

What national and regional overviews of sustainability
in business, management and executive education tell
us (and what they don't!).

John G. Cullen

School of Business

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Maynooth

Co. Kildare.

✉ john.g.cullen@nuim.ie

<http://www.nuim.ie/school-business/our-people/john-cullen>

twitter @drjohncullen

Introduction

Many studies of the growth of the sustainability discourse in the field of business, management and executive education have indicated that the field has undergone considerable growth over the last two decades, and that this growth has accelerated in recent years (Cullen, 2012, Porter and Córdoba, 2009, Starik and Kanashiro, 2013). This paper aims to add to understandings of how this growth has been experienced internationally by analysing the research literature which specifically attempts to generate 'snap shots' of national and regional overviews of sustainability in business education. The paper outlines dominant approaches used in this form of research, and to identify areas which are not usually addressed so they can be explored in future work. It aims to be of value to management educators and business schools who wish to conduct similar studies in their own regional setting, and for generating deeper insights into how sustainability is being 'done' in executive education.

The article proceeds through the following stages. Firstly the method for identifying and isolating the literature is outlined. The method for identifying the units of analysis is discussed. The results are then presented in the next section, which is then followed by a discussion of approaches used, and of areas which are missing from existing national survey work. The conclusion outlines areas which are missing from the existing body of research in order to clarify potential future research avenues, and to propose research questions for future investigation.

Method

Following Oswick's (2009) method for analysing growth rates in professional and academic literature in a new areas of research, the first stage of this literature review involved a search of the Social Sciences Citation Index; a database which has evolved to become the leading quality index of peer-reviewed research in the social sciences Wang *et al.* (2012). The title field of the Social Sciences Citation Index [hereafter SSCI] was searched under the term 'sustain*' [1]. The wildcard character was employed to ensure that the variations on the world sustainable (such as 'sustainability') could be included in the results. The results were then refined on the basis of document type (only articles were included in the analysis). These articles were then refined to work that the SSCI categorised as 'Business' or 'Management'.

All of these articles were checked to see that sustainability was used in the socio-environmental context, rather than as a synonym for prolonging or continuing the subject under discussion. Although there were a small group of articles that referred to specific pedagogical experiments about sustainability, or discussed how certain institutions had attempted to introduce or integrate sustainability in a specific locale, this research focussed on identifying national or regional overviews of sustainability in business and/or management education.

Results

The initial title search of the SSCI using the term 'sustain*' yielded 60,029 results, of which over 65% ($n = 39,331$) were articles. 890 of these articles were categorised as 'management' and 739 as 'business' (1282 in total). Although the proportion of articles returned for fields of business and management were small when compared to the total returned for research sustainability in the social sciences in general (just over 3%), it is very important to point out that the rate at which these articles have been published has increased at an exponential rate: over 50% of peer-reviewed articles on sustainability in the business and management categories have appeared in between 2010 and the end of 2013.

The literature was then reviewed and articles which attempted to perform a regional or national overview of sustainability in business, management and executive education research literature was isolated. Given the relative 'newness' of sustainability in management education it is perhaps not surprising that a small number ($n = 7$) of such studies were returned. This is not to say that overviews had not been undertaken in relation to ethics education in general (e.g., Christensen *et al.*, 2007; Petrick *et al.*, 2011), but that the focus of this article is on regional reviews of sustainability-related research.

In all, the search returned seven studies which attempted to provide a regional or national 'snapshot' of the state of sustainability in business and management education. The first study captured was published in 1996 and the final one in 2013. The regions and nations examined included: Germany (Douglas, 1996); United Kingdom (Coopey, 2003); Brazil (Soubihia *et al.*, 2010, Jabbour *et al.*, 2013); Australia (Fisher and Bonn, 2011); the Asia Pacific Region (Naeem and Neal, 2012); and China and the US (Huang and Wang,

2013). The vast majority of the studies were undertaken in the Southern Hemisphere, and these were also more recent. Only one of these studies was published in a peer-reviewed business journal; the majority appeared in education and/or sustainability journals. Five of the seven studies investigated the curricula of business schools. One focused on the sustainability needs of SMEs (Soubihia *et al.*, 2010) and another on an emerging policy framework from the perspective of industrialists, policy-makers and academics.

