Sustainability Education and Professional Development Programs for Managers in Australian Universities

Ms Lorne Butt
Office of Planning and Strategic Management, Australian Catholic University Ltd,
North Sydney, Australia
lorne.butt@acu.edu.au

Professor Elizabeth More
Institute for Sustainable Leadership, Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia
elizabeth.more@mgsm.edu.au

Professor Gayle C. Avery
Institute for Sustainable Leadership, Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia
gayle.avery@mgsm.edu.au
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ABSTRACT
One of the key responsibilities of universities is that of setting the sustainability example for all organisations. However, universities have generally been comparatively unsuccessful in implementing sustainability programs, with poor management practices often cited as a fundamental cause. One of the underlying problems may be the failure of universities to comprehensively incorporate sustainability education into their professional development programs for both administrative and academic managers.

This paper examines the incorporation of sustainability education into professional development programs for managers in a number of universities in Sydney, Australia and, using brief examples, explores the question of whether embedding sustainability education into professional development programs for managers may enhance implementation of sustainability initiatives.

Keywords: sustainability, professional development / training
MOBILISING THE LEVIATHAN – UNIVERSITY SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMS

Sustainability is a highly topical issue for universities, and the new challenge for both academic and administrative managers is that of mobilising universities to adopt more sustainable practices across all areas of their core business. However, universities have been engaged in efforts to become more sustainable for around 20 years, with only variable progress made to date (for example, Cordero, Todd and Abellara 2008). Many factors have been cited as responsible for the failure of universities to become more sustainable organisations, including the failure of management at all levels to commit to sustainability initiatives, and problems with funding, staffing and planning of such initiatives. Even when attempts are made to address these particular problems, universities remain generally unsuccessful or patchy in terms of lasting change (for example, Carpenter and Meehan 2002; Starik, Schaeffer, Berman and Hazelwood 2002; Velazquez, Munguia and Sanchez 2005; Bekessy, Samson and Clarkson 2007; Christensen, Thrane, Herreborg Jørgenson and Lehmann 2008; McIntosh, Gaalswyk, Keniry and Eagan 2008).

However, this situation may not necessarily be the direct result of poor management practices. A more fundamental problem may be that of managers attempting to implement sustainability initiatives, without any real knowledge or understanding of what it is they are aiming to achieve. This, in turn, may be exacerbated by the lack of sustainability education in professional development programs designed for managerial employees. It could be argued that sustainability is, at the very least, as important as other key (and generally mandatory) development areas for managers in the university setting, including occupational health and safety, trade practices, anti-discrimination, copyright, and workplace bullying and harassment – yet sustainability education is not generally provided for in induction/orientation or professional development programs for new and established managers.

This state of affairs is extraordinary given that universities as institutions of learning, research, engagement, outreach and advocacy have a number of key responsibilities in relation to the theory and practice of sustainability. One of the most important of these is that of preparing future business and community leaders for the ‘sustainability aware’ marketplace. Another key responsibility, no less
important than the first, is setting the sustainability example for all organisations. These two responsibilities are foundations of key initiatives relating directly to the global higher education sector, including the *Talloires Declaration*¹ (the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future) (signed in 1990), and (particularly pertinent), the *Principles for Responsible Management Education* (the United Nations Global Compact [UNGC]) (signed in 2007).

This paper is one component of a larger research project investigating the key factors affecting the management of sustainability programs in universities in the Sydney basin and regions, and aims to explore an issue that has not yet been widely considered. That is, universities also have a responsibility to ensure that the managers responsible for the implementation of sustainability initiatives are ‘sustainability aware’ in order to enhance the likelihood of successful program implementation. This paper examines the current practices of a number of universities in the Sydney basin and regions, and discusses the sustainability education initiatives developed by several international universities that Australian universities might consider in developing their own professional development programs.

**SUSTAINABILITY - REORIENTING THE ORGANISATION**

The effects of poor environmental management, and the consequences for economic and social systems, have long been known (for example, Hughes 1975; Diamond 2005). The link between environmental, economic and social wellbeing has become known as ‘sustainability’ – whether at the community, organisational/corporate or global level (Brundtland 1987; Mirvis 1994; Boyle 1999;

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¹ The *Talloires Declaration*, so-called because it was signed in 1990 in Talloires, France, is a 10-point action plan created by the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future. The Declaration states that ‘universities have a major role in... education, research, policy formation and information exchange necessary’, in relation to sustainability. As of February 2009, the Declaration has been signed by more than 350 university presidents and chancellors at institutions in over 40 countries. The 10 action points are:

