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## 58. The ethical imperative: why teaching sustainability shouldn't come at the expense of ethics

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### TENSIONS IN SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHICS EDUCATION

Whilst an existing debate about whether business ethics should be taught in business schools has been seemingly settled, with the conclusion being that it should, there remains some ambiguity about how it should be taught (Jaganjac et al., 2024). Specifically, it is not clear if, and if so how, ethics ought to be integrated into the teaching of related topics such as sustainability and across the curriculum of business programmes more generally, or if it should be taught as a standalone course (Alsop, 2006; Cullen, 2017). In line with Jaganjac et al. (2024), I propose that business ethics should indeed be integrated across business schools' offerings. However, drawing on my experience as a management researcher and educator of both business ethics and sustainability, and in agreement with others such as Rutherford et al. (2012), I also advocate the need for self-contained business ethical courses. To understand why business ethics ought to be delivered as a standalone subject in addition to its incorporation into other courses, it is important to acknowledge the distinctness of business ethics from related topics such as sustainability as, though the two often overlap, they are different fields.

Ethics, as a broad field of study, is concerned with the Socratic challenge of 'how we ought to live' (Gini and Marcoux, 2011, p. 10) and living well as a human being (Driver, 2022), and it aims to answer questions of what is right or wrong or good or bad (DeTienne et al., 2021). Business ethics is conceptualised in many different ways and is characterised by competing perspectives and thus, the field is far from homogenous. However, a broad definition may be that business ethics is the application of ethics to a business context and is concerned with a wide array of ethical considerations, including the moral responsibilities of firms and what is ethical and unethical in relation to business (Moriarty, 2021).

Similar to business ethics, sustainability may be theorised in many different ways, and ambiguity surrounds its conceptualisation. One commonly cited understanding of sustainability, however, relates to the Brundtland report, which defines development as sustainable when it 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987, p. 16). When applied to management education, sustainability typically concerns how firms contribute to or inhibit the pursuit of sustainable development, often focusing on the value that organisations add or destroy to the triple bottom line (TBL), a term which refers to the existence of three interdependent pillars: economic, social, and environmental (Elkington, 1994). Whilst the TBL reflects a widespread understanding of sustainability, there remains uncertainty around aspects of this framework, depending on the theoretical perspective adopted, including the weight attributed to each of these pillars.

Sustainability has a significant ethical dimension in that achieving sustainability may be considered a normative goal, concerned with going beyond shareholder interests and financial performance (Hahn et al., 2018). Moreover, how firms can be or are sustainable poses ethically challenging questions which require normative reflections, including who or what stakeholders ought to be considered and for how many generations resources ought to be sustained. However, despite the overlaps and intersections between sustainability and business ethics, some scholars maintain that these two concepts and areas of study should not be conflated (Üçok Hughes et al., 2018). In the following sections, I expand on this argument to suggest that it is important that the differentiation between the two be acknowledged so as not to lose the important scholarly nuances that each affords.

## A SHIFT IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS' ENGAGEMENT WITH ETHICS

Following the widespread introduction of standalone, mandated ethical courses in business schools in the 1980s, such courses have largely been abandoned in favour of integrating ethics throughout the curriculum (Sharland et al., 2013). However, whilst some institutions may indeed be attempting to integrate business ethics across the curriculum, research by Jaganjac et al. (2024) and my own experience suggests that sustainability courses specifically are being positioned as replacements for courses on ethics. A review and bibliometric analysis by Jaganjac et al. (2024) of 862 business ethics education journal articles published within the last 40 years reveals a significant thematic shift in business ethics education, from a concentration on ethics to a focus on sustainability through the SDGs and PRME. Jaganjac et al. (2024) explicate that this significant shift has seen educators and researchers moving away from focusing on business schools' role in informing students to be ethical future business leaders, in favour of discussing sustainability and business schools' role in achieving the SDGs and adhering to PRME. This shift is reflected in the author's own experience, where a highly reviewed, elective, standalone business ethics module has been removed from the curriculum, with a core sustainability module positioned to absorb it. With the new sustainability module yet to be taught, it remains to be seen how the integration of ethics into the teaching of sustainability will impact ethics education in the school.

