

Creating sustainable mindsets:

Developing sustainability intelligence through SDG Student Ambassadors

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Abstract

Developing sustainability intelligence is critical for the prosperity of societies worldwide, for conservation of the natural world, for achieving future business success and for the credibility of the concept of sustainability itself. If there is one place where developing sustainability intelligence is crucial, it is management education. It is in business schools that young, ambitious people from a variety of backgrounds find a context in which they can develop their belief systems, their moral values, and their attitudes (Moratis & Melissen, 2017).

At Antwerp Management School (AMS), sustainability intelligence or 'sustainable transformation' is described as the journey of profound change during which we successfully reverse the forces of disintegration in our global economic, social and ecological systems and create a future that is more integrated, i.e. a high-synergy society (Visser, 2015). Studies show that students are increasingly taking sustainability elements into consideration when choosing their career and future companies they want to work for (Haski-Leventhal & J. Concato, 2016).

This paper describes an SDG Student Ambassadorship Program that was developed and implemented for Master students at AMS. This program has the aim of planting sustainable seeds and ethical values in the minds of future leaders. In short, SDG Student Ambassadors work on projects related to one or more Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through this program, students learn about the integrated and indivisible approach of the 17 SDGs.

This paper shows how students are enabled to develop sustainability intelligence by working on and supporting projects on topics such as well-being, fighting climate change and reducing plastic pollution, etc.

The SDG Student Ambassadorship Program challenges students to be more conscious and critical when it comes to sustainability practices, and creates a deeper sense of learning about sustainability dimensions.

Keywords

Management education; sustainability; sustainable intelligence; sustainable transformation; Sustainable Development Goals; students.

The SDGs as a blueprint to achieve a more sustainable future

We live in a rapidly changing world that is challenging us more than ever before. Great progress has been made in advancing new technologies and making knowledge more accessible. At the same time, there are trends such as increasing inequality, biodiversity loss, increasingly climate change, forced migration, etc. (Visser, 2019). The question is: how can we – as individuals, businesses, communities and policy-makers – prepare for the future? How can we maximize our chances of success, not only by being ready, but also by helping to shape the future that we desire?

In 2015, all UN member states came together to agree upon a blueprint to achieve a more sustainable future for all by 2030. Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline 17 goals where we need to make a collective effort and provide a useful sustainability framework to promote prosperity while protecting the planet (UN, 2019).

While there are signs of progress, GlobeScan and SustainAbility's recent 2019 SDG Progress Report shows that sustainability experts continue to view progress on sustainable development as largely inadequate, and rate poorly businesses' contribution to advancing the goals (Malmqvist, 2019).

Quality education for sustainable development

Many scholars argue that global sustainability challenges, such as climate action, cannot be resolved by revolutionary technology or governance alone. They believe that the challenges we face today require a broader mind shift towards sustainability (Edwards, 2015; Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmermann, 2009).

In the search for new approaches, examining human beings' 'inner dimensions' is attracting increased attention. Inner dimensions refer to subjective domains within the individual relating to people's mindsets, worldviews, beliefs, values and emotions (Buchanan and Kern, 2017; Hedlund-de Witt, 2012).

Here, quality education is crucial. In fact, there is growing international recognition of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as an integral element of quality education and a key enabler for sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all UN Member States include ESD. Target 4.7 of SDG 4 on education addresses ESD and related approaches such as Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2019).

Against this background, experiential learning is seen as one of the most powerful approaches for sustainable transformation and creating sustainable mindsets. Experiential learning is seen as a process of self-discovery, rather than knowledge transfer. The key to the effectiveness of such experiential learning programs is that individuals are required to respond to a real-world challenge beyond the scope of their experience, in order to stimulate creative thinking and deep reflection in an unfamiliar context (Courtice, 2012).

Developing sustainability intelligence in management education

As Hart and Sharma point out very well in their article '*Beyond "Saddle Bag" Sustainability for Business Education*', it is not easy to truly integrate sustainability into the curriculum of business schools. To achieve real integration, there's a need for cross-functional collaboration with faculty, research, outreach and operations. The Dean and the leadership of the business school, along with support from key alumni and donors, need to commit to the integration of sustainability (Hart & Sharma, 2014).

