

Embedding sustainability in MBA programs

Education *about* and *for* sustainability in
Australian business schools



This document summarises the outcomes of a research project that not only studied how to mainstream sustainability within MBA programs but also achieved curricula and organisational change for sustainability

Welcome

This summary document was produced following a 15 month research project undertaken by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) and funded by the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources (DEW), formerly the Department of the Environment and Heritage. The project aimed to provide greater opportunities for business management students to develop capacities and competence relevant to change for sustainability in the corporate sector. The focus of the research was on the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and executive education programs in seven Australian business schools.

Who is this summary document for?

This summary document will be relevant to you if you are working to improve the interest and/or the capacity of business executives to implement sustainability. It will also be of interest if you are a university lecturer or business management student with an eye on sustainability issues.

What can you learn from this summary document?

This summary document highlights how organisational and curricula change can be achieved to improve the opportunities for learning *about* and *for* sustainability in Australian business schools. It details how the academics in the business schools involved in the research project were successful in leading change at their respective business schools to educate current and future business leaders in sustainability.

The lessons learnt and tools used to bring about the change for sustainability within the business schools are also included in this summary document.

Who was involved?

Four business schools were involved in the project from June 2005 to September 2006:



Australian Graduate
School of Management
(AGSM)



Macquarie Graduate School
of Management
(MGSM)



University of Queensland
Business School
(UQBS)



University of Technology
Sydney – Graduate School of
Business
(UTSGSB)

They were joined in March 2006 for six months by:



Australian National
University – College of
Business and Economics
(ANUCBE)



Curtin Graduate
School of Business
(CGSB)



Royal Melbourne Institute
of Technology – Graduate
School of Business
(RMITGSB)

Why was this project needed?

As the corporate sector responds to the challenge of sustainability, businesses need managers and leaders who have the capacity to incorporate strategies for sustainability into business planning and drive change for sustainability within the workplace. Business schools have a significant part to play in building this capacity in their role as educators of current and future leaders.

An earlier ARIES study¹ identified that many Australian business schools were lagging behind best practice internationally. It found that Australian business schools need to improve how education *about* and *for* sustainability is incorporated into curricula in order to educate business leaders and drive broader organisational change towards sustainability within the corporate sector.

What was the project trying to achieve?

This project aimed to:

- ◆ Research and better understand how to drive change for sustainability within business schools
- ◆ Achieve curricula and organisational change for sustainability in the participating business schools
- ◆ Provide learnings for others to make change in their own business schools.

It did this by addressing eight key needs identified by the earlier study:

1. Build **relationships and develop partnerships** with the corporate sector
2. Better understand **business needs** for sustainability education
3. Understand student needs and **raise demand** for sustainability courses
4. Build **internal support** for sustainability courses
5. Provide **support for faculty staff** to develop their knowledge and skills in sustainability
6. Revise **core courses and develop new optional courses** to address education *for* sustainability
7. Develop **new resources** (especially case studies) to support integration of education *for* sustainability
8. Build on **international experience** to promote change/research.

Most education in the tertiary sector is focused on education *about* sustainability. This involves teaching 'what sustainability is' and 'why it is important'. There is little on education *for* sustainability; providing business managers and leaders with different skill sets needed to bring about change towards sustainability in their businesses.

The education and training of executives and business leaders needs to focus on more than a discussion on ethics and the role of the corporation in society. These components are covered at some level in many MBA programs. Missing from these programs, however, are the opportunities to understand change for sustainability and how to implement it in practice. Courses which promote broader thinking about societal structures, information flows, politics and hierarchies are required. Such courses need to pose dilemmas rather than promote solutions and they need to equip students with the confidence to address the complexities and challenges for businesses.

Gaining these new skills is necessary for the corporate sector to effectively engage with sustainability and be proactive in creating business cultures and practices which support a more sustainable future.

¹Tilbury, Crawley and Berry (2005)



'Interviews with the staff at MGSM demonstrated that the staff members' disciplines influenced their understanding of the terms 'sustainability' and 'corporate social responsibility'. A great benefit of the interviews was the way in which the conversations I had with the staff members got them thinking about sustainability and sparked their interest in thinking about ways of referring to sustainability issues in their courses. Another benefit of the interviews was the way it mobilised enthusiasm for sustainability issues... amongst staff teaching in a variety of courses. This enthusiasm resulted in support for our project at the School level and professorial level. It also resulted in staff talking about contacts and resources they had in the area of sustainability.'

