Teaching Sustainability in a Global MBA: Insights from the OneMBA

Nigel Roome*
Erasmus University, Rotterdam

ABSTRACT
This paper reports on a module designed to deliver education for sustainability within the framework of the new generation of global executive MBAs. The module described was taught as part of OneMBA, an executive MBA involving five business schools located in Hong Kong, Brazil, Mexico, the USA and Europe. The paper describes the key skills, insights and pedagogy used in this module. Conceptual and theoretical material, cases, role-plays and site visits were developed to provide an understanding of sustainability and its relationship with supply-chain management. Emphasis was placed on sustainability as a context-specific approach, the deployment of systems thinking skills, and stakeholder engagement. The module addressed the paradoxes that arise among stakeholders who populate global supply chains. Sustainability was considered from global, European and local perspectives in Rotterdam and Gdansk through a project that considered extending Unilever’s sustainable agriculture initiative to Poland. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

Received 10 January 2004; revised 10 November 2004; accepted 1 December 2004

Keywords: Global MBA; sustainability and supply-chain management; principles; pedagogy

It is now more than 17 years since the publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development ‘Brundtland’ report (Brundtland, 1987), and 12 years plus since the establishment of an international agenda for action on sustainable development (Agenda 21, 1992), later reinforced at the Johannesburg Summit in 2002. Environmental management and sustainable development are, however, relatively new concerns for management scholars and educators (see, for example, Academy of Management Review Special Topic Forum, 1995). Attention to these issues within management research and education reflects an emerging concern among leading businesses about the environmental and social impacts of their activities dating particularly from the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Fischer and Schot, 1993; Schmidheiny, 1992). Moves to green the higher education curriculum, and the management curriculum in particular also occurred (see for early examples in Europe the work of Ali Khan (1992) and Roome (1994)). This paper considers how such changes in management education and the MBA curriculum intersect with more recent interest in business schools

* Correspondence to: Nigel Roome, Chair of Sustainable Enterprise and Transformation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, PO Box 1738, 300DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: roome@fsw.eur.nl

Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment
in responding to global economic change and the internationalization of business through the development of global executive MBAs. The paper reviews a recent module that sought to bring content on sustainability into the framework of a newly designed global executive MBA.

Many of the early attempts to promote content on environmental management and sustainability in the business curriculum (MEB, 1993; Moser and Arnold, 1993; Roome, 1994; Shrivastava, 1994; Ulhoi and Madsen, 1995; UNEP, 1994) considered the way that managers have identified and responded to environmental and social concerns and begun to integrate these issues in business decision-making. Since then, we have witnessed the development of a new generation of global executive MBAs. These programmes raise specific questions about how education for sustainability might be offered in the context of international management programmes. Offering such an education is particularly important given the growing number of managers responsible for operations and sales in many countries around the globe and the idea that the agenda for sustainable development itself stems from global interconnectedness through human agency (Roome, 2000). This paper outlines the content and pedagogy of a sustainability module taught as part of a premier global, executive MBA – the OneMBA. The paper provides a brief background to the OneMBA (described at http://www.onemba.org). It discusses the main content and principles that informed the module on sustainability and goes on to provide an outline of the types of pedagogy used to support learning about these concepts and principles. The paper identifies key issues in organizing, teaching and learning during a module of this kind.

**Ideas Informing the Approach, Content and Pedagogy**

Earlier work by the author has suggested that globalization involves successive waves of change along environmental, economic and financial, and social and cultural axes. These waves of change not only involve the internationalization of business, they also contribute to new and evolving contexts for business. They challenge management as each wave of change provokes new questions about the role of business in society (Roome, 2000). Moreover, the overall interaction of these waves brings forward ever more profound questions about the adequacy of the governance of business and the skills and capabilities demanded of international managers. A summary of the main points of the argument is as follows.

The call for more sustainable forms of development can be viewed as a response to the environmental and social concerns that have accompanied recent economic development. These social and environmental issues were identified in the 1970s (World Conservation Strategy, 1981) and led to the reforming agenda we now call sustainable development, which came to the fore in the late 1980s and early 1990s and continues today. A clear part of this agenda stems from a growing recognition that the process of development has impacts on the social and environmental systems and resources at local, regional and global levels, both past, present and future. What was argued for in Agenda 21 (1992) and subsequent global agreements was a reorientation of the path of development and the role and responsibilities of the actors that participated in the development process, including business.

