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Abstract

The imperative for addressing complex sustainability challenges through education underpins the UN declaration of the 2005 to 2014 Decade of education for sustainable development. Sustainability has been burgeoning as a theme for business schools worldwide with increasing numbers of courses and specialisations on sustainability in degrees such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. However, in the current 2007-08 Beyond Grey Pinstripes Global 100 ranking of social and environmental issues in MBA programs, only one Australian university is listed (Aspen CBE 2007). The aim of this preliminary empirical research is to explore the essential linkage between the sustainability requirements of business and curriculum offerings. The findings in this paper support the call for holistic embedding of sustainability in business education to develop current and future business leaders’ capacities and competencies in shifting towards corporate sustainable development.

Introduction

Education for sustainability (EfS) in business higher education was prioritized for action by the Australian government through the Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH), (Tilbury, Adams et al. 2005 p. 96). Business schools worldwide are witnessing an increasing requirement for Master of Business Administration (MBA) students to take a dedicated course in business and sustainability (Aspen CBE 2007; Ethical Corporation 2007). However, in the 2007-08 Beyond Grey Pinstripes Global 100 ranking of social and environmental issues in MBA programs, only one Australian university appears (Aspen CBE 2007).

The findings reported in this article relate to an introductory project designed in response to earlier studies indicating that MBA programs in Australia are lagging behind leading business schools internationally in preparing graduates with the skills required for strategic change towards sustainability (Bennis and O'Toole 2005; Tilbury, Crawley et al. 2005; Benn and Dunphy in press). This preliminary study reflects one component of an ongoing longer term program on education about and for sustainability within seven business schools, in collaboration with the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) based at Macquarie University and funded by the Australian Government DEH (now known as the Department of the Environmental and Water Resources).

Several researchers (e.g., Henderson, McAdam et al. 2006; Guide and Wassenhove 2007) have discovered the benefits of identifying and building relationships with organisational sustainability champions. Adams and Larrinaga-González (2007, p. 333) assert that: ‘research engaging with organizations is needed in order to identify how accounting and management systems might reduce their negative sustainability impacts.’ Building relationships with sustainability champions in companies will provide opportunities for understanding the variety
of business approaches, concepts and issues and contributing to EFs within business curriculum offerings and their related pedagogy.

The focus of this project was specifically to explore the opportunities, through education for sustainability, for current and future business leaders to develop capacities and competence in shifting towards sustainability. The research aimed to:

- Identify and understand the current levels of knowledge and the expectations of MBA and other business graduates in the area of sustainability; and
- Identify and build relationships with sustainability champions in the corporate sector, thus providing opportunities for building understanding of the variety of business approaches, concepts and issues and contributing to the development of sustainability within business curriculum offerings and their related pedagogy.

In addressing these major research objectives and exploring the complexity of sustainability challenges, we needed to penetrate the social contexts of EFs in such a way that perceptions and respondents’ views can emerge. To achieve this, the constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology was chosen. The realities of sustainability in business and EFs presented by MBA and Master of Leadership and Management (MLM) students and industry participants must be interpreted and understood (verstehen), rather than empirically measured, and explained (erklären).

Given the focus on EFs and ‘sustainability’ (a concept around which much of the ground is ideologically controversial), this qualitative research is effective in permitting a preliminary exploration of the understanding and contexts within the business community and the graduate students leading to more informed action for achieving curricula change towards sustainability in MBA and MLM programs. It is worth noting that this research forms part of a wider research agenda that adopts an Action Research approach (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000).

The paper commences with a brief review of the literature and its significance. This is followed by discussion of the research methodology used, a report on the findings, and discussion of the emerging themes and their implications on EFs. The paper concludes with a summary of lessons learned and recommendations for future action research in EFs.

**Background**

The most widely cited definition of sustainable development is that defined by the ‘Bruntland Commission’ as development that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. 8). This definition integrates environmental, economic and social sustainability and is the most often referred to by business. However, as Byrch et al. (2007) point out, the original statement included further amplification on giving overriding priority to the essential needs of the world’s poor and on the limitations of the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.

Several researchers believe that the concept of sustainability will continue to be ideologically controversial, ‘fuzzy’ and elusive (Beckerman. 1994; Gladwin, Kennelly et al. 1995). However, the lack of a definitive conceptual framework for sustainable development and sustainability in business does not preclude the advancement of EFs to empower graduates with the vital skills to deal with the challenges.

