

Frontline Perspectives: Educators' Insights into Sustainability Integration in the Management Education

Executive Summary

Background and Rationale: As the urgency of sustainable practises becomes more pronounced in a world grappling with climate change, management education in the UK finds itself at a crossroads. The role of educators in shaping future leaders who can navigate the complexities of sustainability has never been more critical. This study probes the experiences of these educators in the UK, uncovering the multifaceted challenges and drivers that influence the integration of sustainability into management education.

Objectives and Methodology: Through qualitative research, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with management educators across various UK universities, the study aimed to uncover how sustainability is integrated into teaching practises of management education, the resources and support required for its integration, and the impact of such educational approaches on both students and broader institutional frameworks.

Findings: The research highlights a dual approach where both institutional directives (top-down) and individual educator initiatives (bottom-up) are essential for successful integration of sustainability in management education. A significant need for resources and cultural adaptation within universities was identified, alongside the challenges of measuring the effectiveness of sustainability education and its inclusion in formal assessments. Notably, sustainability is gaining traction in Executive Education, providing a model that could potentially be replicated across full-time management programmes.

Recommendations: The study recommends stronger alignment of institutional strategies with educator-led initiatives, enhanced resource allocation, and the development of clear metrics to measure the integration and impact of sustainability in management education. It also suggests leveraging the strengths of Executive Education to inform broader curricular reforms.

Conclusion: While the study is limited by its sample size and focuses on UK universities, it contributes valuable insights that underscore the necessity of a concerted effort to embed sustainability across the management education landscape. It serves as a call to action for academic institutions to prioritize sustainability in their teaching agendas and provides a foundation for future research to build upon.

Keywords: Management Education, Sustainability, Climate Change, Sustainability Education, Higher Education and Business School

Introduction

In an era where climate change poses one of the greatest existential threats to our planet, the role of education, particularly in the field of management, becomes increasingly crucial. The proposed research titled "Integrating Sustainability into Management Studies: Insights from Educators on the Frontline in the Higher Education Sector in the UK" aims to delve into this critical area. This study seeks to explore the perspectives of management educators on the drivers and challenges associated with integrating sustainability and climate change topics into their teaching practises.

The rationale behind this research stems from the growing recognition of sustainability as a key component of responsible management education. As future leaders and decision-makers are being shaped within educational institutions, it becomes imperative to embed sustainability in their learning journey. This is not just a pedagogical preference but a necessity, given the pressing need to address environmental and societal challenges in business practises and leadership.

However, the integration of sustainability into management studies is not without its challenges. Educators often grapple with a range of barriers, from curriculum constraints to a lack of resources and support. Understanding these challenges, as well as the drivers that motivate educators to overcome them, is vital for developing effective strategies to enhance sustainability education in management studies.

Through this research, we aim to contribute valuable insights into how sustainability can be more effectively integrated into management education, thereby equipping future leaders with the knowledge and skills to address the sustainability challenges of the 21st century. Following research questions and research objectives have been designed to lead the direction of this study.

"How do management educators in UK universities navigate the integration of sustainability into their teaching, what are the impacts on their practise, and how do they assess the outcomes of such integration?"

Research Objectives

- To explore how management educators integrate sustainability into their teaching practises, encompassing both institutional mandates and individual initiatives.
- To examine the resources provided and the cultural changes required within universities to support the integration of sustainability topics into management education, including the role of reward and recognition systems.

- To assess the particular strategies and impacts of sustainability integration in Executive Education programmes, exploring how accreditation and workplace application influence this process.
- To develop strategic recommendations for universities, policy-makers, and educators on integrating sustainability into management studies, drawing on the insights from educators' experiences with existing programmes and teaching practises.

Literature Review

The quest to weave sustainability into the fabric of management education in the United Kingdom mirrors a global pivot towards embedding responsible and sustainable paradigms into business practices. This literature review navigates through pivotal works advocating for a holistic and systematic approach to infusing sustainability within both the curriculum and the institutional ethos of management studies. By analysing a spectrum of studies, it seeks to evaluate current practices, pedagogical approaches, and the overall effectiveness of such educational initiatives. Furthermore, it identifies gaps in the existing literature and suggests directions for future research.

