

**Final Project Report**  
**Partnering corporations and business schools**  
**Education *about* and *for* Sustainability in Australian Business Schools**  
**Stage 3**

**May 2008**

**Contents**

Introduction .....	2
Research methodology .....	4
Highlights of action research in the project .....	6
Reflection .....	8
• Highlights.....	8
• Ways in which thinking and actions have changed or been reinforced.....	9
• Aspects of the project we would like to change and improve.....	11
Findings and outcomes.....	12
Some dilemmas .....	23
Conclusion .....	24
References .....	25

## **Introduction**

The imperative for addressing complex sustainability challenges through education underpins the UN declaration of the 2005 to 2014 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development'. Sustainability has been burgeoning as a theme for business schools worldwide with increasing numbers of courses and specialisations on sustainability in degrees such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs (Ethical Corporation 2007; Herro 2007).

However, in the current '2007-08 Beyond Grey Pinstripes' Global 100 ranking of social and environmental issues in MBA programs, only one Australian university is listed - Curtin University of Technology (Aspen CBE 2007). Nonetheless, as a graduate business school in pioneering the delivery of social and environmental sustainability contents since 1998, we are a long way from comprehensively mainstreaming sustainability into the MBA and Master of Leadership (MLM) programs.

This report reflects on the challenges and benefits of a university project from intensified collaborations, including formalized partnerships and exchanges with four other institutions within the ARIES partners who are proficient in applied research approaches and with the business community. It also reflects learning from the theoretically-guided, applied action research approach to sustainability embodied in this project.

Curtin Graduate School of Business and the Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility Research Unit (hereafter referred to as Curtin GSB or CGSB) have also been involved in a learning partnership with CSBP Ltd, a large division of Wesfarmers Ltd (a top 15 ASX listed corporation), (hereafter referred to as CSBP or the company). This organisation was part of an industry network associated with the Curtin Cleaner Production Centre of Excellence, with which the research leader and mentor has been involved. Other than through Cameron Schuster's (CSBP Ltd) participation in one of the previous focus groups for sustainability, this corporation was not part of MBA2 program.

Linkages between academia and industry may be hindered by unequal expectations (Alves et al. 2007), but strategic university-industry partnerships have been shown to be fruitful (Henderson et al. 2006; Guide and Wassenhove 2007)

.The strategic alliance of this project involves three partners - the Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, (who funded this project); Curtin GSB in collaboration with ARIES based in Macquarie University; and CSBP Ltd. Table 1 lists the major participants from Curtin GSB and CSBP Ltd.

**Table 1: Participant Details**

No.	Business school	Participant name (including title)	Role
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dr Anna Lee Rowe Senior Lecturer, Unit Controller Graduate School of Business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Research leader</li> </ul>
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Professor Margaret Nowak Director, Governance &amp; Corporate Social Responsibility Research Unit, Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mentor</li> </ul>
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ms Gail Thomas Research Fellow and Manager, Governance &amp; Corporate Social Responsibility Research Unit, Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Co-researcher</li> </ul>
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Curtin Business School</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dr Marita Naude Senior Lecturer, Leadership Management, Graduate School of Business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Co-researcher</li> </ul>
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CSBP Limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mr Cameron Schuster Manager, Environment and Manufacturing Support, CSBP Ltd</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Champion</li> </ul>

**Primary objectives:**

To facilitate the mutual development of knowledge and insights through the sharing of experiences with an industry partner in embedding Education for Sustainability (EfS). The industry partner was CSBP Ltd. Within the context of a learning partnership between CSBP, Curtin staff and MBA students it was expected that incremental (and future transformational) change for corporate sustainability of relevance to the industry partner, along with student learning, reflection and development would be achieved. The ultimate goal in the project is the mainstreaming of EfS in the MBA and MLM programs.

**Research question:**

In the context of Partnering for Sustainability within Western Australian business and embedding EfS, does action research/learning create opportunities for organisational/institutional and student and staff centred personal change and knowledge development consistent with sustainability?

### Expected outcomes:

- New and relevant teaching resources explicitly embedded in the MBA program and potentially, other GSB programs and CBS undergraduate programs.
- Improved staff understanding and practical knowledge for developing pedagogy in Education for Sustainability.
- Incremental (and future transformational) cultural change towards sustainability through a process of continuous learning and improvement.
- Systematic integration of improved social, economic and environmental considerations into business activities and decision making of participant corporation/s.
- Improved understanding by staff and students of corporate social and environmental practice (within the WA business community) and planned initiatives aligned with strategic intent.
- Increased interactions among participants (within and between each group, i.e. students, academic staff, business school and corporate participant) – a potential ongoing partnership for change.
- Ongoing learning partnerships with the participating corporation and opportunities to build on this initiative with other organisations within the WA business community.
- An MBA 'Leadership in Sustainability' Forum as an ongoing feature of the MBA program; designed to achieve interaction and share learning and ideas with business.
- Wider dissemination of the learning from students, academics and corporate participants through a community of practice (CoP).

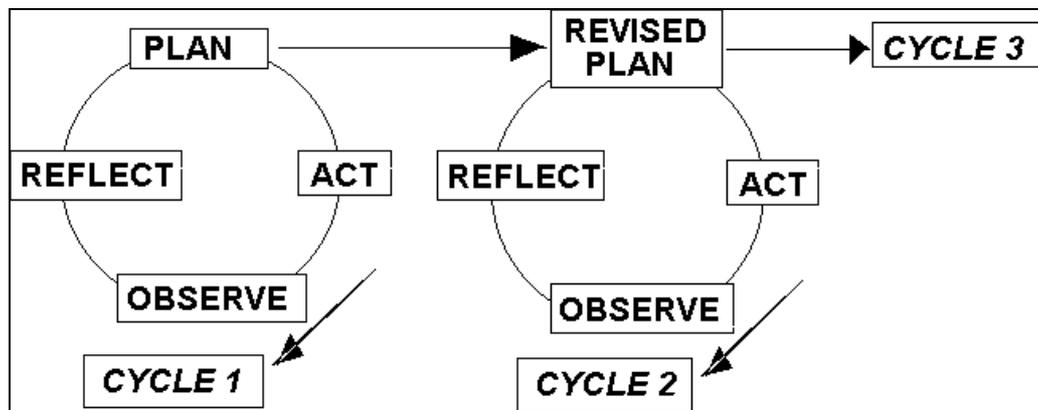
### **Research methodology**

The process of continuous action learning was designed to bring about incremental (and future transformational) change for corporate sustainability relevant to the industry partner and the learning and teaching focus for embedding sustainability into the Curtin MBA and MLM programs. We employed an Action Research (AR) methodology to facilitate critical examination of the experiential learning process. Bennis and O'Toole (2005 p. 104) suggest that MBA programs require multidisciplinary, practical and ethical questions and scenarios that reflect the complex challenges confronting business leaders. As such, AR is an appropriate method of inquiry for this project as it allowed collaborative dialogue, participatory decision making, inclusive democratic deliberation and the participation of relevant parties (Stringer 1996 p. 38).