A recent survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit (The Economist 2008) reveals that corporate social and environmental responsibility issues are increasing sharply in the priorities of global executives. The 2007 United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, coupled with Al Gore’s statements on global warming and the Stern review, have propelled global environmental
sustainability issues further to the forefront (Rowe in press).

International initiatives such as the UN declaration of the ‘Decade of Education for Sustainable Development’ (2005 to 2014), Beyond Grey Pinstripes, and ProSPER.Net attest to the significance of engaging business and education with sustainability. Learning is imperative in understanding and addressing pressing sustainability challenges (Ballard 2005; Dunphy, Griffiths et al. 2007). Higher education institutions, according to the Japanese Ministry of Environment (ProSPER.Net), have a vital role to play in creating a sustainable society.

Sustainability has been burgeoning as a theme for business schools worldwide with increasing numbers of courses and specialisations on sustainability in MBA programs (Ethical Corporation 2007; Herro 2007). According to the most recent Beyond Grey Pinstripes 2007-2008 report, a biennial ranking of business schools' social and environmental leadership sponsored by the Aspen Institute, 54 percent of participating institutions now require a course in ethics, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, or business and society, up from 45 percent in 2003 (Aspen CBE 2007).

The same escalating trend in weaving sustainability into tertiary curricula cannot be claimed for Australian business schools. Only one Australian university made it to the ‘Beyond Grey Pinstripes 2007-2008 Global 100’ ranking for social and environmental stewardship in MBA programs (Aspen CBE 2007). Several studies have found that Australian business schools are falling behind leading practice and innovation in sustainability (Tilbury, Crawley et al. 2005; Holdsworth, Bekessy et al. 2006; Benn and Dunphy in press). ARIES colleagues at another University also noted the ad hoc incorporation of sustainability into the curricula of most business schools, mostly confined to specialist electives (Benn and Dunphy in press).

The literature on education for sustainability has two streams, the first reviewing what is happening in the broad context (e.g., Ferreira, Ryan et al. 2007), while the second stream considers the use of innovative pedagogies for sustainability education. The latter include the use of dialogue and inter-professional learning (Martin 2005), sustainability within an evolutionary guidance system which could lead to institutional evolution (Rowland 2004), inclusion of a critical theory perspective (Kearins and Springett 2003; Welsh and Murray 2003), and action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Lange 2004).

Recognising the important role of Australian business schools in driving change towards sustainability, the Australian Government DEH commissioned ARIES to conduct a study into education about and for sustainability. In ‘MBA Stage 1’, ARIES found that most MBA degrees do not sufficiently equip graduates with the skills required for strategic change towards sustainability and there are no ‘needs analysis’ studies that identify the training requirements of business senior management to advance sustainability within their organizations (Tilbury, Crawley et al. 2005).

This study aimed to address this gap by exploring (a) expectations of MBA and other business graduates in the area of sustainability; and (b) the building of relationships with sustainability champions in the corporate sector, hence, providing a critical link between the business context and curriculum offerings.

The research has the potential to add to our understanding of perceptions of sustainability values and practice by graduate students and practitioners, and the skills and knowledge requirements to deal with the challenges of sustainability. It provides one strand in the link between the requirements for business graduates and what is currently offered on sustainability within the curricula. It provides data on the value drivers and perceived motivations of students in relation to courses on sustainability which provides important learning relevant to the provision of
sustainability education, including input for course design and pedagogy.

**Methodology**

The preliminary study was undertaken in 2006 in Western Australia and formed part of a wider ongoing research program to facilitate the critical examination of MBA curriculum leading to better informed action for mainstreaming sustainability into business education.

**The research paradigm**

All researchers are guided by principles which shape how they see the world and act within it. This set of principles can be termed the paradigm, sometimes called an interpretive framework, which represent a basic set of beliefs that guides action (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Denzin and Lincoln’s definition of paradigm demonstrates how the researcher is guided in the study: ‘the basic belief system on world view that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method, but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p106).

The focus of this project is to explore MBA Students’ and Sustainability Practitioners’ perceptions of the elements of successful sustainability within business and curriculum offerings, as well as relationship building with the corporate sector. The literature highlight the fact that the meaning of ‘sustainability’ is not a socially stable phenomenon but rather a set of personal constructs and individual perceptions giving rise to multiple realities (Gladwin, Kennelly et al. 1995; Marrewijk 2003). The multiple realities in this study are to be found in two sources, MBA students and business practitioners with a focus on sustainability in Western Australia (WA).

