

Solar panels at the Urbasolar photovoltaic park in Gardanne, France. Universities worldwide have a duty to make up for lost time to develop the minds of current business leaders and equip them with the tools and knowledge to create a healthier planet for all living creatures, say the writers.
PHOTO: REUTERS



Back to school: Sustainability 101 for business leaders

Universities need to provide the education and tools needed to help current and future business leaders counter climate change and advance the sustainability agenda.

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For The Straits Times

Climate change, the mother of all existential threats, can no longer be ignored, as it promises to have the most profound impact on humanity.

Many countries and corporates have adopted the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and pledged to go carbon neutral by 2050. Financial institutions, investors and governments are also forcefully promoting green financing, which attaches certain sustainability requirements to project loans, while urging directors to report on their commitments to sustainability.

Yet, sustainability also promises to be a most impactful opportunity area going forward. More businesses are appointing chief sustainability officers to lead their green transition based on the counter-intuitive realisation that going green and adopting sustainability business practices is not only the passport to survival, but also makes good business sense in the longer term.

In fact, the World Bank has estimated that a transition to low-carbon and resilient economies could create tens of millions of new jobs and trillions of dollars of economic growth. In

Singapore, the Government's determination to roll out the Singapore Green Plan 2030 underscores this belief.

Regrettably though, most current business leaders are not sustainability literate because they have not had to deal with the issue. Sustainability concerns, like pollution and environmental degradation, are traditionally classified by economists and accountants as externalities, that is, costs and benefits external to a business and which cannot and should not be accounted for in corporate profit and loss statements or in a business case to support an investment.

Only governments contemplating major infrastructural investments, such as highways, railways and real estate developments, sometimes undertake quantitative benefit-cost analyses, which attempt to account for quantifiable externalities. Even so, these assessments are rarely rigorous, and usually little more than blunt attempts to quantify the time value of shorter or faster commutes, operational cost savings of cheaper energy sources and energy efficiency measures, opportunity costs of alternative uses of land and enhancements in land values around train stations, for instance. Global warming, increases in air pollution, reduction of natural carbon sinks, loss of biodiversity, destruction of wildlife habitat and other "non-economic" costs are treated superficially and mentioned in passing.

The absence of rigorous analyses of sustainability issues in corporate strategic plans is due mainly to a lack of in-depth and quantifiable understanding of the issues.

NO COURSES IN VARSITIES

How is this so? Those of us fortunate enough to have gone to university know that sustainability did not feature anywhere in our curricula. Even today, sustainability does not prominently feature in the vision or strategic plans of most universities worldwide.

This is evidenced in the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (Stars) introduced by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. This is a self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance.

Out of the 20,000-odd institutions of higher learning worldwide, only 1,027 institutions, mostly in the United States and Canada, have employed the Stars reporting tool, and among them only 674 have earned platinum, gold, silver or bronze Stars rating.

And why is this so? The simple answer is that for most of the post-war period, most nations have been single-mindedly gunning for growth, to get out of the poverty trap and improve quality of life. Sustainability considerations have been wilfully ignored or de-prioritised. Not surprisingly, the pursuit of career opportunities and wealth accumulation became the priorities globally, and remain so today.

University courses, accordingly, remain closely aligned with perceived career and economic opportunities, with graduate employability being the main

determinant of curricula content. Industry relevance is key, and faculty members are recruited mainly based on narrow fields of expertise. Hence, most faculty members today do not have in-depth knowledge of sustainability principles or the breadth of skills to offer sustainability solutions.

In addition, most universities worldwide remain focused on satisfying the demand for mass higher education, thus subordinating their wider responsibility as a change agent for the greater good. Universities do not as a rule see sustainability and the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which include clean water and sanitation, and affordable and clean energy – as part of their core business. Rather, these are viewed as the responsibility of governments, large corporates and consumers.

