behind the private sector.

"They don't understand the challenge because they are not out there in the supply chain," he says.

"I know people in the private sector who occasionally give lectures in business schools and say they're astounded at how little students know. Many business schools are too full of self-important academics with entrenched attitudes, narrow disciplines and outdated modes of teaching, to make a difference."

Business school academics and the curriculums they work with are Western oriented, Welford says, when half the world's clothes are made in China: "If they recognised that, they would be more Asia oriented."

Welford, speaking recently in Sydney,

where he was a guest of Macquarie University's Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability, says a small number of private companies and business schools were getting the message.

Companies whose reputations for sustainable behaviour had been attacked such as sportswear firms Nike and Adidas and toymaker Mattel-Hasbro are the ones showing the way, he says.

"Adidas is experimenting with a number of approaches; they are playing

with the idea of co-ops... getting worker buy-ins as shareholders of factories and educating workers about their own rights," Welford says.

As for the educators, schools in Europe and Canada are leaders, "but there's no business school in the world that links their brand to sustainable development and social responsibility".

The ARIES program education about and for sustainability in Australian business schools involves the Australian Graduate School of Management, Macquarie Graduate School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney's Graduate School of Business and the University of Queensland Business School.

Welford says he would be happy to take a group of business school academics on a tour of a factory in China, "to show them the reality".

"They tend to talk about strategy and marketing in a very abstract way and if they actually saw some of the things happening in factories that are making products they talk about, that would help a lot," he says.

An ARIES survey last year found 19 of 37 Australian business schools surveyed did not include sustainability in core or elective subjects of their MBA programs.

"It is nothing short of a disgrace to see the type of private sector initiatives I have been talking about here [at a public lecture last week] and at the same time see MBA graduates leaving their business schools with little or no knowledge of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development."

Welford's visit was funded by the National Heritage Trust and Macquarie University International Office.



Lagging the private sector: Richard Welford says business schools are in a social vacuum

Picture: Chris Hyde