To discover the students’ and the business community’s perceptions, a *constructivist* and *interpretivist* approach requiring a qualitative methodology was adopted. This perspective informed the methods of data collection used in this study which included semi-structured focus group sessions using Group Support System (GSS) technology and a series of ‘elite’ interviews. This constructivist approach was designed to incorporate multiple views of the concepts surrounding sustainability within business, among business students and within curriculum offerings.

**Data collection methods**

Current and past MBA students from the GSB and sustainability practitioners from WA companies were approached in this study.

Two focus groups were conducted to bring together a group of MBA students and a group of business practitioners to elicit their views on the main aspects of the research. The focus group sessions were conducted to explore participants’ experiences and perceptions of sustainability resulting from their activities in business and exploration of curriculum offerings, using the electronic GSS facility. The GSS offers several advantages, including anonymity and opportunity to generate high volumes of quality responses in relatively brief ‘brainstorming’ sessions (Forrest 1999; Easton, Easton *et al.* 2003; Newby, Soutar *et al.* 2003).

Guided by an agenda based on the research objectives and aided by an independent facilitator the focus groups provided an efficient means of identifying and gathering different perspectives, surfacing concerns and issues, identifying possible explanations and a range of options relating to EJS. Through the use of the GSS system, the hardware and software of which was managed by a ‘chauffeur’, the participants brainstormed and organised their ideas and perceptions. The anonymity of the process enabled participants to focus on relevant issues. Automatic documentation and immediate results were provided by the GSS system, with information from individual terminals and aggregated information able to be displayed through projection facilities, enabling ongoing evaluation and reiteration.

The agenda was designed to be as open as possible to encourage maximum
participation and contribution of their various perceptions and ideas. The questions posed to the MBA student group included:
• What does the concept sustainability mean to you?
• Where did you gain your understanding of this concept?
• What value will (or has) the course on sustainability strategies and or management provide you with?
• What would impel or motivate you to enrol in a course on sustainability?
• What are the vital skills or information you need to gain from a course (or have gained from a course) on sustainability that enable or help you to develop sustainable business strategies?

And the questions posed to the business focus group included the following:
• What are some of the aspects of doing sustainability that you would consider to be the most important for business students to gain in their business course?
• Do current business students meet the expectations of your organisation in sustainability management and or reporting?

Each session lasted about two and a half hours. There were sixteen participants in the focus groups.

For the second source of data several elite interviews were conducted using the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This was appropriate for the study’s subject matter aimed at surfacing diverse views, thus allowing the spontaneous flow of information and interaction and maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appeared to be appropriate.

Because the interview was one of just two main data collection methods used in this study it was important that participants were provided with the greatest opportunity to explore the phenomena of sustainability and opinions on EfS. To achieve this, a semi-structured in depth interview format was used. These questions are generally asked in a systematic and consistent order. Interviewers are allowed to probe deeper beyond the answers provided.

In-depth interviews help to uncover the participant’s perspectives on the meaning of sustainability and what would be valuable skills and knowledge in MBA and other business students. An assumption fundamental to qualitative research is that the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researchers view it. The most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach was to convey an attitude of acceptance that the participant’s information was valuable and useful.

Broad questions were used as a focus for the semi structured interview process. It must be stresses that the researchers through the semi-structured process, allowed participants to explore points of relevance, outside the interview structure, when appropriate. A couple of examples of focus questions used in the interview to allow conversation included the following:
• What are some of the aspects of doing sustainability that you would consider to be the most important for a business student to gain in their business course?
• Do you think issues in sustainability should be compulsory in business courses? Why?

The interviews were taped with the permission of the participants. Data analysis was then undertaken and focused on “clustering around themes”. Coding, using descriptive codes for categories of meaning, was undertaken by the researchers. The software package, NVivo, as detailed below, was used to assist in the data management of this stage. The data analysis protocol used in this study was informed by the framework suggested by Moustakas (1994) where every significant statement was initially treated as possessing equal value. Those statements that were irrelevant, repeated and were overlapping were deleted and the remaining statements represented the textual meanings gleaned from the data.

NVivo allowed all data collected to be organised and referenced by two separate but
parallel databases, called the document system and the index system (Weitzman and Miles 1995). The document system kept track of all of the text files and the index system organised codes and kept track of the way the text was indexed. The following section presents the findings from the analysis of the two sources of data collection.

