

“Driving sustainability into education, including business schools”

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A year from now, the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) will come to an end. The ten year initiative was established to integrate sustainable values, principles and practices into all aspects of education in order to lay the foundations for behaviour and decision making that support an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable future for all. Assigning an important role to education as a tool for change, the initiative has called for substantial changes in educational practices (www.unesco.org).

The role of education in sustainable development was recognized already in Agenda 21, the sustainable development action plan adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992, which stated that “education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues. ... It is also critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making.” (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992 ,ch.36)

Looking at the situation in higher education today, however, Shephard concludes that very little has happened regarding the integration of sustainable development into university agenda. In fact, universities have continued to teach unsustainable growth models focused on short-term profit often without consideration of environmental or ethical aspects and consequences (Shephard 2010).

While some business schools have started to include a sustainability aspect in their curriculum, research shows that business students still graduate with poor or limited sustainability knowledge. Business schools have been called “academies of the apocalypse” for producing “toxic bankers and scammers” complicit in escalating social and environmental degradation and being partly responsible for the on-going financial crisis (James, 2009). Scholars have expressed their concern that traditional business education attracts and encourages selfishness, worrying that business schools have not adapted their philosophies to meet the future leadership needs (de Pillis & al 2010, Emerald 2011). Most MBA programs today still leave sustainability and corporate social responsibility to be dealt with in special elective courses (according to the Association of MBAs, only 20% of UK MBA programs include a mandatory CSR module) (James, 2009). There is a risk that failure to educate students and future managers in CSR and business ethics will lead inappropriate business decisions when these graduates enter the workforce (David, 2013).

David observes that those business schools that do provide their MBAs with substantial environmental training do so, because they see an increasing interest among companies to hire students from such universities (David, 2013). The demands and signals of the market and the universities’ interpretation of them seem to play a part in how educational programs are shaped.

Offered or not, Shephard stresses that the most essential part of education for sustainability is its consequences (Shephard 2010). If graduates do not put their knowledge and acquired skills into practice, education for sustainability has failed. However, as long as weak demand pushes sustainability into the extracurricular category, students can graduate without being introduced to critical, alternative thinking leaving little hope for change any time soon.

Questions for discussion (inspired by Shephard)

- If market demands are reflected in university teaching, which direction do we see sustainability education going?
- Does privatisation of universities pose a challenge or an opportunity for the integration of sustainable education?
- Is formal and politically independent education the right forum to enhance students' personal character and morale?

References

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