

Curriculum Audits and Implications for Sustainable Development Goals Integration in Business Schools

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Abstract. This paper investigates the alignment of business school curriculums with the Sustainable Development Goals, utilising a case study of Griffith Business School, Australia. The study utilises an audit of keywords to map content and concepts associated with the goals, targets and indicators of SDGs. The audit results revealed that although there was already considerable uptake of key SDGs concepts throughout the undergraduate programs, in particular Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), there were some gaps. Feedback from teaching staff on the results was combined with existing literature and industry/government approaches to offer considerations for future curriculum development that seeks to better integrate SDGs and sustainability. This work contributes to ongoing discussions about sustainability curriculum development and links previous research with the emerging SDG agenda in business schools. The practical nature of this research lends to direct transfer of method to other business schools who are wishing to map and develop their curriculum in relation to the SDGs.

Keywords: SDGs, curriculum audit, sustainability, curriculum, higher education.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development goals (SDGs) are rapidly becoming an important driver of sustainability curriculum renewal in business schools throughout the world (Storey, Killian, & O'Regan 2017). The Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME), an initiative of the United Nations Global Compact, is promoting the SDGs as a cornerstone of business school curriculum (UNPRME 2016). Presently there are over 700 business schools worldwide that have joined PRME (UNPRME 2019), yet limited documentation exists on how the SDGs can be better introduced and integrated into the curriculum of business schools.

An increasing number of studies have examined the importance of including SDGs into business school curriculum both in general (Edwards, Benn, & Starik

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2017; Hope 2017; Hoveskog, Halila, Mattsson, Upward, & Karlsson 2018; Kolb, Fröhlich, & Schmidpeter 2017) and specifically into disciplines of business, including accounting (Bebbington, Russell, & Thomson, 2017; Bebbington & Unerman 2017) and business law (Verbos 2016). Some attention has been given to goals and how these can be taught in business schools, for example, poverty alleviation (de Paula Arruda Filho 2017; Neal 2017). Overall, the general research into SDG and business schools has been conducted against a backdrop of research on how SDGs can be implemented across the teaching and research programs of universities (Aris, Isa, Yahaya, & Mohamad 2017; Gough & Longhurst 2017; Ávila, *et al.* 2017; Willats, Erlandsson, Molthan-Hill, Dharmasmita, & Simmons 2018).

However, the literature on the curriculum development that provides guidance on how to integrate SDGs in business schools is scarce. An extensive review of the literature yielded only a handful of studies, for instance, see Godemann, Herzig, Moon, & Powell (2011), Kolb *et al.* (2017) Pesonen (2003). While these studies agree that monitoring progress of SDG-integration in business school curriculum is important, they do not provide clear directions on how the curriculum mapping process can be carried out to identify the existing links with the SDGs, nor guidelines on important considerations to inform future development that can deepen these links. This paper thus seeks to address this gap on how the SDGs can be mapped and better integrated within business school curriculum, utilising a case study of Griffith Business School, Australia.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case of curriculum mapping of SDG in a business school to demonstrate its applicability and effectiveness to advance the teaching of sustainability in business schools. In this paper we highlight the importance of mapping the extent to which sustainability and the SDGs exist within the current curriculum. Second, we provide insights into how the mapping of the SDGs in the curriculum was undertaken. Third, we explore the theoretical and practical considerations that business schools need to be cognizant when introducing SDGs into the curriculum. We argue that without a conscious systematic approach to curriculum design underpinned by audits of existing practices of ethics education, the SDGs will be drowned out by the noise of increasing curriculum imperatives facing business schools. In the next sections, we first present existing literature on the SDGs and their link to the sustainability curriculum, before introducing the case study of the curriculum auditing at the Griffith Business School.

2. University Engagement with SDGs

Many organisations have developed materials for SDG implementation for business. The United Nations Global Compact organisation is the global organisation facilitating the adoption of SDGs in business and offers a rationale

and practical guidance for business on SDG implementation (Global Compact 2018). The SDG Compass (Compass 2016) and the related Gap Frame (Muff, Kapalka, & Dyllick 2017) offer practical frameworks for use and reporting on SDGs and this is useful for businesses within individual countries to determine progress towards the goals.