1. Increase awareness of environmentally sustainable development;
2. Create an institutional culture of sustainability;
3. Educate for environmentally responsible citizenship;
4. Foster environmental literacy for all;
5. Practice institutional ecology;
6. Involve all stakeholders;
7. Collaborate for interdisciplinary approaches;
8. Enhance capacity of primary and secondary schools;
9. Broaden service and outreach nationally and internationally;
10. Maintain the movement.
Dawe and Ryan 2003; Flannery 2005; Roberts 2005; Staib 2005; Gore 2007; Hamilton 2007; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2007a; IPCC 2007b; Stern 2007; UNGC 2007). There is mounting evidence supporting the view that organisations that can demonstrate achievement of sustainability objectives may be more likely to realise healthier business returns, cleaner and more efficient operations, reduced costs, higher repeat/new business, increased levels of customer loyalty, improved community relationships, and lower employee turnover (Griffiths, Benn and Dunphy 2005; Polonsky 2005; Benn, Dunphy and Griffiths 2006; Pagell, Krumwiede and Sheu 2007).

The extent to which these practices are evident in organisations varies widely by industry sector, culturally and geographically. For example, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland are widely regarded as highly environmentally aware communities and cultures, while Australia and the United States are not (for example, Avery 2005; Cummins 2008). In terms of the global higher education sector in particular, the United Kingdom is regarded as one of the most highly environmentally aware and proactive geographical areas (Lipscombe, Burek, Potter, Ribchester and Degg 2008), while the United States is regarded as one of the least proactive (Thomas 2004; Thompson and Green 2005).

However, reorienting an organisation toward a more sustainable basis of operation is a challenging task with significant change management implications for planning, business operations, and employees. Managers accountable for such projects need to know what they are doing. Sustainability is not a ‘blanket option’ – it must be carefully honed to the specific circumstances of individual organisations operating within distinct industries (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers and Steger 2005). The situation is not improved by the fact that much of the public discussion about sustainability is a policy maker’s debate, with managers often left confused and uncertain about what it is they should be doing (Hopkins 2009).

**SUSTAINABILITY: A KEY ISSUE……EXCEPT IN UNIVERSITIES?**

Sustainability has purportedly been a concern of the global higher education sector for the past 20 years, as illustrated by the *Talloires Declaration*. However, efforts to embed sustainability into the
global tertiary education sector have continued for many years with little, or at best variable success (Thompson and Green 2005), and are increasingly being dismissed as ‘greenwash’ (Wright 2002; Bekessy et al. 2007). This state of affairs appears to have arisen largely because, unlikely entities in other sectors, universities have not been successful in embedding environmental sustainability across their core business (primarily learning, teaching and research, but also outreach, community engagement, advocacy and operations) on a daily basis. There are environmental sustainability programs of varying lifespan, scope and level of progress in operation within the sector; however, no Australian university is yet recognised as being successful in fully ‘mainstreaming’ its program across and within the institution (Carpenter and Meehan 2002; Holdsworth, Wyborn, Bekessy and Thomas 2008). In contrast, Avery (2005) notes that companies such as Porsche and the BMW Group have been engaged in sustainable operations since 1989, and have made significant achievements in this regard (a BMW 3-series car is now 100% recyclable). Similarly, Alcoa has invested extensively in sustainability initiatives and partnerships with business, community and education providers, with the result that in 2009, it was chosen as one of the top 10 ethical companies across all industries and companies; and one of the most sustainable corporations in the world in the Global 100 ranking of the top role models in sustainable business practice (Cransberg 2009).

This lack of progress by universities in managing sustainability is now attracting mounting criticism from other sectors including business, community and not-for-profit/non-government organisations, the public sector, and professional and industry associations (for example, McIntosh et al. 2008). Thomas (2004), Thompson and Green (2005), and the UNGC (2007) note that universities are training the future designers, planners, scientists, politicians and citizens who will be needed to envision, endorse and implement sustainable practices – yet sustainability is not embedded in curricula. Thompson and Green (2005) and Moore et al. (2005) observe that universities are highly resource-intensive organisations – yet sustainability is not embedded in operations or professional development programs. Mainstream practices in universities in Australia, Latin America and the United States in particular, as they currently stand, are ‘far from adequate’, given on-paper commitments by universities and their role in society in ‘presuming to shape minds, perceptions and values’ (Thomas
Fisher (2003) provides the most telling comment of all: ‘universities cannot teach about environmental values if they are not going to be authentic in embracing them’. This is also a fundamental premise behind the UNGC’s (2007) development of the Principles for Responsible Management Education in particular.

Why universities lag so far behind other sectors remains unclear, in the sense that external issues, and how these might impact on/interact with internal issues, have not been considered in previous research. However, research to date has broadly indicated that elements of the entire internal organisational landscape of universities are adversely impacting upon environmental sustainability programs, including leadership/management models that are traditional/hierarchical and inflexible in nature; how environmental sustainability as a concept/problem and/or project is defined, staffed and funded; the rigidity and inflexibility of organisational structures and cultures; and curriculum, including policy governing development and approval, and strategies deployed by academic staff in particular to resist change) (for example, Hunt and Auster 1990; Carpenter and Mechan 2002; Fisher 2003; Thomas 2004; Sammalisto and Arvidsson 2005; Thompson and Green 2005; Sherren 2006; Bekessy et al. 2007; Blackmore and Sachs 2007; Scott, Coates and Anderson 2008). It may be that adherence to such practices and traditions is also preventing the incorporation of sustainability education into professional development programs.

