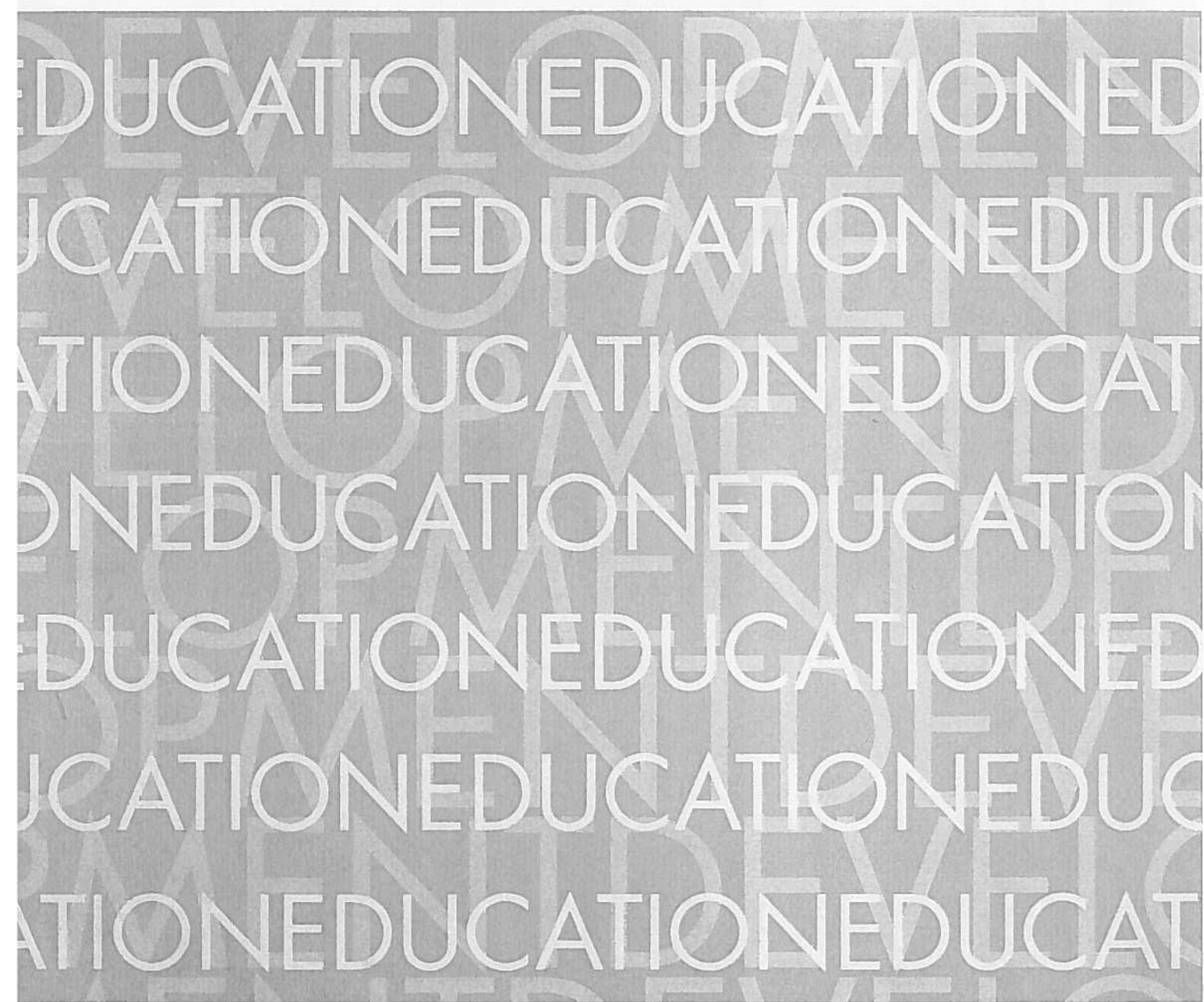


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**RETHINKING SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE**

# Global perspectives in Higher Education: taking the agenda forward in a business school

**Chris Shiel and David Jones** identify the challenges facing those who wish to extend the adoption of global perspectives in business and management programmes and present a series of strategies for addressing the indifference and resistance that characterise the response to this development.

