Can real-world sustainability audits provide a tool for effective responsible management education?

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Over the last decade there has been a growing recognition that Business Schools can make a valuable contribution to the promotion of responsible business futures by equipping students with appropriate responsible management skills (Rieckmann, 2013; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014, United Nations, 2017). However, despite this, Business Schools' responsible management education has not kept pace with the changing world of work (Lonzano et al, 2013; Govender, 2016; Environmental Audit Committee, 2017). This has led to a growing shortage of the responsible management skills (Sadler, 2016) such as critical and reflexive thinking (Howlett, Ferriera and Bromfield, 2016), and questioning (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013) to identify and challenge irresponsible behaviours and business practices that exploit both people and the environment (Mula et al, 2017).

In an attempt to close this skills gaps and prepare students for the changing world of work, an innovative approach to responsible management education has been adopted at the University of Worcester Business School. This utilises real-world sustainability audits as a tool for learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) in Level 5 and Level 6 modules to engage students in the identification and evaluation of current business practices and recommendations of more responsible business practices.

This innovative design for responsible management education offers project-based learning in a real-world learning environment that students find relevant (Wiek et al, 2014): Level 5 students conduct an ISO14001 audit of the University of Worcester and Level 6 students audit a fictional company presented as an online, mixed media-case study. Project-based learning can equip students with softer employment skills for responsible management such as collaboration, negotiation and influencing and transferable knowledge such as enquiry, problem solving and critical analysis (Shepherd, 1998).

The effectiveness of this approach to responsible management education has been assessed over the last three years through annual pre- and post-module surveys in which students report their development of transferable knowledge and employment skills for responsible business management. The findings of this study are consolidated and presented by students' level of study to demonstrate the value of sustainability audits in promoting skills for responsible management. For example, Figures 1(a) and 1(b) show 81 Level 6 students' self-

reported development of the transferable knowledge skills identified by Ryan and Tilbury (2013), Howlett, Ferriera and Bromfield (2016) and Shepherd (1998): enquiry, problem solving and critical analysis.

Figure 2(a) and 2(b) show Level 6 students' development of the employment skills that Shepherd (1998) advocates as outcomes of problem-based learning; collaboration, negotiating and influencing. These practical skills are required for effective responsible business management.

Figures 3(a) and 3(b) and 4(a) and 4(b) show a similar development of responsible management skills for 56 Level 5 students as is recognised for Level 6 students.

The research findings shown suggest participating a module designed around a sustainability audit can promote the skills required for responsible management. This can help to close the skills gaps identified by Sadler (2016) and provide the responsible management education required to meet the needs of future graduates in the changing world of work.

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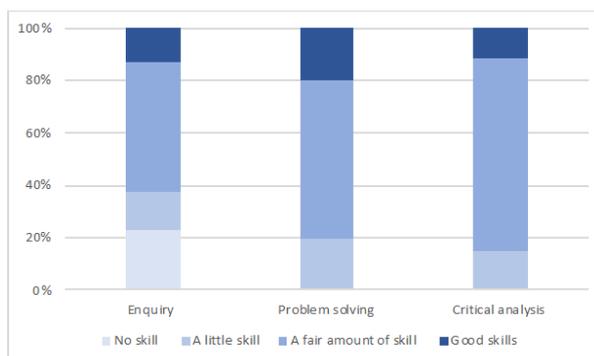
Figure 1 (a): Level 6 students' transferable knowledge skills for responsible business management (pre-module)
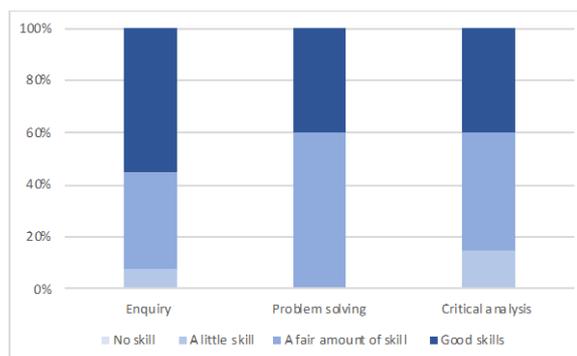