Since these issues came to attention we have experienced other forms of global interdependence and change. These include the globalization of economic and financial systems, which has led to governance responses found in the work of the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the new Basel Accord of the International Bank for Settlements. More recently, global interdependence is seen in the mixing and separating of cultures and ideologies found in the movement of economic and political migrants or as a new global, economic elite. It has given rise to multi-cultural societies and brought forward questions of identity and ideology. The mixing of cultures has been driven by the movement of people in the face of resource scarcity, political instability and conflict and palpable differences in economic prosperity as well as the images of opportunity portrayed by developed economies in the global media. Interweaving
of cultures can bring positive aspects, when the identities of individuals and their (ideological) perspectives work together. It also generates grounds for conflict when belief systems or ideologies come into conflict as with 11 September 2001. This conflict of cultures and ideologies has opened up new dimensions of risk and challenge for business. Unlike the Cold War, when ideological blocks were separated by geography, the present situation has the possibility for those in conflict to live and work in the same country as one another. The interweaving of societies provides a basis for difficult issues of security, at a national and global level, and brings forward problems manifest as mistrust between people of different cultural, ethnic, religious or ideological backgrounds. Conflict across boundaries has been replaced by conflict within boundaries. Conflicts increasingly arise between belief systems, including those who stand for and against the ideals of market-based capitalism.

These waves of global change and interdependence are increasingly laid one on top of the other. They are a concern for not only governments but also businesses and business managers. They provoke the need for business to acknowledge and take account of environmental, social and cultural aspects of business choice and increasingly demand managerial sensitivity and awareness to a wide range of social concerns and settings. In other words, as business becomes more global it has had to take increasing account of an ever-broader range of non-traditional issues and interests expressed at global and local levels. Part of the response to this increasingly complex setting is for business to consider the interests of a wider range of stakeholders when formulating strategy (Ansoff, 1979; Freeman, 1984; Clarkson, 1995). However, just as managers become more interested in stakeholders of salience to their company, so who constitutes a stakeholder has become less easy to determine with clarity. A number of issues contribute to this lack of clarity.

The number of stakeholders and the interests they purport to represent has become increasingly fragmented, contested and localized. Networks of shifting alliances for learning and collaboration between companies and stakeholders (Clarke and Roome, 1995, 1999) are progressively replacing dyadic relationships. The convergence of interests between groups anticipated by authors such as Ansoff (1979) is being replaced by increasingly contested and adversarial relationships. While these might be a source of learning, this conflict requires distinctive organizational and managerial capabilities (Heugens, 2003) as well as a willingness from all parties to engage.

While the internationalization of business informed the OneMBA programme as a whole, the contribution of business to sustainability in the context of an increasingly multi-local, interdependent and ambiguous world, with its proliferation of stakeholder interests and concerns for social and environmental aspects of business, informed the OneMBA module on sustainability.

The OneMBA and the Sustainability and Supply-Chain Management Residency

The OneMBA programme was developed as a partnership between five business schools on four continents. It was established with the vision that no single business school could take a clear view of what constitutes success in other regions of the world. Sensitivity to regional context was seen as an aspect of good international business. The partners that founded OneMBA were Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina, Rotterdam School of Management, the Chinese University Hong Kong Faculty of Business Administration, FGV-EAESP Sao Paulo and Tec de Monterrey’s Graduate School of Business. The combination of Asian, European and North and South American schools enabled the development of an executive MBA programme that is diverse, global and locally informed. The programme ran for the first time in 2001/2 and continues with around 100 participants in each cohort of the programme. Programme participants work for companies and are mostly aged between 30 and 40 years.
Participants are recruited by each of the partner business schools and graduate after 21 months. The OneMBA is issued by the five partner universities, and participants also receive an MBA from their ‘home’ university. Faculty members from the five partner universities jointly design the OneMBA core modules that are offered in each business school. The programme includes modules that provide content covering the main disciplines, functional areas and insights required in a normal MBA. In addition, four seven-day global residencies are held, one in Asia, one in Europe and two in the Americas. These global residencies bring all the programme participants together to experience the business opportunities and challenges faced by developed and developing nations within each of the regions. The module on Sustainability and Supply-Chain Management discussed in this paper provided the basis for the European residency taught by Rotterdam School of Management.