According to Greenwood and Levin (2000) the AR process is enriched by the diversity of experience and capabilities of participants. Through collaborative

communication processes, “participants and researchers cogenerate knowledge” (Greenwood and Levin 2000 p. 96). The participatory nature of AR provided a valuable continuous process for exploring ways in which sustainability is relevant to the researchers’ and respondents’ workplaces. This iterative process is described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000 p. 595) as: “the spiral of self contained cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting.” Each stage of the self-reflective cycles tend to overlap as new discoveries are achieved for continuous improvement. In this sense, it views change for sustainability as the desired outcome. Figure 1 illustrates the Riding, Fowell and Levy (1995) version of the cyclical change process of AR.

**Figure 1: Self-reflective cyclical change process of Action Research**



*Source: Riding et al (1995)*

The key features of the AR cycles adapted for this project are (Riding, Fowell et al. 1995; Mah J. et al. 2006 p. 6):

- Develop a **plan** of critically informed action to improve current practice. The preliminary meeting in June 2007 between CGSB and three CSBP co-researchers set the scene for this iterative process of action learning. The flexibility in planning afforded to us in making allowance for unforeseen effects or constraints is well suited to this exploratory action research with an industry partner and in EfS;
- The group members **act** to implement the plan which must be deliberate and controlled;
- This action is **observed**, to collect evidence which allows thorough evaluation. The observation must be planned and a journal may be used for recording purposes. The lead researcher kept a journal log and students’ assessment included the submission of an individual critical reflection journal of their experiential learning in the project with CSBP. The action process and its effects within the context of the situation have been observed individually or collectively; and
- Critical **reflection** on the action recorded during observation was aided by discussions among the group members. Group reflection led to a

reconstruction of the meaning of CSBP's community volunteering and EfS situation at CGSB and provided a basis for further planning of critically informed action, thereby continuing the cycle. These steps were carried out in a more careful, systematic and rigorous way than that which usually occurs in daily practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

Since the effectiveness of the plan or idea is never known with certainty until it has been implemented (as will be discussed in the findings and through critical reflection), the most valuable learning transpires when action has occurred. This is known as 'action learning' (Pedler et al. 2005). It serves as a platform for integrating learning and work experience across the various conditions for EfS (Ballard 2005).

The principle of action learning was applied to the corporate partnership and embedding effort on EfS. The underlying assumptions of action learning (Pedler 1983; McLoughlin and Thorpe 1993) have been summarised as:

- it must be based on an actual organisational issue – EfS based change in the current case;
- those involved must be willing to take risks and experiment - CGSB and the company were taking a leap of faith in launching this project;
- there must be authority for action - this was invested in the partnership team and the leaders; and
- a system for learning reflectively - critical action learning developed by the partnership in line with Pedlar (1983).

The next section provides an overview of the application of the AR iterative process model to the project, with further details in the following sections on reflection and findings.

### **Highlights of action research in the project**

In accordance with the objectives of this MBA3 project employing an AR approach, we commenced research *planning* with the identification of interested researchers and potential industry partners while preparing the research proposal in consultation with *ARIES*. In choosing which companies to approach, we focused on companies within the resources/industrial area for a number of reasons. The companies chosen had a public commitment to sustainable development; their size and the nature of their operations mean that they have a significant impact on environmental, social and economic sustainability; and it was felt that a partnership project would be mutually beneficial to the companies, the Business School and the students.

- *Company A*. Discussions with this multinational resources company were initially fruitful, with a 'champion' identified within its sustainability management section. They were keen that this would help them to move from strategic policies and plans to the implementation of initiatives. However, as we neared the date for the finalisation of the project agreement, the company withdrew its support. The reason given was stretched time resources - they were concerned about the

potential number of students involved in the project and the possible time commitment. The proposed research topic was a sensitive one, so this may have been a factor. While the company withdrew from this stage of the project, it did agree to participate in the MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum, so valuable linkages have still been maintained and the MBA students will still benefit from the company's input.

- *CSBP Ltd.* The second company was a major industrial company. The company has a well-advertised commitment to sustainability issues and I (chief researcher) already had a good professional relationship with Cameron (champion) one of the senior managers, with whom I had participated in an earlier project. Cameron Schuster agreed to be the 'champion' of the project and was supported by the CEO of the company. After the preliminary discussions with the company, it was time to move ahead with the project.

**Acting** on initial discussions in several meetings and dialogue with Cameron and his colleagues, we conducted a scoping session with a focus group of eight diverse key staff members at CSBP in October 2007 to identify the potential major sustainability topics for our joint research that were of mutual beneficial interest (see **Reflection - Ways in which thinking and actions have changed or been reinforced**).

Meanwhile, in mapping the MBA and MLM course curriculum we identified potential courses and unit controllers who were sympathetic to providing appropriate students for the unique AR projects with CSBP. As **observed**, this was another time consuming effort to solicit colleagues support not only in embedding EfS but also in selecting appropriate students to participate in the *ARIES* project with CSBP.

On **reflection**, due to timing constraints, it was not always convenient to expect unit controllers to change their assessments to allow for students to undertake this exciting 'hands-in' AR project in the field. In fact, even one of us lead researchers found it difficult to adjust our project assignments and assessments (Organisational Change and Development) for EfS with CSBP within the project timeframe.

A major dilemma prevailed – we had been successful in convincing an enthusiastic industry partner to collaborate in the *ARIES* project but we were unable to provide the students who were ready to commence this exciting experiential learning. Consequently, a **revised plan** was put into **action** with a widely circulated recruitment exercise through the offer of a Business Research Project 572 (BRP 572) course (specially designed for *ARIES* project), but it did not attract the appropriate students capable of pursuing action research during trimester three last year (see, **Some Dilemmas**).