Sustainability as a concept

Sustainability has evolved over time, but its core remains consistent: balancing current needs with future limitations. Hart and Milsten (2003) characterized sustainability as enhancing the social and environmental performance of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to fulfil their needs. Herman Daly's (2014) measurement-based definition emphasized environmental considerations, stating that a sustainable society must adhere to three conditions: the rate of use of renewable resources should not surpass their regeneration rate; the use of non-renewable resources should not exceed the rate at which sustainable renewable substitutes are developed; and pollution emissions should not exceed the environment's capacity to assimilate them (Elkington, 1997). Despite evolving understandings, the fundamental principle remains; sustainability is about meeting current needs while ensuring future generations can meet theirs, particularly regarding environmental stewardship and resource management.

Integrating sustainability into Higher Education

Responsible Management Education (RME) gained prominence in business schools after the United Nations (UN) unveiled its Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) in 2007 to support the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (PRME, 2023a). The principles, initially including Purpose, Values, Method, Research, Partnership, and Dialogue, were recently refreshed to include seven principles: Purpose, Values, Teach, Research, Partner, Practice, and Share (PRME, 2023b). Interest in this research area has increased, with the number of articles on PRME growing steadily.

A recent literature review from Russo et al. (2023) shows this progression, along with the global distribution of empirical studies (Fig. 1) and which journals they are published in. Most of the research has emerged from Europe, followed by North America and South America. Articles have also been published from Africa, Australia and Asia, although to a much lesser extent. The International Journal of Management Education published the most articles.



Figure 1 – Global distribution of PRME studies (Russo et al., 2023)

The overarching topics that have been explored include the *perceived obligation of Business Schools to act on PRME*, *Institutional support for PRME* and *how PRME is embedded into the curriculum* (Russo et al., 2023).

Edwards et al. (2020) explore participatory methods and boundary objects as vehicles for integrating sustainability into the business school curriculum. These methods foster interdisciplinary dialogue and ensure pedagogical coherence across diverse academic

disciplines. Leal Filho et al. (2021) articulate the urgent need for an integrative approach to incorporating the SDGs into academic curricula, highlighting a multidimensional framework spanning institutional, thematic, structural, and personal facets. Figueiró et al. (2022) advocate for holistic and integrative models to champion sustainability in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), emphasizing the need for a rigorous evaluative component to gauge impact.

Fang and O'Toole (2023) highlight the integration of SDGs within university curricula through experiential education and project-based learning, showcasing the potential of embedding sustainability within business curricula. However, they call for a deeper exploration into how experiential learning paradigms can be adapted and scaled to fit various educational contexts and disciplines.

The narrative on sustainability in higher education is further enriched by the insights of Leal Filho et al. (2021), who articulate the urgent need for an integrative approach towards incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into academic curricula. Their exploration into the multidimensional framework—spanning institutional, thematic, structural, and personal facets—lays the groundwork for embedding SDGs comprehensively within university agendas. Despite offering a robust framework, their discourse opens a Pandora's box regarding the tangible impacts of such integration on educational outcomes, hinting at the broader issue of bridging the chasm between theoretical models and their tangible implementation. This gap invites a deeper examination into how these frameworks can be adapted and applied across diverse educational landscapes to foster measurable sustainability outcomes.

Figueiró et al. (2022) further the conversation by advocating for holistic and integrative models to champion sustainability in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which crosses the themes of curricula and institutional support for PRME. Their framework, which intricately weaves together contextual, organisational, curricular, and pedagogical dimensions, aims to scaffold the integration of sustainability across the critical domains of HEIs—spanning management, pedagogy, research, and community engagement. While their advocacy for diverse perspectives is laudable, the absence of a rigorous evaluative component to gauge impact beckons a critical review. This oversight underscores the imperative for a model that not only embraces a plurality of perspectives but also delineates a clear trajectory for navigating institutional impediments to sustainability integration, thus fostering a more inclusive and effective educational ecosystem.

Fang and O'Toole (2023) illuminate the integration of SDGs within university curricula through the prism of experiential education and project-based learning, underscoring

enhanced student cognizance and comprehension of SDGs. The synergy between industry collaboration and experiential learning methodologies showcases the potential of embedding sustainability within business curricula. However, the study's focal narrowness begets a discourse on its expansive applicability. This limitation beckons a deeper exploration into how experiential learning paradigms can be morphed and scaled to fit various educational contexts and disciplines, ensuring the infusion of sustainability education beyond isolated courses, permeating the entire educational journey.

Institutional support for PRME

Snelson-Powell et al. (2020) highlight the organizational dichotomy within business schools, juxtaposing their professed sustainability ethos against their pedagogical practices. Their framework dissects the layers of organizational and operational factors contributing to this incongruence, using fsQCA to scrutinize the dissonance between sustainability 'action' versus 'talk' in UK business schools. Despite the importance of this insight, the reluctance to explore potential policy reforms or curriculum re-evaluations limits its applicability. This restraint underscores a broader challenge in sustainability education—the urgent need for institutions to go beyond rhetorical commitments and implement substantive, systemic reforms that align pedagogical practices with proclaimed sustainability values.

