An Engaged Scholarship Endeavour
Involving Students in Systems Thinking for Sustainability at Auckland Airport

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This paper results from an engaged scholarship endeavour involving an academic, a practitioner and students. It describes salient interactions which sought to inform Auckland Airport’s sustainability planning, and which provided excellent learning opportunities. The company wanted to develop a comprehensive approach to sustainability following best practice. Staff worked under the mandate that the formal introduction of sustainability into the business needed to add value. Novel ideas were difficult to generate when the company was deemed to be doing well; external stakeholders were not so willing to engage; sustainability performance reporting did not find a ready audience; and awareness of the company’s sustainability initiatives was relatively low. The paper shows how theoretical ideals embracing broader systems thinking relate to on-the-ground practice.

Keywords: Business education and research, sustainability, learning via case studies

Considerable academic attention in management and organisation studies has focused on the theory-practice divide (e.g., Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001; Bartunek, 2005, 2007; van de Ven, 2007). There have been ongoing debates around “the apparent marginality of business school academics in the production of management knowledge ... and their consequent (in)ability to develop and conduct research with practitioners and communicate the results of this research to a practising audience” (Fincham & Clark, 2009, p. 510). Parallel debates concern the educational experiences of students in business schools being somewhat disconnected with the realities of business practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). There have been concomitant efforts to embrace both experiential and service learning opportunities, particularly in undergraduate education (Kenworthy & Fornaciari, 2010). In the context of business education for sustainability, Galea (2004, p. 9) notes “one of the main challenges facing educators is that of creating an environment where student learning moves beyond theory and becomes instinctive practice.”

In this paper, engaged scholarship is offered as a means of bridging the theory-practice divide that also links research activity to learning opportunities. In its original formulation (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), engaged scholarhip is offered as an approach to research. According to Van de Ven (2007, ix), “engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) to understand a complex social problem.” Sustainability qualifies as one such problem currently on many political, business and business
school agendas. It is argued that no single group has a monopoly on solutions - precisely because, fundamentally, sustainability is a broad systems concept (Stead & Stead, 1994; Starik & Rands, 1995).

The focus is on a tripartite engaged scholarship endeavour involving Auckland International Airport Limited. The paper describes salient interactions between three main parties – an academic, Auckland Airport’s sustainability advisor, and successive classes of postgraduate students – which sought to inform Auckland Airport’s sustainability planning efforts. The aim of the engagement from the academic’s point of view was to bring together an understanding of theory relating to sustainability with the realities of practice in an economically and socially critical business, albeit one which is inherently unsustainable in environmental terms. The paper discusses how engagement can be of benefit more broadly and to the focal company, academics and students through the provision of research and learning opportunities.

**THE CASE FOR ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP**

The ideal is that scholarly research draws from and informs business practice, allaying traditional concerns of academic irrelevance (Bartunek, 2005). There is seen to be complementarity in the knowledge held by practitioners and academics (Van de Ven, 2007). Bartunek (2007, p. 1328) suggests “managers’ and other practitioners’ knowledge may often precede academics’ knowledge”. What is required are collaborations between practitioners and academics, on issues that matter with outcomes important to both (Rynes & McNatt, 1999; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007).

Several problems emerge in achieving this ideal. Academic-practitioner knowledge production and transfer/translation are well-documented problems (Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007). In the case of academic-practitioner knowledge production, various suggestions involving collaborative modes of working are offered as potential solutions (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). Popular among them is action research wherein academics and practitioners collaborate to work on organisational issues and problems with scholarly outputs also a result. Such outputs often lack rigour as required for top journal publications, as pointed out by Bartunek (2007). She endorses Van de Ven’s (2007) observation that rigorous methodologies are not always seen by management practitioners as particularly relevant or helpful.
Academic-practitioner knowledge transfer problems are supposed to be able to be resolved through publications being designed for a practitioner audience (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). However, reward structures in academia do not generally hold such efforts in high esteem. Where academics do discuss the implications for practice in their published journal papers (in Bartunek’s *Academy of Management Journal* sample, 64% of the articles published in 2006 did so), increased managerial awareness of particular phenomena, and provision of employee training dominated the recommendations given. Bartunek’s conclusion was that much of the advice was “not easy for managers or other practitioners to apply” (2007, p. 1325), or did not offer rationales for the intended actions. Enticing managers to read or otherwise ingest the results of academic articles is another problem. Pfeffer and Fong (2002) note the contribution of business school research to management practice is modest – with most research and ideas coming instead from journalists, consulting firms and other companies.

