

Education *about* and *for* Sustainability in Australian Business Schools



This summary of findings is taken from a study into the mainstreaming of sustainability education in Business Schools, commissioned by the Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) in January 2004 under the guidance of the National Environmental Education Council (NEEC) Industry Working Group.

The research was carried out by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) and Arup Sustainability, and completed in June 2004.



Australian Government
Department of the
Environment and Heritage

ARIES

MACQUARIE
UNIVERSITY - SYDNEY

ARUP

Why this study?

The sustainability agenda is gaining significant ground in the business and industry sector internationally, although in Australia this is happening at a slower pace. The lack of opportunities across Australia to build capacity for sustainability in business may help to explain why the increasing interest in the area of sustainability has only resulted in limited reorientation of business strategy and practice.

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) program is probably the world's best-known and most influential postgraduate program. In preparing future decision-makers, Business Schools have a key role to play in providing education and capacity building as well as leadership in sustainability. What is not clear is the extent to which this is happening in Australia and overseas.



What was the aim?

This study set out to identify current best practice in sustainability within MBA programs internationally and across Australia and to review opportunities for enhancing education *about* and *for* sustainability within these programs and related professional short courses.

In practice, most environmental education programs educate *about* sustainability. However, education *for* sustainability goes beyond the dissemination of knowledge, seeking also to empower people and build their capacity to take action. Through teamwork, stakeholder dialogue and decision-making, people can learn from each other as they consider desired futures and alternative options for getting there.

When combined, education *about* sustainability and education *for* sustainability provide people with not just the knowledge and understanding to engage with sustainability issues, but also the skills and capacity to plan, motivate and manage change towards sustainability within organisations or industries.

The main questions addressed by this study were:

- What exists in terms of education *about* and *for* sustainability in MBAs and professional short courses in Australia?
- What is current best practice in Australia?
- How does this compare with international best practice?
- Does current practice meet the needs of business and industry in sustainability?
- Where are the opportunities for improvement in this area within MBAs and associated short courses?

How was it carried out?

Business Schools in Australia and overseas were examined to identify education *about* and *for* sustainability in MBA curricula and short courses, using relevant information from internet sources as well as from related published literature. The study identified current best practice overseas through a benchmarking process which adopted three levels of performance criteria. The same criteria were applied to thirty-three Australian Business School MBA programs in order to understand how they address sustainability content and teaching of skills for sustainability.

Four additional Australian Business Schools participated in research studies, independent of the benchmarking process, to provide more in-depth information regarding their MBA degrees and the education content *about* and *for* sustainability. Recognising that there is also an extensive range of non-university programs, Global Knowledge Ventures was commissioned to conduct a separate study of other professional training and short courses relating to sustainability.

Partnerships were formed with the following four Australian Business Schools:

- Australian Graduate School of Management - University of Sydney and University of New South Wales
- Graduate School of Business - University of Technology Sydney
- Macquarie Graduate School of Management - Macquarie University
- Melbourne Business School Ltd - Associated with the University of Melbourne

Findings from the benchmarking and review of in-depth responses informed the recommendations of this study.

What were the outcomes of the study?

Best practice overseas

Several overseas MBA programs have embraced sustainability as a core aspect of their work and interests. Major Business Schools in the Americas, Asia and Europe offer Masters programs demonstrating 'leading edge' education *about* and *for* sustainability.

These 'leading edge' Business Schools either provide specialised sustainability MBA programs or have integrated education *about* and *for* sustainability as a fundamental part of business studies.

'Leading edge' Business Schools share the following characteristics:

- A considerable number of core and elective subjects based on education *about* and *for* sustainability and a sub-specialisation stream in sustainability
- Staff who have teaching and/or research expertise in the area of education *for* sustainability
- Staff and senior management who recognise the importance of developing sustainability knowledge and skills amongst business graduates, articulated through course material and promotional information
- MBA subject and generic outcomes or MBA graduate profiles which include sustainability
- Opportunities for students to address sustainability through their assignments
- Development of student skills in areas considered important to the understanding and implementation of strategic change toward sustainability such as critical reflective thinking, systemic thinking, change management, stakeholder engagement and futures thinking
- Extracurricular and student initiated sustainability activities such as conferences and seminars offered as part of the curriculum

Australian Business Schools

Thirty-seven Business Schools were analysed for the purposes of this study.