Szczepankiewicz et al. (2021) and Greenland et al. (2022) emphasize the necessity for a coordinated, institutionalized approach to climate change education, proposing conceptual models for a comprehensive educational strategy that transcends traditional pedagogies. While these models offer a theoretical foundation for systemic educational reform, the lack of empirical validation leaves a significant gap. This void highlights the need for empirical investigations that not only theorize but also rigorously test these models in real-world settings, providing insights into their practical applicability, effectiveness, and potential areas for refinement.

United Nations PRME initiative and single programme focus reassessed

Godemann et al. (2014) position the PRME initiative as a transformative force in reshaping management education to meet the growing societal demand for responsible business conduct. Their synthesis of progress among PRME signatories, derived from SIP reports, outlines a trajectory for the initiative's evolution. However, the absence of a comprehensive impact assessment casts doubts on the initiative's efficacy, underscoring the ongoing need for methodical, rigorous evaluations to gauge its impact and guide continuous improvement.

Zhang and Szerencsi (2023) examine the effects of responsible management education courses on students' awareness and ethical stances towards sustainable business practices. Their findings reveal significant positive shifts in student attitudes and understanding, yet they call for more potent catalysts of behavioral change. The study's narrow focus on a single program prompts a call for expansive, multi-institutional research endeavors aimed at capturing the diverse landscape of educational experiences and contexts. Such research would provide comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of sustainability education initiatives across various educational settings.

A single program focus within the principles of responsible management emphasizes dedicating efforts and resources to a specific, comprehensive initiative that addresses a particular ethical, social, or environmental issue. This approach ensures that the initiative is impactful, measurable, and sustainable. Key principles such as the integration of ethical values, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement are essential. By aligning the program with ethical standards, involving various stakeholders, and focusing on long-term sustainability, organizations can create meaningful value for both the organization and society.

Despite the increasing uptake in PRME signatories (PRME, 2023a; PRME, 2023b), barriers to delivery remain (Shah et al., 2022; Stough et al., 2022; Weybrecht, 2022). This includes neutral and even negative views towards the SDGs and PRME (Blasco, 2021; Mousa, 2021), although these views primarily stem from academics feeling that other parts of the curriculum are receiving less time and attention rather than opposition to PRME and the SDGs themselves (Falkenstein et al., 2021; Millar and Price, 2018). Research has also shown that PRME principles are not universally adopted by students. For example, Mousa (2021) found that business students in Egypt did not prioritize PRME, preferring to focus on career skills they felt would be more valued by employers.

Beddewela et al. (2017) explore the challenges of implementing PRME principles in a UK business school, highlighting issues such as faculty skill misalignments and institutional bureaucratic inertia. While their study sheds light on the complexities of embedding sustainability into curricula, it does not extend to the tangible outcomes of such integrations. Future research must address this gap by examining both the perceptual and concrete impacts of sustainability education on student learning outcomes and institutional practices, thus enriching the discourse with empirical evidence and actionable insights.

Talk vs Action

Numerous scholars have identified a significant gap between 'talk' and 'action' in sustainability education (Garcia-Feijoo et al., 2020; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Verbos and Humphries, 2015), with some suggesting that business schools need to realign themselves with their purpose of thought leadership and the promotion of change (Maassen, 2014; Schlegelmilch, 2020). Various studies have proposed practical ways for universities to achieve this realignment. For example, aligning the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the vision and mission of business schools is crucial (De Assumpcao and Neto, 2020; Haertle et al., 2017), as is providing more time, mentoring, and training for academics (Abdelgaffar, 2021).

Similarly, Singhal et al. (2018) have highlighted that sustainability initiatives can be difficult to measure, recommending that business schools explore measurable approaches. Other scholars (Beddewela et al., 2017; Louw, 2014; Moratis, 2013; Mousa, 2021) argue that PRME should be more deeply embedded in the curriculum, rather than being treated as a 'nice to have.' In a similar vein, Blasco (2012), Borges et al. (2017), and Caldana et al. (2021) advocate for PRME principles to be formalized and not relegated to the 'hidden curriculum.'

Gaps in literature

The literature review explores the integration of sustainability within management education, emphasizing the need for holistic and systematic approaches. It brings to light critical areas such as empirical evaluation deficits, the practical application and scalability of theoretical frameworks, and the necessity for holistic and interdisciplinary methods.