The pedagogy used in the OneMBA emphasizes collaborative, team-based work that draws on the multi-cultural experiences of the participants. International team projects are a strong component of the curriculum. Participants are not only expected to deal with content and context; they also have to learn to deal with the challenges of working across time zones, adapting to cultural differences, and building trusting relationships with their peers. Work during global residencies is undertaken in multi-cultural teams established by the OneMBA’s academic steering committee.

The seven-day global residency on Sustainability and Supply-Chain Management was partly based in Rotterdam at the Rotterdam School of Management and partly in Gdansk, Poland, with the cooperation of the Gdańska Fundacja Kształcenia Menedżerów. The dual location was designed to provide experience of management and sustainability issues in a developed member state of the European Union as well as a former East European country, which became a member of the enlarged European Union in 2004. Material was presented and experienced by participants in both settings. Experiences in these two locations were held together by a team project that simulated a management issue faced by the Anglo-Dutch multi-national food company, Unilever. The next section of the paper sets out the principal ideas that underpinned the content and experiences of the programme.

Principal Ideas

The Sustainability and Supply-Chain Management residency was informed by a number of key ideas. These include the notion that at present no company is sustainable and that at best companies are in transition to sustainability. Moreover, the residency was set in the context of the development of global interdependence discussed in the background section and the growing importance attached to integrating the economic, environmental and social aspects of business and relating business choices to the many different local contexts within which global businesses operate. Global business is not just seen as the province of multi- or trans-national companies but as an issue for any business that makes use of raw materials or industrial products and services that are from international sources and/or which sell products or services into other countries.

In line with this notion that sustainability is often locally determined it was explicitly acknowledged that the residency offered a ‘European’ perspective. The purpose of the week was to provide a European experience and to demonstrate a European perspective on sustainability as found in a recent prospective report on sustainability and competitiveness in European manufacturing (European Commission, 2001). The emphasis on European sustainability was consistent with the overarching philosophy of the OneMBA – the need for global managers to be aware and sensitive to the demands and characteristics of global regions. It was also consistent with the Brundtland Report’s (1987) view that sustainability is locally determined and context dependent, meaning that sustainability has no single blueprint. This meant accepting the suggestion that sustainability might be conceived in different ways in different eco-
nomic and cultural settings, that the role of business in society could vary between regions and that there might be fundamentally different models of corporate governance operating in different regions of the world. Residency tutors were at pains to point out to participants that we were not saying that the continental European approach to these issues was right. However, we were arguing that the approach we were describing was developing within Europe and the enlarged European Union. Indeed, we argued that the approach was becoming a hallmark of a European view of responsible and competitive business (see for example CSR Europe, 2002: European Commission 2002; Roome, 2004). What was happening in Europe was therefore important not only to European businesses but to any global business with interests to operate in Europe. The intent was to present sustainability as a basis against which to consider the challenges and approaches adopted in other regions, say the USA, Mexico, South America or Asia.

The main ideas that underscored the Sustainability and Supply-Chain Management residency were

1. the principles of sustainability in business,
2. the role and contribution of systems thinking to sustainability and its relationship to other information and processing and decision-styles,
3. supply-chain management,
4. stakeholder engagement and the paradoxes that arise from conflicting stakeholder interests in global supply chains and
5. the importance of developing and retaining local value added in global supply chains.

Each of these ideas deserves further explanation. The principles of sustainability in business were presented and discussed because participants were not necessarily familiar with the notion of sustainability or the strategic and operational impact of the concept on business practice. At this time in the development of the OneMBA none of the participants had been exposed to the concept or supporting ideas of sustainability. The material used drew on ideas developed from the Greening of Industry Network Conference held in Toronto in 1995, which formed the basis for the text recommended for the residency (Roome, 1998).