Initiatives and platforms that raise the profile of sustainability in schools around the world - such as Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) - gain more support. As a voluntary initiative with over 650 signatories worldwide, PRME has become the largest organized relationship between the United Nations and management-related higher education institutions. Working through Six Principles, PRME engages business and management schools to ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic and sustainability goals, while drawing attention to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With support of PRME and the Six Principles, more programs emerge on the integration of sustainability in education and research. Also, more business schools use the PRME principles to start a dialog and debate among educators, students, business, government, consumers, media, civil society organizations and other interested groups and stakeholders on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability (UN PRME, 2019).

Within education, more competences regarding sustainable development have been defined, courses on sustainability have been developed, and manuals and exercises for teaching on sustainable development have been developed and integrated in curricula (Lambrechts et al, 2013).

Having experienced that most students enrolling in the AMS master's programs only have little knowledge about sustainability and the SDGs, AMS launched the SDG Student Ambassadorship Program in 2016. Starting with some assumptions such as the diversity of students' backgrounds that may prove fertile soil for learning about sustainability, putting the students in the driver's seat of their own sustainability education, and learning about wicked problems in interaction, the program has the aim of developing sustainability leaders (AMS, 2019).

By using experiential learning, the program tries to work on seven key characteristics in distinguishing the leadership approach taken by individuals tackling sustainability issues: systemic, interdisciplinary understanding; emotional intelligence and a caring attitude; values orientation that shapes culture; a strong vision for making a difference; an inclusive style that engenders trust; a willingness to innovate and be radical; a long-term perspective on impacts (Visser, 2013).

Learning objectives of the SDG Student Ambassadorship Program

Given the scale and urgency of the sustainability challenges, sustainability leadership needs to be bold leadership. It also needs to be collaborative leadership – leaders acting together. Therefore, the SDG Student Ambassadorship Program laid out the following learning objectives: Experiencing teamwork and developing project and time management skills; Identifying dimensions of sustainable development and the SDGs; Create partnerships with businesses and organizations; Developing a critical posture towards CSR and sustainability; Experiencing the impact of sustainability in a professional and social context; Create sustainable mindset/intelligence (AMS, 2019).

Organizing an SDG Student Ambassadorship Program

From the on-boarding days onwards, students work together in cross-cultural teams on a so-called Action Learning Project (ALP), a leadership project that focuses on one of the SDGs. Via this project they learn to collaborate in a culturally diverse team, practice their leadership skills and make a contribution to sustainable transformation – and in doing so they are able to step out of their comfort zone, and grow as a person (AMS, 2019).

During the on-boarding days, all master students get introduced by their professors into foundational CSR and sustainability knowledge. A workshop session aims to identify and

familiarize students with key issues and concepts, including the SDGs, transparency, materiality, greenwashing, and the role of consumers in achieving and compromising sustainability (see e.g., Moratis, 2014; Visser, 2018).

In a follow-up session, students form groups and brainstorm on possible projects with a clear link to one or more SDGs. They receive support from the ALP team which consists of staff within AMS. One AMS mentor gets appointed for each group.

The role of a mentor is to connect with the student group and meet them 3 times between September and February. The students can reach out to the mentor in case they have (practical) questions regarding their project. When the students have content-related questions, the mentor refers them to the Global Leadership Skills team. This team consists of thought leadership professors within AMS. The mentor also refers to the Global Leadership Skills team when there is a problem in the team.

Outcomes

Every group receives an outcome document where they have to keep track of their actions during the year. The outcome document consists of the description of the project, the title, the dates of the main actions, a list of the group members, pictures or useful links and key outcomes. From 2019 onwards, student groups will present their projects to each other, to order to learn from each other.

Peer review

At the end of the academic year, all groups need to fill out a peer review document. Through this document, they score their colleagues and themselves. They need to evaluate the general effort that was put in by themselves and their fellow-students to reach the final result of the team work. Also, they need to motivate each score in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