**Findings**

Guided by the *constructivist* ontology and *interpretive* paradigm (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Parker and Roffey 1997) and the developing of theoretical sensitivity, we constructed “many ideas which have emerged from analysis of the data” (Glaser, 1978, cited in Strauss 1987 p. 23). Through systematic analysis of interview and focus group notes, observations and the continual coding and comparing of data, a number of themes emerged throughout the iterative data collection and various stages of analyses in this exploratory study. In reporting the data, the convention adopted for acknowledging blocks of extracts from focus groups and interviews is to introduce and to conclude each quote with the following designation …/

As a precursor to exploring the main objectives of the study, we discovered that one of the difficulties faced by business was the language surrounding *sustainability* and *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) issues. The plethora of definitions were confusing to those who were knowledgeable in the field, but even more confusing to those in the workplace who were being introduced to these terms. The all encompassing ‘fuzzy’ conceptual perceptions of *sustainability* were evidence by some of the following quotations:

…/[having] their own language about it was important because I know Company A's philosophy about training people and needing people is that you can create that culture and get people operating that way if you do create your own language internally that everybody gets inducted into and starts to use. …/ it was interesting to watch that in action because they were upholding many of the concepts of CSR but just not willing to use the language…/ the terminology can be seen quite negatively…/ anyone who’s been around for twenty-five years or more is a sustainable company. It’s just they don’t know how to express it…/

Indeed, the normative overtones and assumptions inherent in much of the debate are likely to leave practitioners and proponents confused (Wheeler, Colbert et al. 2003). In understanding the context from which the concept of sustainability was construed, it is noteworthy to consider some of the students’ perceived meanings of sustainability through their worldview. For instance:

…/sustainability means utilisation of resources that can last well into the future generations that is viable and friendly to the environment …/ The responsibilities of individuals and corporations in how resources and environmental factors/contributors can be sustained and used towards business and future lifestyles. …/ true sustainability is the utilisation of resources in a way that they never run out, i.e. regrowth of forests= logging rate …/ Taking the future into account in decision making including the costs to future generations of our actions today. This means having a handle on the costs and benefits in social, environmental and economic terms…/

Equally important to understanding the conceptualisation of sustainability through the lenses of the students are the source(s) from which they derived their understanding of the concept. This provided vital insights into the degree to which current curricula (e.g., Environmental Management Strategies 660 and triple bottom line in Financial Management 550) in the MBA program had contributed in part, to graduate students’ awareness of sustainability issues and how we can continue to improve our commitments to our stakeholders. Through critical experiential reflection during the focus group session with students, GSS
captured some of their recollections as extracted below.

.../initially from the media.../ increased understanding from MBA units.../Knowledge acquired at Environmental Management Strategies 660 unit.../Financial Management 550 unit.../Discussions with colleagues and other students. .../Through Local Councils and Government initiatives.../witnessing the destruction of the worlds natural resources through travel.../First from high school and later at undergrad studies, and finally at EMS as part of MBA course...

The last provided a deeper understanding of business and sustainability .../past organisations programs in recycling; public forums on conservation, newspapers and magazine articles on deforestation.../

In exploring organisational approaches to sustainability challenges, there was strong agreement that advancement towards sustainability needs to be holistic, embedded within the company rather than constrained within a ‘sustainability silo’, or as one participant described it, an isolated ‘bolt-on’ unit.

.../understanding what your core business is and managing it in that way and building your business strategy around that... is what will lead to a sustainable outcome .../it’s just part of how you deliver value to your shareholders.../sustainability, it’s everyone’s responsibility.../

However, there were differing accounts of how far individual companies had progressed with this approach.

.../ how you build it into your selection processes, how you build it into your KPIs, how you build it into the actual business plans of the business units... they do that informally at the moment... we’ve ticked the boxes on health, safety, environment, community contribution, but it’s not coordinated.../

Without taking a holistic approach to sustainability, the tangible elements such as profitability, financial stability, marketing and manufacturing may be addressed, but the intangible value that can be brought to bear for the company and its stakeholders are missed.

.../The intangible stuff is the stuff around the corporate social responsibility portfolio, it’s risk management, it’s all those bits that you think might have an impact but you’re not really sure they do or what that impact is.../it’s good to teach the nuances around it and the grey area around it, in addition to the pure black-and-white of what it is and how would you do it.../

One of the key issues associated with sustainability that emerged from the data is that of corporate reporting, pertaining to voluntary versus mandatory transparency, the extent to which corporations should be reporting on their actions and in what format. Amongst the participants, there were varying views on the place of reporting in the sustainability context.