The identified gaps within the literature highlight a trio of critical areas needing further exploration. Firstly, there is a notable empirical evaluation deficit characterized by a shortage of studies that rigorously assess the effectiveness of sustainability integration strategies within management education. Although various models and frameworks have been proposed, the lack of empirical validation remains a significant limitation. Future research must focus on conducting rigorous evaluations to determine the real-world impact of these sustainability initiatives.

Secondly, insights into the practical application and scalability of sustainability frameworks are markedly lacking, particularly in how these frameworks can be adapted and applied across varied educational contexts. Many existing studies focus on isolated cases or single institutions, making it difficult to generalize findings. Research is needed to explore how

these frameworks can be implemented across diverse educational settings, ensuring their broad applicability and effectiveness. Lastly, there is a burgeoning call for more holistic and interdisciplinary studies that address sustainability in education, with a focus on weaving together the economic, social, and environmental dimensions to foster a more comprehensive understanding and implementation of sustainability principles. The integration of these dimensions is crucial for developing a robust sustainability education model that can adapt to the complexities of real-world challenges.

The proposed research attempts to address these gaps. Although the study is cross-sectional and not longitudinal, it aims to provide a snapshot of current practices, challenges, and drivers of sustainability in management education from the perspective of educators. This approach offers a grounded understanding that connects theoretical models with their practical application in educational settings. By focusing on educators' insights, the research will contribute valuable empirical data to the field, providing a foundation for future longitudinal studies. Despite not addressing the longitudinal research gap, this study's findings will help inform and refine sustainability education strategies, promoting more effective integration of sustainability principles in management education.

Research Methodology

This study embraces an interpretivist philosophical stance, which posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding the world from the perspective of individuals who are part of it, thereby valuing the complexity of human sense-making as the primary source of knowledge. This approach is particularly suited to the study of management education, where teaching and learning processes are deeply entwined with individual experiences and contextual variables.

Given the interpretivist orientation, a qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative research allows for a deep exploration of phenomena within their natural settings, yielding rich, detailed data that are essential for understanding the nuances of management education practises. The design facilitated an environment where the subtleties of human behaviour could be observed and interpreted, without the constraints imposed by more rigid quantitative methods.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six management educators. These educators were carefully chosen to represent a diverse array of subjects including Economics, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Human Resources, Change Management, Corporate Governance, and the Voluntary Sector. This purposive

sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) strategy was intended to capture a breadth of perspectives across different disciplines within management education. Diversity in participant selection was further ensured by including educators from various universities and who taught at multiple academic levels, from undergraduate to postgraduate programmes.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews was deliberate, offering a balance between the structured approach of fully structured interviews and the flexibility of unstructured interviews. This format allowed the educators to freely share their experiences, perceptions, and insights while still ensuring that the conversations remained focused on the research questions. Participants were encouraged to share narratives and stories that illuminated their teaching practises, decision-making processes, and the challenges they face in their professional roles.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification of patterns within qualitative data (Gioia et al., 2013). This involved a careful reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts, followed by a process of coding and categorizing data into themes. The aim was to uncover emergent themes that could inform the development of a grounded theory model. Grounded theory is a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theories through methodical gathering and analysis of data (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2016). It is a research method that operates almost in a reverse fashion from traditional research and at first might appear to be a contradiction of the scientific method.

Throughout the process, rigor was maintained through a consistent methodological approach and adherence to ethical standards. Interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Data was analysed by multiple researchers to mitigate potential biases and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings

Empirical Findings

Our study employed thematic analysis to distil insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with management educators across the UK. This rigorous analytical process unearthed pivotal themes that illuminate the intricacies of integrating sustainability into management education. As a result, five distinct but interrelated themes emerged, each shedding light on different facets of the challenges and drivers behind this important pedagogical endeavour. These themes are:

Emerging Theme 1: Coupling Top-Down and Bottom-Up Initiatives: Highlighting the synergy between institutional directives and individual educator initiatives for effective sustainability integration.

Emerging Theme 2: Resourcing the Culture Change: Underscoring the need for adequate resources, time, and institutional support to foster a culture conducive to sustainability education.

Emerging Theme 3: The Challenge of Measuring Success: Exploring the complexities of assessing the impact and effectiveness of sustainability integration in curricula.

Emerging Theme 4: Limited Inclusion of Sustainability in Assessments: Addressing the gaps and opportunities in embedding sustainability principles within formal assessment mechanisms.