From the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDNS) a guide to implementing SDGs at universities has been recently published in 2017 (Sustainable-Development-Solutions-Network 2017). For instance, SDNS suggests that the SDGs and the principles of ESD (Ecological Sustainable Development) should be integrated into all undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as graduate research training. However, as the SDGs cover 17 different goals and 169 targets, it is certainly not a simple task to integrate all these topics into curriculum development. Furthermore, different subjects or majors may align more strongly with certain goals than others, yet the diverse nature of subjects/majors have not been considered in the SDNS report. In this same document, several universities have indicated auditing of course and program content that offer links with the SDGs. Importantly, and similar to the gap in academic studies, documentation of curriculum mapping and further discussions arising from this first stage of curriculum development is not provided.

The nexus of SDGs and higher education is still relatively new, given that the SDGs have only come into existence since 2015. Existing research on how SDGs can be implemented across the teaching and research programs of universities indicates several actions that are required to integrate SDGs into the university curriculum (Aris *et al.* 2017; Gough & Longhurst 2017; Leal Filho 2017; Willats *et al.* 2018). These actions include commitment of the university to value and embed the SDGs within the institution (Albareda-Tiana, Vidal-Raméntol, & Fernández-Morilla 2018; Longhurst & Gough 2016; Willats *et al.* 2018), the creation of online libraries dedicated to SGD information (Willats *et al.* 2018); utilising community case studies (Willats *et al.* 2018), offering workshops (Hoveskog *et al.* 2018), using living labs and partnerships outside the university (Christensen & Iderheim 2017), and investing in staff development (Annan-Diab & Molinari 2017). Several universities have also implemented programs where dedicated staff develop curriculum across the university that focus on SDGs (Willats *et al.* 2018). It is beyond the scope of this paper to document all universities undertaking such work. One key factor appears to be common among these universities: institutional recognition of the importance of SDGs is linked to the implementation of SDGs within the teaching programs of universities (Albareda-Tiana *et al.* 2018). An important next step often missing in teaching program development is a systematic approach to including SDGs in program curriculum. The auditing aspects of an assurance of learning process is one way to assist the development of curriculum and ensuring recognition of the importance of SDGs is translated into content and assessment development of courses.

3. SDGs and Business School Curriculum

In a business school context, extensive literature exists on how to develop sustainability curriculum, although with no specific links to the SDGs (see e.g., Barber, Wilson, Venkatachalam, Cleaves, & Garnham 2014; Figueiró & Raufflet 2015; Stough, Ceulemans, Lambrechts, & Cappuyns 2018; Stubbs & Cocklin 2008). Sanford (2011) conducted a review of approaches to developing sustainability curriculum in business schools and identified five steps involved in introducing and improving the content and process of sustainability. These were to 1) determine the need for including sustainability, 2) determine the content and extent of coverage, 3) prepare handouts and relevant course material, 4) assess achievement of sustainability objectives through exercises, exams and surveys, and 5) modify course content for a better fit. Whilst this approach has merit, at an individual course level, it does not address how elements of SDGs (and indeed the broad range of sustainability content) can be taught in a program or degree. Creating content in courses to address broad-ranging needs of SDG curriculum will not necessarily address gaps in SDG curriculum in a systematic way across a program.

Beyond the broader research on SDGs and university-wide practices, specific studies focusing on integrating SDGs into curriculum development of business schools is still rather scarce. A handful of relevant papers tend to focus on curriculum development of specific business majors such as accounting (Bebbington, Russell, & Thomson, 2017; Bebbington & Unerman 2017), business law (Verbos 2016), or specific subjects such as ‘sustainability in organisations’ (de Paula Arruda Filho 2017). These studies do not acknowledge the importance of SDG curriculum auditing as one of the first stages of SDG-integrated curriculum development and thus do not provide clear directions on how the auditing can be carried out to identify the existing links with the SDGs across majors and programs at business schools. More recently a university wide study was conducted to audit courses across faculties in Taiwan in order to identify baseline status of sustainability in the university curriculum. The purpose was so that the university could plan strategies for sustainability and prioritise the allocation of resources accordingly. (Chang, 2020).

The importance of business schools to focus on SDGs is increasingly being recognised as a primary strategy for social responsibility that defines the professional standards to train future leaders qualified to manage organizations positive impact (García-Feijoo, Eizaguirre, & Rica-Aspiunza 2020). Business schools across the world have increasingly used the SDGs as a framework to increase legitimacy of their graduates as well as the legitimacy of the business school itself and environmental positive impact for all the stakeholders and capable to shape a better world (Miotto, Blanco-González, & Díez-Martín 2020). However, to date there are very limited research on auditing SDGs across business schools as an organization.