.../reporting is not the issue, it’s the people who set targets the people report on, that’s the issue. Reporting is just a product. Reporting is a last link in the chain. It’s the corporate strategy that drives the behaviour that set targets that you work to that your report on. .../A sustainable development reporting position is that it’s about storytelling...it’s actually really understanding your actions.../

There was concern about whether the plethora of reports developed actually addresses the issue of sustainability and what their impact is.

.../all the reports say, our environmental performance, our social performance, our economic performance. No one actually talks about our sustainable development.../ Then we made it environment health safety and community and eventually they have now morphed into this social responsibility report.../we have it [social responsibility report] available on our web site... ...you wonder who is taking any notice of it.../

Whilst there are regulatory mandates (e.g., Section 299 (1) (f) of the Corporations Act
and Section 1013DA of the Financial Services Reform Act), reporting on sustainability and CSR in Australia is predominantly voluntary. However, it was envisaged that this may change with demand for greater transparency in the future.

…/probably in two or three years time the Australian government might say, look here is a reporting framework, which will be legislated…/the [Australian] Stock Exchange has been looking at this so the writing’s on the wall, it’s happening. And the smart thing is to get ahead… and that’s what we’re doing, ‘A’ because we believe in it but ‘B’ because we think it’s inevitable…/

Armed with the background knowledge of participants’ diverging connotations of the sustainability concept and organizational approach to sustainability challenges, we proceeded with the major focus of the project - to identify business requirements and expectations of MBA and other business graduates in the area of sustainability. In addressing the first objective, participants from the business organisations were asked to highlight some of the aspects of doing sustainability that they considered to be the most important for business students to gain in their business course. Although expressed in different ways, there was consensus that, ‘sustainability strategy has to be a core business strategy’.

…/Sustainability is a non negotiable determinant of business success in the 21st century…/It’s probably the realisation that doing sustainability is actually no different from doing good business…/license to operate …/work out how this concept of sustainability can be somehow implemented, integrated into our operating businesses…/students need to understand sustainability mechanisms (i.e. ISO 9000/14001) and EMS) from conception to implementation and beyond…/Understanding the lifecycle of a particular element including site visits …/links between financial performance and non financial costs such as reputation and environmental footprint of the business have to be considered, and this requires new metrics -- but it does need to be based on a bottom line…/reporting and monitoring is a critical part of sustainability progress…/

Similarly, the views of business industry participants broadly mirrored those of graduate students in terms of the vital skills needed to be gained from a course on sustainability that will or have enabled them to develop sustainable business strategies. The student participants, most of whom also managed organisations, mentioned;

…/Practical skills and examples of where it has been done successfully or even not successfully and why… ../Triple Bottom Line approach…/ Frameworks, models and tools to be able to apply to a business to enhance the sustainability of the solution…/Where to look for resources and tools to help me make sound business decisions that take sustainability into account. Plus, more comprehensive decision making, taking into consideration a wider set of factors, i.e. TBL…/ability to use frameworks and consider an integrated approach to business, projects etc. The case studies helped immensely as it provided real problems and real solutions that could be critically analysed…/aware of businesses that have integrated sustainability concepts into their business plans and be able to study these as models. You will need to be made aware of the outcomes of not taking the sustainability pathway…/Action Research Models…/

During one of the focus group forums, graduate students were also asked what values will a course (or has the course) on sustainability strategies and/or management provide them with? And what would impel or motivate them to enrol in a course on sustainability? There appear to be an interest in and strong value for business sustainability as evidenced from some of the participants’ extracted responses.

…/EMS660 unit has enabled a stronger understanding on what I can do as a manager in improving the sustainability
strategies in my employment/organisation…/The value a course on sustainability strategies will provide is a greater understanding and awareness of this in making management decisions that plot the course of an organisation on the future viability of those decisions on the environment…/the course provided me with a more strategic picture and also understanding of some of the tools, methods and management theories. It changed my perception of a lot of areas with respect to sustainability…/Will give an extra dimension to underpin management direction…/Better decision support tools are needed such as Triple Bottom Line accounting and Life Cycle Assessment for projects and products…/[lecturer] piqued my interest in EMS when I was studying FM…/

There was recognition, though, that the business graduates could experience variation in corporate commitment to sustainability and also differing attitudes to their own studies of this issue. …/Sometimes it [sustainability] does suffer from that association with buzzwords and also perhaps being said to me, ‘oh, that’s just something bleeding hearts are interested in.’ You know, if you’re a big greeny or something. And that might be why part of it hasn’t really been taken up yet, here in Australia. …/raise students’ awareness that (A) it could be seen as a dirty word, (B) you can find a lot of people scoff at it and can’t align that with making a profit, (C) if you just follow these things you might be seen to be disinterested in the main game, or just being a trouble maker…/