The critical importance of sustainable development and the vital role of education in promoting action to secure the adoption of global perspectives will be obvious to subscribers of this journal. It is now eleven years since Toyne (1993) concluded that sustainable development and enabling responsible citizenship should be 'recognized as a core business of all learning institutions and a legitimate purpose of lifelong learning'. However, as we shall see, business schools have been slow to respond to the challenge.

In 1998, Forum for the Future was asked to undertake the HE 21 Project and take the sustainable development agenda forward. Business, Design and Education were identified as the three key subject areas.

The HE 21 Project commissioned a survey of 104 business schools to evaluate the state of sustainable development education in business programmes. Of the 30% of schools responding, not one had specified a learning agenda relevant to the needs of students that embraced sustainable development themes. While some curricula included some elements, coverage was limited. The barriers to development were cited as 'lack of time' (and linked to this a perception that the issues were of marginal importance) and 'lack of staff expertise'. Some respondents suggested that the terminology associated with the concepts was 'unfamiliar and confusing' (HE 21 Project 1999).

The Secretary of State for Education (as part of the HE21 project) responded by emphasizing the centrality of the government's citizenship agenda, suggesting that 'business educators can do more'. Organisations such as BAA, B & Q and J. Sainsbury were enlisted to back the initiative. In all, over thirty companies signed a statement asking for a 'high priority to be made of sustainable development education, in all UK business schools/Higher education business departments'. These organizations stressed that business schools must 'play their part' in helping students acquire this 'crucial knowledge'. The paper, 'A Sustainable Development Education: Business Specification' ([business.bournemouth.ac.uk/coe/global%20responsibility.pdf](http://business.bournemouth.ac.uk/coe/global%20responsibility.pdf)), was published by the HE21 project, on behalf of the DETR (Department for Environment, Transport and Regions), to facilitate engagement. The 'specification' was originally designed to embed education for sustainability across business programmes, outlining concepts and solutions and providing a detailed set of learning outcomes.

These welcome initiatives would appear to have had little impact on the business school community, judging by the

responses elicited at the Association of Business School's Undergraduate Forum, after a presentation entitled: 'Global Responsibility and Sustainable Development: What are Business Schools doing?' (Shiel 2002). Some participants confirmed that their business schools have ethics and social responsibility options; some commented that curriculum pressures and modular structures had meant ethics had been 'marginalised'; others saw the issues as not 'high priority' and stated that they were not really addressing the agenda at all.

Why has the response been so disappointing? The policy drivers are clear and regularly reinforced by Government Departments, Funding Councils and NGOs. The reasons for the response seem to us to reflect the difficulties in securing engagement between policies driven out at a national level, institutional commitment, and staff involved at the local level in curriculum development and teaching. We would argue that if we are to make significant progress then we need to find ways of both capturing the interests of business school lecturers and making the job of incorporating the development agenda a more professionally salient and easily accomplished task. We would also maintain that development educators working at the local level can play a critical role in facilitating this, especially where they are sensitive to the issues facing business school curriculum developers and lecturers.

We hope that this case study of one business school's experience of wrestling with the agenda, will provide business school lecturers and development educators with some constructive guidance as to how to engage commitment to adopting sustainable development, to use Toyne's words, as a 'core business' (*ibid.*). The case study focuses on the challenges we have had to overcome and shows how working with development education can trigger change.

## Enlisting support: learning from DE

Bournemouth University started working with Development Education in Dorset (DEED) in 1998, as part of a DfID, 'mini-project'. This engagement focused initially on the development of a 'Global Vision' for the University.