Source: Robin Kramar, MGSM journal summary

What was involved?

Two senior academics from each of the seven business schools identified specific change actions to address some or all of the eight key needs. They participated in bi-monthly workshops, kept reflective journals and worked collaboratively to share their experiences of change and learn from each other.

ARIES facilitated a process which enabled the participants to:

- ◆ **Envision** what the future focus and key purpose of business schools should be and anticipate the needs of future students e.g. work with senior decision makers, businesses and students to develop a vision for a sustainable business school
- ◆ Use **critical thinking and reflection** e.g. engage students and staff in thinking about the relevance of the complex concepts of sustainability to their area of expertise
- ◆ Increase levels of **participation** in decision making e.g. enable staff and students to work effectively together to create learning environments which include Education *for* Sustainability
- ◆ Form **partnerships** with other organisations to collectively achieve change e.g. create two-way relationships between the business school and the corporate sector to provide real life examples for students and cutting-edge research back to business
- ◆ Think more **systemically** e.g. provide skills for academics and students to think across business school disciplines and specialist areas to provide a more integrated approach to sustainability for students.

What did it achieve?

The participants drove change in their business school by:

- ◆ Building internal support for sustainability
- ◆ Creating partnerships with businesses
- ◆ Increasing demand for sustainability courses
- ◆ Providing education for students *about* and *for* sustainability within specialist and general courses.

The participants at the four business schools involved in the 15 month project achieved the following specific outcomes:

Australian Graduate School of Management revised and *developed new course material*, in particular case studies, for existing core and elective MBA courses. They built relationships with the corporate sector via case study development and guest lecturing from businesses. They raised awareness of the need for education *about* and *for* sustainability and built faculty and *senior management support* for change.

Macquarie Graduate School of Management conducted *needs-analysis research* and interviewed and surveyed students, staff and experts from the corporate sector. They developed a *new elective course* and built senior level support for education *about* and *for* sustainability. Strong, formal partnerships were developed with the corporate sector.

University of Queensland Business School developed *new courses* for sustainability and modified existing MBA and executive programs. They built new and strengthened existing *partnerships with the corporate sector* through the development of case studies. In turn, these partnerships increased the businesses' capacity to make change towards sustainability.

University of Technology Sydney – Graduate School of Business built relationships with corporates and developed new and revised existing *case studies*. They extended existing needs-analysis research by interviewing students and staff to better understand the levers for change within UTSGSB. They developed *collaborative relationships with staff* who would not normally be engaged with sustainability and assisted them to address it within their specific courses.

The three business schools involved in the six month project partnered with the other business schools and achieved the following:

Australian National University – College of Business and Economics built on existing needs-analysis research to increase *staff and student awareness* of the importance of education *about* and *for* sustainability. They developed a *framework for case studies* and teaching material and gained approval for the first postgraduate course on corporate sustainability.

Curtin Graduate School of Business conducted *needs-analysis research* to understand student and business demand for sustainability education. They built *senior faculty support* for the incorporation of education *about* and *for* sustainability within course material.

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – Graduate School of Business updated *sustainability content* and learning resources in an existing elective course and *built cross-organisational* staff support to increase student demand for this course.

What was different about the change process?

Higher education is one of the most challenging sectors to engage in sustainability because it involves more than just re-evaluating curricula and teaching materials. Change towards sustainability in this sector has ‘implications for the institutional culture, influencing the decisions, management procedures and research actions’².

These challenges drove the adoption of a different approach to change. ARIES used an action research process within an Education *for* Sustainability framework to build the capacity of business school staff and provide opportunities for collaboration and change within the participating business schools.

Action research has been shown to be one of the most effective means of initiating action and change towards sustainability³. It differs from other types of research in that its end goal is action and change, not just knowledge generation.

Action research differs from the standard professional practice in change management and focuses on critical reflection and changing mental models which lead to new forms of action and change.

