

EDUCATION ABOUT AND FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS SCHOOLS STAGE 3

An action research program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The full report explores the outcomes and discusses the recommendations generated by the action research program: **Education about and for Sustainability in Australian Business Schools Stage 3**. The program aimed to create change for sustainability in the learning and teaching focus of the five participating Australian business schools and in the operations of the business schools and their partner corporations. It was conducted by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES), funded by the Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, and supported by Macquarie University. Participants included project teams from five Australian business schools who collaborated in a process of learning-based change with selected business or industry partners.

The program builds on Stages 1 and 2. **Stage 1** examined business schools in Australia and overseas to identify and benchmark best practice in education *about* and *for* sustainability in Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and Executive programs. **Stage 2** focused on driving change within seven leading Australian business schools that worked together to make changes to their MBA program using Education for Sustainability and action research.

“At the alumni meeting it emerged that graduates now and in five years time would require capabilities around sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Other capabilities included visioning, ‘helicopter vision’, managing uncertainty, critical reflection and collaboration. All of these capabilities are consistent with the “principles of education for sustainability”. Our capacity to identify these principles and apply them is a direct outcome of mentorship by ARIES over the past two–three years.”

Project Participant



Australian Government
Department of the Environment,
Water, Heritage and the Arts



OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the **Education about and for Sustainability in Australian Business Schools Stage 3** program were to:

- generate changes in business school pedagogy, resources and core curricula which incorporate learning insights and resources derived from the program
- facilitate corporations moving from awareness to implementing improved corporate policies and practices
- engender changes in policy and practices leading to improved sustainability outcomes in the management of the organisations' operations
- foster new and stronger partnerships among corporations and business schools to build engagement and capacity
- assist the formation of a Community of Practice involving participating corporations and business schools, which generates and shares knowledge and experience
- improve identification and dissemination of effective learning and management practices that generate organisational change for sustainability
- foster progress towards the eventual outcome of a collaborative MBA in Sustainability that would function across the Australian higher education sector.

THE PARTICIPATING BUSINESS SCHOOLS

- Curtin University of Technology, Graduate School of Business
- Griffith University, Griffith Business School
- Macquarie University, Macquarie Graduate School of Management
- RMIT University, Graduate School of Business
- University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Business.

Each business school interpreted the program objectives according to their individual capacities and needs. Outcomes from the program related to the individual objectives. They demonstrate that the approach was successful in generating change towards sustainability in each of the target areas.

Of the five business schools that participated in the program, four enhanced education for sustainability in courses and/or introduced new post-graduate business programs in sustainability during the program. The fifth business school, already a leader in sustainability education, developed a new cross-disciplinary sustainability masters program which was submitted for approval. A number enhanced the education for sustainability pedagogies and content in their courses. There were also additional flow-on effects to undergraduate courses and through improving academic staff understanding and capacity.

All five business schools built networks and relationships with peers and corporations. Three conducted student action-learning research projects in corporations. They found the combination of these projects and the classroom education for sustainability exercises generated valuable lessons around deeper learning. Students were found to gain an appreciation of the relevance of sustainability to their role, and improved their capacity to engage with sustainability in the work environment.

Some students initiated sustainability projects or research at their workplaces. Although this approach to teaching and learning demanded more time and resources from the lecturers, the positive learning outcomes suggest that future projects will continue and that the experience gained through this project will make for easier implementation. Other important outcomes relate to enhanced understanding on the part of project leaders of the challenges associated with developing a cross-institutional postgraduate sustainability program.

“This course was absolutely fabulous and the learning I received was highly valuable both personally and within my work environment. I found the course one of the most challenging I have done – intellectually and practically. If possible, this would be a great course to be run as a core – I believe everyone should have to do it!”

Student email

The eventual outcome sought from this research was the establishment of a leading-edge Australian MBA course about and for sustainability. The learning insights, partnerships and resources generated by this program were intended to support this objective. However, the objective needed some clarification. The experience of these projects suggest that the market-based operational realities of the business schools would make it unlikely that a specialist MBA that placed sustainability on par or above other business concerns would be launched. Given that the MBA is now a mature product, competition is fierce and most innovation occurs as specialist degree offerings that fit within a business school's pre-existing degree structure. An example would be a Masters of Management that offers specialist majors (subject streams) that play to the schools' strengths.

In line with this, some of the business schools in this study did develop new specialist Masters degree programs. One business school took a more innovative approach by contributing to the development of a cross-disciplinary Masters in Sustainability degree that would be supported by several faculties, each offering a specialist major. It is not yet certain if this will be launched. One possible approach to developing a leading edge Australian MBA course about and for sustainability would be as a collaborative effort, supported by several universities and perhaps also by government.

