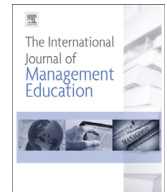




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## Research Notes

# Interdisciplinarity: Practical approach to advancing education for sustainability and for the Sustainable Development Goals

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 8 December 2016

Received in revised form 11 March 2017

Accepted 12 March 2017

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Interdisciplinarity

Education

Sustainable development

Sustainability

MBA

PRME

## ABSTRACT

The need for a more sustainable world was unanimously acknowledged by United Nations members in September 2015, when 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were set, positioning education at the heart of the strategy to promote sustainable development. This paper aims to demonstrate the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to education for sustainable development, and to illustrate how to advance it, acknowledging different perspectives of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the context of diversity. It examines the broad agenda of the SDGs, which requires the participation of multiple disciplines and sectors to be delivered. Considering the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), the paper reviews the literature regarding interdisciplinarity and its application in education for sustainable development, including practices and barriers to enhance it. A case study is provided to illustrate how to advance interdisciplinary education for sustainable development amongst postgraduate MBA students from different backgrounds, in a course where sustainable development concepts are already embedded across disciplines. The case illustrates the application of the Six Principles of PRME and explains how a sustainability and CSR module can encourage students to combine knowledge from all disciplines in order to advance their understanding and action on sustainable development issues.

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## 1. Introduction

*What if we broke down the silos in the universities? What if all professors practiced what they taught? What if we embraced the kind of multidisciplinary perspective that is reflected in your membership? What if we had courses that brought together examples from not just the business world, from political sciences, law, from environmental studies, so students get a richer appreciation of the challenges they will confront when they graduate? Why does a case have to be taught in one lesson? Why can't we take a business case and deal with all these multifaceted issues over two weeks? Why can't we get all the disciplines to come and teach it, so that students get an appreciation of the depth of the knowledge they've got to have when they go out to the real world? [Indra Nooyi, Pepsico CEO] (Nooyi, 2016, 1:04:32).*

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Sustainable development has been identified as an important area of focus for business leaders, governments, universities, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the media. The need for a more sustainable world became more evident with the global financial crisis of 2008 and has been conveyed by the United Nations (UN) through several initiatives, including the Global Compact, a catalyst that highlighted the importance of a global sustainable development strategy, bringing together companies, public sector and civil society. The UN has placed education at the heart of its strategy to promote sustainable development and has supported the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the Unesco Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development, whilst defining 2005–2014 as the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. There is clearly a drive to embed sustainability across the curriculum, which is closely monitored by accreditation bodies.

This paper aims to demonstrate the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to education for sustainable development, and to illustrate how to advance it, acknowledging different perspectives of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the context of diversity. It commences by examining the broad agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), followed by the literature regarding interdisciplinarity and its application in education for sustainable development, including the Six Principles of PRME, practices and barriers to enhance interdisciplinarity. A case study is provided to illustrate how to advance interdisciplinary education for sustainable development amongst postgraduate MBA students with diverse backgrounds, attending a course where sustainable development concepts are already embedded across disciplines. The case also illustrates the application of the Six Principles of PRME, followed by the conclusions.

This paper adopts the definition for sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987, p. 43): “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, reiterated by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED, 2002): the goal of integrating economic activity with environmental integrity, social concerns and effective governance systems, while maximising the contribution to the well-being of the current generation, fairly sharing the cost and benefits, without compromising the potential for the next generations to meet their needs. This broad definition was selected for this paper based on three reasons: its dominance in discussions on environment and development (Baker, 2016), this is the definition adopted by the UN and it is broad enough to encompass distinct contextual nuances. Although there are differences between the expressions sustainable development and sustainability – for example, for Robinson (2004), sustainable development may reflect a managerial and incremental approach, more attractive to government and business, while sustainability focuses the attention on people’s ability to continue to live within environmental constraints, more adopted by NGOs and academic environmentalists – both terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

## 2. Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

Building on the Millennium Development Goals set in 2000, 17 SDGs were formally adopted by all 193 member states of the UN in September 2015, aiming at ending extreme poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all by 2030 (UN, 2015). The SDGs expanded the agenda to include issues such as climate change, sustainable consumption, innovation and the importance of peace and justice, requiring all countries to take action, including those with high levels of development (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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