However, universities are not immune from the pressures of market competition, and must also engineer a position for themselves whereby they attract and retain stakeholder loyalties. This includes students (consumers), alumni, employees, communities, industry, government, professional/accrediting associations and others. The benefits for universities of being sustainable extend beyond gaining stronger competitive advantage in the marketplace. By engaging in sustainability initiatives themselves, universities are able to contribute directly to society through being models of sustainable practice; deploying teaching and learning practices that contribute ‘sustainability aware’ graduates to society and the workforce; expanding the sustainability frontier in
the course of undertaking research activity and engaging in partnerships with commerce and government; and via supporting and encouraging sustainability initiatives in the community through engagement, outreach and advocacy programs.

For the university manager – whether administrative or academic – this type of situation may seem impossible to navigate. Issues that may have initially appeared to have an environmental point of origin rapidly develop humanistic and economic components that hugely complicate the work of the manager.

A REVIEW OF SEVEN UNIVERSITIES’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is ample evidence to suggest that many sustainability programs within the global higher education sector are never achieved and remain empty ‘motherhood’ statements (Carpenter and Meehan 2002; Starik et al. 2002; Griffiths et al. 2005; Sammalisto and Arvidsson 2005; Velazquez et al. 2005; Sherren 2006; Beringer, Wright and Malone 2008; McIntosh et al. 2008). This lack of success may, at least in part, be due to the fact that sustainability education generally appears to be absent from professional development programs for university managers. A survey of the human resources/professional development and sustainability websites and programs of seven Australian universities, situated in the Sydney metropolitan basin and immediate surrounding regional areas, was conducted in June 2009 to examine the nature of sustainability education in professional development programs for managers in terms of what is promulgated in the public domain in relation to the promotion of ‘green credentials’. Document sources included annual reports, media releases, regulatory reports, planning documents, manuals, policies, guidelines, procedures and meetings of minutes. The final dataset comprised 169 documents, and ‘dumped’ copies of each university’s environmental sustainability website as at 24-26 June 2009 – a total of 176 data items.

Table 1 indicates that the inclusion of sustainability education in professional development for university managers in the selected universities appears to be highly variable, ranging from the first
attempts to formally mandate sustainability education for managers (Macquarie University), to apparently no attempt currently being made in this regard (the universities of Newcastle, New South Wales, and Technology, Sydney). The status of the professional development programs at the universities of Western Sydney and Wollongong could not be assessed as these universities do not currently provide access to these programs in the public domain. This review indicates that currently, sustainability education for university managers does not generally appear to be regarded as a priority by those universities where information could be accessed. In relation to the popular practice of promoting in public the ‘rhetoric’ of one’s ‘green credentials’ (in this specific instance as they relate to potential managerial employees interested in employment in the sustainable university), this situation is currently one that would appear to require significant improvement.

MODELS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is absolutely vital that managers are properly equipped with the knowledge, understanding and tools – that they are ‘sustainability aware’ – in order to be able to manage or contribute to such complicated projects as sustainability programs. However, despite employing academic experts and consultants in strategic planning, the latest professional development training, and the latest theories on organisational behaviour, culture and ‘people’, universities generally remain in the grip of management and organisational theories based on assumptions that are rigid, highly hierarchically structured and inflexible. The Australian higher education context provides a particularly good example of these poor practices (for example, Coaldrake and Stedman 1998; Blackmore and Sachs 2007; Scott et al. 2008).

There are exceptions, however. Sammalisto and Brorson (2008) note the example of the University of Gävle in Sweden, which undertakes change management with regard to its sustainability program through direct training of all employees and students, including its executives, line managers, academic and non-academic employees, and new employees. No employee is left at a ‘knowledge disadvantage’ in relation to sustainability, and the university’s commitment to its program is clear to all employees through the deployment of an approach that assists employees and students in gaining
the skills and knowledge they require to participate actively in the sustainability program (Sammalisto and Brorson 2008). Initial steps began in 1995 and centred on implementation of ISO 14001, the Environmental Management System standard of the International Standards Organisation. All staff and students are provided with a copy of the University’s Environmental Management Policy; training programs cover environmental/sustainability issues, the University’s Environmental Management System, environmental auditing, environment and the law, curricula and environmental issues; there is continuous review of all courses for their coverage of sustainability and environmental issues; and various strategies are deployed as part of training and communication programs, including consultation opportunities, group discussion, interactive games, theme days, panel debates, magazines, booklets, meetings, exhibitions and competitions (Sammalisto and Brorson 2008).