Emerging Theme 5: Greater Prominence in Executive Education: Revealing how sustainability topics are more prominently featured in programs tailored for working professionals, suggesting potential models for broader educational contexts.

The following sections delve into these themes, presenting a nuanced understanding of the perspectives, challenges, and aspirations of educators on the front lines of this transformative educational movement.

Emerging Theme 1 - Coupling top-down and bottom-up initiatives

The first emerging theme was the perceived importance of coupling top-down and bottom-up initiatives to integrate sustainability and climate change topics into teaching practises, which was spoken about by a number of respondents. In this context, top-down refers to directives on integrating sustainability from an institutional level, and bottom-up refers to initiatives that are being produced by the Educators themselves. The participants spoke very strongly about the importance of both top-down, institutional support and bottom-up or 'grass roots' initiatives.

For example, Participant D4 argued for the value of both in their interview, they said "I think we need really clear guidance. I think we need it to be instilled. You know, we now know it's important because it they've made us write it in (sustainability into curricula). So, we know there's an institutional commitment. We need to be doing this, and sometimes you need to enforce it from above and also encourage it from the grassroots of module."

Similar views were expressed by Participant B2 who stressed the importance of aligning top-down and bottom-up perspectives, they said that sustainability in management education “Should be embedded and come from bottom-up in line with top-down approaches to make a difference in the future. So, aligning those two perspectives is something which might really make a difference. So, this kind of perspective I think is something I'm really inspired by.”.

A lack of coordination between top-down and bottom-up approaches could hinder Universities abilities to integrate sustainability topics effectively and consistently into management education. Clear top-down approaches along with effective communication can help educators to understand what is required of them, whilst bottom-up approaches allow educators to feel they are part of the change and suitably interpret how best to integrate sustainability into their subject area.

Emerging Theme 2 - Resourcing the culture change

The second emerging theme is that more needs to be in done in resourcing the culture change required to make sustainability topics more prominent in management education. Educators are often time poor, and as such will have limited time to engage with new initiatives. As such, they will typically focus on the requirements of their role, first and foremost. If integrating sustainability topics into teaching is not explicitly required, and educators are measured on a number of other priorities that are required, they are more likely to focus on the required tasks that they are measured against. Institutions should make the inclusion of sustainability a clear requirement and provide educators with time, resources and support to integrate sustainability into their subject areas.

All respondents spoke of resourcing being a challenge, with time being a common challenge mentioned, participants had varying views on what they felt the solutions were, and sub-themes emerged around integrating sustainability not being linked to reward and recognition.

Participant A1 spoke of their experiences in an institution where they felt that the culture, and the resources and priorities given to educators did not meet the need to successfully integrate sustainability into their courses. They said ‘I couldn't get really mad necessarily at people in the in the management school because they actually wanted some of this to happen, but higher up it was it wasn't on their agenda. But if you don't build this stuff into the systems for which staff is rewarded or expected to work to it, it's not going to happen because they're going to follow whatever it is, you know (is expected).’.

They later continued “So, if you're not going to be rewarded for that, why would you do it? You know what I mean? Like if it's not part of like the culture and then also what the expectations of the systems and processes of the curriculum development and the quality assurance procedures. There's nothing to make sure it becomes embedded and everybody's living and breathing it, and it needs to be put through everything.”.

Echoing the reward and recognition point, Participant C3 also shared their experiences of whether sustainability was being prioritised and if educators were incentivised to make it a priority. They said, ‘If people are being paid to do other things, they're going to focus on those other things first, you know, delivering and teaching and marking and research and publications and so on.’.

Participant D4 spoke of Educators being overstretched and argued that additional support and resources were needed to help them to successfully integrate sustainability topics into their teaching. They said “I do just think sometimes its giving people support to do that thinking and that planning and seeing how it can be built in. Because on a very human level these are people who are massively overworked. So, I do think that's the resourcing issue. I think that needs to be taken seriously. I do then think there's something around time for staff teams to build this in and to do the changes. I don't think we can just expect that change to happen and we also can't assume that if it's not happening it's because people aren't interested. I think it's often the stretch nature and no time, all that kind of stuff.”

However, there were those who recognised the challenge of culture change, but who felt that their institution provided what was required in terms of support and resources. Participant B2 said “In order to change and shape it requires time. So, it's one of the challenges. Time of not necessarily modular leaders but more time to make a change in the thinking of module leaders, a cultural maybe change which really takes time and that is positive. An advantage for us is our strategy which is completely clear for everybody coming to work in our institution, that it is a very strong focus for us. So, it supports but again to make it happen. It still requires time, efforts and cultural change and agreement in that sense”. These findings suggest that most educators feel that they need more time, resources and support to successfully integrate sustainability topics into their teaching.