The Business School educates significant numbers of overseas students and at that time was exploring how to make its curriculum more responsive to the demands of multi-cultural learners. Working with DEED on a second initiative (the DEA Global Perspectives in HE Project) helped us to identify a number of ways in which we might introduce development education into the business curricula. As we worked with our development education colleagues we became more aware of the differences between our

professional languages. If we who had already committed to the development agenda found its language sometimes difficult, then what chance was there of getting these ideas across to, let alone accepted by, more sceptical colleagues? It was important to find ways of making the language accessible. This was a painful process but by working through it with our DEED colleague, we were able to develop a persuasive rhetoric that seemed, to us, capable of being understood and accepted by those involved in business education.

### **Relevance to business education: overcoming barriers**

One of the early barriers that we had to overcome was the view that sustainable development was irrelevant to the business curriculum. We responded to this in two ways. Firstly, and more philosophically we argued that sustainable development provided an opportunity to develop a holistic and more critical awareness for students, addressing the concern that writers such as Barnett (1997, 2000) have highlighted, in terms of the need for HE to develop 'critical beings' and graduates who can deal with 'super-complexity'. Secondly, we adopted a more pragmatic rhetoric arguing that since major corporations and the companies that employ our graduates were taking the agenda more seriously, from an 'employability' perspective, it was vital that our graduates were able to demonstrate their awareness and capability in respect of sustainable development. The growing internationalisation of trade and the recognition by multinational business of the need for cross cultural sensitivity and competence provided weight to the pragmatic rhetoric.

### **Problems with the concept of sustainable development**

Staff found the concept problematic in two distinct ways. Some staff suggested the term was too embracing and too complex to absorb in an already crowded curriculum. Others interpreted the term as being primarily intended for students in environmental sciences and of limited value to business students. We addressed these problems of interpretation by linking the concept of sustainable development to global perspectives, a term which colleagues were more ready to accept. This helped us to make a connection between sustainable development and the growth of international business. However, we had to ensure that colleagues understood the concept meant more than globalisation.

### **So how do we interpret a global perspective?**

We started with the Brundtland definition of sustainable development 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' This helped us explain the breadth of our concerns. We developed understanding further using the DEA principles that describe the concept of development education (see inside front cover). Finally, in identifying the characteristics of the global citizen we have worked from the Global Vision for Bournemouth University document (BU 1999), which draws on the Oxfam curriculum (1997).

### **Making it happen: curriculum development and working with DEED**

The development of an acceptable professional rhetoric to demonstrate the relevance of sustainable development and the reinterpretation of sustainable development as global perspectives provided us with a persuasive conceptual argument and approach. The next challenge was to change the curriculum. Initially, working with DEED, a team of academics reviewed the business curriculum. Business studies courses generally include a focus on political, economic, social, technological and environmental forces to ensure that students understand the context and drivers of strategic decisions. Our approach has been to seek to broaden this knowledge and to include issues of equity and justice. We already had units on International Awareness, International Capability and Management Ethics at undergraduate level and a Masters level unit, International Social Responsibility. As a first step, our DEED colleague critiqued the language used in course documentation and came up with suggestions as to where specific units could take a more critical perspective. This was not an easy process and some colleagues suggested 'macho management techniques' served students better in a world where 'business is cut-throat'. The acronyms of HE were a challenge for our DEED colleague and academics could not always relate to the language of development education.

An important reference in developing curriculum is the generic Business and Management Subject benchmark (QAA 2000). The QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) expect business and management staff to address this as part of curriculum design and delivery. The benchmark states the purpose of business and management programmes:

- The study of organizations, their management and the changing external environment in which they operate
- Preparation and development for a career in management
- Enhancement of lifelong learning skills and personal development to contribute to society at large.

We were able to demonstrate that the adoption of global perspectives would enhance the achievement of the above. Moreover, the benchmark specifically identifies 'contemporary and pervasive issues' as part of the curriculum, including 'sustainability, globalization and business ethics'. We also drew attention to the 'cognate skills' of 'critical thinking' and 'ability to detect false logic' and 'identify implicit values'. When the argument is linked in this way, it provides a powerful logic.