Fortunately, Environmental Management Strategy 660 (EMS660) which was offered during the summer school in January 2008 provided the opportunity for the chief researcher to articulate the course curriculum and pedagogy to encourage and prepare students for the *ARIES* project. For students undertaking the project, their assessments included the submission of an individual Reflection Journal and major

project assignment (see unit outline previously handed in). On *reflection*, this too had its trial and tribulations but the experiential learning process has been most enriching and satisfying (see Reflection and Findings).

Hence, as an iterative process, AR balances problem solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven collaborative analysis or research to understand underlying causes enabling organisational shift to sustainability. It is therefore imperative for researchers to accept potential challenges to one's own assumptions and prejudices. Critical action learning can lead to insights about the role of the lecturers, students, industry partner and expert knowledge in learning. The next section records an overview of our major critical reflection on this action learning journey of discovery.

## **Reflection**

- **Highlights**

Bringing something real to fruition – working through the various stages from our initial meetings with CSBP, engaging with the students, clarifying the project, and then seeing the students work with the company to produce their final results.

There is a feeling of satisfaction that all those involved in the project in some way have achieved something – the academics, the students and the CSBP participants.

This has been a voyage of discovery for all of us at the CGSB and we have all been supportive of each other and eager to contribute. We have certainly learned from this collaboration with each other. In terms of the national ARIES program, the projects of all of the universities have made an important contribution to our knowledge of education for and about sustainability. We are pleased that the CGSB project involved student participants and that these students demonstrated that they were able to work with an unfamiliar company (rather than the organisation in which they worked). This really called on their interpersonal and organisational skills. Failure to perform on their part could also have jeopardised the CGSB's good relationship with CSBP. Hence, it was satisfying that the students applied their skills and knowledge remarkably well.

Whilst authors such as Mintzberg may suggest that we need more experiential learning where students undertake projects within their *own* organizations, where they have a history and accountability, rather than brief, casual exposure to a foreign organization, we would question this. Firstly, we do not see that the two types of learning have to be mutually exclusive and that one of the aims of a project such as this is to explore different models of experiential learning. The dynamics of undertaking a project in-house are very different to those in an external organization, where the students have stepped outside their comfort zone. It takes some adventurous spirit to plunge into the unknown!

In his reflections, one of our students expressed his nervousness at managing the focus group at CSBP, even though he is a confident professional who regularly delivered presentations for a large multinational company. For instance, the student's

reflection journal revealed that: “*Looks like they are quite keen to get a lot of people involved... their optimism scares me...*” Part of that nervousness was recognition that he would be working with people who are experts in their field and that he would be putting his own learning into practice. The students’ interaction with CSBP was not a casual exposure, but a rather structured interaction which emerged as part of the action research process.

- **Ways in which thinking and actions have changed or been reinforced**

We think it has brought home for us the value of having a champion – both within the research process, but also within business if that business is to be truly sustainable. Cameron at CSBP was really the one who made it work at his end and we question whether we would have achieved as much without having the involvement of someone with such commitment, drive and leadership.

We think it also helped that the researchers had already established a relationship with this ‘champion’, who had assisted in the MBA2 phase of the project. Both the company and the CGSB were taking a leap of faith in launching this project and it helped that an element of trust already existed between the researchers and the champion.

The initial focus group session with staff at CSBP in October (the official start of the project following the signing of the contract) was very stimulating and appeared to facilitate new insights, not only for the Curtin representatives but for the various CSBP participants. The latter were drawn from diverse elements of the CSBP workforce, from management, from engineering and from the technical/trades workforce. We do not believe this diverse group had been brought together before to focus specifically on sustainability. The sharing of insights which was apparent at this meeting was very stimulating for us. The discussion of the two possible project topics provided the researchers with a window into CSBP, but it was also interesting to observe various members of the CSBP group sharing opinions and experiences, and gaining new insights into the company themselves.

When discussing the issue of volunteering, it quickly became apparent that CSBP did not have a formal policy on this topic and that the amount and type of ‘volunteering’ undertaken by employees in company time varied. For example, it surprised some to learn that employees who are members of the local bushfire brigade “spend almost as much time fighting fires in the bushfire season as they do at work”. Use of company facilities also included photocopying and occasional loan of vehicles. There was considerable discussion about what would be the most valuable approach to volunteering both in terms of the company and the local community. The breadth of volunteering experiences that emerged in the discussion brought home to the CSBP team and the researchers for a need to explore this issue further. We felt energized by the values expressed and willingness to move forward and learn which we encountered. While the employees did not discuss values in a theoretical sense, values very much underpinned their talk of commitment to the company, to their colleagues and to the wider Kwinana-Rockingham community. Many of them live in the community and see CSBP’s ongoing sustainability linked to the sustainability of the community.

We found Cameron's talk to the MBA students a seminal learning opportunity. He came from the position of 'doing sustainability'. His own commitment and values were very apparent and he was able to show that with this equipment a champion can, over time move some 'mountains'. He gave fascinating insights into the 'mountains' he had moved, the various paths to achieve that and the frustrations encountered. Some of these related to specific environmental programs which have made "the Kwinana industrial area the most integrated in the world" and involve approaching sustainability from a multi-stakeholder point-of-view. The practicalities of developing such approaches involve juggling economic and environmental priorities of sometimes competing companies, and could be seen to be mountains to be overcome. Other comments related to the development of targets such as the aim to reuse 12% of scheme water by 2010. As well as the more technical examples, Cameron also spoke of the way of doing business, that "you're only as good as your last decision" and that team leaders and managers are "the key people in terms of integrity". From the student questioning afterwards it was clear that many were able to integrate this with their own workplace experience to draw new understanding.

While it is impossible for the researchers to know if this talk resulted in any changes in work practices by the students, we are confident that it fits in with the aim of the MBA program to challenge the critical thinking of students and to encourage them to reflect on and question their own work practices and those of their colleagues and organizations. Nevertheless, feedback from students in regards to EMS 660 was enlightening as some remarked that this course has empowered them to change the way they view their personal and work environment. For instance, a student remarked in eValue (student feedback software) that: "This unit well and truly exceeded my expectations. I work in procurement, and I was surprised at how relevant the unit was to the work I do everyday. It has certainly enriched the way I think about things."