There was strong consensus that sustainability should be broadly integrated in business education programs and that failure to do so would result in graduates who were not fully equipped to deal with these issues in the business place. …/These are things that are happening that are going to require people in businesses, whether they be engineers or accountants or lawyers or general business managers to suddenly start realising these issues are out there…/ it’s a train coming down the track…/even if it’s like a few units, everyone has to do it but there’s an understanding of what true sustainability is about and how it can be applied to any business or industry…/It’s got to happen otherwise they’ll find when they go into workplaces in ten years time that this has become an important part of their performance…/

While the business practitioners acknowledged that they were not totally familiar with the structure of university business courses, nor were they educators, they were definite that sustainability should be incorporated into business school curricula at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across courses. …/ any MBA courses should have a philosophical unit on sustainability…/I don’t think they should be optional…/need is for sustainability principles to be integrated into existing …/at least get them thinking about it…/It needs to be couched in the rationale for why are we doing this and why does it actually have value and why is it of interest…/it would be better if they could come in with a philosophical understanding of what sustainability is about. …/core business tools and management techniques taught in a manner that includes environmental and social sustainability considerations (e.g. is management accounting taught with inclusion of e.g. carbon tax, reputation risks, etc) …/

Another theme that emanates from the data was the recognition of the need for organisational drivers, of the need for leadership from the top and for sustainability champions within the corporation. …/all these things never really get any traction unless the CEO and the executive team are sitting there going, ‘this is how we going to do it’, and the board is directing back…/ It has to be driven from the top-down. But that’s in the initial
stages, to get traction within the business…/

The need for management leadership and for sustainability champions within the corporation as described by participants is no different to a university’s attempt in infusing sustainability in curriculum development. It requires the support and involvement of the Executive Dean, Head of School and identification of sustainability champions among faculty members. The project grant and video conferencing arranged by ARIES with Professor Richard Welford (University of Hong Kong) was an effective means for engaging key senior faculty staff and decision makers in participative dialogue about how we go about creating greater awareness and appreciation of the complex issues of sustainability in business. The outcome of this is an on-going project in embedding sustainability into the MBA and other business programs.

The group of sustainability champions formed from the focus group sessions and in-depth interviews will provide future opportunities for partnerships with the corporate sector to develop Australian case studies and other initiatives. In providing a critical link between the sustainability context of business and curriculum offerings, industry participants have stressed the importance of students’ exposure to and experience with real world examples. …/operational case studies can be put on the screen but actually having the opportunity to talk to the hands on operators would add a new level of understanding (would require partnership with some willing business operations) …/

One of the outcomes from the findings in identifying and building relationships with champions in the corporate sector is the willingness of a participant from the focus group to partner with the GSB in allowing students to undertake an action research in the field with his corporation. The next section will discuss the lessons learned and implications from the findings of this exploratory study.

Discussion and implications

The findings as elaborated in the preceding section direct back to the literature and paradigmatic assumptions implicit in the body of knowledge on sustainability and more particularly, education about and for sustainability. The major themes that emerged from the data are (1) sustainability issues in business, and (2) education about and for sustainability. The sub-themes (categories) for the former include: diverse perception of sustainability concept; core business strategy requiring a holistic approach in business and education; corporate reporting; leadership and champions.

The concept of sustainability is extremely complex as surfaced from the findings of this exploratory project. Invariably as observed from our study, one cannot begin to commence a dialogue about embedding sustainability into the MBA and other business programs without having to come to grip with participants’ variously conceived notions of sustainable development or sustainability. It ‘means different things to different people, but it essentially fosters the view that human activities need to be undertaken in ways that support long-term economic growth, environmental protection, and social progress’ (Rowland 2004, p.290).