Systems thinking was viewed as a rare but important skill that supports sustainability practice. It has been claimed that systems thinking is a critical capability in management for sustainability (Roome, 1994). The author of the present paper has used systems approaches and systems thinking in teaching environmental management and sustainable development issues since 1978. More recently, systems thinking has been identified as a core skill in organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Senge et al., 1999). The importance of systems thinking to sustainability arises not just because of its contribution to organizational learning. Systems thinking recognizes that choice and action are often context dependent, in line with the Brundtland Commission’s view of sustainability (Brundtland, 1987). Systems thinking emphasizes that choices in open, complex systems require a sense of the mutual causality that arises between economic, social and environmental systems rather than drawing on a simple view of cause and effect. Finally, systems thinking is important because it supports discovery of the deeper patterns and structures behind events (see Sweet et al., 2003).

The residency explored the role and contribution of systems thinking in relation to other information processing and decision styles. These ideas were presented and discussed with participants on the grounds that systems thinking was a critical skill in the transition to more sustainable business choice. It was also important in the work of teams (such as those used in the OneMBA’s own projects) where team members drew on different approaches to information processing and decision-making. Encouraging awareness of the contribution of these different information processing and decision styles therefore contributed to the development of more reflective teamwork (Sweet et al., 2003).
However, while systems thinking was seen as critical to sustainability it was viewed as a necessary rather than sufficient condition in moving business toward sustainability.

Supply-chain management was seen as a cornerstone of international business and a key concern for more sustainable business. Global supply chains are important to sustainability because they create the need to ensure the social and environmental provenance of raw materials and suppliers and they militate against the move to more local closed loop systems of production and consumption of the kind advocated for Europe (European Commission, 2001). Furthermore, Europe’s economic heritage is based on mercantilism and the import of commodities and raw materials from other regions of the globe, through trading or empire. European economic history is therefore rooted in global commodity chains and their governance.

An appreciation of stakeholders and stakeholder engagement is critical if managers are to understand the interests and needs of stakeholder so that they can make informed judgments and choices about which interests they serve or ignore, and the risks that might arise from those choices. However, when stakeholder engagement takes place around global supply chains it is quite possible for significant disagreement to arise between stakeholders. This disagreement and contest arises not simply at one location within the supply chain but at multiple points, especially when supply chains stretch from the developing to developed economies. The capacity of managers to appreciate the complexity of stakeholder engagement, and the paradoxes that arise, was a critical element of the residency.

Finally, it was observed that practice among leading companies operating in global supply chains increasingly involves choices about how much value to extract for shareholders and how much value to add and leave at various points in the supply chain. It is self-evident that all developing and emerging economies seek skills to enable value to be added and retained locally. This concern of developing and emerging economies stands in confrontation to the conventional assumption that global business adds and extracts value for its shareholders.

**Types of Pedagogy**

The residency drew on three different types of pedagogy, including material presented didactically, experiential learning involving cases, exercises, roles plays and consulting projects, and visits to companies as a way to raise awareness of current management approaches and issues in sustainability and supply-chain management.

The emphasis of the residency was on experiential learning. Academic support for an experiential approach to learning is found in the work of Revans (1980) and Kolb (1984), but the main reason for using this approach was that the author had used experiential learning since he began teaching environmental management in 1978. He had also worked briefly with Reg Revans, while at Manchester Business School with its MBA programme that draws heavily on experiential learning methods. Examples of the three pedagogic approaches are given below. These were used with the 90 participants, divided into one or two sections and in small group work.

Material was presented didactically following standard classroom practice with PowerPoint statements of learning objectives, the presentation of material, supplemental readings and reference material. At the beginning of the residency, classes of this kind were used to introduce the participants to key concepts and ideas in sustainable enterprise, systems thinking and other information processing and decision styles, supply-chain management and stakeholder engagement as a process and the issues arising from that approach.

Experiential learning involved the use of cases such as the case of Ontario Hydro, which was the first and only corporation to the author’s knowledge to reference an agenda for organizational and social
change for sustainable development against the principles of Agenda 21. The case was used to provide the participants with an example of the extent of strategic and operational change deriving from a commitment to sustainability. Exercises designed to provide participants with experience of practical systems thinking, supply-chain and stakeholder issues began during the opening dinner, when they were asked to identify the social and environmental issues arising from the production and supply of the food they were eating. The purpose of this exercise was to expose participants to the idea that the food on their plates was the culmination of a supply chain within which there were many social and environmental issues and that these could be imagined as a ‘system’. Few, if any, of the participants had ever been asked to consider the food they were eating from a systems perspective. It was also quite clear that the group as a whole had quite an extensive knowledge as well as much ignorance about these issues even though food consumption was a daily activity. The content of the meal had been selected to reflect the use of local produce, with relatively short supply chains.

