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Developing Live Projects as Part of an Assessment Regime within a Dispersed Campus Model

Sarah Williams, Department of Strategy and Management, University of Bedfordshire

Alexander Kofinas, Department of Strategy and Management, University of Bedfordshire

Cathy Minett-Smith, Business School, University of Bedfordshire

Contact: sarah.williams07@beds.ac.uk

Abstract

Our newly designed MSc unit, Sustainable Business Management (SBM), is designed to engage students in the real-life practical application of sustainability at work. The authentic assessment uses a live project approach to develop and evaluate both the practical and academic skills needed to deliver sustainability. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how the unit assessment needed to change beyond the original, intended design (March to December, 2016) and its first delivery (February to March, 2017) in order to accommodate the inclusion of a new transnational education partner delivering the unit synchronously. The use of video technology, weaved into a revised assessment design and adapted in an imaginative way, allowed for a localised delivery that retained the authenticity and creativity of the original assessment while ensuring the maintenance of academic standards.

Keywords: transnational education; teaching sustainability; live project; authentic assessment

Introduction

The Sustainable Business Management (SBM) unit contributes 30 credits towards two potential MSc degrees in Purchasing, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, and Sustainable Management. Both degrees are in 'Block' delivery mode whereby students have 50 hours of intense face-to-face teaching and two assessments within a 6 week block of study. The Masters course is comprised of four sequentially-taught blocks plus a 60-point capstone project.

The central aim of the SBM unit is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to assess the impact of a business on the environment and society and how this impact may be managed in order to improve business sustainability. Thus, it closely reflects the revised international environmental management standard, ISO 14001:2015, with its shift from control and conformity to influence and innovation (Williams, 2018). The unit explores the context of climate change and the move to a circular economy, both integral components of the revised standard (ISO, 2015; NQA, 2015) and critically assesses current business practice while developing strategic and operational opportunities to embed sustainability throughout the business. This includes systems but also emphasises the need for senior leadership, creativity and engagement skills. Thus, the unit's design was informed by businesses via a long

standing collaboration with a local Green Business Network (GBN) and aims to engage students with real life case studies and opportunities for practical skills development. It is mapped to meet the Graduate Level accreditation of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA).

The two assessments in the unit are inter-connected while examining different skill sets and focus on a live company case study. The two different assessments are designed to help students develop and demonstrate two key management skills: persuasion by presentation to the 'Board' and persuasion via a written report.

The first assessment (40%) assesses where the case study company is in terms of its current engagement with sustainability, such as resource use, waste management and pollution control, and compares it to other similar organisations to compare best practice and innovation. The assessment is effectively a 'walkabout review' of the case study company, designed to be a 'fresh pair of eyes' (Envirowise, 2002) and to support an environmental manager to recognise opportunities for improvement. The informal review supports appropriate student learning by delivering an authentic assessment based on industry practice. Student work is assessed via face-to-face presentation and a hard copy submission of the fully referenced PowerPoint presentation is submitted via virtual learning environment. Students presented live to teaching colleagues and then uploaded their PowerPoint presentations and the visual recordings on the virtual learning environment. This allowed the presentations to be marked, second marked and moderated internally and by the external examiner.

Assessment 2 (60%) is a formal 3,000 word management report where the students are asked to critically explore the threats and opportunities to the case study company from a sustainability perspective, including climate change and resource constraints in order to make appropriate recommendations to the company. The final report should suggest how the business can engage more strategically with the sustainability agenda. In both assessments, students need to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the impact that businesses can have on the environment and how businesses can run environmentally sustainable operations. Students are assessed on their critical evaluation of the company's current business practice to identify opportunities and challenges related to sustainability.

Local delivery versus dispersed campus delivery

The unit was originally to be delivered solely at the University's home-based campus and members of the Green Business Network (GBN) were involved as the industry partner providing the authenticity in the assessment. GBN members were involved in shaping the design and content of the unit and supported students to apply what they were learning in class. They did this through providing real-life case studies of sustainable management in practice as well as taking part in class sessions.