One important question relates to whether the new course can provide enough scope to comprehensively cover the key topics associated with both fields. A concern may be that, given the breadth and complexity of the challenges and concepts associated with both sustainability and business ethics, a course that attempts to integrate what were previously two, fully separate modules will result in at least one of these areas being taught superficially. Given that the module is packaged as a sustainability course, one might assume that it will be the business ethics content that will fall victim to a shortage of space and time. And thus, what is positioned as an integration of business ethics and sustainability, may well transpire to be the superseding of business ethics in favour of sustainability.

## PRME, THE SDGs, AND THE DETRIMENTAL IMPACT ON ETHICS

Whilst discussions of how businesses can contribute to sustainability through the achievement of the SDGs and PRME are demonstrably important, given the pressing nature of so-called

grand challenges such as sustainability (Böhm et al., 2022), a deficit of ethics in the teaching and learning approach to business education, and sustainability education more specifically, is problematic. Sison and Redín (2023) offer that business schools are already largely ineffective in developing ethical behaviours and understandings within their students, particularly when compared with their impact on traditional business-oriented subjects such as finance, marketing, or strategy. This might be due, as Alsop (2006, p. 13) notes, to the lack of expertise/engagement with ethics among business/management faculty. This implies that, when integrated into other courses such as those focused on sustainability, ethics ‘too easily gets crowded out’ (Alsop, 2006, p. 13); a suggestion that seems to support the concerns expressed in the previous section. And, even when an attempt to incorporate ethics in management education is made, the focus is often instrumental or descriptive, focusing on the ‘business’ side and how ethics can be used to enhance profit, competitiveness, or compliance, neglecting normative considerations of what business ought to be doing (Shaw and Shaw, 2010).

In relation to the integration of ethics with sustainability courses specifically, Jaganjac et al. (2024) problematise that the dominant focus on the business case of and for sustainability sidelines environmental and societal issues which, as previously outlined, are vital pillars of sustainable development. Sustainability evokes many normatively challenging questions regarding what ought to be done and what ought to be the case and hence, a comprehensive understanding of and awareness of this dimension of ethics is needed to address these issues.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the increased frequency of unethical behaviour observed in organisations (Kaptein, 2023), the need for ethics in business ‘has never been greater’ (Shaw and Shaw, 2010, p. 483). The persisting unethicity of many corporations stresses the need for business schools to focus on educating ethical managers (Wymer and Rundle-Thiele, 2017) and yet, the integration of business ethics into other areas of the curriculum, and particularly into the teaching of sustainability, may be hindering business schools from fulfilling this need. A shift from an explicit focus on ethics to a focus on sustainability, the SDGs and PRME may mean that business students, the future business leaders of tomorrow, find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the many ethically demanding business challenges of the day. With this in mind and based on my experience navigating business ethics education’s shift toward sustainability, I offer some suggestions to encourage a more explicit focus on ethics within business schools, to ‘reclaim the “ethics” in business ethics education’ (Jaganjac et al., 2024, p. 2). These suggestions are by no means intended as a comprehensive solution to address the decline of ethics in business education. Rather, I hope they will encourage and guide business schools’ educators to engage more significantly with ethical issues and dilemmas in their curriculum.

Whilst I support the need for the integration of ethics across business/management education, I suggest that, where possible, standalone business ethics courses ought to be offered alongside this integration, to equip students to critically engage with the foundational ethical dimensions of business and management, including those at the heart of grand challenges such as sustainability. If integration is only pursued, for example, through the teaching of ethics within a sustainability module, then business schools should resist conflating the two fields, and the distinction between the two should be made obvious. Namely, teaching staff and students should be made aware of the important nuances that separate ethics from sustainability,

and the teaching of ethics should not be considered implied through the teaching of sustainability. Where a sustainability module is intended to stand in place of a business ethics course, business ethics topics such as moral philosophy, ethical decision-making, ethical leadership, and ethical corporate culture ought to be more comprehensively addressed, rather than focusing solely on business-oriented topics such as measuring and reporting on sustainability, the cost of sustainability to businesses, and the potential commercial outcomes of sustainability.

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