This food system example was developed to reinforce subsequent classes on stakeholder engagement and supply-chain management. Later in the residency, participants were involved in a simulated stakeholder engagement for Mars (Masterfoods in the Netherlands), involving the cocoa supply chain. In this exercise participants were divided into 12 inter-cultural groups, and provided with a briefing pack about the economic, social and environmental issues surrounding cocoa production and the global chocolate market. Each group was given a brief description of a stakeholder group, which they represented in a simulated stakeholder engagement. The stakeholder groups originated from three locations, Ghana, Colombia and the Netherlands. Through the exercise it became evident that the interests of stakeholders at each of the three points in the supply chain differed and that the overall views of the stakeholder groups along the global commodity chain were divergent. The intent of the exercise was to illustrate that the sustainability agenda of developed countries is often different from that in the developing economies and that stakeholder engagement leads to information about stakeholder interests and needs rather than providing a clear course of action between the interests of different groups. Some interests that surfaced were completely irreconcilable. Examples of the groups represented included welfare rights and environmental groups, cocoa importers and Unilever from the Netherlands, small farmers and large landowning interests from Colombia and Ghana including a farmers’ selling co-operative providing fair trade chocolate, the Ghana Cocoa Board, a small farmers’ group from Colombia and the Cocoa Farmers Federation. The role-play included a group representing the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture, which promotes planting cocoa as a cash crop to replace cocaine production.

Some participants were better able to master the role-play exercise than others. While some participants were fully involved in their roles, others remained more detached, maintaining their more familiar managerial role. Indeed, the exercise became a memorable part of the residency through the ability of some participants to play their roles with conviction. It was evident that while all the residency participants were familiar with the stakeholder concept, their ability to appreciate the vantage point of different stakeholders was less well refined. In pedagogical terms, as the stakeholder engagement simulation became more realistic through the ability of the participants to role-play so the task of facilitating the exercise became more difficult.

Participants undertook a number of site visits. These included the Dutch flower auction where they considered the development of global trade in cut flowers with the auction as a hub in this network. Visits to the Dutch airline operator KLM and Schiphol Airport were used to examine the stakeholder approach, together with the environmental and social policies of both companies.

In Gdansk, visits followed the theme of ‘transitions’, which was illustrated by questions about possible future uses of the Gdansk shipyards, the development of value added Polish amber jewellery and the branding and marketing of luxury goods designed in Poland. These visits focused on local Polish businesses and explored the idea that developing and emerging economies take the position that sus-
tainable development involves the addition and retention of value in countries that provide resources to global supply chains.

Each component of the global residency was designed to contribute to the work by the participants on a ‘design project’ for Unilever that spanned the content and experiences in the Netherlands and Poland. The design project was set in the context of the enlargement of the European Union to include Poland in 2004. Sustainability was brought forward through the challenge to each group that Unilever was considering expanding its sustainable agriculture initiative, then based on commodities such as spinach and tea, to the whole of Polish agriculture. A hypothetical exercise was written specifically for the residency in collaboration with Unilever. The exercise placed participants in the role of Unilever employees, who were to attend a course at Rotterdam School of Management on sustainability and supply-chain management and then undertake a study visit to Poland. Their responsibility was to produce a poster display by the end of the week that contained a logo, a mission statement and a roll-out plan for a sustainable agriculture initiative that could apply to Polish agriculture.

The posters that the groups developed during the week were intended to draw on the material presented and discussed during the residency together with other material gleaned from the internet or the other resources available to the participants, although most participants were surprised that internet access was much poorer in Poland than they were used to. A member of Unilever Poland was present at the poster presentations. Each group as in a Roman Forum showed these presentations simultaneously. Other groups circulated to see these posters rather than having a sequential series of 12 separate PowerPoint presentations.