OUTCOMES

Specifically, the range of **outcomes** across the business schools and their business partners included:

- the introduction, revision and/or development of new specialist courses or programs on sustainability within business schools, and across disciplinary areas
- progress towards wider acceptance and embedding of pedagogies, such as critical thinking, systems-based and problem-solving approaches to learning, reflective practice, suitable for educating for sustainability in a business school context
- higher levels of engagement between corporate partners and their employees and the wider community
- review and revision by corporate partners of leadership, human resource management, supply chain management and corporate social responsibility strategies and practices
- improved understanding of appropriate change mechanisms for more sustainable social and environmental practices in the business schools and their business partners

- the introduction of innovative and participative cross-disciplinary processes and organisational structures to underpin the development of new sustainability teaching programs
- increased recognition of the learning benefits of linking operational practice in sustainability to teaching content
- generation of communities of practice to include business schools, business and industry that facilitated knowledge dissemination concerning effective learning and management practices around sustainability by means of various forums and publications
- stimulation of network formation that supported sustainability-related curriculum development
- identification of sources of resistance to change towards sustainability in the higher education and other industry sectors in Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the research program, recommendations for embedding sustainability at the level of the institution and the business school include:

- **Apply flexible approaches to leadership and change.** Leaders and change agents should be enabling rather than directive, supporting learning, adaptation and innovation. Strong support from senior management is also essential and transformational leadership can motivate wider faculty support.
- **Structural change**, such as the creation of new cross-disciplinary roles and responsibilities, may be necessary to overcome disciplinary silos at faculty or university level.
- **Ensure engagement and partnership.** Mapping stakeholders and monitoring network and stakeholder interaction is a key source of creativity and change. It is important to network and harness the power of champions, be they from institutes, senior management, alumni, businesses or international experts.
- **Establish the change program on holistic foundations.** Build on pre-existing strengths, mission statements, learning agreements, accreditation requirements, awards and other prior agreements.

- **Target sustainability principles to the specific workplace and industry sector** when implementing education for sustainability through professional development in the workplace.
- **Look for innovative opportunities** that have mutual advantages and invite collaboration. Collaboration among several business schools and other organisations is more likely to permit radical innovation, such as an Australian Sustainability MBA which is built around experiential and critically reflective capacity-building pedagogies for sustainability.

Recommendations for embedding sustainability in teaching and learning practices include:

- **Leaders and change agents are transparent** about the process being new, or a pilot, with lecturers and students acting as co-learners.
- **Communities of practice are formed** with other academics and business partners to provide mutual support and opportunities for reflection.
- **Planned learning experiences are aligned** with explicit learning outcomes and assessment activities.
- **Agreement is made with students** on safe learning rules or approaches to learning to create a safe environment, and these are referred back to occasionally.

- **Students are offered a choice** of project and assessments – standard, or in sustainability and action learning.
- **Students are encouraged to look for ways to make connections** between sustainability and their workplace, work experiences or functional roles.
- **Problem-based learning, complex cases, and learning from failure are utilised** as teaching and assessment approaches.
- **Case materials and resources are locally and culturally relevant.**
- **Businesses are invited to contribute** to curriculum and case materials, to provide guest lectures, and to hold a critically reflective dialogue session.
- **Reflective journaling is utilised** by both lecturer and students – students can share insights from their journal as part of their assessment.
- **Peer review is used to allow iterative learning, feedback and improvement.**

The following are recommendations for obtaining effective co-learning from partnerships with business and industry:

- **Communicate about expectations, logistics, roles and timing** with corporate partners and course administrators.
- **Introduce the action research/ learning approach to business and students.** Make expectations clear and explain its benefits to sustainability and its usefulness to link theory and practice.
- **Allow time for an iterative cycle to have feedback** between students and business partners on the outcomes and experience of the project.
- **Select projects and students carefully.**
- **Pilot one project to begin with.**
- **Anticipate differences** in capabilities and expectations between different student cohorts. Students may need a preparatory subject before undertaking an action learning experience in the workplace.
- **Expect the unexpected** and prepare to be flexible!

We suggest that this report has useful lessons for business and industry organisations, universities and governments who are interested in bringing about change through embedding sustainability in professional education and training.

“It is worth noting from the key outcomes in the context of Partnering for Sustainability within a [state] business, that action research/learning does create opportunities for organisational/ institutional and student and staff centred personal change and knowledge development consistent with sustainability.”

Project Participant

CITATION

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The full report is available in PDF from the ARIES website at: www.aries.mq.edu.au/projects/MBA3

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ENQUIRIES

The Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability
Graduate School of the Environment
Macquarie University NSW 2109

ariescoordinator@gse.mq.edu.au
+61 2 9850 8597

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