Features of action research in this project

- ◆ **Critical thinking and reflection** by participants to find the relevance of sustainability to their field/specialist areas and to question their assumptions and knowledge of sustainability.
- ◆ **Identifying and challenging core assumptions** (their own, staff’s and students’) about sustainability and change.
- ◆ **Self-driven change**. The participants were ‘action researchers’ and actively participated in all aspects of decision making associated with their project.
- ◆ **Systems thinking** about organisational culture, decision making processes, hierarchies and management systems and how they act as levers for change.
- ◆ **Participation and dialogue** with key stakeholders in the decision making associated with change to understand the issues of power, politics and information flows within their business school.
- ◆ **Capacity building** and professional development of the participants and staff in their business school.
- ◆ **Partnerships** within and external to the business school to facilitate change which will extend beyond the life of the project.
- ◆ **Iterative process** of adaptive learning and change rather than a linear approach to change.

‘The action research approach has been used not only in the conduct of the research program itself but has also become part of the learning approach used in the units themselves. This means that the students are also learning the skills of action research which they can employ in the future to solve organisational problems around unsustainable practices and to pursue new opportunities... Action research changes the nature of the traditional research done at universities which is primarily directed to the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. It creates a shift in emphasis to the active use of knowledge for instrumental and ethical purposes.’

Source: UTSGSB project report

² Tilbury et al (2005)

³ Tilbury, Crawley and Berry (2005)

'The networks established with the business community serve to increase their involvement with the university and to build their awareness of the need for business to contribute to the awareness, commitment and knowledge of future business leaders.'

Source: UTSGSB project report

'Partnerships have been vital to our project and these partnerships have emerged through our research. We believe that there is a strong systemic bias which links research, partnerships and teaching which in turn feeds education for sustainability.'

Source: UQBS project report

'Students need to be able to see the day-to-day aspects of sustainability. They need to hear from managers who live the issues rather than a pure academic treatment of the material. The most effective speakers were those who combined the 'head' issues (profits, business case, etc.) with 'heart' issues (doing the right thing when that is the hard thing). It certainly helped to have speakers from leading CSR practitioner firms.'

Source: AGSM participant journal summary

'The process of talking to key opinion leaders and practitioners in the field did yield some surprises...it allowed the research team to critically analyse systems and ideas as they surfaced and, as the process continued, respond to the ideas and information with further exploration of the systems in use. The interaction with business as a result of the project was one extremely valuable aspect of this project. It enabled us to identify a network of which contacts we were previously unaware. The relationship, in some instances, is a two-way one as these contacts are interested to learn more about our findings and about the research of the research unit and they are willing to continue to contribute to activities like case studies.'

Source: CGSB project report

What can you learn from this project?

The participants used an action research process to drive change in their business schools. You can use a similar approach to drive change in your business school.

Learning 1: Build relationships and develop partnerships with the corporate sector

Many of the seven business schools built research partnerships with businesses with a long term focus. These partnerships are critical to keep up with emerging business practice and to feed 'real life' examples into the classroom either via case studies, guest lecturers or mentoring.

Example: University of Technology Sydney – Graduate School of Business

UTSGSB developed relationships with a number of 'change champion' organisations including Lend Lease, Fuji Xerox, Hewlett Packard and Insurance Australia Group. The participants are continuing to work collaboratively with senior executives from these organisations. Maintaining and strengthening these relationships will ensure continued involvement of these leading organisations with the business school.

Example: University of Queensland Business School

UQBS developed a number of partnerships with corporate and government organisations including Ergon Energy, Hatch, North Australian Pastoral Company, Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland Rail, Rio Tinto and Rockcote.

Example: Australian Graduate School of Management

AGSM invited guest speakers from Australian Gas Light Company, Westpac Banking Corporation, AMP, Social Ventures (Australia), Unilever and National Australia Bank to present on their organisation's sustainability initiatives. This engaged students in real life examples and discussions about the challenges of the corporate response to sustainability.

Learning 2: Better understand business needs for sustainability education

Some of the seven business schools conducted research to better understand the business needs for sustainability education. They did this by undertaking extensive needs-analysis research and by engaging in productive partnerships with the corporate sector.

Example: Curtin Graduate School of Business

CGSB conducted needs-analysis research which involved structured focus group sessions and interviews with students and businesses. This research enabled the participants to identify the drivers for students enrolling in sustainability courses and better understand how to increase student demand for these courses. In particular, it provided a greater appreciation of the diversity of sustainability practice in the key primary and extractive industries in Western Australia which will help inform curricula development. CGSB plans to revise the existing Environmental Management Strategy elective course based on this information.