Emerging Theme 3 – The challenge of measuring success

The third emerging theme was the agreement of all participants that measuring successful integration of sustainability topics into curricula is a challenge, however interpretations of success and opinions on the ways to measure success varied, some considered success as

impact and discussed how to define this, whereas others focused on integrating sustainability into teaching as the measure of success.

For example, Participant A1 was most focused on impact when talking about measuring success in their institution, and said “It's almost going one step further and trying to figure out how to measure the impact, how it's tangible as well. So that's what they're aiming to do next, which obviously is gonna be messy, you know, cause it's not gonna be easy to do at all.”. Similarly, Participant D4 said of their experience “I think we often think we know what we mean when we're talking about impact, but there's not always an easy answer to how do we measure the impact on students, you know, well when and where do we measure that and how. But I think it would be really important to try, because if we're not doing it well, we need to then think how to do it better.”.

Whereas, Participant C3 spoke more of the challenge of ensuring environmental issues and sustainability were consistently taught and how to measure this, they said that in their institution “We discuss it generally but if we got it as an objective, people could be assessed against that later on, then it's clearly part of part of the teaching that's got to be delivered.”.

Finally, participant B2 spoke of their own experiences, and agreed that integrating sustainability into management education is hard to measure, but added that it becomes easier with time. They said they first considered “what could be the suitable measure, the suitable impact, or something that would demonstrate your impact, and then learning by doing you implement measures. So, I completely agree that it is not always easy, and I would probably say since the beginning, it's not easy, but when you are into this year by year, you learn how it would be possible to measure it. Not everything is measured in quantitative measures, you know, like pounds or units or something. Sometimes it is measured more with something that might demonstrate your change in the pattern.”.

These views suggest that there is a need to understand the impact of sustainability education on management students, for universities to be able to understand what is effective and how best to integrate the topic into their curricula. The difficult in measuring success and or impact in this area could be an area to be addressed by future research.

Emerging Theme 4 - Limited inclusion of sustainability in assessments

The fourth emerging theme is the inclusion of sustainability in assessments. In this context sustainability in assessments described an assignment or assessment as part of a module which contains clear links to sustainability topics.

The results are mixed. A small minority felt that sustainability was explicitly included into assessments in their institutions, most did not.

For example, Participant D4 spoke of how a recent change to their curriculum had led to more sustainability in assessments 'Increasingly we are seeing explicit assessments that have this (Sustainability) written into them. So actually now as a result of this big curriculum restructure, all of our work, all of our modules have to have some kind of attention paid to sustainability goals.'

Whereas others, who did not cite recent changes to curriculum, felt that more could be done in their institutions to bring sustainability into assessments. Participant C3 said 'we should be having more assignments linked to that (Sustainability).'

It can be suggested from our findings that educators feel there should be more explicit links to sustainability in assessments. However, it can also be suggested that Universities that have recently changed their curricula seem to have a greater integration of sustainability topics, in the views of their educators.

Emerging Theme 5 - Greater prominence in executive education

The fifth emerging theme is the suggestion of greater prominence of sustainability in Executive Education. In this context, 'Executive Education' refers to management courses that are specifically designed for working professionals, who are typically in senior management positions. This includes Executive MBA programmes and Senior Leader Apprenticeships in the UK.

A number of respondents shared their experiences of how sustainability was being taught in Executive Education in their institutions, without a specific question or prompt on Executive Education.

For example, Participant A1 spoke of how they felt MBA accreditations influenced the inclusion of sustainability topics in MBA programmes. 'The AMBA accreditation for the MBA does that (promotes inclusion of sustainability topics). That is one of the key, core requirements is to create employability in creating sustainable managers. So that is one that you got to show quite a bit for that one. So, you do. So that's why I would say probably with sustainability, you see quite a lot of that if you look at MBA and executive MBA's.'. This suggests that the requirements of the AMBA accreditation for MBA and Executive MBA programmes could promote the inclusion of sustainability topics, based on the requirements of the accreditation. They also have their views on the EQUIS and AACSB accreditations,

which they did not feel did enough to require the inclusion of sustainability topics, they said “I think some of these things like a AACSB could really do a lot more with what their expectations are for what those people and even EQUIS, I would say could have a stronger sustainability requirement in terms of accreditation.”. These views highlight the potential of increasing the integration of sustainability topics into management studies, through accreditation requirements.