**Key Issues in Organizing, Teaching and Learning that Emerged from the Residency**

As far as the organization of the content of the global residency was concerned, much of the material was as new to the organizing committee with responsibility for the OneMBA as it was to most of the participants. There were tensions between faculty tutors and the organizing committee and between those who saw the residency in terms of a ‘European’ experience and those who were more concerned about the delivery of content with its focus on a European view of sustainability. In practice, this meant it was necessary to try to reconcile the pressure to visit key points of interest such as the Gdansk shipyards with the overall content of a programme on sustainability. There were also pedagogic tensions between those who advocated a formal structured residency based on classroom content and site visits, with its emphasis on controlled learning, and the more dynamic approach to experience-based open learning, which was seen as ragged, uneven and sometimes incomplete. In this sense the residency was not a place for those who wanted to retain ‘control’, as control of the residency was often shared between tutors and participants as learning evolved. One notable example was that the original design for the residency required that the poster presentations of the Unilever exercise would lead to the selection of the four best group posters. These posters would then be worked on overnight to prepare a PowerPoint presentation for the final day. The idea was that the work of all the groups would be shared and the work of the four best groups would be developed into a presentation for Unilever management. The participants pointed out to the tutors that this seemed to be more a punishment than a reward for producing good posters and it would probably lead to a descent to mediocrity as groups competed with one another to avoid being selected to work overnight. The design for the poster work was changed and the posters that were produced were rich in ideas and content.

The residency tutors from Rotterdam School of Management, including the author of this paper, were greatly supported by the commitment of the school’s senior management, who pushed for the focus of
this residency with senior members of the other business schools involved in the OneMBA. Without their support, the residency would probably not have got off the ground as sustainability was not regarded as such an important leadership issue by the other schools as it was in Europe. In addition to this political support, the residency required extensive work to develop a coherent set of cases and exercises that reinforced one another, together with the briefing and co-ordination of speakers in the Netherlands and Poland who would contribute to the overall residency. The residency could not have succeeded without the involvement of Unilever, or a company with a similar strong position on sustainability. Organization of the residency was made all the more demanding by the dual location of the residency and the use of some speakers not familiar with core ideas of sustainability.

There were also logistic and planning issues with a group of 90 participants, involved in site visits, classroom time and small group projects. Some elements of the original planned residency had to be altered under the pressure of time constraints, especially those that arose due to the need to transport a large group from the Netherlands to Poland. In particular, a stakeholder simulation of the strategic development of KLM’s business at Schiphol airport had to be curtailed under pressure of time.

In terms of key ideas the most critical element of the residency was the importance attached to systems thinking and the context specificity of sustainability. Regrettably the residency tutors were not permitted to assess the information-processing and decision-making styles of participants at the beginning and end of the residency, even though they have used this approach in other courses on sustainability (Sweet et al., 2003). However, previous work suggests that the systems thinking style is not found commonly among managers, although it can be developed through experience. It was therefore expected that systems thinking would be rare among the participants of the residency. This view was supported by evidence that many of the participants found it difficult to accept that European, Dutch or Polish perspectives on issues of business, and environmental and social concerns were unique, valid and different from their own views and perspectives. A property of systems thinking is the ability to entertain multiple perspectives including those that are different from your own (Sweet et al., 2003). Indeed, the opposite tendency seemed to be dominant in much of the group, as participants sought to impose their own cultural values or perspectives on contexts where these were not necessarily applicable. This issue indeed went to the core of the residency, with its emphasis on developing context-tailored solutions that transcend a manager’s individual perspective. For example, KLM discussed the problems it experienced with expansion at Schiphol airport due to limits imposed on aircraft noise by the regulator and local communities. The KLM speaker observed that European Airbus was more responsive to KLM’s need for quiet aircraft than Boeing. This position was seen by many participants as a critique of American business rather than a challenge to the American aircraft industry to develop products that better meet local needs and standards. In this sense, difference was not seen as a source of learning and reflection but often as a basis for defensiveness.