Learning 3: Understand student needs and raise demand for sustainability courses

MGSM, UTSGSB and CGSB conducted needs-analysis research as a primary component of their change projects with students, staff and business representatives. They found this invaluable in driving the direction of their change actions and curricula development. Inviting these key stakeholders to participate in course development meant that course content was not only determined by the participants but by the interests and needs of the stakeholders involved.

The needs-analysis research provided a better understanding of student interest in sustainability issues and teaching approaches that would most effectively generate and maintain their interest over time.

The formation of new and the development of existing partnerships in the corporate sector has led to students being more aware of how organisations are making change to address sustainability and realise that there is a demand for graduates with skills to help business achieve this. These partnerships have closed the gap between current strategies and future plans for sustainability in the 'real world' and education *about* and *for* sustainability in the classroom.

Example: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – Graduate School of Business

RMITGSB developed collaborative partnerships with other teaching areas of RMIT and also with marketing and administrative staff. These partnerships aimed to increase awareness of and promote the Managing Personal and Social Responsibility elective course.

The partnerships directly increased student demand for the course. In particular, 30% of new students are from areas within RMIT that have not traditionally considered or enrolled in MBA electives. This increased demand goes against the trend of decreasing demand for the course and ensured the course will continue to be offered.

Learning 4: Build internal support for sustainability courses

The participants built effective ongoing relationships with key internal stakeholders. This created better understanding by senior staff of the business case for sustainability, especially at dean level. This business case then drove the incorporation of sustainability both within MBA programs and business school operations.

Key components of building internal support were to create a vision for a sustainable MBA and engage faculty staff and course coordinators about what is being taught and by whom and help identify pockets of support.

Example: Australian National University – College of Business and Economics

ANUCBE built on existing needs-analysis research on student demand to better understand how to embed sustainability curricula into existing courses. They worked across the organisation with all staff from the School of Accounting and Business Information Systems and the School of Management, Marketing, and International Business.

An important outcome of the cross-organisational engagement was that staff became aware that sustainability was not a peripheral issue in business and started to actively seek out material, especially case studies, to use in their courses.

'The introduction of key managers responsible for sustainability in organisations has helped engage students' interest in sustainability issues and from anecdotal evidence has contributed to student demand.'

Source: UQBS project report



'Our brief was to develop three new case studies for the core subject areas of the MBA program and to modify existing case studies. We recognised the importance of ongoing interaction with coordinators early in the research period and modified our planning accordingly. This aspect of the project has, indeed, been the most beneficial in terms of educating for sustainability outcomes. We have all developed new acquaintances in the faculty as a result and are now known as a source of supportive and interesting material. Through this shift to a more discursive approach a number of other faculty staff, aside from core coordinators, have been involved in awareness raising discussions.'

Source: Suzanne Benn, UTSGSB journal summary

'Further, working collaboratively with staff develops curriculum that is more relevant to their needs and the course requirements. By linking sustainability curriculum with their own professional interests, staff are more likely to become committed to extending their own learning in sustainability.'

Source: UTSGSB project report

Revised core and elective courses

- ◆ **AGSM** revised core courses including Business Ethics Integrated Program (IP), Corporate Social Responsibility IP and Finance and Marketing core courses. Integrated Programs are week-long, intensive courses on cross-disciplinary topics that are part of the MBA core courses.
- ◆ **MGSM** developed a new elective course, Managing Sustainable Organisations, to be run in 2007.
- ◆ **RMITGSB** revised the content of their existing elective course, Managing Personal and Social Responsibility.
- ◆ **UQBS** revised two existing courses; the Executive program course on Corporate Sustainability and the MBA course on Change for Corporate Sustainability. UQBS is currently designing a third course for Universitas 21 on corporate social responsibility.
- ◆ **UTSGSB** increased the number of courses which include sustainability curriculum to a further six core courses and four elective courses through developing curriculum support material such as case studies and role plays.

Learning 5: Provide support for faculty staff to develop their knowledge and skills in sustainability

This project enhanced the capacity of the participants to incorporate education *about* and *for* sustainability into MBA programs. The project also built self-sustaining partnerships between the seven business schools. This Australia-wide network will continue to extend the learnings of the project and also provide ongoing opportunities to share knowledge and resources regarding education *about* and *for* sustainability with others.

