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Using Sustainability Audits to Enhance Responsible Management Education and Develop Personally and Professionally Responsible Work-Ready Graduates
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Abstract
It is widely held that responsible management education within UK business schools is lagging behind the needs of graduates in the changing world of work, leaving a UK-wide skills shortage. New approaches to learning and teaching are therefore required to address this skills shortage and develop personally and professionally responsible work-ready graduates who possess the knowledge, skills and values required to deliver environmentally, socially, and economically responsible business futures that balance short term economic management with long-term responsible business practices.

In response, the University of Worcester Business School has adopted real-world ISO14001 and Global Reporting Initiative sustainability audits as teaching tools to enhance responsible management education for second and third-year business management students. Engaging students in the critical and reflexive thinking and questioning required to undertake a sustainability audit of business procedures and practices can develop graduates who are personally and professionally responsible, work-ready, and have the necessary responsible management knowledge, skills, and values to identify and address any irresponsible business practices.

This innovative approach to responsible management education will be of interest to educators seeking opportunities to enhance student engagement in responsible business practices and to graduate employers seeking work-ready graduates who can close gaps in sustainability skills and help to develop responsible business futures. Both of these are urgent needs in the changing world of work.

Key words: Responsible management education; sustainability audits; personally and professionally responsible work-ready graduates; responsible business management

Introduction
Many corporate managers and decision makers are educated by business schools (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2011). There is a long-held expectation that higher education institutions should play a leading role in developing the knowledge, skills and values required by businesses to achieve a responsible, just, and sustainable future (Cortese, 2003; United Nations, 2015; Financial Times, 2019).

It is widely recognised that business schools have the potential to support businesses in addressing issues of irresponsible behaviours and practices through learning, teaching, and research (Rieckmann, 2012; Sterling et al, 2013; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2013; Higher Education Academy, 2014; United Nations, 2017). There are specialist courses, and responsible management education is being incorporated into business curricula; 85% of graduate jobs in the UK now require a knowledge of responsible management practices (Drayson, 2015. But despite this, it is still generally accepted that business schools are failing to adequately prepare their students to deal with the issues of
irresponsible management they will face in their future workplaces (Drayson, 2015; Govender, 2016; Sadler, 2016; Financial Times, 2019).

To overcome this skills shortage and ensure students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values needed in the changing world of work, business schools need to increase their focus on sustainability, ethics, and social purpose in business management education (Financial Times, 2019) and promote critical and reflexive thinking (Howlett, Ferriera & Blomfield, 2016) and questioning (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). Together these can equip future business managers with the ability to identify and challenge irresponsible behaviours and business practices that exploit both people and the environment (Mula et al, 2017).

This paper explores the challenges faced by business schools in equipping graduates with these skills. It proposes the adoption of real-world sustainability audits such as ISO14001 and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) as teaching tools that are able to engage students in the active and participative learning styles they prefer. These tools ultimately provide the graduate employment market with personally and professionally responsible work-ready graduates.

**Challenges Facing Business Schools, Graduates and their Future Employers**

Business schools are playing a significant role in closing sustainability and employment skills gaps by increasingly incorporating employment skills into teaching and investing in resources to enhance graduates’ employment skills (Cashian, Clarke and Richardson, 2015). But Figuero & Raufflett (2015) cite two challenges that remain:

- How can business schools effectively educate the leaders of the future to become responsible managers and change agents?
- How should business schools integrate responsible business practices into management education?

The ability of business schools to address the challenges of environmental accountability and social and economic responsibility is widely recognised (Higher Education Academy, 2014; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2013; Financial Times, 2019), but no consensus has been established as to the most effective ways to do this. Rather, generic teaching approaches have been advocated. These include

- Engaging students in realistic, relevant, and authentic experiences in contexts and learning environments they find meaningful (Matthew & Butler, 2017)
- Developing immersive learning environments that enable students to construct knowledge (Howlett, Ferreira & Blomfield, 2016; Staniskis and Katiliute, 2016)
- Incorporating potential scenarios for a responsible and sustainable future (Rieckmann, 2012)
- Engaging students in authentic enquiry (Hensley, 2017)

In addition, Wiek et al (2014) advocate incorporating real-world business tools to further enhance authentic learning experiences. This practical application of learning can promote responsible business futures and develop the personal and professional knowledge, skills, and values that are increasingly in demand by businesses.

Individually these approaches may go some way towards enhancing responsible management education. Combining them will integrate practical and theoretical knowledge, skills, and values into responsible management education and encourage thinking in the new ways needed for them to become the responsible managers of the future. This can be achieved by using a real-world sustainability audit as a tool to enhance responsible management education.
Sustainability Audits

A sustainability audit is a methodological examination of a business’s procedures and practices that determine or influence its environmental, social, and economic impacts. This is widely used to allow a business to develop a systematic approach to:

- Improve responsible business activities (Viegas et al, 2013)
- Identify problems before they affect operations (Hillary, 2004)
- Provide a benchmark from which to measure subsequent changes (Clark & Whitelegg, 1998).

