Barriers and enablers

Jasmin Godemann, Christian Herzig and Jeremy Moon

Organisations which aim to initiate wider and deeper curriculum change towards sustainability and integrate sustainability into their research and organisation can face several obstacles. In our research we analysed the experience with the integration of sustainability made by business schools in order to investigate which aspects undermine efforts in turning sustainability into practice and which strategies for surmounting these barriers are reported to be effective. To this end, we rely on Hofmann and Bazerman’s (2007) work who describe such constraints in the form of cognitive and organizational biases. Cognitive obstacles and barriers to individual implementation include, for example, fear of the unknown, threats to one’s own interests, habitual distrust or overconfidence and may be confronted by developing a common ground and sustainable solutions early in the process. In addition, organizational arrangements are seen to hamper individuals from perceiving opportunities to better the organization and society, for example due to organizational silos, resource constraints or misaligned coordinating mechanism. Organisational biases thus reflect the ways in which organizations have evolved based on environmental pressures and adaptive organizational responses. Taken together, the work by Hofmann and Bazerman (2007) suggests that psychological and organisational sources of resistance are closely interlinked with each other and that alterations in organisational structures and individual interests and biases are required to overcome obstacles to sustainability implementation and achieving sustainable transformation (Hofmann and Bazerman 2007, Winn and Angell, 2000).

Findings

In reflecting on the sustainability integration process, business schools attested to the importance of time. Interviewees stressed that people would approach sustainability in their own way and work in their own time and, more generally, that the academic wheels would turn very slowly. Moreover, several business schools acknowledge that they are still at too early a stage on the journey and for the work to be a work in progress (Box 1).
The director of a centre dedicated to build sustainability in one of the case study business schools acknowledged the process character of integration but also underlined the necessity to advance the progress in the future (see Box 2).

Closer inspection of the findings from reflecting on learning experience revealed a set of challenges and barriers to the integration of sustainability (Table 1 and findings presented below were derived from the analysis of SIP reports, telephone interviews and interviews carried out within the multiple case study). Challenges and barriers were generally around

i) difficulties in translating sustainability into individual management disciplines due to the uncertainties surrounding the focus and nature of responsible management education; and

ii) engaging with faculty and providing an account of where it stands on sustainability and what needs to be done without seeming to preach or to interfere with academic freedom.

More specific barriers to the integration of sustainability into business schools are staff related cognitive biases such as underdeveloped understandings of relevant concepts and the variety of terms in use, which also refers to a lack of knowledge of strategies to increase student engagement and change student culture; underdeveloped knowledge about the relevance of sustainability for their discipline; and the overconfidence that sustainability would be addressed sufficiently in teaching despite a mismatch with students’ expectations.

Concerning the acceptance of a sustainability-orientated change of the curriculum, there is uncertainty surrounding ways to enhance the attractiveness and relevance for students and limited clients’ awareness of the role of educating employees for implementing organisational sustainability strategies (‘demand’).

Cognitive enablers include basic strategies to improve the availability of resources (e.g. teaching case studies, publications) and internal communication in order to raise awareness...
of sustainability issues. This can also include surveys among academic staff with teaching responsibilities to explore mindsets and viewpoints. Engaging the hearts and minds of lecturers through increasing their efficacy and a strategic use of language to frame sustainability issues and make them adaptable appears to help business schools to overcome cognitive barriers.

Turning to the organisational level, we found some self-reported barriers which are very common for implementation processes and which have been reported by individual case studies before. These principle organisational barriers are around resource availability (time) and organisational silos. Interestingly, we also found evidence for difficulties in integrating sustainability in customised education programmes, i.e. those whose design is largely influenced by customers. This may explain why new programmes (e.g. executive education training specialising in sustainability) are more frequent, relative to the integration of sustainability into existing structures such as regular executive education programmes.

A barrier which emerged through the analysis of the case study data is related to the limited extent to which sustainability research can be promoted within business schools and create impact for society as long as research is driven by organisational pressures to publish primarily in high-ranked peer reviewed journals (see Box 3).

This may explain why, in the SIP reports, the ‘traditional’ academic way of publishing (publication in international refereed journals and presentation at conferences) dominates the business schools’ account on how to transfer knowledge. Only a few business schools elaborate on ways to transfer their knowledge to other audiences through, for example, contributions in the media or other print media. In the UK, stronger recognition of impact considerations in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework may encourage a change in this regard.