In our initial thinking about the student research project, we envisaged involving several students rather than just the final two. However, as the project progressed, it became obvious that we would have had great difficulty dealing with more than just those two students and it would also have increased the amount of time committed by the company. The pilot has been extremely valuable in identifying the factors which would need to be considered in the development of future experiential work based projects. These are discussed in more depth in the next section, but probably the most significant requirement would be the need for adequate resourcing. The pilot provided assistance with staff resources (thanks to ARIES funding) which would not necessarily be available if projects such as these were incorporated into regular MBA units. Conversely, some of the staff time in the ARIES pilot was taken up by contract negotiations, reporting requirements, meetings, etc which would not be needed if projects were incorporated into regular MBA units.

In terms of CSR/sustainability, we think our discussions with CSBP brought home just how broad this topic is. We had fairly wide-ranging discussions with them and the two topics that we finally agreed democratically as possible projects were both relevant but diverse – CSBP and volunteering in the local community; and recruitment/retention issues and sustainability. In some ways this is slightly daunting in terms of EfS because it demonstrates the enormity of the social, economic and environmental issues faced by business and the wider community today. However, it

is also exciting in the scope and challenge of the possibilities it provides us in terms of relevant teaching resources and in developing pedagogy in the MBA and MLM programs.

- **Aspects of the project we would like to change and improve**

In terms of Curtin's specific project, there were a number of things from which we have learned and which could be modified for similar projects.

- Time constraints – this is always a problem. In terms of project planning, it takes time to bring different cohorts of people together – the academics, participants within the company and the students. All the people involved have busy schedules. We had to be mindful of not over taxing CSBP participants' and student's time constraints. Had the supposedly '1 year MBA3' project started as planned in June/July instead of October (when contract was signed), it would have optimized on the academic study leaves of two researchers. Fortunately, the DEWHA grant and ARIES allowed the much needed funding required for a partial teaching buy-out for the lead researcher to devote solely on this innovative project since January 2008; especially one that involves careful time management in articulating students' experiential learning in a partnering corporation. Mentoring of students is crucial and their major business project on CSBP staffs' community volunteering will be completed next month.
- Then there are all the other variables that take up time – the logistics of arranging wide diverse participants across the company from CSBP to participate in the focus group sessions and interviews, obtaining the interview recordings from the students, having the interviews transcribed, getting the transcriptions back to the students. Constant mentoring and meetings between the chief investigator and the students.

The fact that the company was located about 45 minutes south of the CBD also impacted on the number of meetings we had with them and the amount of time the students were able to meet with them (both students work fulltime). The anticipated time commitment was off-putting to some excellent potential students because of work commitments.

- Selection process – in committing ourselves to a project such as this, as well as to an external organisation, we need to ensure that we will attract a sufficient pool of interested and capable students. If the students had not committed to the project, it would have been embarrassing for the researchers, both in terms of CSBP and the wider ARIES project. On reflection, the selection process will be better streamlined in future through the newly structured SMS 660 summer courses and as another colleague(s) adjust his/hers/our courses focusing on *EfS* to facilitate such action research with industry partner(s). The Director for MLM is keen to work on this too. Given the lessons learned with CSBP, we will still need to be mindful of human resources and budgets by requiring no more than a couple of groups of students into CSBP and another potential company at any one time.

- Unanticipated events – need to be prepared for the unexpected. Inability to recruit and prepare the appropriate students to participate in 2007 following several dialogues and a fruitful focus group at CSBP. There was a dilemma similar to those confronted by our fellow ARIES partners as to whether we should proceed with the action research with the company ourselves or persisted with the opportune time to prepare the most appropriate students months later when the lead researcher’s EMS 660 intensive class ran during summer school in January 2008. It would have been so much easier to start working with two corporations without the hassle of involving students. In fact, a major listed corporation in WA withdrew from the partnership due to the level of commitment required to send MBA students into their sites. However, dealing with the ‘hassles’ was part of the learning process for the researchers, and while frustrating at times, at no stage did we consider aborting the student participation component of the project. This was a key part of our project and one of our major aims was to provide the opportunity for students to improve learning outcomes and capacity building. During the course of our project, one of the main CSBP co-researchers moved to another company in the Wesfarmers group, and towards the end, Cameron moved to Wesfarmers itself. Fortunately this was sufficiently towards the end of the project that it was not jeopardized by the disruption to projects which inevitably follows staff changes.
  
- Unrealistic timeframe – Whilst “baby steps” (according to a CSBP participant) or incremental change towards sustainability may have been observed from our observation and reflection, longer time scales are required if significant change management is to be realized (Henderson, McAdam et al. 2006) within CSBP and CGSB. It is unrealistic to expect change in the company within a period of only seven months (October 2007 to May 2008). It is difficult to also expect meaningful critical reflective learning journal from busy managers who have yet to see (let alone digest) findings from this exploratory project when students have yet to complete their group assignment with CSBP.

## **Findings and outcomes**

This section reports on the major findings of this action research in partnering with CSBP and the attempt in integrating our action learning in the process of EFS in the MBA and MLM curriculum. The findings, insights and unexpected outcomes presented here are guided by the ‘monitoring and evaluation’ framework formulated in alignment with the ultimate objectives of the ARIES program. Each set of outcomes address in part, the research question in the context of partnering with a corporation in our journey to incremental change towards sustainability.

New and relevant teaching resources explicitly embedded in the MBA program and potentially, other CGSB programs and CBS undergraduate programs.

- Updated teaching content and pedagogy, and the way students are assessed in Environmental Management Strategy 660 (EMS660).

