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Citation:

DUFFY, Marc and WATTS, Joanne (2021). The world is literally on fire, so why are we so slow to react? Implementing Responsible Business in curricula. Giving students a voice in Sheffield Business School. In: BAM2021 Conference. The British Academy of Management. [Book Section]

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The world is literally on fire, so why are we so slow to react? Implementing Responsible Business in curricula. Giving students a voice in Sheffield Business School

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Track 15: Knowledge and Learning

British Academy of Management – 2021 Conference

Summary

The world is literally on fire, so why is it business as usual for so many? (Mahdawi, 2019). The population consumes an average '1.7 earths' each year (CRM, 2010) and is expected to reach nine-billion by 2050 (Young and Ernst, 2012). 93% of CEOs view sustainability as a business issue (KPMG, 2018), Cortese (2003) argues that Higher Education '*can serve as a model of sustainability by integrating all aspects of campus life.*' The Cone study (2019) identified that generation Z are increasingly concerned for the planet, with 94% believing that action is needed. Zundans-Fraser and Bain (2016, p. 841) argue that progress from Universities has been slow and that Higher Education providers need to critically examine their offer.

Universities are under pressure from the United Nations (2020) Sustainable Development Goals, the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) (2020) who call for more sustainable curricula and accrediting bodies, who increasingly insist on embedded sustainability content within degree programmes. However, progress and implementation of sustainable education has been limited and slow.

Missing from this argument, is the student perspective of responsible and ethical business practice education. The paper emphasises speaking distinctly '*with*' as opposed '*to*' first, second and final year students to understand their experiences of sustainable and responsible education. The second and final year students have been exposed to responsible management learning and their experiences will be compared to that of first year students.

Word Count: 1,885

Introduction

The population of earth is over seven-billion, consuming an average *'1.7 earths'* each year (CRM, 2010) and expected to reach nine-billion by 2050 (Young and Ernst, 2012). If projected consumption continues, three-earths will be required within a generation (Laasch and Conaway, 2015). 93% of CEOs view sustainability as a business issue (KPMG, 2018), with 53% expecting to spend more on sustainability, and academic publications increasingly focusing on sustainability agendas (Handy, 2012).

Cortese (2003) argues that Higher Education (2016, p. 15) *'can serve as a model of sustainability by integrating all aspects of campus life.'* The United Nations (2020) are clear that *'education'* is an important tool in the implementation sustainable development with Goal 4 dedicated to *'education'* and target 4.7 specifically dedicated to *'promote sustainable development.'* Within business schools, the importance of this target is clear, where the graduates and leaders of tomorrow are educated. Finally, the Principles of Responsible Management (PRME) has become the *'largest organised relationship [between responsible management education] and the United Nations and Higher Education institutions leading change and the UN's mission.'*

Sustainability and Responsibility (herein S&R) business resonate strongly with younger people. The Cone (2008) study identified 69% of millennials wished to work for organisations with S&R strategies. It's time to *'take this generation seriously'* who are *'tired of how negative our country has become'* and *'stand ready to take action'* (Cone, 2019, p. 2). Generation Z (1997-2012) have been described as the *'most ethnically and culturally diverse generation to-date'* with 94% believing we *'need to come together to make progress'* (Cone, 2019, p. 3). Generation Z bring new expectations and values and as a result, the landscape for education needs to adapt in turn (Mauder *et al.*, 2013).

Zundans-Fraser and Bain (2016, p. 841) argue universities have been slow to respond to the growing importance of S&R in the curriculum and suggest the need to *'critically examine their current situation and evaluate available options.'* Earlier cohorts have enjoyed the flexibility of generic and wide-reaching business degrees and MBAs (Arnold and Davey, 1999; Baruch, Bell and Gray, 2005), however generation Z have drastically different values in terms of business, leaning towards personal responsibility and ethics. As a result, Dvorak and Busted (2015, p. 2) argue that management education has become *'ripe for disruption.'*

In response, Sheffield Business School have begun to offer several dedicated modules focused on S&R (Responsible and Ethical Business Practice (Level 5) and Sustainable and Responsible Business (Level 6). The introduction of such modules appears progressive and considerate of stakeholder expectations; however, they are a requirement of the accrediting body. The *'American Association of Colleges and Business Schools'* (AACSB, 2020) who are themselves under pressure from the United-Nations, and PRME agendas (AACSB, 2020). Further, AACSB and PRME institutions are required to embed sustainability into all courses and modules.

Earlier research has highlighted the importance of Generations Z's expectations in relation to working for sustainable and responsible business, meaning that relevant education in this area becomes increasingly important (Leveson and Joiner, 2014; Farrington *et al.*, 2017). Sheffield Hallam University (2020) has the mission to become the *'world's leading applied university'*

and Sheffield Business School goals are aligned to empower '*responsible leaders*.' However, what is not known at this point in the process of developing S&R education is how learning is received, particularly for students studying non-sustainability focused degree programmes. Earlier research has highlighted the importance of Generations Z's expectations in relation to working for sustainable and responsible business, meaning that relevant education in this area becomes increasingly important (Farrington et al 2017, Leveson and Joiner 2014).

Whilst course and module reporting tools such as module evaluation questionnaires and the National Student Survey consider overall satisfaction with learning provision, they fall short of providing nuanced insight. Given the growing demand for, and interest in S&R education underpinned by the case for elevating the role of the student voice we propose research to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the impact of sustainability education. The researchers set out a research strategy to illuminate the perceived suitability and relevance of sustainable education for students studying S&R as part of a non-specialist degree programme.