Figure 1 (b): Level 6 students' transferable knowledge skills for responsible business management (post-module)
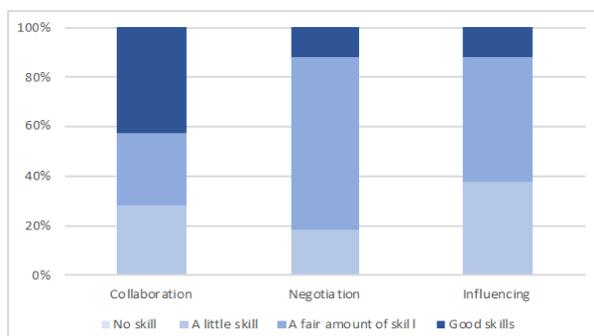

Figure 2 (a): Level 6 students' employment skills for responsible business management (pre-module)
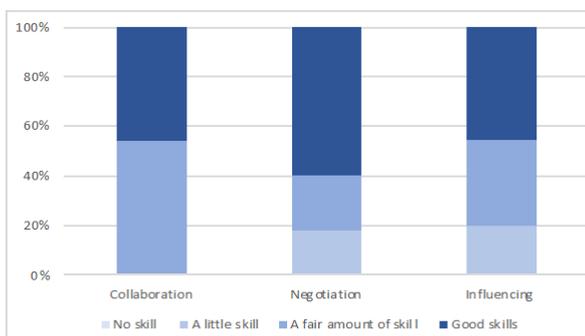

Figure 2 (b): Level 6 students' employment skills for responsible business management (post-module)
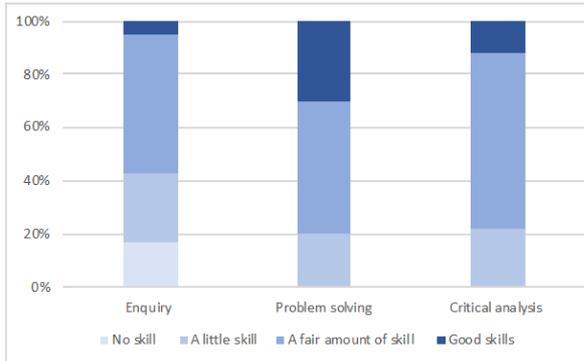
Figure 3 (a): Level 5 students' transferable knowledge skills for responsible business management (pre-module)
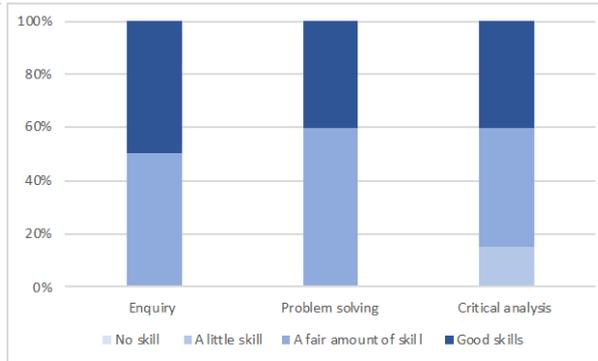

Figure 3 (b): Level 5 students' transferable knowledge skills for responsible business management (post-module)
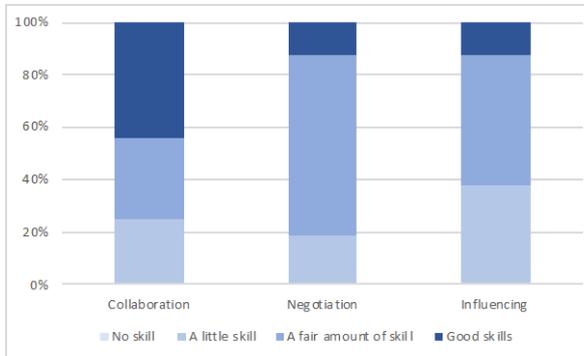

Figure 4 (a): Level 5 students' employment skills for responsible business management (pre-module)
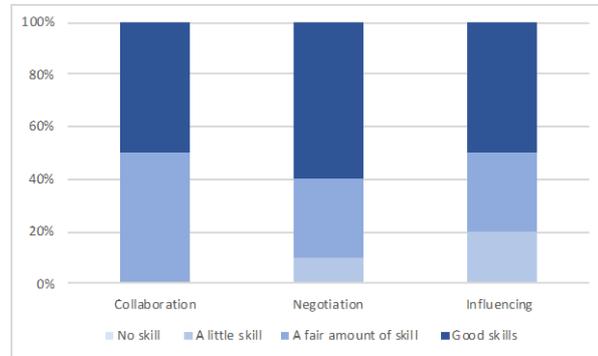

Figure 4 (b): Level 5 students' employment skills for responsible business management (post-module)