- Included critical reflection journal in the assessment of students undertaking action research with CSBP Ltd. The draft personal reflection journals that I have the pleasure of perusing provides some interesting insights into students' critical thinking as we progress with the iterative AR cycle of simultaneous plan, act, observe, reflect and continuous revised plans. Students will be submitting their critical reflection journals for assessment in July.
- Introduced Action Research (AR) and Critical Thinking in EMS660. These are also in the unit outline.
- EMS660 has been replaced by Sustainability Management Strategy 660 (SMS660) to reflect updated teaching content. This change of unit name was approved by the Teaching and Learning committee in March 2008.
- The Teaching and Learning committee in March 2008 also approved the Graduate Business Certificate – Sustainable Future (i.e., 4 units that include SMS 660). This is a positive start to embracing of the ARIES long-term objective.
- In anticipation of increased number of enrolments for SMS 660, we will be developing this unit for on-line students next year at a cost of approx. \$10,000.
- We also witnessed a “trickling down” of influence from the ARIES project to undergraduate degrees. Interest in EfS for undergraduate has been expressed by some faculty members (e.g., School of Law, School of Management and School of Accounting).
- Findings from students' project exploring CSBP staff's community volunteering will add to teaching resources (e.g., case study).
- In addition to Financial Management 550 (core) and SMS 660 (elective), two other subjects have specifically included sustainability issues in students' assessments. These two courses that are assessing on sustainability embedded in the units for the first time are Reasoning Skills for Leaders 610 (elective) and the capstone course Business Strategy & International Business 660 (Core) that are currently running in Trimester 2, (see unit outlines for these two subjects – 2007 & 2008).
  - FM 550, a foundation unit for MBA is delivered every trimesters & on semester 2 (200 enrolled students approx). EMS 660 had 38 enrolled students while Reasoning Skills for Leaders 610 has fewer students. As a capstone course Business Strategy & International Business 660 (Core), it runs three times a year with up to 50 enrolled students per trimester (150 enrolled students p.a. approx).
- In the next Trimester, other subjects that will not only cover topics on sustainability but will also be assessing a component of EfS include – Strategic Cost Management 660 (alternative core) and Strategic Management for Leaders 610 (core). Business Research Project 572 (BRP 572) will be made available again.

## Improved staff understanding and practical knowledge for developing pedagogy in Education for Sustainability

- Enhanced practical implementation knowledge for academics directly involved in the relevant units. These include the MBA director, Master of Leadership and Management (MLM) director, an expert in organizational change and development and the relevant course controllers. For instance, there is greater awareness of sustainability issues among the faculty as a result of the CGSB ARIES project as evidenced from the activities and on going incremental shift towards sustainability in the above mentioned and following paragraphs. The MBA Director, Assoc Professor Peter Galvin encouraged relevant course controllers to state more clearly in the unit outlines about their coverage of sustainability in their respective subjects whenever applicable.
- This has been an extremely slow and sometimes frustrating process. Through AR and Action learning with the benefits of critical thinking and reflection among researchers and participants, we are only beginning to see the fruition of our intermediate objectives.
- Mapped the MBA and Master of Leadership (MLM) programs – most of the units within the programs covered a certain level of CSR/sustainability content. However, this is generally in terms of content and pedagogy rather than formal assessment activities. Some topics were covered in a number of units, eg triple bottom line reporting, corporate social values, ethical business practice, externalities, climate change and green marketing. Others were identified in only one or two unit, eg supply chain management and sustainability. A questionnaire was sent to all CGSB staff and the results analysed. In December 2007, two of the researchers presented the findings of the survey to CGSB staff. There was considerable discussion about the need to incorporate sustainability into MBA and MLM units. The chair of the Teaching and Learning Committee undertook to take the issue to his committee and the Director of the MLM program to have discussions with the researchers about this process.
- We identified that sustainability is not made explicit in the course outlines. As a result, the MBA Director requested that unit controllers include in their unit outlines whether the unit covers sustainability issues and some of the major CSR/Sustainability issues covered.
- Continuing dialogue with colleagues to embed EfS in the MBA and MLM programs. We see this as an ongoing process. Through the ARIES project we have raised the issue of sustainability within the CGSB in a way that we hope will continue to have life after the project has finished. It could well be called an informal Community of Practice, with the lead researchers as champions.
- We suggested that sustainability be included in project work and assessments in applicable units. With a few exceptions (e.g., FM550 and EMS 660) we are still canvassing for and grappling with the assessment of sustainability in those units that have implicitly covered certain aspects of sustainability
- Seek opportunities for MBA and MLM students to be involved in sustainability related projects in their respective courses. This is an ongoing

process (which relates to the previous comments). One of the benefits of the ARIES pilot project is that we have this experience on which to draw in terms of developing future opportunities.

- As a direct result of our previous activities, members of the research team were invited to attend the one-day retreat organized by the CGSB for 14 August for a major review of the MLM. The retreat was organized to consider the current curriculum map, possible changes to the current structure and possible new units. This provides an excellent opportunity for the researchers to provide input both from the earlier MBA mapping exercise and from the findings of the ARIES MBA3 project.
- The mapping of the MBA & MLM programs is a precursor to a much wider sustainability mapping exercise that will be undertaken by the researchers across the Curtin Business School (CBS). The exercise will ultimately include non-award and undergraduate programs, but may begin by focusing on postgraduate awards. Time and resource constraints are slowing the process even though the CBS Board of Executives granted approval after a presentation by the mentor and lead researcher. In addition, a new Dean of the Curtin Business School was appointed earlier in 2008 and while he has informally expressed interest in our work, we have not yet had the opportunity to formally discuss the mapping exercise with him. The outcomes of the ARIES project will be used to inform this process.
- During the chief researcher's sabbatical in the months of November and December 2007, she visited several universities in the UK to explore business schools' advancement in Corporate Sustainability. The Centre of Social and Environmental Accounting Research at St Andrews University, Scotland, are in the forefront in this field (i.e., Social and Environmental Accounting). Professor Rob Gray provided useful module outline including associated pedagogy for CSR, Accountability and Reporting.
- Nottingham University's MBA in CSR provided an excellent benchmark regarding teaching content upon which the ARIES team is able to ascertain our progress towards EfS. Their MBA in CSR program has earned top ranking in the UK by 'Beyond Grey Pinstripes'. Professor David Owen and his colleagues were collegial in sharing their teaching contents and pedagogy. These were subsequently shared with fellow Business Schools during the February workshop.
- It was hoped that the presentation on my (lead researcher's) reflective findings about the UK 1st ranking MBA – CSR specialisation (at the February workshop) gave us some indication as to where we are at and provide the stimulus in working towards the ARIES long-term goal of developing a leading-edged MBA – Sustainability program. This also informed ARIES' discussions at ProSPER.Net in Asia.
- It appears that Australian business schools are at a similar stage regarding the level of CSR/sustainability content within the MBA program. However, upon further critical reflection with fellow ARIES partners (as asserted by Michael, RMIT), we are of the impression that Australia may be ahead in relation to

pedagogy. We tend to require students to undertake assignments that apply their learning in their work environment or organisations. The pilot student project with CSBP is one such valuable experiential learning where students encounter the complexity of corporate sustainability first hand and applied action learning approach to critically think and reflect on the iterative AR cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning. (See highlights under the above Reflection section.)