Sustainable business focuses on ‘triple bottom line’ (Elkington 1997) outcomes and was defined as a ‘company's ability to achieve its business goals and increase long-term shareholder value by integrating economic, environmental and social opportunities into its business strategies’ (Symposium on Sustainability 2001, cited in; Wirtenberg, Harmon et al. 2007, p. 11). Kearins and Springett (2003) point out that the understanding of sustainable development has been contested, particularly on the grounds that the framing of the issue in some sections of the debate is ultimately about the preservation of a particular social order (Harvey 1996), premised on the possibility of responsible business action for the good of society.
Welford (1995) puts forward a more radical approach which involves the need for a distinct shift in business style based on the recognition ‘of values at the global, organisational and individual levels’ (p. 147). These values include smallness, wholeness, posterity, community and quality. Participants’ diverse conceptualisations of sustainability appear to have encompassed these components and more, including value-laden perceptions as indicated by extract from the following comments:

…it’s just part of how you deliver value to your shareholders...needs to be couched in the rationale for why are we doing this and why does it actually have value and why is it of interest.../

Wheeler, Colbert and Freeman (2003) propose that these issues can be clarified by a focus on ‘the creation of business value’ as an integrating ground for the concepts of sustainability, CSR and the stakeholder approach to corporate business. Their notion, which involves embracing stakeholder notions of value, is that sustainability involves ‘value creation on three dimensions: economic, social and environmental’ (p. 17).

Participants’ wide ranging notions of sustainability may well be attributable to what Gladwin et al., (1995) assert as incongruent paradigms—a traditional techno-centric position involving economic growth and technology based problem solving; and an eco-centric view involving changed behaviour and radical realignment of political and social systems. They advocate an integrative paradigm of sustain-centrism, a view promoting sustainable business which combines elements of both. Perhaps in reality, one’s connotation of the concept that straddles between the conventional techno-centric and the complex adaptive sustain-centric paradigm is dependant upon one’s organisational stage of progress towards sustainability (Hoffman 2001; Rowe 2006).

The findings indicate that the numerous concepts are deeply infused with complex interdependencies, multiple objectives and ingredients, and considerable ‘moral thickness’ (Williams 1985). No wonder some observers believe that the concept of sustainability will continue to be ideologically controversial and elusive (Beckerman. 1994; Gladwin, Kennelly et al. 1995). Perhaps, the ‘one solution fits all’ definition is futile as discovered in this study.

.../sustainability...does not require, or even have, an exact definition that we can all agree upon. However this does not have to preclude or block action towards more sustainable outcomes.../there is no one size fits all - each organisation has to determine its magnetic north and define in what way it can best contribute to sustainable development, e.g. by corporate citizenship, transparency, eco-efficiency, new process technology etc.../

The findings echo the contention of some researchers that we should abandon our quest for a definitive concept of sustainability and accept ‘various and more specific definitions matching the development, awareness and ambition levels of organizations’ (Marrewijk 2003, p. 95) instead?

This study also provides an insight into how participants’ organisations responded to the challenges of sustainability in holistic integration into core business strategy driven by reporting and leadership. Among sustainability practitioners in business there is acceptance of the need for a more holistic approach to sustainability, whether it is for integration into core business strategy (Bell and Morse 2005; Espinosa, Harnden et al. 2008) or for education (2007, p. 388).

.../work out how this concept of sustainability can be somehow implemented, integrated into our operating businesses.../need is for sustainability principles to be integrated .../has to be core business strategy.../
Participating students also affirmed the necessity for holistic approach to business and their need for awareness ‘of businesses that have integrated sustainability concepts into their business plans and be able to study these as models’. If universities are to be proactive in advancing sustainable development this will require a holistic view of academic organisations in addressing the issue. According to Adomssent et al., (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Carroll 1999): ‘results can only be achieved with the aid of holistic, integrative project-based approaches, as only thus can systemic internal university processes run their course - thus allowing potential obstacles and success factors to be identified’.

A valuable insight, involving change towards sustainability by organizations, was that there can be a favourable inclination for managing the challenges of sustainability, coupled with avoidance of internal use of the terminology of ‘CSR and sustainability’. Anything which could be reduced to characterisation as ‘a faddish management tool’ was seen by industry as counterproductive. In external reporting, however, there is a need to use the terminology and some saw the need to achieve greater clarity in meaning for the concepts and sought our input into that.

One unexpected insight gained of industry sustainability activities suggests that in some cases the practices are being driven by a reporting imperative, which, while it seems to be having some impact, nevertheless appears to us to put the cart before the horse. The underlying implication of this may be that it is impelled from stakeholder pressure (Porter and Kramer 2006), induced as an innovative core business strategy in sustainable development (Deegan 2002). Interpretations of the latter view are that this is due in part to ‘license to practice’ considerations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Hoffman 2001; Rowe in press) or superficial compliance to institutional mimetic isomorphism of benchmarking to industry trend without the intrinsic embedded value that supports sustainability (Orr 2002; Holdsworth, Bekessy et al. 2006).