The research question is therefore as follows:

What is the overall student experience of studying sustainable and responsible education within traditional and generic Business Studies Degrees?

The research objectives are as follows:

- *To identify the student understanding (experience) of sustainable and responsible business education*
- *To establish the perceived relevance and applicability of sustainable and responsible education from a student perspective*
- *To make recommendations to business schools relating to the perception and implementation of management education*

The Role of Student Voice

Flutter and Rudduck (2004) argue that in recent years, there has been an increasing move towards listening to the voice of students in colleges. Cook-Sather (2007, p. 359) add that '*young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education.*'

The process of obtaining such feedback from students is often associated with '*student voice*,' with the National Student Survey (NSS), specifically asking if students perceive that they have had a voice in the development of their course. Fielding (2004) is critical of student voice, arguing '*fadism*' and that constantly seeking student feedback leads to '*unrealistic expectation, subsequent marginalization, and the unwitting corrosion of integrity; manipulative incorporation leads to the betrayal of hope, resigned exhaustion and the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo.*'

Rudduck and Fielding (2004) share concerns that student voice can lead to surface level compliance where quick solutions are identified, focusing on the '*how*' of education, rather than the '*why*.' This is potentially a concern for this research project, where student may potentially not understand the importance and relevance of sustainable and responsible education relative to their overall education and future employment.

However, the authors agree with Cook-Sather (2007) that students have a legitimate perspective and opinion in relation to their studies and play an active role in decisions relating to their educational policy and practice. Leren (2006) describes the role of student voice as students having 'agency' over their education.

Fielding (2004) presents seven fundamental questions they feel are instrumental to the sustainable development of student voice, arguing that the framework is designed to improve our chances of successfully giving students a voice. These are as follows:

1. Problems of speaking about others
2. Problems of speaking for others
3. Getting heard
4. Speaking about/for others in supportive ways
5. Dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than for
6. Students as co/researchers
7. Recalcitrant realities, new opportunities' offers some ambivalent, but still hopeful thoughts about current realities and future possibilities.

Fielding's (2004) seven fundamental questions are a clear and useful tool in the understanding and development of student voice implementation, notwithstanding Rudduck and Fielding's (2004) concerns over the use and implementation of student voice within the context of Higher Education.

The section that follows proposes a methodology to answer the research question and objectives.

Methods

The overview of the problems associated with sustainable development and the challenges associated with the implementation of student voice have been considered in this developmental paper. The purpose of this section is to produce a methodology suitable to begin to answer these questions. The developmental nature of the paper means that the ideas are open to feedback and further suggestions at the conference.

The researchers propose focus groups with three groups of students at Level 4, 5 and 6 (First, Second and Final Year) of the Business Studies Degree, therefore creating a pseudo-longitudinal research approach (Dewaele and Dewaele, 2017). The first-year students will have received no formal sustainable and responsible management education, the second year will be in the middle of a relevant module and the final year students who have chosen the '*Sustainable and Responsible*' level 6 module will have selected a relevant module as an elective.

The intention of the proposed methodology is to understand the different perspectives of students at different stages in their degree journey, the qualitative approach has been selected on the basis that it allows the researchers to achieve depth of understanding over statistical and causal relationships. The research philosophy aligns to the interpretivist approach or post-positivist approach where reality can be seen as subjective and subjectively understood, as we believe is the case for sustainability.

The researchers propose to adopt Fielding's fundamental questions of student voice to guide the focus group, whilst allowing the participants to lead the conversation where appropriate.

Fielding's Fundamental Questions	Focus Group Questions
Generic Introduction Questions	<p><i>Do you feel that you have a voice on your course?</i></p> <p><i>Do you feel listened to?</i></p> <p><i>Do you have a consistent voice across modules and courses?</i></p> <p><i>Is this important to you?</i></p>
Problems of speaking about others	N/A
Problems of speaking for others	<p><i>What do you think students on the course feel about sustainability?</i></p> <p><i>Do you feel that students in general understand the need for sustainable education?</i></p>
Getting heard	<p><i>Do you feel that you have a voice in your degree?</i></p> <p><i>How do you feel about the role of sustainability on your degree?</i></p> <p><i>Do you think sustainability and responsibility is important to your degree?</i></p>
Speaking about/for others in supportive ways	<p><i>If you were the module leader for responsible and ethical business, how would you approach a module such as this?</i></p> <p><i>What kind of topics would you cover?</i></p>
Dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than for	<p><i>As a group of students, how do you feel about the topic of sustainable and responsible education?</i></p> <p><i>Do you think that this topic is relevant for your future career?</i></p>
Students as co/researchers	<p><i>*Achieved through this proposal*</i></p> <p><i>Do you feel that your involvement in this project gives you more of a voice?</i></p>
Recalcitrant realities, new opportunities' offers some ambivalent, but still hopeful thoughts about current realities and future possibilities.	<p><i>What do you think about having a voice on your course?</i></p> <p><i>Do you feel that your voice has made an impact?</i></p>

What's next

- Complete the methodology and data collection proposal
- Expand the Literature Review
- Establish the data analysis protocol
- Complete the data collection with the proposed sample
- Convert to a full paper with complete results and findings

Conclusion

The researchers have highlighted an important and emergent area of management education, the topic of teaching sustainable and responsible business. The pressure from accrediting stakeholders and learners from a generation who have strong commitments to sustainability were also highlighted.

The researchers propose an empirical research project where student voice can be used as a means to improve our academic understanding of student needs, views and understanding of the area to improve our overall delivery and offer.

The full project and resulting paper should serve to greatly increase our understanding our knowledge of responsible and ethical management education.

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