Teaching of the residency was mainly conducted through team teaching by three core staff involved. However, team teaching placed considerable demands on staff flexibility, their command of content, their ability to facilitate rather open-ended learning and the need to be open to new ideas as they emerged through interaction with participants. In many senses, all those involved in the residency were learners, whether their formal role was as participants, tutors or organizers. It was a demanding residency that pushed the boundaries of practice. Moreover, the use of simulations and role-plays blurred the traditional distinction between professor and participant and led to the co-production of knowledge. A corollary of this blurred distinction was that some of the elements of the residency were more obscure to the participants than others. In particular, the relevance of the work on the issues of transition and the notions of adding and retaining value and how these related to sustainability were seen less clearly than the work on stakeholders, systems thinking and supply chains. For example, a qualitative analysis of the content of the poster presentations identified that the idea of stakeholders, systems representations and
supply-chain issues were used by all the groups, yet little reference was made to how value might be added and retained in developing economies as part of sustainability.

It was also evident that some participants were much more familiar with some aspects of the content than others. The emphasis on systems thinking and integrative skills placed great demands on some of the participants who were more accomplished in skills of traditional business analysis.

The Unilever case and poster exercise created a great deal of energy and enterprise. It was seen as an invaluable means to integrate the elements and ideas to which participants had been exposed. This simulation was an essential component of the residency.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper describes an intensive seven-day residency on sustainability and supply-chain management that was organized as part of a global executive MBA. Sustainability was envisioned as an increasingly critical issue for global business, with the management of environmental and social issues increasingly seen as a leadership issue in Europe and likely to become a more prominent part of the agenda of international business in the coming years. It was argued that understanding and managing these concerns would require a set of particular skills and insights.

The residency set out to expose participants those skills and insights. These included knowledge of the principles of sustainability in business, supply-chain management, stakeholder engagement, awareness of the paradoxes that arise in global supply chains as a result of the different perspectives and interests of stakeholders, and the need to develop and retain value added. The residency also exposed participants to the contribution of systems thinking. The paper explains the principles, ideas and pedagogy of the residency and illustrates the methods used in the didactic presentation of conceptual and theoretical material and the experiential learning with its use of cases, role-plays and site visits. A key part of the residency was a management project developed in cooperation with Unilever.

The residency required extensive and detailed collaboration between the academic partners who organized the OneMBA as a whole as well as those involved in the design of the residency in both Rotterdam and Gdansk. It involved particularly close collaboration between the educational partners and tutors and staff at Unilever, KLM, the Dutch Flower Auction and the sites visited in Poland. The residency was demanding in terms of logistics and the development of a coherent content.

However, probably the most critical element of the residency was aligning its taught content and the residency’s structure, design and operational approach. For example, it was not considered appropriate to teach ideas about facilitated stakeholder engagement unless course participants were treated as central stakeholders in the residency itself. This approach placed unusual demands on participants and tutors. For example, tutors took on the role as facilitators of experience as well as providers of knowledge. In this way, participants and tutors jointly constructed knowledge. This alignment between what was taught and how it was taught was far more significant than in most MBA programmes or courses.

The residency was therefore designed more as a learning laboratory through which participants would gain experience of ways of learning and thinking than as a class-room in which a core body of facts or tools was passed from tutors to participants. The residency as laboratory was not always a comfortable place, especially for those who felt that management education requires the acquisition of competence in the use of ‘tools and analytical frameworks’, whereas in our view a laboratory for sustainability required the development of critical and reflective thought and the ability to assess context. Moreover, the laboratory invoked the idea of sustainability as experiment, where the boundaries between tutors, participants and the experiments themselves were ambiguous and blurred. Our emphasis that the
residency provide experience and experiment was therefore disconcerting for those who appeared to want to know clearly at the end of the course what it was they were supposed to know.

Indeed, the main challenge of the residency was the notion that there is no universal approach to sustainability. Sustainability as context or situation dependence consequently required an ability to judge the suitability of policies and approaches against context. It is for this reason that importance was placed on systems thinking capabilities; yet the main conclusion of the paper is that it can be very difficult to enhance the ability of participants to appreciate and deploy a self-reflective, systems style of thinking in different situations. In short, participants often appeared to search out the comfort of analysis and analytical tools rather than to value the exercise of critical judgment based on systems assessments.

References


---

**Biography**

Nigel Roome is chair of Sustainable Enterprise and Transformation, Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research interests include business and technology, sustainable development, corporate social responsibility and global change. Nigel has taught environmental management, sustainable enterprise and corporate social responsibility since 1978; his curriculum development was recognized by the World Resources Institute in 2003.