

FT.com site : The MBA: Going green on campus takes fresh impetus.

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In the past few years, growing numbers of a new type of academic centre have been appearing on business school campuses. They have names such as "Institute for Sustainable Enterprise", "Centre for Global Citizenship" and "Forum for Corporate Sustainability Management". Collectively they present powerful evidence that business schools are starting to take sustainability seriously.

"It indicates that faculty are starting to innovate and conduct research in this area - and of course when faculty become interested in an area and begin to research it, that naturally flows back into the curriculum," says Judith Samuelson, executive director of the Business and Society Programme at the Aspen Institute.

Through its "Beyond Grey Pinstripes" programme, the Business and Society Programme gives awards to schools that build environmental and social management into their MBA curriculum. In recent years, it has tracked a rising number of sustainability courses in the 100 or so schools that participate in the programme. From the 13 courses available in 2001, the number rose to 40 in 2003 and 60 last year.

Among the schools leading in the field are big brand names such as Stanford, which offers more than 30 elective courses addressing areas such as environmental sustainability and social and environmental entrepreneurship. Another top school, the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, has more than 25 socially and environmentally-focused electives.

However, some of the most innovative efforts are coming from smaller institutions, such as Portland State University, and schools in developing countries, such as the Asian Institute of Management and Mexico's Monterrey Institute of Technology. "In developing countries, conventions around what MBA education has to look like have evolved in a different way," says Ms Samuelson.

The focus for the most pioneering schools is on the introduction of core courses in sustainability, as opposed to electives that are voluntary. At Portland State University, much of its MBA programme includes material on social and environmental sustainability. However, its course also includes mandatory courses such as "Ethics in Organisations" and "Managing Operations and Supply Chain".

Carolyn Woo, former chair of the board of directors of AACSB International, the US business education accrediting agency, sees the evolution of sustainability content in MBA courses similar to the path taken by subjects such as globalisation and entrepreneurship.

"It goes from ad hoc cases that are opportunistic into the elective and then the concentration," explains Prof Woo, who is dean of the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. "And then there's an explosion of knowledge and the infrastructure for distribution of that knowledge. Sometimes it develops into a whole college or will become woven in to the core curriculum."

Part of the "explosion of knowledge" to which Prof Woo refers can be seen in the dramatic rise in the number of environmental and social business cases studies available to business school professors. Many of them are accessed via CasePlace.org, an online database of cases and other materials for faculty that want to integrate discussions of sustainability into their courses. The site has, for example, 47 sustainability case studies and 79 community development cases.

When it comes to hard business skills, a few individuals have introduced programmes in which sustainability is

taught as part of finance or accounting, as it is in Columbia Business School's "Finance and sustainability" course, where cases cover areas such as renewable energy, microfinance and socially responsible investing.

However, sustainability topics are often presented either as separate programmes or optional units rather than material integrated into more general business teaching. The appearance of sustainability in mainstream courses such as accounting, finance and marketing is slow.

"They tend to be standalone courses on corporate sustainability, social marketing or the environment," says Sheri Willoughby, corporate sustainability expert at the World Resources Institute. "So they cater to the students that already have an interest in this area."

Many professors are still acquiring knowledge when it comes to how issues such as climate change and social exclusion should alter business strategies. "The biggest challenge is bringing faculty up the learning curve," says Ms Samuelson.

There still appears to be a gap between proclamations of business leaders on the importance of sustainability and how they hire graduates. "[Recruitment] is based on the professional services firm model, where recruiters may be reaching into specific schools for specific types of skills," says Ms Samuelson. "And usually at the top of the list are the technical and analytical skills."

For Prof Woo, the missing link in the chain between corporate sustainability aspirations and recruitment remains a financial one. "There's not so much money chasing sustainable development," she says. "So the pressure [for more sustainability programmes] will come from students."