Another view expressed was that Executive Education Students were able apply their research directly in their workplaces, and so were able to include sustainability more easily, due to the real-life context and impact they can have in their organisations, when compared with full-time students.

For example, Participant D4 shared their experiences of delivering on the Senior Leader Apprenticeship standard (a Level 7 Apprenticeship for Senior Leaders in the UK). They said “Often with for example our senior leaders, we're talking about research that's actually applied within their workplace. So, we're always letting them have an element of choice. We're always encouraging them to take something that's important and impactful. But increasingly we're also talking about sustainability as one of the things that we see that should be woven in. And that's not to say that we dictate or guide or push students down certain avenues. But when we're talking about the kind of the current, contexts that organisations are operating in and we're thinking about the bigger picture for all organisations, one of the core things we talk about is sustainability.”.

Participant C3 shared similar sentiments based on their experience of Executive Education. They said “Particularly with Exec Ed (Executive Education) you know, it would be around. What are you doing? You know. Share your (Student's) experience. Share it with others and they can share theirs. And we build up, you know, a momentum about what can be done?”. Again, it can be seen from the views expressed that the discussion and inclusion of sustainability topics is seen as easier due to the students being part of real organisations, with real challenges, that can be discussed in class and in assessments.

To summarise, our findings suggest that there is a greater prominence of sustainability topics in Executive Education due to the students working in organisations where they can apply their research directly. Universities could consider emulating this approach with their Full-time management students by leveraging external partnerships with organisations, which would allow students to apply their research to live organisations, in the same way as Executive Education students.

Summary of findings

The first key finding is that educators feel that there is an opportunity to align top-down and bottom-up approaches to improve integration of sustainability topics in management studies. As a result, there is a need for universities to strengthen upward and downward communication to ensure that grass roots initiatives can effectively align with institutional support. The second finding of the research is that educators need more time, resources and support to effectively integrate sustainability topics into their subject areas. This could be helped by clearer inclusion of sustainability requirements in teaching and assessments, so that they are prioritised alongside existing requirements, but whilst also recognising that additional time and resources will be required.

The third main finding is that educators feel it is difficult to measure the integration of sustainability topics, and respondents had different views on how it should be measured. Universities should be clear with educators in how they should measure the inclusion of sustainability topics in their teaching. The measurement of impact on students and organisations was also discussed, which could be an interesting area for future research. The fourth finding is that educators feel there is a limited inclusion of sustainability topics in assessments. As a result, there is a need increase the number of criteria linked to sustainability topics in assessments.

The fifth key finding is that sustainability topics are more prominent in Executive Education, with the reasons suggested as the sustainability requirements of the AMBA accreditation (for MBA programmes) and the fact that students are managing in organisations, and so can apply their research to workplace challenges. Universities could consider leveraging partnerships with external companies to allow full-time students to apply their research to live organisations, in the same way as Executive Education students.

Discussion

The discussion of findings from the study on integrating sustainability into management education reveals both consonance and divergence with existing literature, alongside novel insights. The first finding of this paper aligns with literature advocating for integrated approaches in sustainability education, specifically as discussed in the works of Leal Filho et al. (2021) and Figueiró et al. (2022). This finding emphasizes the synergy between top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

In the second finding, this paper connects with literature that underscores the need for resources and support, as noted by De Assumpção and Neto (2020) and Fang & O'Toole

(2023). It introduces a counterintuitive view that challenges the sufficiency of resource provision in the absence of addressing the systemic and cultural obstacles within institutions. It implies that a focus solely on resource allocation might inadvertently uphold existing power dynamics and marginalize grassroots initiatives, which could otherwise contribute to more profound organisational transformation.

The third finding corroborates the literature's call for empirical evaluation and clear metrics in sustainability education, as highlighted by Godemann et al. (2014) and Zhang & Szerencsi (2023). However, it presents an intriguing counterpoint that an overemphasis on quantifiable measures could detract from the inherent value of sustainability education. This suggests the importance of balancing the pursuit of measurable outcomes with the need to foster a deep-rooted sustainability mindset among students.

In the fourth finding, the paper resonates with concerns about the lag in assessment practises compared to curricular integration, issues brought to light by Snelson-Powell et al. (2020) and Beddewela et al. (2017). It challenges the prevailing notion that the explicit inclusion of sustainability in assessments is the definitive measure of success. Instead, it proposes that true integration is perhaps more accurately reflected in how sustainability principles are interwoven throughout all learning outcomes, not just in overt assessment criteria.