- As a result of discussions at the ARIES workshop in February, it was identified that MGSM could benefit from research already conducted by CGSB in the area of gifting/volunteering. This information has been shared.

#### Incremental (and future transformational) cultural change towards sustainability through a process of continuous learning and improvement

- Building on shared knowledge deriving from earlier meetings, interviews and focus group sessions in October, March, April and May staff members of CSBP Ltd had opportunities to voice their aspirations for incremental shift towards sustainability through a process of continuous learning and improvement. Comments by participants made it quite clear that participants would like to see encouragement from CSBP for staff to get involved in the community as volunteers. E.g. of quotes:

*"there's a lot of people (CSBP employees) who would like possibly to be involved in things but they're concerned that if they do it and it cuts into work time they will lose their jobs. However, if the company then turned around and said well here's an opportunity then some of the passions would come out of people and they'd maybe be more enticed to get involved";*  
*"maybe if they were offered the chance to be able to spend say one work day being able to volunteer..., it might promote them (CSBP employees) to become more community minded".*

- Findings from the current action research will provide CSBP Ltd with an understanding of their community volunteering activities in improving this component of the organizational sustainability journey. Undoubtedly, when the results are presented to CSBP Ltd by the students, this unique pilot Action Learning will enhance their understanding of their staff community volunteering activities. Whether the recommendations to be presented to them will be acted upon is anyone's guess now that the original champion (Cameron) and co-researcher (Jo Williams) are transferred to the head office of Wesfarmers Ltd. I am however, keeping in communication with Cameron and his replacement at CSBP.
- Building on earlier shared knowledge, members of the research team are provided with opportunities to voice their ideas for a shift towards sustainability through a process of continuous learning and improvement.
- To maintain an open communication channel, the lead researcher has been in dialogue with students (weekly) and CSBP (fortnightly and/or monthly), and meet and discuss progress of the project with CGSB co-researchers and ARIES. As mentioned above, the unexpected change of personnel towards the

end of the current pilot project means that we have to rebuild the trusting partnership relationship with the successors of CSBP. One positive aspect in having the champion & co-researcher transferred to the Wesfarmers head office is that further sustainability projects will potentially have a wider coverage with several divisions within this large conglomerate.

- Participation in the project and conversations with members of CSBP provided the researchers with an insight into some of sustainability issues important to the company. Please see above – Reflection: **Ways in which thinking and actions have changed or been reinforced.**
- Fostering of a culture within the CGSB that recognizes the need to not only consider the place of sustainability within existing curricula but also how we look at the School itself and its future directions. The ARIES projects have built on existing initiatives in the School. All of the CGSB researchers are members of the Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility Research Unit that is a Curtin Business School Area of Research Excellence. While the Unit has members from across the Business School, it is located within the CGSB and that is the focus of much of its research. The ARIES researchers and a number of our colleagues in the Research Unit are active in researching and publishing in the area of governance and sustainability, both externally and in the CGSB's Working Paper series. Thus in terms of cultural development, academics within the CGSB would probably say that addressing sustainability is just part of the way we do things here; in terms of process, it is almost like developing a critical mass – after that it is self-sustaining. Again, please see the above mentioned activities and achievements
- The ARIES group meetings have been a great forum for sharing our discoveries about the challenges and opportunities that every one of us have been encountering in progressing towards the ARIES objectives. We take comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our journeys of trials and tribulations. See above, especially **Some Dilemmas**. Key lessons learned here - accept potential challenges to one's own assumptions and prejudices. Be prepared for the unexpected as per a student's reflection journal: "*Morale of the story: you can plan for everything but you need to expect the unexpected.*" The AR approach has provided us with the flexibility to continually reflect and re-plan our project strategies towards achieving the ARIES objectives. This is particularly the case in the manner in which the MBA2 & MBA3 ARIES projects have managed to ignite our colleagues' interest in sustainability education and propelled EfS into the foreground for further action.

Systematic integration of improved social, economic and environmental considerations into business activities and decision making of participating corporation.

- Regular dialogue with staff members of CSBP Ltd through meetings, interviews and focus group sessions are beginning to provide some insights into the level of community volunteering being undertaken by staff and how

the corporation can contemplate assisting their needs in meeting corporate social responsibility.

- Data collected to date are being iteratively analysed and reflected upon in order to allow the major themes to emerge.
- Findings from current action research will provide CSBP Ltd management with an understanding of their community volunteering activities in improving this component of the organizational sustainability journey. Students have provided a draft of their AR approached findings and are refining the report in accordance with EMS660 criteria for a business project. Whilst permission has been granted by the new CSBP Environmental Manager for presentation at the November MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum, they have yet to receive an Executive Report of this ARIES project. It would be presumptuous to predict CSBP's response to the findings until we are able to present them with their report. We will be writing this concise Executive Report upon receiving and analyzing the students' findings by August. It is anticipated that a presentation be made to the CSBP staff.
- Our initial focus group session with eight CSBP staff provided participants from different parts of the company with the opportunity to critically reflect on the social, economic and environmental considerations associated with their own work, that of the company itself and the wider community. It stretched their critical thinking on these issues by requiring them to consider the way in which the company works in terms of its employees and the wider community; in terms of what they see as the company's responsibility to the community and the requirements to ensure the sustainability of CSBP, the Kwinana industrial area and the local community. Talking to the researchers may have also raised issues that they had not previously considered or articulated and we see this as a benefit to the company in terms of integrating social, economic and environmental considerations into the way it does business.
- Participation in the project also encouraged further reflective thinking on these issues by workers in the company. The focus groups at CSBP comprised of some sixteen diverse key staff members from the following work area: Environment & manufacturing, communications, engineering, supply/contractors, commercial, sales and marketing, other support groups and HR. The participants of the focus group in October 2007 were predominantly senior managers who identified the potential major sustainability topics for our joint research that are of mutual beneficial interest (see **Reflection - Ways in which thinking and actions have changed or been reinforced**).
- The second major focus group conducted by the students at CSBP and follow up interviews provided some interesting observations (i.e., through students' reflections with lead researcher). For instance, when it was brought out in the focus group that that some companies offer their employees 2 days a year to undertake volunteer work, there is observable change in attitude in what a company run program can and should be. (e.g., see respondents' comments in Findings above, under "Incremental (and future transformational) cultural change towards sustainability through a process of continuous learning and improvement").