In developing the learning experience, we acknowledged that first year students are often quite instrumental, self-absorbed and concerned about their immediate 'local' experience: settling into and enjoying, HE. It seemed appropriate to introduce 'preferred futures' exercises (Hicks 1996) at induction to widen horizons. We then adapted business simulation exercises, to focus on citizenship through volunteering. It seemed important to get students thinking about the local/global connection at an early stage, by

involvement in the community. The Students Union has provided vital support in developing a community focus.

As part of the 'Global Perspectives in HE project', we also introduced a final-year unit, 'Global Responsibility and Sustainable Business Practice', building on the HE21 specification (Shiel and Bunney 2003). This allowed us to offer a unit at every level of study addressing some aspect of the agenda. We also exploited the opportunity provided by the Personal and Professional Development theme, which runs across all levels, to develop the skills, values and attitudinal aspects of the global citizenship agenda. This theme develops students' abilities to engage with critical reflection, enhances their capacity to deal with complexity and encourages them to challenge orthodoxy, question values and explore the socio-political context of knowledge.

None of this would have been possible without project champions, the commitment of the University and colleagues in the School. Supportive senior management and a small amount of pump-priming funds have made a critical difference. There is still more to do but the challenge is exciting: some 250 students graduate from the programme each year and secure employment across a range of industry sectors and professions, achieving positions of influence quite early in their careers. If their studies address the issues of sustainable development and global citizenship, then the potential to make a difference is significant.

### What next?

Our future plans are to extend working with the Students Union exploring ways to empower students to become involved in the community, and more active as citizens. We will continue working with colleagues on subject development to incorporate global perspectives. There are still some who present 'globalisation' as relatively unproblematic, in value terms. Experience suggests that students do not find reflective learning and student-centred approaches particularly easy. We will be reviewing techniques to facilitate engagement and the development of experiences that are more appropriate to transformational learning.

The potential to bring about change through the learning experience we provide our students seems obvious: business and management graduates can change the world of work and have opportunities to influence business decisions. We need to ensure that they are equipped to face this challenge and to make a positive difference to the way business is done. However, the immediate challenge is to convince academics that they need to ensure that their teaching provides students with the knowledge, skills and values to participate in a global society; opportunities to explore values, attitudes and the perspectives of others; and that students are empowered to challenge the status quo. Academics need to explore the global dimension of their own subjects: critique the extent to which teaching is from an ethnocentric perspective; and reflect on whether approaches are defensible, in the light of recent corporate scandals and serious world events. If we do not promote change, then we are responsible for delivering an education that supports the maintenance of the status quo.

We conclude with two quotes:

*'In the end, educating for a global community has to do with attitude – the attitude that we relate to one another. That attitude amongst graduates will produce a more literate and thoughtful population. This will not occur, however, through special courses, but rather by changing the way academics think about their work'* (Boyer 1994).

*'As educators we have a unique opportunity and a clear responsibility to help prepare our students to be responsible citizens of the future'* (Slater 2003)

Hopefully this article has identified some ways in which development and business educators can work in partnership to persuade those engaged in business education to change their thinking, accept responsibility, and take up the challenge.®

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**Chris Shiel** is Head of Learning and Teaching in the Business School at Bournemouth University. She has been involved with the Global Perspectives Group at Bournemouth, since its inception. She recently contributed, (with Andrew Bunney), to the Global Perspectives in HE Project. She is currently championing Global Perspectives across the University and is also a Board Member of Development Education in Dorset.  
cshiel@bournemouth.ac.uk

**Professor David Jones** is the former Head of the Business School at Bournemouth University and is currently Pro Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Faculty of Professional Studies, at Thames Valley University.  
D.Jones@tvu.ac.uk