

# Taking care of business and the planet's future

Sustainability has become a core corporate topic, writes **Steve Coomber**

In April the professional services company KPMG published *Corporate Sustainability: A Progress Report*. The study indicated that 62 per cent of businesses surveyed had corporate sustainability plans — up from 50 per cent in 2008.

In the light of the global financial crisis, Japan's nuclear power problems and a lack of consensus over tackling climate change it is no surprise that the issue of sustainability is moving irresistibly up the corporate agenda. As it does so, more business schools are making it an integral part of their MBA programmes.

"Sustainability is no longer a fringe topic for business," says Dianne Bevelander, associate dean of MBA programmes at Rotterdam School of Management. "Business and society must take steps to reduce carbon footprints, take greening measures, look

at sustainable value chains and look at financing in a more sustainable way."

These are global issues. Take China, for example, one of the world's fastest-growing economies. "In China, the challenges of sustainable development are evident: building an economy that will pull billions of people out of poverty has put great strains on the environment, the social systems and the management and governance systems that control the entire process," says Lydia Price, associate dean and MBA director at China Europe International Business School.

"We tell incoming students they will be under great pressure during their careers to build their businesses and continue China's development without depleting the world's natural resources, or triggering massive social unrest, or polluting the country's air and water resources to the point that they become toxic. At the same time they will be part of global efforts to control carbon emissions in order to prevent catastrophic levels of global warming."

There is strong demand from students for the subject. "It is extremely important to address and discuss sustainability as part of any MBA programme, especially now it has become a significant part of doing

business in almost all sectors," says Wissam Shaar, an MBA student at the Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University, Montreal. "Moreover, the increase in the importance of the topic makes it essential that the next generation of managers is familiar with and aware of the impact of their businesses on the environment, society and future generations."

In the past sustainability was usually covered in the optional electives, but that is changing. Richard Elliott, dean of the University of Bath School of Management, says: "If it is done well, it has to be embedded in the whole curriculum, not just be an opt-in." The school of management and Nottingham University Business School are engaged in a project to determine the extent to which busi-

ness schools are integrating social, economic and ecological sustainability in their programmes and research.

Desautels has reworked its MBA programme. Instead of taking functional disciplines separately in the core, five integrated modules are studied, including value creation, managing resources, and markets and globalisation. Each module is taught by up to four faculty members, which offers lecturers interested in sustainability greater scope to work those issues into the programme, says Steve

Maguire, director of the Institute for Integrated Management at Desautels.

Some schools are going further and creating sustainability themed MBA degrees. Last month the University of Exeter Business School launched its One Planet MBA, which embeds sustainability into each taught module. The programme was set up in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund and 11 corporate partners, including IBM, IKEA and Sony.

"The companies are involved in a



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number of ways," says Robin Mason, dean of the business school. "They provide scholarships for students and we have consulting projects that

the students have to do. Businesses want managers who can cope with these issues.”

Perhaps the best news for MBA students passionate about these issues, though, is that sustainability is quickly becoming a viable career option.

“We are seeing a phenomenal shift in corporate thinking across all organisations,” says Atreyi Dass, a full-time MBA student at Rotterdam. “With the corporate world recognising that the triple bottom line [people, planet and profit] determines a company’s health, career opportunities in sustainability have gained traction.

“What is interesting is the wide variety of roles available in the sustainability field — ranging from quality management to finance and business development. Now is the right time for the sustainability career track.”



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