Improved understanding by staff and students of corporate social and environmental practice (within the WA business community) and planned initiatives aligned with strategic intent.

- Findings from current action research have provided academic staff, students and CSBP Ltd management with an understanding of their community volunteering activities in improving this component of the organizational sustainability journey. While there was a definite practical aspect to the community volunteering project in terms of benefits to the company, the project also provided a lens through which all participants were able to view the linkage of social and environmental practice within a business environment. It enabled us to consider sustainability in an *applied* sense rather than just a *theoretical* one and the need for sustainability issues to be approached in a strategic way as part of the way a company does business.

Increased interactions among participants (within and between each group, i.e. students, academic staff, business school and corporate participant) – an ongoing partnership for change.

- Build ongoing partnerships with participating corporation and gradually expand that within the Western Australian business community. Woodside Ltd is still keen to participate in CGSB's future guest speaker forums and/or seminars (e.g., guest lectures in leadership management and SMS660). KPMG Ltd may also be involved in the MBA leadership forum as one of the students conducting AR with CSBP is from this organisation.
- Indicators include the willingness of CSBP to participate in future activities. CSBP .... At the Leadership in Sustainability Forum, held in November 2008, and possibly a collaborative journal article. Cameron has indicated his interest in working jointly with us (lecturers of SMS660) on a case study on a sustainability project in the Kwinana region subject to approval from a multi-organisational approval (e.g., BP).
- The fact that meetings with CSBP were held at both the CGSB in the city and at the company in Kwinana meant that both groups of participants were able to acknowledge their different working environments. It also enhanced the equality aspect of the projects – we were all there to learn from each other, there were no experts.
- Opportunities for staff to interact with corporate partner and to provide resources to partner as well as learn from the processes. Our involvement with CSBP widened our horizon on the practicalities of developing environmentally sustainable programs, which requires juggling economic and environmental priorities of sometimes competing needs, and could be seen to be mountains to be overcome. As Cameron put it, in doing business “you’re only as good as your last decision” and that team leaders and managers are “the key people in terms of integrity”. Our experience with our industry partner taught us to appreciate the value of a champion in undertaking a

strategic alliance with a co-researcher ion business. By the same token, this ARIES project has also facilitated CSBP's discovery of their staff community volunteering activities as part of corp. social sustainability. (See above section on Reflection and paper submitted to ANZAM conference that is under review: "Partnering for Sustainability: Reflections on an Industry-Academia Alliance" and above reflection).

Ongoing learning partnerships with the participating corporation and opportunities to build on this initiative with other organisations within the WA business community.

- Several sustainable social responsibility themes of major importance to CSBP Ltd emerged from scoping session and meetings with CSBP in October – namely, community volunteering; staff attraction and retention; suppliers and supply chains.
- Selected students from the Environmental Management Strategy 660 summer school (January 2008) who are best equipped with the knowledge about Sustainability started applying *EfS* by meeting with key CSBP Ltd participants in January 2008, followed by collecting workshop materials from focus group and interviews. Our experience with students who have responded to the widely circulated offer of the *Business Research Project* designed for this action learning revealed that students without a foundation in EMS660 or equivalent and business strategy background would have required an even more intensive mentoring from limited academic teaching recourses to bring them up to speed. Perhaps, as *EfS* is increasingly becoming mainstreamed, this will make an innovative pedagogy and AR projects such as this a whole lot more practical and inclusive for all students to participate rather than the current "privileged better students". Perhaps, there may be some plausible explanation from Mintzberg's (2005) Scale of learning authenticity that posit Action Learning and Experienced Reflection above the normal classroom artificial experience (e.g., computer simulation, role playing). This is but a journey towards embedding *EfS*.
- On reflection, key CSBP Ltd and CGSB researchers discovered that we were originally too ambitious in believing that we could have two groups of students (i.e., up to 10) conducting action research at CSBP Ltd. We now realize that involving student participation and finding a business partner who is willing to welcome such shared learning, require an enormous amount of time and human resources.
- The competing needs of different stakeholders – CSBP, academics, students; in terms of involving student participants, the CGSB is constrained by academic timetables and student assessment frameworks, which doesn't necessarily fit in with the company's timetable.
- CSBP and Cameron Schuster have been very generous and we have appreciated the value of developing a good working relationship with our business partner. The issue of trust is also important. The company and the research team were taking a leap of faith and it helped that an element of trust

already existed through lead researcher's prior professional association with the corporate champion.

- Hence, opportunities for staff and students to interact with corporate partner and to provide resources to partner as well as learn from the processes.
- The wide-reaching discussions held with CSBP identified more project possibilities than were within the scope of ARIES MBA3. In some ways this is slightly daunting in terms of EfS because it demonstrates the enormity of the social, economic and environmental issues faced by business and the wider community today. However, it is also exciting in the scope and challenge of the possibilities it provides us.
- May lead to further initiatives within the company and further collaborative ventures with the CGSB.

An MBA 'Leadership in Sustainability' Forum as an ongoing feature of the MBA program; designed to achieve interaction and share learning and ideas with business.