The following points identify what exists within these Business Schools in terms of education *about* and *for* sustainability in MBAs and professional short courses:

- Nineteen of the Business Schools reviewed did not include sustainability in core or elective subjects of their MBA programs
- Thirteen of the Business Schools were rated within the category of 'acceptable standard' generally due to the incorporation of elective subjects that address education *about* and *for* sustainability within MBA programs
- Three of the Business Schools' MBA programs were rated within the category of 'good practice' where core and elective subjects which include education *about* and *for* sustainability are offered
- None of the Australian Business Schools reviewed were considered currently to be in the category of 'leading edge' for the delivery of an MBA course that is specialised in relation to sustainability (or where a considerable number of core and elective courses are offered)
- Short professional courses on offer at Australian Business Schools do not explicitly address education *about* and *for* sustainability

Business and industry needs

Business School websites show little evidence that business and industry are communicating their need for graduates that can understand and operationalise sustainability, or providing input on associated curriculum improvements. In the four Business Schools conducting in-depth research, it was evident that business does have opportunities to inform MBA curricula through forums, advisory boards and committees. However, only one of the four identified that they specifically consult with sustainability-focused businesses to contribute to their MBA program.



Opportunities for improvement

Opportunities do exist for the future inclusion of education *about* and *for* sustainability in Australian MBA programs, with further minimal opportunities in short professional courses.

For example, the University of Technology Sydney is about to commence a specialised sub-major in 'Sustainability and Governance' and has high student demand for its existing subject 'Managing for Sustainability'. A new fully integrated executive MBA program explicitly addressing sustainability and business is being developed at the University of Queensland. There is also the possibility of the inclusion of a short course relating to sustainability and strategy at the Australian Graduate School of Management where no core sustainability courses currently exist.

Other Australian Business Schools identified opportunities through such activities as raising awareness of sustainability through student clubs, offering education *about* sustainability within core courses and introducing education *for* sustainability by building on existing skills offered through subjects in the MBA program. However, most Business Schools did not identify opportunities for growth within short courses.

Where to from here?

In June 2004 a workshop was held at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management City Campus in Sydney to reflect on the findings of the study and to identify relevant and realistic recommendations. Ten people who informed the research of this project attended the workshop.

Those in attendance studied the findings carefully and explored a number of future options. The discussion formed the basis of a recommendation for a further project that will promote the mainstreaming of sustainability across the major Australian Business Schools by:

- Developing industry partnerships that provide work placements and mentoring
- Revising core courses to address education *for* sustainability
- Developing new optional courses on sustainability
- Developing new resources for sustainability including industry case studies
- Encouraging the integration of international experience to promote change and research
- Engaging students through extracurricular activities such as competitions and involving industry and alumni
- Seeking to address the criteria associated with 'leading edge' Business Schools

Citation:

Tilbury, D. Crawley, C. and Berry, F. (2004) 'Education About and For Sustainability in Australian Business Schools' Report prepared by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES), Macquarie University and Arup Sustainability for the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage.

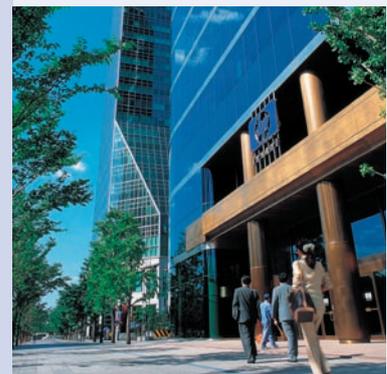
For further information

please contact:

Environmental Education Section
Department of the Environment
and Heritage
John Gorton Building
King Edward Terrace
Parkes ACT 2600
+61 2 6274 1111
www.deh.gov.au

Daniella Tilbury
Australian Research Institute in
Education for Sustainability
Graduate School of
the Environment
Macquarie University
North Ryde NSW 2109
+61 2 9850 7950
www.aries.mq.edu.au

Cathy Crawley
Arup Sustainability
Lvl 4 192 Ann Street
Brisbane Qld 4000
+61 7 3023 6000
www.arup.com



Other researchers involved in the study:

Robin Kramar, Macquarie Graduate
School of Management (MGSM)

Sue Benn and Dexter Dunphy,
UTS Graduate School of Business
(GSB)

Robert Marks, Australian Graduate
School of Management (AGSM)

Mark Crosby, Melbourne Business
School Ltd.

Peter Castellas, Global Knowledge
Ventures

The views expressed herein are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, and the Government does not accept responsibility for any information or advice contained herein.