Three of the studies employed documentary content analysis to investigate the curricula or research activities of business schools (Coopey, 2003; Fisher and Bonn, 2011; Huang and Wang, 2013); the latter two employed a content analysis of publicly available web sources. Two of the studies employed a survey approach (Soubihia *et al.*, 2010; Naeem and Neal, 2012), and the remaining two studies employed a case approach (Jabbour *et al.*, 2013) or interviews (Douglas, 1996). The findings of the studies demonstrate that there appears to be much interest in the topic of sustainability in 'southern hemisphere' business schools. However, this interest appears to exist largely at the level of individual faculty and is generally not integrated in a structured way into business school curricula as has happened in the US (Christensen *et al.*, 2007) where sustainability has grown in importance in relation to businesses ethics and corporate social responsibility courses (Huang and Wang, 2013). The general finding that the provision, and/or integration of, sustainability into business school curricula lags behind faculty interest and support for such initiatives informs the proposed research agenda arising from these articles which call more research and teaching coordination between universities on sustainable business education, and for making the curricula or business schools more representative of broader societal issues and needs.

Discussion

A limitation of this research was that only national or regional overviews were considered for review. Sustainability as a topic is very much concerned with the *global* impact of business activities on other regions, so only considering sustainability solely in national terms risks externalising the perspectives of important stakeholders. Doing this type of research, however, illustrates the small number of such studies which have been undertaken. A more significant limitation is that only articles published in peer-reviewed research journals were undertaken, and this excludes policy, trade body and other official research which might have been undertaken.

It is encouraging that national overviews of sustainability in business education has been undertaken with greater regularity, and it is interesting to note that most of these tend to be published in journals concerned with sustainability and/or educational policy rather than business journals. This is not to say that business journals are unconcerned with sustainability; the volume of articles published outlined at the beginning of this article indicates the opposite. It is more the case that national or regional overviews do not yet tend to be reported in business publications.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is that the perspective that most authors discuss sustainability in the context of business school education. All agree that the principles of sustainability represent a key priority area for management education, but discuss it from the perspective of business schools, policy makers and, to a lesser extent, organisations. This perspective is what Cullen and Turnbull (Cullen and Turnbull, 2005) refer to as an *etic* management development perspective: the business and management

education research paradigm which is oriented towards providers, rather than participants.

Huang and Wang (2013) acknowledge the lack of research on business and management students and call for further research on pedagogical design, student learning and satisfaction, and call for more work in this regard.

Although much research articulates that business students tend to be both interested in and enjoy sustainability-oriented content (eg. Starik and Kanashiro, 2013), there is a dearth of work which articulates how graduates can benefit from have learned about it from a career perspective. In short, although there is much research on sustainability from a business school perspective, there is little on how understanding sustainability will benefit students in the business market. This is an important consideration to bear in mind when discussing business students for two reasons. Although business students often engage in business courses from an intellectual curiosity about how the commercial world works, many are attracted to the field on the basis of increasing their chances of employability. Indeed Lehmann (2009) mentions that the adoption of a careerist orientation to university education is often a useful transitional strategy for working class students who may not have a family tradition of engagement in higher education, and whose investment in university is often riskier . Future 'snapshot' research on sustainability in business education would be enhanced by investigations of the nature of national recruitment markets for sustainability-oriented, or sustainability-informed, business graduates.

Conclusion

Overviews of sustainability in business education from a global perspective are not unusual (e.g. Christensen *et al.*, 2007; (Yen-Chun Jim *et al.*, 2010), but they share an etic focus on the educational *provider*, rather the *recipient*. That said, the number of such national and regional overviews, although still small in number, have gradually increased in recent years, and could represent an important part of the university 'taking its own pulse' with regard to how it incorporates and integrates sustainability into its curricula. A key research need in future studies, as discussed above, is to incorporate an understanding of sustainability as something that is required by national recruitment markets, rather than being solely driven by providers.

Finally, just as Coopey (2003) suggested that university business schools need to move away from inter-institutional competition and to adopt collaborative models of delivery. As mentioned above in this article, this also presents a significant opportunity to researchers who conduct national 'snapshot' research on sustainability in higher education at a national or regional basis. Naeem and Neal (2012) and Huang and Wang (2013) have recently demonstrated, a deeper picture of the condition of sustainability in business schools can be attained by conducting national research in a collaborative and co-operative mode. Indeed, such collaboration and co-operation is very much part of the ethos of sustainable systems. In a similar way, respect for local traditions and communities are part of the sustainability turn. Research which is sensitive to the ways in which local markets, commercial and educational systems and 'human economies' operate can add much to the small but growing field of research on national and regional studies on sustainability in business and management education.

Notes

1. The '*' symbol is known as a 'wildcard' by information scientists. It is employed to extend the reach of a search terms. For example, the search term 'manag*' would capture the following variations: 'managing, manager, management, etc.'. This search was undertaken on December 1st 2013.

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