Students and businesses want programmes that prepare managers to build and lead companies that are resilient and capable of creating long-term value. Photograph: AberCPC/Alamy

Alison Davis-Blake, dean, University of Michigan Ross School of Business

The prevailing view of the role business in society is changing, and not all MBA programmes fully reflect those changing views. We're seeing more students, alumni, and corporate partners who believe that business can and should be a force for good. The next generation of leaders genuinely wants to change the world and many see business as the best path to do so. Therefore, it's essential that business schools build an educational experience that incorporates positive business, focusing on developing leaders who can create economic value, build great places to work, and contribute to their local and global communities.
David Grayson, director, Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Cranfield University School of Management

Is the glass half-full or half-empty when it comes to deciding whether the world's 13,000 business schools are drivers of, or obstacles to, businesses becoming more sustainable? There is some excellent innovation and experimentation, but it needs to be disseminated faster and applied more widely. Academia at its best is perpetually curious and it should embrace the challenge of providing rigorous models and frameworks to help organisations to identify and minimise negative impacts and optimise positive impacts. To do so will require radical shifts in academics' incentives, for example 4* journals publishing multi-disciplinary articles; recognition of insights co-created by practitioners & academics; valuing of practitioner experts' reviews alongside academic peer review and more varied entry and career progression routes into management education.

Robin Mason, dean and professor of economics, University of Exeter Business School

The One Planet MBA, run by the University of Exeter Business School in partnership with WWF International, is now four years old. Over that time, we've seen many businesses shift their view, from sustainability being considered a specialist function, to it becoming increasingly integrated in all aspects of their organisations. But business schools and universities are inherently conservative institutions, and innovation in programmes and curricula is slow.

It takes some boldness to do what we did: completely reinvent an entire programme to base it on sustainability. And it requires working across disciplinary boundaries, often difficult given academia's focus on disciplinary expertise. These are supply-side challenges, however. Our experience is that students and businesses want programmes that prepare managers to build and lead companies that are resilient and are capable of creating long-term value. The demand side of the market will, eventually, drive the innovation in business education that is needed.

Jean-Marc Duvoisin, CEO, Nespresso

For businesses to be sustainable, it’s vital for future leaders to understand and engage with sustainability issues. This is critical to ensure that sustainable thinking becomes the norm in the way businesses, not just our own, think and perform. Sustainable learning should be at the core of executive education. We have established the Nespresso MBA
Sustainability Challenge to engage with future generations of sustainable business leaders and discuss their ideas to further improve our sustainability initiatives. So far, over 70 business schools worldwide have taken part in the challenge and it has helped to provide training around the importance of sustainability and the opportunities for business.

Kellie McElhaney, Whitehead Faculty Fellow, Corporate Sustainability, UC Berkeley Haas School of Business

After two decades working in sustainability and business education, my assessment is that we have travelled the surface only. If the early driver of sustainability was student demand and championing, it remains the top driver today. Every business school today touts efforts in sustainability. Few have horizontally added, let alone integrated it, within the traditional core.

Any time I teach a non-sustainability-titled course (this year it was a new "Global Macro Trends" course) which attracts the sustainability virgins, they are gob-smacked at the water, waste, energy and climate change issues that are already constraining business's ability to succeed. "Wow, we learned accounting as if climate change externalities did not exist," is the common student light bulb moment.

Madeleine Evans, senior analyst, TPG Capital and founder Finance Matters

I graduated from Wharton in 2009. Unable to find a major that examined finance for social good, I created an individualised major from courses in business and public policy, markets, and regulation. Five years later, the school has a Social Venture Fund and courses on impact investment, the result of bottom-up student lobbying and top-down strategic decisions by the schools' governing bodies.

Just as major banks are struggling to find a new niche post-crisis, each business school's journey to adapt to students' interest in sustainability will be different. The critical catalyst for change will be a highly public tipping point in key constituents' preferences. If we want a greater focus on the tools of sustainable finance in business schools, then the alumni, boards, current students and prospective students need to ask for it.

Sydney Perkins-Martinie, MBA student EM Lyon

As our MBA coursework currently lacks a sustainability focus, I began attending regional conferences to meet actors in the field. One meeting with a co-founder of a social...
innovation incubator, Impact Hub Geneva, led to an MBA class visit to the Hub for a course in sustainability. More recently I organised a conference on careers in social business with like-minded students which included an EM Lyon alumnus, the director of social business at Renault SAS.

These student initiatives not only spread awareness, but they also let programme directors know how they can improve to meet growing demand. I'm convinced that there a many MBAs like me who want hands-on academic coursework that reflects the industry realities.

Henri Claude de Bettignies, professor emeritus, INSEAD & CEIBS, visiting professor, Stanford University

Business schools should have integrated sustainability into their courses years ago. What is happening to dominant business models and to society should have made it an imperative. However it is only recently, in the majority of schools, that sustainability has finally entered the MBA curriculum and executive education. Today it is a buzzword, with new courses using it as a label and workshops and conferences bringing it into the mainstream. Is the noise sustainable? Will it produce the paradigm shift we need so badly if we want to leave our grandchildren a planet they can live on? I hope so.

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