Aware of such problems, Pfeffer (2007) articulates a vision of management research as: having more effect on the actual practice of management in organisations; being influential in the formulation of both public and private sector policy; and being connected to, engaged with and relevant for management professionals. Requisites would include “some degree of mutual influence over the research that gets done and the questions that get asked as well as over how the research gets disseminated” (Pfeffer, 2007, p. 1335). Engaged scholarship meets at least the first of these two requisites.

McKelvey (2006) highlights three nuanced differences between engaged scholarship and action research. First, engaged scholarship involves arbitrage (exploring differences between practitioner knowledge and academic knowledge and using them to drive exploration and create new knowledge. Second, engaged scholarship asks bigger questions, in particular questions that go beyond the problems of single organisations – like sustainability. Third, engaged research ideally uses method triangulation.

Engaged scholarship is supposed to exploit the different knowledge bases of its exponents so as to produce “knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone” (Van de Ven, 2007, ix). The first author of this paper is a management academic and critically-oriented scholar, and the second a sustainability advisor with training in environmental science
and considerable business experience. Both focus on sustainability but from different perspectives: the academic from a more idealist broader systems perspective through academic research and classroom teaching, and the sustainability advisor with a more realist incremental approach to effecting change within a company. Not often, however, are both perspectives present together – contributing at least in part to the theory-practice divide in this domain.

SUSTAINABILITY AS A COMPLEX ISSUE

Sustainability has become a popular term in policy and business discourse. An allied concept, sustainable development, attracted attention in the wake of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) report. The WCED definition of sustainable development drew attention to the desirability of more careful development that not only met the needs of present generations but also allowed for the needs of future generations to be met. In essence, sustainable development is a social change process through which sustainability, a state which has the ability to endure, might be reached (Connor & Dovers, 2004). Sustainability is a vision of an ideal future state. Elkington’s (1997) triple bottom line heuristic, comprising economy, society and environment, is commonly employed to focus attention on three pillars to which equal priority should be given in the attainment of sustainability. The vision is for economic prosperity, social equity and environmental integrity and futurity for all beings – but it is generally regarded by critical scholars as problematic in its achievement (Crane & Matten, 2007). Trade-offs are a common occurrence and not always well-understood (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse & Preuss, 2010).

In theoretical terms, sustainability can be described as a social construction – its meaning is contestable (Banerjee, 2003) and signifies quite different things to different people (Byrch et al, 2007). Two contrasting perspectives on sustainability in the management literature are described next.

A critical/radical perspective usually privileges an understanding of sustainability as a dynamic and embedded systems concept that has at its heart ecological sustainability and the longevity of biophysical systems which support human life (Starik & Rands, 1995). Such a view transcends entity and national boundaries to embrace notions of equity, equality and futurity (Welford, 1995) in relation, but not
limited to economic, social and environmental conditions. As a broad systems concept, sustainability requires engagement by a variety of stakeholders. A growing body of theory on sustainability suggests that what organisations require to become sustainable is fundamentally different from the status quo (see, for example, Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008; Shrivastava & Hart, 1995; Welford, 1997 & 2000). Theorists taking a broad systems perspective might well be sceptical about the use of the term corporate sustainability (e.g. Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; see also Dentchev, 2009) which implies an interest in sustaining business, and corporate longevity. For critical/radical theorists, the realisation of sustainability at entity/firm level, even when embracing open systems thinking, is seen as extremely problematic.

The second and more dominant perspective is on the business case for sustainability wherein the easiest arguments for environmental and social initiatives can be made where they are also good for business (through cost savings, revenue increases or enhanced reputation) (Porter & van der Linde 1995). However, in a meta-analysis of 167 studies seeking to establish whether there is a relationship between firm level social and environmental responsibility initiatives and economic performance, only a weak positive relationship was found overall (Margolis, Effenbein & Walsh, 2007).

When academics come to teach sustainability they are often faced with a tension between systems theory that might underpin a paradigm shift inciting radical changes in the wider interests of society and the environment (Stead & Stead, 1994), and a focus on a more practical incremental, tools-based approach towards more responsible social and environmental impact management within the firm. The former promotes an ideal vision of sustainability and the latter counts more for sustaining business. The former is more theoretical and the latter more reflective of on-the-ground realities, or what Porter and Cordoba (2009) refer to as a more functionalist orientation. It has been argued that students should be aware of both approaches – radical/critical and incremental – and their limitations (Kearins & Springett, 2003).

