Aalto University School of Business

Improvement of “sustainability literacy” of first year business students through innovative business partnerships

Introduction

We approach sustainability-related education through two lenses at the Aalto University School of Business. On one hand, we train sustainability specialists in our Master’s programmes Management and Creative Sustainability. On the other hand, we aim at improving the “sustainability literacy” of all business students, because the lack of knowledge of other managers in companies is one of the major challenges of present day corporate responsibility officers in business. The latter is the main target of this case story, where we present new developments of first year business studies at Aalto University School of Business.

Challenges

The corporate responsibility officers of large companies still face the challenge that their fellow managers have too little understanding of sustainability for efficient cooperation in the improvement of company performance. Even though we have offered a fair number of good quality courses in corporate responsibility at our university, the integration of responsibility issues in the whole curriculum has been insufficient. As a result, many students have failed to understand the importance of corporate responsibility as well as how responsibility issues are related to other management subjects. These have led to rather low motivation towards the topic altogether.

Actions taken

Given the challenges discussed above, sustainability and corporate responsibility have been given more weight and impact in the new degree regulations that will come into effect in academic year 2013-2014. Specifically, there will be four major changes:

First of all, the overall learning outcomes of the Bachelor’s programme have been renewed. In the new learning outcomes, sustainability and responsibility issues play an important role; one of the five degree programme learning outcomes states that when graduating, students can analyse business issues from the perspective of ethics, sustainability and internationality. More specifically, this means that students can identify and analyse questions in their own area of expertise from ethical, social, economic, environmental and international viewpoints. Including responsibility issues in the overall learning outcomes is hoped to encourage all instructors to bring these issues up in their own courses.

Second, the new degree regulations mean that there will be an introductory course on corporate responsibility and business ethics during the first year of studies. Until now, we have only offered a course in business ethics, which according to student feedback has not been seen as very motivating. The purpose of this change is to broaden the scope of the course so that it better integrates issues discussed in other courses.
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The third change is closely related to the second one. We have recruited a specialist whose main responsibility is to ensure the alignment of courses and learning during the first year. This means encouraging the instructors of first year basic business courses to work together in planning teaching content and methods. In the case of corporate responsibility teaching, this means that there is a dialogue between the responsibility-related issues taught in accounting, financing, marketing, business law etc. In all basic courses that are taught during the first year, responsibility issues are brought up and discussed whenever appropriate. The specific corporate responsibility course, which is offered in the last period during the first year, will then build on the issues already discussed during other basic courses, referring back to the examples used earlier during the year. Through this dialogue, we aim at helping the students really understand how responsibility issues are integrated in all business.

Finally, we will introduce two new 1 credit (ECTS) courses to the first year curriculum, Real Case 1 and Real Case 2. The former takes place already during the students’ orientation week before they start studying, and includes an introduction of a case company as well as an introductory session of the different majors offered at the School of Business. The purpose is to give students an understanding of different functions in organisations and help them understand questions related to them in business activities. The latter takes place at the end of the first year. During that course, the students need to integrate the knowledge and skills they have learned during the first year to solve a real business case presented by another case organisation. In both these courses, corporate responsibility is included as a subject among others, and students need to address responsibility issues in both cases.

Results

We expect the above discussed changes to benefit our students and teaching staff in three main ways. First, we expect students to gain a strong overall understanding of the role and importance of corporate responsibility and sustainability issues in business, because this understanding will be built course by course. Second, we expect the students to become more motivated to consider responsibility in their own and businesses’ behaviour, as they can see that every subject area has critical responsibility issues which might significantly harm business performance if not considered properly. And finally, through encouraging interaction between the instructors of first year basic business courses, we expect the instructors to become more interested in providing students with a broader perspective to business studies – a perspective that includes corporate responsibility issues at its core.

The Role of PRME/sustainability principles

- improvement of incorporation of corporate responsibility (Principle 2)
- improved educational frameworks (Principle 3)
- development of capabilities (Principle 1)