The fifth finding of this paper touches on a novel insight regarding the role of sustainability in executive education, an area not widely covered in existing literature. It raises a counterintuitive question about the implications of focussing on executive education for sustainability knowledge dissemination, potentially perpetuating a hierarchical perspective. This finding suggests that the application of sustainability principles in executive education should be examined for ways to democratize and extend its reach to the entire student body, transcending levels and disciplines.

Recommendations

The research suggests the need for improved alignment of top-down and bottom-up approaches to integrating sustainability into management education. This will help to ensure that educators are aware of the requirements from top-down approaches and that bottom-up approaches are encouraged and supported by the institution. Ultimately, employing a more 'joined-up' approach has the potential to improve the integration of sustainability topics, benefiting students.

The findings also suggest that Universities need to give educators more time, support and resources to effectively integrate sustainability topics into their subject areas, and make this integration explicitly required. In doing so, Universities can increase the inclusion of sustainability topics in their courses, whilst giving educators the time, support and resources to use their specialist knowledge to embed the topics effectively. This will also support educators and universities in being able to measure the inclusion of sustainability topics and allow them to increase the prominence of sustainability topics in assessments, which were other challenges highlighted in the research.

Similarly, the research found that there is no clear way of measuring the wider impact of sustainability in management education e.g. on students' careers, their organisations, society etc. This is an area that can be explored in future research.

Finally, the research recommends drawing on the strengths of Executive Education in integrating sustainability and applying this to other management programmes by leveraging external partnerships with employers, to allow students to apply sustainability topics to real-life organisational challenges.

Limitations

There are several important limitations of this study to consider when interpreting its findings. The first limitation is the small sample size, which will mean that the findings are not yet generally applicable to large populations. Further research with larger samples should be conducted to enhance the reliability of this study's findings.

Similarly, all educators interviewed work at UK Universities, which may limit the application of this study's findings in other higher education contexts or other parts of the world. Further research can reduce this limitation by involving other types of higher education institutions and universities outside of the UK in future samples.

Finally, because the study focused on self-reported data (semi-structured interviews), the data produced may be subject to various human biases such as post-rationalisation (Cushman, 2020) and social desirability (Larson, 2019). This should be taken into account when applying the findings of this study. Future research should aim to reduce this limitation by including objective measures alongside self-reported data to strengthen the reliability and validity of findings.

Despite the above limitations, this study provides useful insights into the views of management educators on the integration of sustainability topics in management education.

Future research could build on this study by increasing the sample size and including universities outside of the UK, or by utilising different research methods.

Avenues for Future Research

The call for systematic, longitudinal research to elucidate the long-term impacts of educational interventions on sustainability is paramount. Advocacy by Mulder (2004), Stead and Stead (2010), and Lozano et al. (2022) for comprehensive, time-spanning studies is a clarion call to the academic community. Such research endeavours are critical for distilling insights into the durability and efficacy of educational interventions, offering a compass for best practices and informing future sustainability education initiatives with empirical rigor.

The innovative perspectives opened by Rezaee and Homayoun (2014), Setó-Pamies and Papaoikonomou (2016), and Kholiavko et al. (2021) in integrating sustainability into business education underscore the necessity of a multi-dimensional, holistic approach. Their emphasis on the pivotal role of universities in fostering sustainable knowledge and the criticality of an interdisciplinary approach in unpacking the socio-economic and environmental facets of sustainability is commendable. However, the absence of empirical testing of these innovative models and frameworks marks a significant lacuna. This gap signals a pressing need for scholarly endeavours that transcend theoretical speculations, rigorously testing and validating sustainability education strategies across diverse educational landscapes, thereby ensuring their effectiveness and contributing to a more sustainable future.

Collaborative research between PRME signatories, as suggested by Avelar et al. (2022), presents another promising avenue for future research. Such collaboration can leverage shared experiences and insights, fostering a more unified and effective approach to embedding sustainability in management education globally.

Building on the perspectives of UK educators shared in this study, future research should explore the views of management educators in other parts of the world. This will help provide the global perspective required to address this global challenge and inform the academic community about the nuanced challenges that business schools around the world face in integrating sustainability into management education. This further research could lead to the creation of a grounded theory model, necessitating a significant increase in sample size (Thompson, 2010) and benefiting from a global perspective.

Lastly, there are opportunities to extend the scope of this research beyond the parameters of business schools to include higher education institutions (HEIs) more broadly. Additionally,

considering the inclusion of industry partners and other stakeholder groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding and foster collaborations that enhance the practical implementation of sustainability education. This broader approach will contribute to creating a more inclusive and effective educational ecosystem, addressing the complex challenges of sustainability education.

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