Sustainability audits give a valuable opportunity for students to develop personal and professional responsible management skills, giving them additional employment skills to offer potential future employers. The practice of auditing can also provide students with knowledge and values to feed forward into their future workplaces to develop responsible business practices from within.

Why use sustainability audits as tools for learning and teaching?

As a sustainability audit is a systematic process, it can introduce students to the complex issues faced by responsible and irresponsible businesses on a daily basis. Undertaking an audit gives the advantages of:

- Exposing wider issues and empowering students to identify, critically evaluate, and question issues with greater insight than would be encountered through receiving pre-digested information in lectures (Centre for Teaching, 2017).
- Engaging students in the active, real-world learning processes in environments they prefer; learning-by-doing and problem-based learning in real-world settings.

Learning-by-doing can promote engagement with the subject (Dewey, 1916; Drayson, 2015) whilst problem-based learning can equip students with transferable skills of enquiry, problem solving, and critical analysis (Shepherd, 1998), which encourages individuals to challenge accepted practice. Together these can help students to become independent learners rather than consumers of knowledge (Juarez-Nayera et al, 2006).

The Practical Application of Sustainability Audits as Teaching Tools

At the University of Worcester Business School two different real-world audits are used to enhance responsible management education – ISO14001 and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) audits. Second year business management students studying responsible management undertake an assessed ISO14001 audit of the University of Worcester, whilst third year students undertake an assessed GRI audit of a fictional case study company. The author designed and created both audits. The modules they are taught in and the fictional case study facilitates a teaching approach based around sustainability audits taken from real-world business tools. In both sustainability audits the students independently collect, synthesise, and evaluate evidence of business practices to develop evidence-based judgements of responsible business performance.

For second year students this involves exploring and evaluating the university as a business. Students develop their audit findings from their critical analysis of information provided on current practice by the university’s sustainability practitioners in expert witness sessions, their investigation of on-campus activities during site visits, and evaluation of sustainability strategies, targets, and achievements published on the university’s sustainability website.

Third year students undertake their GRI audit of a fictional company created as an online case study by the author to replicate a real-world manufacturing company. Students review and evaluate the emails, letters, photographs, and company reports provided, which mirror as closely as possible the documents and site visit undertaken by an auditor in a real-world sustainability audit.
The students are advised to act as sustainability consultants when conducting their audit to give them experience of work-based learning and freedom to explore the complexity of real-world responsible business practices. They are guided to act in two specific ways: firstly, to conduct an assessment of the process rather than the person undertaking it and secondly, to focus on the processes that are working well. Experience from professional auditors suggests auditing the process generally generates a more detailed response, whilst assessing the person can lead to a limited response for fear of reprisal. In addition, it is generally accepted that by seeking good practice, irresponsible actions will become visible.

Both second and third-year students are given an audit template to complete which replicates those used in real-world sustainability audits. They then collect evidence and analyse and filter it to identify what is important and what can be left out. These are both important academic skills for successful learning outcomes and valuable employment skills for their future. Performing this situational analysis leads to an evidence-based judgement of responsible business practice against each area of activity on the template, i.e. audit findings.

The ISO14001 template includes audit questions, whereas third year students are required to construct audit questions which they then answer. This additional task is incorporated to increase the level of academic challenge whilst further engaging them in real-world business tools. Following this situational analysis, students are required to frame potential actions accompanied by SMART targets to address the irresponsible actions identified.

The Potential of Sustainability Audits to Develop Personally and Professionally Responsible Work-Ready Graduates

This teaching approach has been specifically designed to develop students' personal and professional responsible management practices. It can expose them to the process-based approaches to responsible business management that organisations are currently adopting and promote a gradual development of responsible business knowledge, skills, and values that are vital for responsible business futures.

The independent learning processes built into the practice of auditing are valuable in students' academic careers, for their future employment prospects, and for their future employers. These processes can develop the higher order cognitive skills considered lacking in students (Sadler, 2016), promote long-term thinking, assist students to recognise their own learning and, perhaps most importantly, help them to recognise what they do not know.

The long-term thinking promoted by auditing typifies the reality of responsible business behaviours, particularly the challenges organisations face in balancing short-term economic management with the longer-term responsible business practices that society is increasingly expecting. This, along with the process of learning what needs to be learned to complete the audit, can challenge students' preference for just-in-time learning. It can also engage them in self-directed learning whilst facilitating the continuous academic support and guidance that is expected by current students (Ertmer & Simons, 2006) in the massified and marketised environment of business schools (Lynch, 2006) which is demanding increased student numbers, better learning outcomes, and more student retention.

Conclusion

This paper has presented sustainability audits as a tool for teaching which can enhance responsible management education through authentic and real-world learning in the learning environment that students prefer. Utilising the real-world ISO14001 and GRI audits is designed to immerse students in real-world systematic processes that encourage them to critically analyse and question environmental, social and economic (ir)responsible management practices. The evidence-based situational analysis of the business audited and construction of potential improvement actions seeks to develop students’ responsible management skills...
in the safe environment of a classroom, to close responsible management skills gaps and empower students to develop both academic and employment skills to enable them to graduate from the University of Worcester Business School as personally and professionally responsible work-ready graduates.

Bibliography