Another example is that of Göteborg University, also in Sweden, which has initiated a different leadership approach in relation to its sustainability program, by ‘activating’ people in departments who view sustainability as a natural step forward – these individuals directly initiate sustainability activities and simultaneously work to influence others to increase the rate of uptake and the reach of the sustainability program (Wright 2002). Göteborg University deployed its sustainability implementation plan in 1994, which mandates the consideration of environmental ramifications in all decision-making.

Wright (2002) also cites the University of Waterloo in Canada, which uses a consortium approach to leadership through the recruitment of faculty representatives to promote and embed its sustainability program. The representatives work both locally within faculties and also through the University’s WATGreen Committee, which is tasked with deploying an interventionist approach to sustainability in the University through awareness-raising and project management, in line with specified environmentally-appropriate and financially-sound policy and practice (Wright 2002).

All three universities experienced challenges in adopting these approaches; however, the benefits in terms of staff participation, motivation and positive attitude with regard to implementation of sustainability programs are substantial (Wright 2002; Sammalisto and Brorson 2008).
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In order to learn from such international examples and assist Australian universities to improve their sustainability practices, this paper forms part of a wider research study that is designed to investigate the key internal and external factors which may be affecting the management of environmental sustainability programs in universities in the Sydney metropolitan basin and outer regional areas. This study also aims to examine whether the successful management of environmental sustainability programs challenges established, traditional theories of change management and leadership.

The major section of the larger research will commence in late 2009. The first phase of the research involves building a matrix-based profile of each university’s environmental sustainability program using material available in the public domain to 1) examine the institutions’ public ‘rhetoric’ with regard to environmental sustainability, and 2) identify gaps that could be used as focus points in the next phase. Interviews and focus groups will then be conducted with key stakeholder groups, such as administrative and academic employees, students and senior/executive management, from universities in the Sydney metropolitan basin and surrounding regions in order to elicit the ‘reality’ of their experiences in relation to the development and implementation of the sustainability program at their university. Content analysis will then be undertaken on the transcripts of these interviews and focus groups to examine various impacts (external and internal) on the universities’ sustainability programs.

Part of this research will involve the examination of whether the failure to incorporate sustainability education into professional development programs for both academic and administrative managers has a negative impact on successful implementation of sustainability programs.

CONCLUSION

Much research has been undertaken as to the impediments to the successful implementation of sustainability programs in the higher education sector. Some sections of the global higher education industry are more successful than others, although when viewed in comparison with the private sector in particular, universities are many years behind accepted sustainability thinking and practice.
Universities are now confronting an environment where their credibility in relation to sustainable practice is being challenged by organisations in other sectors.

Poor management practices have frequently been identified as impediments to the ‘mainstreaming’ of sustainability in universities. However, little consideration has been given to incorporating sustainability education in the actual models of human resource management and professional development for managerial employees in the general university setting. This paper has examined an approach that universities could consider – that of incorporating sustainability education into professional development programs for the entire university community, and particularly managerial employees. This would enable universities to examine their professional development practices with a view to how these could be improved in order to enhance sustainable practices and programs, thereby assisting managers in the higher education setting to actively ‘manage for the future’. This is preferable to making continual short-term adjustments to faulty sustainability programs designed to fit with inflexible practices that do not provide space for the flexibility, responsibility and creativity required to enable sustainability programs to succeed.
REFERENCES


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## Table 1: Review (June 2009) of Coastal Universities in New South Wales, Australia – Comparing Sustainability Education in Professional Development Programs for Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Sustainability Education Elements of Professional Development Programs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>The Sustainability@MQ Human Resources Action Group is tasked with achieving the inclusion of sustainability into induction programs for all new employees (online training modules); in executive/leadership programs for current staff; and into workplace relations training on an annual basis. Sustainability is now included in the First Time Manager’s Course. The University mandates the incorporation of education for sustainability into new staff development courses. Many training courses have now been reviewed to include sustainability learning, including orientation and induction programs, and various workshops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Newcastle</td>
<td>No evidence publicly available of sustainability education in professional development for managers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Sustainability Education Elements of Professional Development Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
<td>No evidence of sustainability education in professional development for managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>Sustainability education not included in the Executive and Senior Leaders Program, the Developing Managers Program, the New Managers Program or the Team Leaders Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information sessions and skill-based learning are available to staff volunteers, with indication of customised delivery where requested, through Campus Infrastructure Services, which is responsible for the University’s sustainability initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Technology, Sydney</td>
<td>No evidence of sustainability education in professional development for managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Western Sydney</td>
<td>No information available in the public domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
<td>No information available in the public domain</td>
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</tbody>
</table>