- The planned MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum for April 2008 had to be postponed to November 2008 due to delayed commencement of actual action research with CSBP Ltd (completed October 2008). Students and researchers were analyzing transcribed interview data and awaiting students' completion of the exciting project in July 2008. Drawing on students' findings it is anticipated that an Executive Business Report will be written up by us for CSBP Ltd by August 2008. There are potential commercial sensitive materials that will require CSBP's written permission to release. (Students have signed confidentiality agreements with CSBP).
- Funding from Curtin Business School under the Visiting Research Fellowship scheme was approved to invite Professor Richard Welford (University of Hong Kong, who was involved in ARIES MBA2) to the MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum in November 2008.
- Seeking additional funding through corporate sponsorship.
- Professor Richard Welford's visit is also planned to enhance public awareness of business sustainability and encourage increased profile on EfS in CBS. We anticipate a number of events as part of Professor Welford's visit. There would be a public forum addressed by Welford, to be held at the CGSB. A panel discussion would follow, drawing on representatives from business and academia. Advertising for the Forum would be directed at the local business and government sectors, CBS researchers and postgraduate students, and CGSB alumni. We would anticipate approximately 50 attendees and would arrange coverage of the event through Curtin marketing publications, websites and local media.
- Received favourable interest from the business community contacted (e.g., Australian Institute of Company Directors and Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA)

- The additional time that we will now have leading up to the Forum will enable us to put more extensive time and resources into organizing and promoting the event.

Wider dissemination of the learning from students, academics and corporate participants through a Community of Practice (CoP).

- The planned MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum for April had to be postponed due to delayed commencement of actual action research with CSBP Ltd.
- The Champion of CSBP, Cameron Schuster took up a new position in Wesfarmers late in the project so was unable to continue participation in a CoP. However, his new work at Wesfarmers (the parent company of CSBP) may provide other possibilities in the future. Another one of the original CSBP participants has also moved to the Wesfarmers subsidiary, Coles, thus providing a linkage with that company.
- Planning the MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum scheduled for November 2008. Professor Richard Welford has been invited to CGSB to present at this forum.
- Findings from students' project with partnering company will be presented to CSBP Ltd. And with their permission, we hope to share their experiential action learning process and outcomes at the upcoming November MBA Leadership in Sustainability Forum.
- This particular forum will attract a wider CoP. It is likely to build the capacity of the audience and possibly enlist more participants to enroll for student projects.
- Experiential ongoing mapping exercise and constant dialogue with interested academics in attempting to embed EFS into MBA & MLM curricula has been a journey of discovery.
- A paper reflecting on CGSB findings from the MBA2 project was accepted (30 May) for publication in the refereed Journal of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Accountability, Vol. 14, Issue 2, pp. 20-34.
- A paper addressing the process of action learning in partnering with industry has been submitted to the 22nd Annual Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference to be held in Auckland in December 2008. The paper is entitled "Partnering for Sustainability: reflections on an industry-academia alliance" and notification of acceptance/rejection/revision is anticipated for late August.
- Hence, findings and ongoing ARIES research are transferable to the University and the wider community as evidenced by applying research and teaching nexus. Through the above mentioned activities the knowledge created from action learning in this project will be disseminated to the university (e.g., academia, teaching) and wider community.

## **Some dilemmas**

Fulfillment of the abovementioned action learning outcomes has not been achieved without unforeseen 'derailments' requiring continuous amendments to original plans as our journey advances towards incremental shift towards sustainability. Such is the practicality of an action research in the 'real world' that afforded the flexibility in this iterative process of the project.

Following several preliminary meetings and exchange of ideas by the mentor and lead researcher with a couple of top listed corporations in WA who were keen to participate in this student-centred action research, one of our potential partners pulled the plug in July 2007 when reality set in. Whilst this corporation saw great opportunities in partnering with CGSB MBA and DEWHA through ARIES, they realized that their staff resources could not manage the level of commitment required to work with students. Consequently, the original objectives (identified by this potential partner) for this project had to be amended. The Sustainability Director was however, still eager to accept our invitation to participate in the MBA Leadership seminar. Given hindsight, we are most grateful as it proved to be a blessing in disguise.

A major dilemma reared its ugly head when we were confronted with a situation where we were so successful in raising the energized interest of a great number of staff in exploring several potential sustainability projects during the October focus group at CSBP, but we were unable to provide the students to undertake their requests in 2007. Both teaching researchers were on sabbatical leaves at the time and did not have any classes from which to prepare students to go into the field despite lead researcher's constant soliciting for suitable students through canvassing colleagues. A widely circulated recruitment exercise through the offer of a Business Research Project unit (specially designed for ARIES project) did not attract the appropriate students capable of pursuing action research during trimester three last year.

In maintaining the momentum to continue building a trusting relationship with CSBP we commenced the project ourselves (without students co-researchers) with constant dialogue with the company following the October scoping session with the focus group. The themes that emanates from this and subsequent communications were already mentioned above.

We were naïve into thinking that we had a huge cohort of students from the EMS 660 summer school intensive class in January from which to select two large groups of students (about 5 in each group) to send into CSBP to stretch their critical thinking skills and apply their new knowledge learnt. Unfortunately, students preferred to undertake their major assignments with their own organizations out of convenience (predominantly attributable to their demanding work commitments) rather than taking the plunge into the unknown with an unfamiliar corporation arranged by their lecturer. This is not withstanding the enthusiastic student responses to Cameron's insightful presentation of CSBP's challenges and journey in sustainability. Only four students were able and brave enough to take up the challenge of pursuing such an intriguing opportunity with CSBP. Eventually the 'power of two' (in the words of the students)

prevailed as the other couple of students succumbed to their busy work schedules and had to reluctantly withdraw.

On reflection, given the level of dedicated commitments and resources demanded of this student-centred project in the field (for the number of staff involved from both CSBP and CGSB), we are thankful that we did not end up with the initial over zealous plan with large cohorts of student participation. Similarly, from the students' perspective as stated in their critical reflection: "*The exposure to work with a real client is definitely a challenging one and requires a lot of hard work and guidance. Without a good mentor... I will find this really really tough to get it done...*"

## **Conclusion**

It is beyond the scope of this report to describe in detail the development of the partnership with CSBP and its effect on organisational change towards sustainability over only a seven month period. However, it is worth noting from the key outcomes in the context of Partnering for Sustainability within a Western Australian business, that action research/learning does create opportunities for organisational/institutional and student and staff centred personal change and knowledge development consistent with sustainability.

The emphasis on criticality involving this iterative cycling process enabled us to critically reflect and to carry out reflexive change actions in EfS. This MBA3 project has been an illuminating experiential learning process that is profoundly rewarding - knowing that we, in our humble participation have contributed to the aims of the UN Decade of EfS Development, and the DEWHA and ARIES long term goal to establish a leading edge Australian MBA course *about* and *for* sustainability. This is not a conclusion but a journey towards EfS.

*"A journey of a thousand miles began with a single step"*

- Lao Tse

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