Our analysis revealed a strong focus on organisational enablers for integrating sustainability in management education. Organisational enablers of integration were generally around observation and learning from other business schools (e.g. those who participate in PRME). The participation in the PRME initiative itself and the respective establishment of a reporting system was highlighted, too. Other external factors influencing transformational processes within business schools are educational standards/ accreditation and the acknowledgement
of responsible management education herein. Organisational arrangements which are viewed to be beneficial for learning more about how to best integrate sustainability in teaching are

i) sharing best teaching practice and innovative learning materials with other business schools;

ii) inviting experienced faculty and lecturers to participate in business school activities (conferences, lectures); and

iii) curriculum discussion events.

The latter one takes place among faculty or integrates external stakeholder viewpoints (local community/business leaders) and has been used to develop ideas for specialised sustainability programmes (new courses and material updates). Organisational responses to facilitating sustainability-related curriculum change also include alterations of structure and context. Whilst centres dedicated to sustainability are viewed to be a strategic coordination mechanism in terms of facilitating sustainability teaching and engaging with business through dialogue, there is also evidence for the integration of sustainability considerations in staff recruitment, are likely to influence the climate of change. With regard to the integration of sustainability into existing curriculum structures (see also Rusinko’s Matrix from Session 2, Quadrant 1 and 3), the findings confirm the importance of clear support from the school leadership and of formal requests from school and program directors. In addition, the employment of an experienced teacher was reported in order to enable faculty to test out approaches to integrating sustainability in particular disciplines. This teacher was well-versed in sustainability teaching and acted as a mentor for faculty.
Table 1. Barriers to and Enablers for Integrating Sustainability into Business Schools

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<td><strong>Cognitive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Barriers</strong></td>
<td>Uncertainties surrounding the focus and nature of responsible management education;</td>
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<td>Staff reluctance to integrate sustainability into their teaching because they lack confidence or knowledge about the relevance for their discipline;</td>
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<td>Risk of being seen to preach or interfere with academic freedom;</td>
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<td>Mismatch between staff assumptions that they already address sustainability issues within their courses and students’ expectations;</td>
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<td>Reluctance of faculty to contribute to the debate around sustainability and generate opportunities for sustainability dialogue with businesses;</td>
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<td>Uncertainties surrounding curriculum change which enhances the attractiveness and relevance of sustainability to students;</td>
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<td>Majority of students is less proactive in engaging with networks/projects/theses on sustainability;</td>
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<td>Lack of knowledge for strategies to increase student engagement and change student culture;</td>
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<td>Lack of awareness of management education’s role for implementing organisational sustainability strategies on the side of clients;</td>
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<td><strong>Enablers</strong></td>
<td>Raising faculty’s awareness of sustainability issues related to their field through:</td>
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<td>making available publications, providing good teaching case studies and internal communications more generally (opportunities for research topics/conferences – research led teaching);</td>
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<td>Surveys among academic staff with teaching responsibilities to explore mindsets and viewpoints;</td>
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<td>Explaining that sustainability does not require to revolutionise teaching and drop chunks of the core materials developed in recent years to insert sustainability;</td>
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<td>Use of language to frame and foster sustainability issues;</td>
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<td>Engage the hearts and minds of the lecturers by increasing their perceived efficacy.</td>
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Organisational

**Barriers**
- Specification of sustainability in customised educational programmes where the business school has limited control over design;
- Staff reluctance to integrate sustainability into their teaching because they lack time;
- Organisational silos, i.e. responsibilities for implementation attached to a few organisational members;
- Organisational expectations and setting incentives to deliver research which is solely oriented towards high-ranked journals;

**Enablers**
- Observing and learning from others (e.g. monitoring of developments in PRME reporting);
- Centres dedicated to sustainability engage businesses in dialogue with academia;
- Sharing best teaching practices and innovate learning materials with other business schools;
- Clear support from school’s leadership and formal request from school and program directors;
- Experienced teacher who acts as mentor for faculty to test out approaches to integrating sustainability in particular disciplines;
- Inviting international faculty and lecturers to participate in conferences and lectures for both students and alumni in order to learn how to best incorporate sustainability in teaching;
- Acknowledgement of responsible management teaching in education standards/ accreditation;
- Participation in PRME itself and development of reporting (e.g. SIPs reports) and control system;
- Curriculum discussion events to i) get input from external sustainability leaders (local community/economy) or ii) discuss among faculty innovations and ideas for teaching;
- Recruitment of staff with specialist interests in sustainability;
- Make use of assessed coursework.
References