In addition, other faculty staff increased their capacity, knowledge and skills in education *about* and *for* sustainability and are more able to drive changes in course material. The relationships built with staff members have enhanced the learning culture within the business schools and will lead to greater incorporation of sustainability into core and elective courses, continued revision of sustainability content and increased support for organisational change within the business schools.

Example: Macquarie Graduate School of Management

MGSM interviewed a range of faculty staff and found that most staff were prepared to learn about sustainability by teaching it. This meant that the participants needed to find ways to 'seed' case studies, simulation games and other experiential learning activities into other courses, especially core courses. This has implications for both the development of staff and the sustainability content of MBA programs.

Learning 6: Revise core courses and develop new optional courses to address Education *for* Sustainability

Education *about* and *for* sustainability needs to be in both core and elective courses and across disciplines. This ensures that students are engaged in sustainability issues at various stages during their MBA studies. Five of the seven business schools revised existing courses and developed new sustainability courses and resources such as case studies and teaching materials. This was based on a better understanding of the needs of students, staff and business.

However, course revision needs to provide students with the tools to explore the challenges of sustainability in a new way, Education *for* Sustainability. This will equip them with more systemic and critical thinking skills to use back in their organisations.

Example: University of Queensland Business School

UQBS introduced sustainability elements in the core Accounting, Entrepreneurship, Finance and Strategy courses. They found that students responded positively to the introduction of cutting-edge ideas and research. Based on this they focused on developing course content and case studies by approaching and working with organisations which were highly entrepreneurial or who had a strong strategic commitment to sustainability.

Learning 7: Develop new resources (especially case studies) to support integration of Education for Sustainability

New sustainability resources, such as case studies and teaching materials, were developed based on a better awareness of the needs of students, staff and the corporate sector. This led to greater incorporation of relevant sustainability materials across core and elective MBA courses which will build the skills of graduates.

Example: Case studies developed

- ◆ **AGSM** revised case studies, including Genzyme HBR, Levis Strauss, Nike and Aravind Eye Hospitals.
- ◆ **UQBS** developed case studies including Rockcote, Monsanto and Patagonia; a 'simulation' exercise focusing on sustainability impacts; and Sustcase, an innovative online system that acts as a repository of sustainability case study material for industry and academic use.
- ◆ **UTSGSB** revised and developed seven case studies, including Insurance Australia Group, Fuji Xerox, Carlton United Brewery, Hewlett Packard, Lend Lease, Orica and Stuart Oil Shale Project.

Learning 8: Build on international experience to promote change/research

In addition to using external change agents from the corporate and government sectors to build the business case for change within their business school, the participants used an international sustainability expert.

They all participated in a 'Sustainability Leadership and Inspiration Week' organised by DEW, Macquarie University International Office and ARIES. The purpose of the week was to provide leadership and inspiration for change amongst the business schools and to showcase their projects to internal and external stakeholders.

This was achieved by inviting Professor Richard Welford, a high-profile international expert in the field of sustainability, to share his skills and knowledge in sustainability and higher education. Professor Welford led a week of activities including meetings with key decision makers such as the deans, senior level faculty staff and students at all of the business schools.

'We want students to question their assumptions and recognise the biases and frames of reference they bring to the understanding and analysis of issues. This capability would be reflected in the students not accepting what they read and to be able to explain how their personal values influence their perceptions. ... Teaching exercises such as developing 'mind maps' and exploring 'dilemmas' regarding particular sustainability issues such as child labour would be an essential component of education about and for sustainability.'

Source: MGSM project report

'The principles of action learning have been implicit in the design of the course materials, specifically in assuming a small group workshop structure to explore experiential learning. The exercises provided as part of the lecture material use double-loop learning as their foundation by encouraging students to explore their underlying worldviews or understanding the systems within which they operate. The discussion generated can then lead to revision of these subjective models and new insights and understanding of sustainability issues and their impact on business.'

Source: UTSGSB project report

'Employing an external advocate such as an expert in the field of sustainability with the reputation to attract business to awareness raising activities can act as a catalyst for developing relationships with business.'

Source: Group discussion in workshop 5

In summary

The seven business schools made significant steps towards incorporating education *about* and *for* sustainability into their MBA and executive programs and will continue to build on their achievements. However, they are still in the early stages of building corporate capacity for sustainability and capacity in education *about* and *for* sustainability within their own business schools.