Galea (2007) points to sustainability in the business context – and by implication business education for sustainability – needing interdisciplinary thinking, engagement with different stakeholders and non-traditional operating approaches. The project of which this paper is a part seeks to make connections between engagement with the focal company, research and teaching. It is accepted that bringing a
theoretical systems approach to sustainability to firm level considerations is fraught with practical
challenges – but it is postulated that such an engagement does represent a valid attempt to bridge the
theory-practice divide and provides valuable learning opportunities for the parties involved. It is further
argued that articulating a method for an engaged scholarship endeavour provides the possibility for others
to emulate and extend learning in their own localities.

A METHOD FOR ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

The engaged scholarship endeavour began as follows. The academic agreed to a meeting initiated via
email from the Auckland Airport sustainability advisor in 2008. At that meeting the sustainability advisor
raised the possibility of the academic participating as a member of Auckland Airport’s soon-to-be formed
sustainability forum, which was to include key staff from across the airport’s operations in the company’s
sustainability planning process. The sustainability advisor, in turn, committed to an ongoing relationship
with the academic with a view to eventually contributing to a case study on Auckland Airport. That case
study has not been written yet; however it is claimed more immediately useful opportunities for the
academic’s own students have presented themselves over the twenty-one month engagement period.

The principle of mutual benefit underpinned the initial arrangements. The academic was a New
Zealand management professor with research and teaching interests in business and social change towards
sustainability, and the practitioner the sustainability advisor at New Zealand’s largest airport. The
academic was mentioned in the company’s internal newsletter as an independent expert participating in its
sustainability planning processes. Research possibilities were afforded through the engagement not being
constructed as a consulting relationship with attendant fees and confidentiality agreements. At the outset,
permission was requested for access to multiple data sources for research purposes including planning
documentation, the writing of field-notes during meetings and interviews with key staff. Participation in
monthly and later quarterly sustainability forum meetings at Auckland Airport, and access to
organisational documents and personnel provided rich data.
The academic had read both the original Van de Ven and Johnson’s (2006) article and Van de Ven’s (2007) book on engaged scholarship and met once with Van de Ven to discuss a different project which did not eventuate. She saw her involvement with the airport company as an opportunity to adopt an engaged scholarship approach. The academic and the sustainability advisor discussed how a broad systems view might inform the business situation wherein the sustainability advisor was faced with needing to plan for sustainability at an entity level. As time went on, it became clear that although the academic and practitioner shared the same broad aspirations about a broad systems approach to sustainability, each was paid by a different master and had different degrees of freedom. The academic could bring in a systems view while the practitioner was faced with needing to deliver for the company. The main commitment from the academic was to share wider research findings and offer a critical questioning approach. The latter did not always mean problems raised were able to be readily solved. As time went on, building on an initially successful exercise involving students, the approach was made to successive classes of students to try and address other problem areas that appeared significant in the academic’s field-notes of meetings. This approach was endorsed as potentially useful for the company and involved the sustainability advisor in successive class visits. Three such exercises with postgraduate students feature in the section below.

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP AND AUCKLAND AIRPORT’S SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING

The motivations for Auckland Airport’s sustainability efforts were summed up in retrospect by the second author as follows:

With media and investor focus on sustainability and climate change intensifying in 2006-7, it was clear to Auckland Airport’s leadership team that as managers of the main international gateway to ‘100% Pure New Zealand’, it was time to act.

An effort was made to report on sustainability initiatives in the 2007 annual report. Stakeholder interests and engagement modes were identified. The sustainability advisor was subsequently employed to produce and implement a company policy and plan. He considered:
The true nature of sustainability - that is socio-cultural, economic and environmental performance - was not currently being captured in airport reporting. It presented an opportunity for Auckland Airport to show some leadership in this area for the airport and tourism sector. The airport company had in place an environmental management system based on achieving compliance as opposed to being particularly pro-active. It did not have clear objectives and targets around environmental performance beyond “licence to operate” requirements around noise. Auckland Airport had signed the Airports’ Council International declaration on climate change. It was decided to publicly disclose Auckland Airport’s emissions profile through the international Carbon Disclosure Project and work towards reducing the airport company’s carbon footprint. Moving to embrace sustainability thus presented both challenge and opportunity. Within the company it was mandated that the formal introduction of sustainability into the company “needed to add value to the business and to avoid duplicating any existing practice that fell within its domain”. Auckland Airport’s leadership team approved the development of a sustainability forum with involvement from key staff across the company. “Input from an independent sustainability expert was thought to be a way of adding value to the process” and an approach was made to the academic who joined the forum in September 2008. She was encouraged by the sustainability advisor’s stated desire to achieve best practice wherever feasible:

Doing things right from the beginning would enable effective reporting, management and transparency in the near term as well as facilitating audit and assurance should this be required in the future.

By December, with considerable behind-the-scenes work from the sustainability advisor, the sustainability forum had agreed on a draft action plan that covered 14 key areas of the business and 41 specific targets over a 5-year timeframe. The plan included hard and soft targets, some of an ongoing nature and others with specific dates for achievement. When a comparison was later done against the emerging Global Reporting Initiative (2009) indicator areas for the airport sector, excellent coverage was found. In response to the academic’s statements about airports being associated with unsustainability through airlines’ use of non-renewable fossil fuel, a forum member commented: “We are an airport – someone has to provide this infrastructure, and we want to do it as best we can”. Moving beyond benchmarking against arguably currently unsustainable airport activity, the question was raised as to what
other new sustainability initiatives the airport company might consider going forward – and it provided the genesis for the first class exercise as described in Figure 1 [insert Figure 1 here].

The sustainability advisor was aware of the desirability of input from airport stakeholders and sought feedback on the draft sustainability plan to share with sustainability forum members and the company leadership team. The academic spoke of research both promoting wide stakeholder engagement in planning for sustainability and noting problems in its actual achievement. In the event, even with repeated requests and a personal approach, little external feedback on the draft plan was obtained. This situation prompted the second class exercise as described in Figure 2 [insert Figure 2 here].

Later in the airport company’s sustainability planning processes, which still mostly privileged a business case, the focus shifted to ensuring internal commitment for effective implementation. A plan summary indicating the areas, targets and roles with responsibilities was shared with the leadership team and a reporting structure agreed. Reporting occurred both via the Intranet and Internet, as well as in an annual sustainability plan. It was emphasised by forum members that internal reports needed to be concise and yet incisive to capture the attention of busy executives. “They needed to be readily understood and focus on what had been achieved and where effort was still required.” The sustainability forum considered several possible forms of such reporting, and ultimately a colour-coded reporting dashboard was put in place to give a quarterly snapshot across all areas to the leadership team. External reporting was reviewed post hoc by the sustainability forum, which gave rise to the academic’s ad hoc implementation of a class exercise as per Figure 3 [insert Figure 3 here].

In a progress review in June 2010, many of the airport company’s targets were noted as being met. The academic raised the question as to whether reporting on one-off targets might be dropped and new objectives and targets identified. Sustainability forum members were keen to promote external awareness of the airport company’s stand on sustainability. Reminding them that “from a broad systems perspective an airport would hardly be considered sustainable so long as in the public’s eye it was associated with the smell of aviation gas and jet streams in the sky,” the academic was treated again to the refrain: “Yes we
know, but it’s about being the best airport we can be” with the codicil “and connecting outwards to influence others in the system is important in that bid too”.

DISCUSSION

Ideas on best practice from a variety of sources informed the sustainability planning process implemented at Auckland Airport. There were four identifiable work phases. First, it was important to develop locally-meaningful understandings of best-practice sustainability in the airport context. Second, the introduction of sustainability into the business needed to add value and avoid duplication of existing practice that fell within the sustainability domain. Third, there was an assessment of airport stakeholders, their expectations and engagement. Fourth, parameters and methodologies were established for reporting performance both internally and externally. Proceeding through these phases was nonetheless problematic at times.

Developing locally meaningful understandings of best practice can require considerable time and effort to get management and staff on board. In this case, best practice was very difficult to determine as the approaches to sustainability, and what might be called “sustainable business practice” within the airport and aviation sector varied widely. Taking a broader systems perspective seemed to complicate discussions at first as it tended to introduce unlimited possibilities for action which sustainability forum members often saw as outside the scope of airport operations.