There is also reluctance to draw up sustainability-inclusive curricula ahead of time for fear of insufficient demand for graduates focused on sustainability issues.

NEED TO CHANGE TACK

As the bastions of higher education and research, universities bear the primary responsibility to educate business leaders, both current and future, in sustainability and to equip them with the tools to walk the talk across the canvas of sustainability, spanning the environment, social and governance (ESG) domains as they go about their daily work lives.

So what do universities need to do?

At the outset, there must be recognition that sustainability is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted challenge. For example, proponents of the

circular economy (which embraces life-cycle as opposed to point-of-action thinking) have long realised that a collaborative, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach is crucial to creating sustainable solutions.

So, universities need to first of all foster a culture of collaboration among diverse university disciplines. Faculty members need to be brought up to speed on pedagogical methods and tools for collaborative teaching with global experts in SDG-related education and in learning and sustainability generally.

These efforts include creating quality and relevant resources and curricula related to sustainability, which is extremely broad-based and lacking a core set of teachable principles.

Similarly, stronger collaboration links and partnership arrangements tying the academic, private and public sectors together are needed to advance the sustainability action agenda nationally.

For example, universities are well-placed to lead the way in creating collaboration modalities, like entrepreneurial incubators, which can draw, inspire and nurture diverse individuals from small and medium-sized enterprises and academia to work together in teams to explore ideas on finding innovative solutions for sustainability problems identified by governments, communities, large corporates and multinational corporations.

The need for this arises partly because sustainability solutions are often dynamic or bespoke, and not always readily transferable from one ecosystem to another, as the sustainability challenges themselves are unique to the specific ecosystem.

Also, new scientific knowledge, business and social models are continually emerging, as are creative and innovative ways of pairing solutions with sustainability problems and challenges.

Sustainability education, in short, is best delivered in conjunction with exposure to real problems and immersive experience.

Universities hold the greatest promise to deliver on the massive task ahead to educate, equip and encourage current business leaders to seize the challenges of sustainability by the horns.

Fortunately, some enlightened universities are already pushing ahead on this front.

Foremost among them is Arizona State University (ASU), where 95 per cent of its 54 academic departments have sustainability course offerings. ASU established a dedicated School of Sustainability in 2006, making it the first to grant bachelor's and master's degrees in sustainability.

The school also offers further education programmes in sustainability for managers and those looking to advance into sustainability roles. Upon successful completion, they can earn micro-credentials for professional purposes.

In Singapore, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University

have already started on this journey by offering a range of sustainability-focused courses. So too has the University of Newcastle in Australia, which has a presence in Singapore.

Finally, what is especially heartening is the rapidly growing sense of urgency at the highest levels of major universities to embrace the challenges of sustainability education.

On March 24, for example, the presidents of 56 universities, including NUS, from 30 countries across six continents signed a Joint Statement of Global University Leaders on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, witnessed by UN officials. In this historic document, they committed to working together to meet the UN SDGs.

The statement said: "With less than 10 years left to achieve the SDGs... it is more important than ever for the global community to mobilise for collective resolve and accelerated action."

It added: "With their unique advantages in generating knowledge, uniting stakeholders and enabling transformation, leading universities around the world should play an active and essential role in forging a sustainable future through dialogue, solidarity and collaboration."

Sustainability advocacy has been around for decades. So why the urgency now for deeper commitments and actions by universities?

The answer is that although the data on environmental impacts shows that time is no longer on our side, there is a dearth of suitably trained talent globally to address the challenges coalescing rapidly to create a perfect storm that threatens humanity.

Tertiary education urgently needs to be reimagined globally, with sustainability in mind and, importantly, packaged into digestible, bite-size programmes for current business leaders grappling with the challenges facing them.

Universities worldwide have a duty to make up for lost time to develop the minds of current business leaders in corporations large and small, and equip them with the tools and knowledge to create a healthier planet for all living creatures.

It is really not difficult if only they put their minds to it.

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