SDG Projects

In the following paragraphs, some SDG projects are briefly showcased. One of the projects aimed for creating awareness about sustainability and inspire people to think in a more sustainable way. Therefore, a group of 8 students created a blog, where they posted articles about sustainability. In order to do this, they created a website, an Instagram page and a Facebook page. They worked in groups of two people and had four main categories of subjects: Business2Business (e.g. toward a sustainable economy), City Events (e.g. make sure your events are fun and sustainable), Lifestyle (e.g. sustainability starts with you) and Transport (e.g. say yes to sustainable transportation). They always ensured they had beautiful pictures about the subject to attract the attention of new and old readers. In addition to the weekly blogs, they posted about anything connected to sustainability, which the students came across in their daily lives, with the product or place in their Instagram story. In total, the students posted 26 articles, where the category Lifestyle was the biggest one with 12 articles. Additionally, they gained a reasonable number of followers (175 followers on Instagram, 199 followers on Facebook). Furthermore, they got people outside of Antwerp, and people who are not very familiar with sustainability more acquainted with the subject. They raised awareness, visited different shops and learned about new places that we were able to share with their readers. A lot of the articles were even shared on the page of Antwerp Management School through LinkedIn and Facebook. Some people even contacted the students through social media because they had a question or just wanted to say that they liked the content.

For another project called 'pay with a smile', 2 students offered free micro blading for cancer patients. They got in touch with several hospitals and organizations in the area of Antwerp, and presented their idea in front of the head of oncology who referred them afterwards to some

patients. The first patient received the micro blading treatment and after the six weeks healing process, the students received wonderful feedback. They were able to release the cancer patient from a little bit of suffering and support her in her well-being. The students raised nearly 300 Euros via a crowdfunding platform to afford the required materials. Moreover, the national newspaper HLN as well as the television network ATV published a report about this project.

A third group engaged in a project to support cleaner beaches. Their primary objective was to have the Belgian coast cleaned, and optionally the Antwerp beach 'St-Anneke' too. To make this initiative more achievable, they enlisted in the Eneco Clean Beach Cup. This is an initiative held at multiple surf clubs at the Belgian coast. The organization gives trash bags and trash pickers. This way, everyone can volunteer to clean up the coast line. 7 students walked for 5 hours picking up plastic and trash. They collected 5,6 kg of trash. With this project they increased the awareness concerning beach cleanup initiatives in Belgium to their fellow students and AMS staff.

Other successful projects were a Zumba contest to raise money for charity, a project intended to raise awareness regarding the food waste which is a very common practice among big supermarket chains, a closet sale to give used clothing a second life, a sustainable consultancy project, etc.

Conclusion

In the past, some student groups failed to hold on. Others were lacking knowledge, or changed projects during the year. Therefore, the newly introduced mentorship is key to keep track and support the students. Another challenge in the past was that some students were not motivated as the program was voluntarily and not graded. From 2019 onwards, this changes, and students receive a grade on their project. The SDG projects will become Action Learning Projects on a Global Leadership Skills course, where societal consciousness leading to sustainability is one of the three core elements, next to self-awareness and global perspectives. Students will also be required to integrate their learning from the SDG project in their Personal Development Plan. With these lessons learned, AMS wants to improve the program and create sustainable mindsets, students with 21st century skills and competences for sustainable development.

The program challenges students to be more conscious and critical when it comes to sustainable business models and leadership practices. In addition, the program inflicts a deeper sense of learning about sustainability dimensions than through merely analyzing sustainability reports or through academic lectures. Through the program, also faculty members that normally conduct research and teach only in core functional areas become exposed to possibilities of examining their research and teaching through the lens of sustainability. This could open up avenues of new research ideas, the potential to ask new and interesting research questions, and the potential for collaborations across disciplines (Hart & Sharma, 2014).

From the peer review documents, it can be concluded that the SDG program has enabled some key characteristics of effective sustainability leaders (Visser, 2013). Some characteristics such as systemic understanding, emotional intelligence, a strong vision for making a difference, and long-term perspective on impacts, were enabled more. Others, such as values orientation that shapes culture, an inclusive style, a willingness to innovate, were enabled less.

Students testified saying that the SDG Student Ambassador Program was a prolific learning experience, helping them with interdisciplinary understanding and integrate their experience into other learning processes. They learned and experienced the impact of sustainability in both professional and social life. Some students pointed out that this module of their curriculum proved out to be an eye-opener, helping them to create a strong vision. Many students learned a lot from their colleagues who were indulged into different SDG projects about various aspects of

sustainability. Also, several students mentioned they all want to incorporate the same learning into their professional life where they'll look for a career which creates value sustainably for them, their employer, and for consumers.

From 2019 onwards, students will have to focus on one SDG and must ensure that they influence or impact others beyond their own student group. In the future, it might be useful to look for variations of the program, zoom in on specific topics such as circular economy, link the program with other courses, or even collaborate with similar initiatives in other parts of the world.

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