Introducing sustainability into the company did involve some capitulation to business case thinking, and some adaptation of the ideal to acceptable practice at Auckland Airport, rather than the broad-based visioning that systems theory might suggest as desirable. The idea of sustainability needing to add value aligns with win-win paradigm as discussed earlier and severely constrains the scope of what might be considered. The sustainability plan did incorporate aspects such as surface access to and from the airport and efforts to engage airport tenants in sustainability initiatives. It was accepted by sustainability forum members that some initiatives added value in their own right, beyond just the business case.

Effectively engaging airport stakeholders was difficult. Attempts at engagement around sustainability planning attracted a low response. Stakeholder engagement on an organisation’s
sustainability plans is probably not a high priority (Collins, Kearins & Roper, 2005), even for key airport stakeholders like airlines with their own sustainability plans. There is, however, an opportunity for the airport company to influence on a local scale through the burgeoning airport community and on a national scale through its ties with the tourism and trade sectors. Whether the airport company is ready to take a leadership role in its own sector has yet to be determined.

Setting the parameters for measuring performance is important to allow for meaningful comparisons. Building the systems for collecting data closely reflected the initial policy statement and key areas of business. It included the sustainability forum in refining performance indicators and targets. Deciding on a compelling reporting focus for relatively complex data was yet another problem. Beyond its educative value, internal reporting has an important disciplinary function in focusing attention on both achievements and priority areas for further achievements (Adams, 2002). Leadership team engagement remains a crucial element. Internal reporting strengthens the basis of external reporting – but external reporting focuses attention more on what is important for external stakeholders and ideally is informed more by a broader systems view beyond the business case. Extending sustainability efforts beyond the company to suppliers and airport tenants is a key part of Auckland Airport’s sustainability planning. Sustained efforts are needed to focus attention towards actual implementation (Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2007) and to extending the focus outward, as well as going beyond the business case.

CONCLUSIONS
Auckland Airport wanted to introduce a best-practice sustainability planning process. Engaged scholarship informed this process; it offered broader systems understandings and ideas for enhanced practice. Whether it contributed to real change is more difficult to ascertain. Positive outcomes cannot always be guaranteed and neither is it reasonable to expect that all aspects of engagement would necessarily result in immediate and positive change. In the words of the sustainability advisor: “engaged scholarship has already added value to the process for the airport and has the potential to add even more value as the company evaluates its progress and sets new targets and reports on them over time. Such an
approach is particularly useful in the airport case as the ability to benchmark and assess performance within its sector has proven difficult.” In somewhat different language, with different goals, the academic frames the engagement as opening up learning opportunities about the application of sustainability as a broad systems concept, and raising new possibilities for action beyond the business case. It has given both the academic and her students a real-world context in which to test ideals, and to learn about how to encourage action towards sustainability. Both authors are keen to see the engagement continue.

At various points in the sustainability planning process, challenges were identified. It became clear that novel ideas were somewhat difficult to generate when the company was already deemed to be doing well and the mandate was for “value-add”. External stakeholders were not as willing to engage as had been hoped. Sustainability performance reporting to busy executives needed to be concise and yet incisive. Moreover, external awareness of Auckland Airport’s initiatives towards sustainability was considered relatively low. Many of these challenges - inherent in the business case for sustainability but rarely documented - provided excellent opportunities for student engagement. Having students actively consider systems and incremental approaches, application and limitations in a real-world context is considered an important part of education for sustainability. Broad systems thinking underpins the more radical change many commentators have said is necessary for sustainability to be achieved.

Finally, it is claimed the engaged scholarship endeavour provided a useful test as to how theoretical ideals embracing broader systems thinking relate to on-the-ground practice. Successful engaged scholarship requires the willingness of academics and practitioners to engage on the basis of mutual benefit and respect for their different roles and responsibilities. They can benefit from opportunism in exploring ideas as they arise. In the context of business and sustainability, courage is needed to work for enhanced practice for sustainability beyond what is immediately able to be supported through the business case. Openness on the part of the company to academic problematisation, as with the organisational learning it contributes to, is seen as a good start, but it is acknowledged that it does not always lead to fundamental change. The theory practice divide may have been bridged in theory; but the bridge remains to be crossed.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: Good Idea Pitch

In March 2009, the sustainability advisor made a presentation on Auckland Airport to a postgraduate class of business students. Prior to his presentation, the students were directed to Auckland Airport’s website and given access to working documents including the soon-to-be-finalised sustainability plan. They were encouraged to look at what other airports were doing or considering doing in relation to sustainability, and to freely quiz the sustainability advisor as to what might be feasible at Auckland Airport. The first class assignment worth just 10% of their final grade was a 2-page good idea pitch for sustainability at Auckland Airport. The students had had just two previous 3-hour classes on sustainability as a systems concept that was of increasing interest at an organisational level, and an introduction to the business case for sustainability.