Whilst the unit was developed for a team-teaching delivery approach, the move to global delivery repositioned the unit into a transnational education (TNE) team teaching context. The challenge of balancing the need of demonstrating equality of student experience whilst providing a locally relevant student experience within a

TNE context is well documented in the literature (Ziguras 2008; Lovett 2010). The UNESCO and OECD code of good practice for transnational education articulates that TNE providers are 'responsible for the quality as well as the social, cultural and linguistic relevance of education and the standards of qualifications provided in their name, no matter where or how it is delivered' (UNESCO and OECD 2005). The added context of team-teaching in an international context has received less consideration in the literature, even though some authors have explored the experience of working in a teaching team where students are located in two or three different continents (O'Neill, 2010; Clay and Minett-Smith, 2011). Assessment is the area where these tensions and challenges are most evidently exposed. Assessment and differences in grading are often cited in the literature as areas of greatest dissatisfaction for students in relation to team-teaching (White et al 1998; George and Davis-Wiley 2000; Williams et al 2010) and this challenge is further compounded in a TNE context.

Specific challenges addressed

The assessment strategy for the unit needed to be revisited to take account of the complexity of an international team teaching context whilst retaining the authentic, work based elements that were fundamental to both the intended learning outcomes for the unit and the learning and assessment experience for students. The main challenge was with regards to the case study and the composition of the live business panel. Initially time was rearranged to enable students globally to be involved via Skype. However, the time differences and different teaching patterns meant this would not be feasible. Using a pre-recorded session was considered but there were concerns about the freedom of business managers to speak openly to students if there was the potential for videos to surface elsewhere on the internet. After discussing the matter with the TNE partner the decision was taken to actually create a local business panel for future presentations.

As the University is ranked 'First Class' (2018) in the UK-based People and Planet University Green League, it was decided by the unit team to base the assessments for the first student cohort on the University's own sustainable management as the assessment case study. This would serve a number of purposes: firstly, it would provide an opportunity for students to engage with the University and provide valuable input into its own continuous improvement. Secondly, the People and Planet League provided a ready way for students to compare the approach and actions of the case study company across the sector and to learn from best practice and innovation at other institutions. Thirdly, sustainability within the higher education sector is of growing academic interest and would allow topical and contemporary research to be carried out by the students. Finally, there was the benefit of convenience and the opportunity that the case study offered for engaging the University's sustainability team with the MSc unit.

The concept of the two assessments being based on an authentic business-activity was the greatest challenge in the move to a dispersed delivery model. The original plan was for students at the home-based campus to carry out a live walkabout review with the Sustainability Manager. After considering a number of options, the team (unit coordinator, course coordinator and Associate Dean) decided that

removing this authentic element would be a wasted opportunity as the assessments were innovative and smartly designed to help students reach and demonstrate potential. There were two issues to deal with: firstly, the students in the partner site could not do the walkabout of the chosen company, and secondly, the company was possibly not relevant to their context. To address the second point, the assessment was slightly modified to enable comparing the case study to the local context.

To address the first point, the team worked with the University's technology specialists and the Head of Sustainability to pre-record an onsite review of the home-based campus. The result was a series of eight videos that reflected the different aspects of operations and strategy that the students should consider. This meant that students could use the videos as the basis for their assessment regardless of which campus they were based on. The videos included a recorded interview with the unit coordinator and Head of Sustainability that asked the questions that students needed to address for the second assessment, for example regarding approach, engagement and leadership.

Together the eight videos gave students a tool for reflection that was more useful to individuals than a walkabout review where information could have been missed. The videos also meant that students with English as a second language could have more time to reflect on content and understanding. In addition to team teaching between tutors across campuses, clarification of understanding was available to students on all campuses via onsite tutors and direct email contact with the unit coordinator and Head of Sustainability. Looking forward, the videos will also be used to support case study work with undergraduate sustainable business management students as part of the local and dispersed campus delivery of the BA Business Management award.

Conclusion

Student satisfaction was high in both deliveries, with students appreciating the opportunity to apply their skills in a different context. In addition to informal feedback, students across both deliveries provide formal feedback through a student feedback survey. The data is anonymised, collected and analysed by a third party. The surveys in both sites consistently demonstrated over 95% satisfaction on various criteria including teaching, unit design and learning support. Furthermore, assessment distributions were comparable across delivery sites. This feedback suggests the assessment regime is effective and enhances the student experience. Future presentations are likely to include other types of organisations and may be based in either the home or partner country.

While the move towards a dispersed campus model undoubtedly presents teaching and assessment challenges, the need to ensure standardization of experience across different campuses across different global locations, time zones and languages may lead to simplification of assessment as a safe and easy teaching option. However, as this case study demonstrates the spirit of innovative and smart assessment can be maintained within the model. Good communication, a learning culture that supports innovation and risk taking, good team communication and the use of imagination

and technology can enable students to engage with smart assessment and fully demonstrate their potential, wherever they are physically based.

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