A key finding from the research is that there are multiple drivers for achieving change towards sustainability in MBA programs:

- ◆ **Internal drivers** such as building faculty support and gaining senior management buy-in are vital to build a business school culture which recognises the importance of education *about* and *for* sustainability for corporate managers and leaders.
- ◆ **External drivers** such as support from business, demand from organisations for MBA graduates educated in sustainability and a greater recognition amongst students that sustainability skills are necessary and valued.

Responding to these drivers will increase the ability of business schools to develop leading edge courses in sustainability and help increase student and corporate demand for such courses.

ARIES has also made some recommendations which will form the basis for future research projects. They include:

- ◆ Further **build capacity** within Australian business schools for curricula change to increase MBA graduate skills to assist business in moving towards sustainability
- ◆ Conduct a **national review of student needs** to better understand the mechanics of student demand and help develop targeted courses and teaching material
- ◆ Build **relationships with the corporate sector** to decrease the gap between current 'best practice' in business and course material
- ◆ Build partnerships with organisations **outside the corporate sector** to better understand how organisational processes for change within these sectors are similar to or differ from corporate sector organisations and equip students accordingly
- ◆ Engage **international experts** to drive and support change within Australian business schools and higher education.

Other business schools can now learn from the success of this research project and help to better equip a generation of business leaders and decision makers for the complex and interdisciplinary challenges of sustainability.

Additional information

References

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Tilbury, D., Keogh, A., Leighton, A. and Kent, J. (2005) *A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Further and Higher Education*. Report prepared by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability for the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage.

Where you can find more information

ARIES website: Details of the components of Education *for* Sustainability and other projects similar to this one.

www.aries.mq.edu.au

Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability: Promotes environmentally sustainable development by giving practitioners the resources, knowledge and developmental opportunities they need to green their campuses and ensure that Education *for* Sustainability is integrated into higher education.

www.acts.asn.au

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education: This membership-based association of colleges and universities works to advance sustainability in higher education in the USA and Canada. AASHE works in partnership with businesses, NGOs and government agencies.

www.aashe.org

Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future: ULSF's aim is to make sustainability a major focus of teaching, research, operations and outreach at colleges and universities worldwide. ULSF pursues this through advocacy, education, research, assessment, membership support and international partnerships to advance Education *for* Sustainability. ULSF also publishes The International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education.

www.ulsf.org

Beyond Grey Pinstripes: Is a biennial survey and ranking of business schools which aims to spotlight innovative full-time MBA programs that are integrating issues of social and environmental stewardship into curricula and research.

www.beyondgreypinstripes.org

Forum for the Future: This UK based group aims to improve sustainability literacy by ensuring everyone has enough knowledge and skills to be able to contribute towards sustainable development.

www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/education

Globally Responsible Leadership Forum: This group comprises senior representatives from companies, business schools and centres for leadership learning. It was formed by the European Foundation for Management Development with the support of the United Nations Global Compact.

www.efmd.org/html/Responsibility/cont_detail.asp?id=041207trlv&aid=051012qnis&tid=1&ref=ind

Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium: HEASC is an informal network of higher education associations with a commitment to advancing sustainability in education, research and practice.

www.aashe.org/heasc

Net Impact: Is a network of MBAs, graduate students and professionals committed to using the power of business to improve the world. It has more than 120 student and professional chapters on 4 continents in 75 cities and 80 graduate schools and is an innovative and influential network.

www.netimpact.org

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Citation

Hunting, SA., Mah, J. and Tilbury D. (2006) *Education About and For Sustainability in Australian Business Schools: Embedding Sustainability in MBA Programs*, Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) for the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources, Sydney: ARIES.

Acknowledgements

The Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability is grateful to the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources and the Natural Heritage Trust for providing funding for this project. We are also grateful to members of the Industry Working Group of the National Environmental Education Council for informing this research. In addition, we express our thanks to those business schools that participated and supported this project and the participants for devoting their time and efforts to make change towards sustainability.

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Government or the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources.



ISBN 10: 1 74138 217 3

ISBN 13: 978 1 74138 217 4

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This booklet was printed on Monza Satin — 55% recycled paper that is ECF and certified FSC mixed source (Certificate no. SACOC-1532).

Printed by Macquarie Lighthouse Press and designed by the Centre for Flexible Learning, Macquarie University CFL W06154.