A week after the presentation, the students submitted assignments containing ideas ranging from paperless check-in, carbon-offset kiosks, free eco-lounges for passengers paying carbon offsets on their flights, and permeable surfaces for aircraft parking. Some ideas involved technology transfer, others were original. Some took a broad systems view moving beyond areas for which the airport was responsible such as improved public transport links. Following preliminary grades being awarded by the lecturer, The sustainability advisor reviewed the students’ work and added comments. In one instance, a student grade was amended upward, based on his assessment of the eminent feasibility of the suggestion made, and its potential for taking Auckland Airport forward on a sustainable basis. He summarised the students’ ideas and presented them to the company’s leadership team. Student feedback was extremely positive. Students reported feeling challenged yet highly-motivated to do well because of the direct link with a real company.

Figure 2: Engagement by Proxy Stakeholders

In September 2009, the sustainability advisor joined a different postgraduate class for a stakeholder negotiation exercise¹, where students took on the roles of various airport stakeholders, presenting and agreeing on a list of five priority areas for stakeholder engagement. The earlier-assigned stakeholder roles included airport company shareholder representatives, airline and airfreight industry customers, tenants and workers in the airport precinct, local authority planners and regulators, travelling public and residents of nearby suburbs. Three students were assigned to each stakeholder group, and one to a facilitator role.

In preparation for the in-class stakeholder negotiation exercise, students were directed to the Auckland Airport website to review material including annual reports, the airport growth strategy and the company’s sustainability policy and action plan. Students were also asked to look for specific information regarding their assigned stakeholder group on the Auckland Airport website and from other relevant sources. Allowances were made for the unevenness of the available information. Student ‘research’ was guided by the following questions:

What is your stakeholder group’s understanding or vision of sustainability?
What expectations would your stakeholder group likely have of Auckland Airport in

¹ For a full write-up of a similar exercise and a copy of the associated generic reflection matrix, see Collins & Kearins (2007).
What challenges do you see for the airport company in meeting your expectations? What concessions/tradeoffs are you prepared to accept in relation to Auckland Airport’s attempts to engage with sustainability?

The 3-hour class proceeded with an initial half-hour for the preparation of stakeholder group presentations. Each group then made a 5-minute presentation outlining its initial negotiating position. These were introduced by the facilitator who afterwards allowed time for private discussions between the groups to occur in light of the presentations. The whole class negotiation absorbed the remaining 1.5 hours of class time, with commentary from the sustainability advisor where additional information was considered useful, and a final summary from him at the end. He provided the company a summary of student ‘stakeholder representative’ demands on Auckland Airport in respect of sustainability.

After class, in their own time, students completed a written evaluation of the process and outcomes of the negotiation exercise, and the overall value of such negotiations. A matrix was provided to assist students’ reflections on their own role in assisting either the achievement or lack of achievement of sustainability through the negotiation exercise. Assessment (worth 15% of the total course grade) was based on evidence of individual preparation, participation in the actual negotiation exercise and considered reflection.

Student feedback on this exercise was again very positive. Students reported learning about what sustainability might mean from stakeholder perspectives often vastly different from their own, about what might be feasible in an airport context given different and sometime competing stakeholder views, as well as various process skills in relation to negotiation. A wider systems perspective underpinned the exercise; however the summary of proxy stakeholder demands revealed the weakening effects of negotiated compromise in some instances.

In March 2010, as preparation for and as quid pro quo for an otherwise unlinked class presentation by the sustainability advisor to a subsequent class, students were asked to provide a 1-2 page evaluation of Auckland Airport’s sustainability-related web reporting. They were told the evaluations would be given to the sustainability advisor and could lead to changes in aspects of company reporting.

This exercise was much less successful in terms of student learning with only around half of the class opting to participate and the quality of their written evaluations extremely variable. Some of the oral feedback given, however, was deemed useful by the sustainability advisor who wanted to make a case for changes to the company’s web-based reporting to enhance stakeholder interest.