On EJS, the overall data suggests that there was strong support for sustainability to be addressed in core units within all business school curriculum and support also for this content to be core also in other professional courses such as engineering, planning and architecture to support the culture and holistic nature of the systems for doing sustainability. These results resonate well with the body of knowledge (Marshall and Harry 2005; Aspen CBE 2007) that sustainability and sustainable development are becoming mainstream concepts in the academic, business and policy arenas (Ethical Corporation 2006).

However, as observed from this study, the interpretation and application of these ideas varies widely. It’s not surprising that the greatest challenge encountered by business schools is the mainstreaming of sustainability into core curriculum (Mah J., Hunting SA. et al. 2006). In order for sustainability courses to become more common components of business curricula, Marshall and Harry (2005, p. 192) advocate the need to develop ‘integrative conceptual frameworks that attend to multi-level, systemic aspects of sustainability and that are accessible to a broad student audience’. The analysis in this project uncovered the call for holistic approach to embedding sustainability into education and the critical link with the requirements of the business industry. The views of this participating student hit the nail on its head with the following quote.

…/To ensure that such a skill develops - there needs to be definite link between the course/school/ university and the industry/ organisation, so as these so called methods of sustainability can be seen in action not just read from a book or heard from a lecturer…/

The process of approaching both graduate students and more particularly industry practitioners did identify industry champions
who expressed willingness to continue to interact with us. As a result, the Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility Research Unit is establishing a data base of contacts. This is expected to be used to form a small advisory group with wider catchment than the previous interaction with the business sector. The contacts developed contributed to a Business Symposium in September 2006, organised by the School and the Research Unit. Results of the preliminary analysis of the data collected within this introductory project were provided in that symposium.

The interaction with business as a result of this project was an extremely valuable aspect of this study. One of the significant outcomes was the building of partnership with an identified industry champion in an on-going research involving student projects within the corporation. This is a unique opportunity for students to ‘go out there’ and be immersed in experiential action learning about the complex issues of sustainability in the real world. New curriculum pedagogy (e.g., critical reflection journal) had to be developed to assess students’ experiential learning for EMS 660 which has been revamped and renamed Sustainability Management Strategy 660 to better reflect its content and focus.

For tertiary education a two-way engagement with industry is mutually beneficial. The information obtained from research can be used to inform both curriculum development and provide feedback into the organisations to inform organisational change strategies toward sustainability. For instance, research being conducted on the origins and use of terminology in the area of CSR/Sustainability was welcomed as input to inform the ongoing pressure for accountability and reporting. It demonstrates the value of backing teaching with research and the integration of the two to achieve valuable programs for students.

Conclusion

As a preliminary study of a larger ongoing project, this research provided deeper understanding of the needs of the students, staff and business, and built relationships with internal (staff) and external (corporate sector) champions. This will assist in developing a leading edge educational course about and for sustainability that could be delivered through a number of centres of excellence throughout Australia. Critical reflection from our initial experiential learning provided valuable direction in developing a flexible plan of critically informed action to embed EJS (through improved ongoing action learning, observation and reflection on our sustainability journey). We underestimated the impact of this exploratory project within the tertiary education setting through advocacy by a small but committed group of champions, able to exert influence over attitudes and educational input.

For tertiary education a two way engagement with the corporate sector, where you have something to give as well as wanting support, is important. In this case one such engagement is the current partnering with a company to enable students to conduct a joint project on community volunteering, thus providing an opportunity to apply their knowledge and learning in sustainability strategy in the field. This illustrates the value of backing teaching with research and the integration of the two to achieve valuable programs for current and future business leaders in the ‘real world’.

Business schools need to tread carefully in their advocacy of processes for sustainability to ensure that in doing so we avoid the “management fad” label for this very important issue. In this respect ‘recipes’ and ‘ten simple steps’ need to be avoided and complex issues and unique solutions involved for the individual corporation highlighted through pragmatic cases and projects.

Business sees the need for education about and for sustainability as being broader
than business schools and has put the case for integration across all disciplines such as accounting, law, health, engineering, architecture, policy and planning.

The formation of new, and the development of existing, partnerships in the corporate sector has led to students being more aware of what action businesses are taking to address sustainability and realise that there is a demand for graduates with skills to help business achieve this. These partnerships are beginning to close the gap between current strategies and future plans for sustainability in the ‘real world’ and education about and for sustainability in the classroom.

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