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Chapter 17. Business Ethics – Reflecting on Sustainability Issues in Business

17.1. COURSE SUMMARY

Table 17–1

Audience and level of studies	Students (Postgraduate Specialist Training Programme)	
Group size	26–50	
Course duration	14 weeks	
Credits	4 ECTS	
Workload	Presence: 16 h Self-study: 60 h	Total: 76h
Contents/primary topics	• Sustainable and responsible business operations • Business ethics	
Main course objectives	• Familiarising students with the most important models in the field of business ethics and sustainable operations • Enabling them to participate in corporate sustainability programmes through critical self-reflection • Developing moral sensitivity and expanding related expertise	
Main teaching approaches	• Lecture-based learning • Collaborative learning • Active learning	
Main teaching methods	• Lecture and group discussions/debates • Flipped classroom • Self-reflective exercises	
Learning environment	Classroom (face-to-face learning)	
Link to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	SDG 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	

Table 17–2

Impact assessment:	(None) Low/ Medium/ High	Explanation
1. Degree of student participation / activeness	Medium	Students engage in debates and in-class role-plays during the course.
2. Degree of student collaboration / group work	Medium	Medium: Students participate in extensive group assignments in class.
3. Degree of student emotional involvement	High	Students articulate their own emotional stands on different sustainability related issues, connecting the topics to their own lives and decisions as consumers, employees; or leaders.
4. Degree of inter-/trans-disciplinarity	Medium	Most of the students lack a BA degree in economics (as they are mostly engineers and lawyers), so their inclusion and experience make up a significant part of the course. Additionally, guest lectures from different business stakeholders are provided.
5. Degree of student (self-) reflection	High	As a course assignment, students produce a reflexive paper about a first-hand corporate or consumer sustainability experience.
6. Degree of experience of real-life situations	Low	Several case studies are discussed during class.
7. Degree of nature-related experiences	(None)	Classroom teaching, although there are a lot of references discussing the impact of business on the natural environment.
8. Degree of stakeholder integration	Medium	During the duration of the course, more guest lecturers are invited to familiarise students with the corporate manifestation of sustainability. As part of the case studies, several stakeholder groups are referred to, forming the basis of in-class role-plays during which students act as different stakeholders of a company.
9. Degree of integration between theory and practice	High	The recognition and discussion of the practical implications of theory are the main points regarding class assignments and in the reflective course paper.

17.2. COURSE INTRODUCTION

Business ethics is a field of science that deals with the ethical analysis of economic activities and systems of activities (Boda, 2013; Boda & Zsolnai, 2016). This course is offered as part of the Postgraduate Specialist Training Programmes, and for this reason all students have a BA degree in different fields (such as in economics, education, law or engineering). They have knowledge and experience in corporate practice, but the ethical side of decision-making and working for a company have not been taught to them before. Responsibility is primarily an ethical phenomenon, which is why this viewpoint is emphasized in relation to CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and corporate

sustainability. Speaking about ethics in a mainstream economics programme is still surprising and innovative in a sense, but as students' feedback show – after the acceptance of this topic – students understand why the topic is so important to deal with.

Thus, our course "Business Ethics" is innovative because it goes beyond the general debates of business ethics and debates focusing on ethical or moral dilemmas and decision-making by covering the most important concepts of sustainable and responsible business operations, i.e., the ethics of sustainability as proposed by Biedenweg et al. (2013).

The main point is to present the pitfalls of mainstream economic thinking through using short-term and one-dimensional value creation approaches (Pataki & Radácsi, 2000; Győri, 2012; Boda & Zsolnai, 2016). The three dimensions of sustainability (Elkington, 1997; UN, 1987, 2015a, 2015b) and especially the strong form of sustainability (i.e., manmade and natural capital are complements) (Daly, 1995, 1996, 1999) provide the key concepts for changing the mindset of future businesspeople and leaders about the role of the economy and activities within society and biosphere. According to Brenkert (2019), business ethics lacks a focus on its enactment component, transferring certain theories of moral change into principles and values that need to be followed up on. Overall, a better understanding of unethical behaviour in the workplace is needed (De Cremer & Moore, 2020), to be able to improve current business and management education as it also needs to move away from an organisation- to a human-centred worldview (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006) with an ultimate goal of measuring business success not against monetary/financial goals but on how well it will advance the interests of humankind.

On a more operative level, the course aims to familiarise students with the most important definitions and models in the field (EC, 2001, 2011; Kindler & Zsolnai, 1993; Boda & Radácsi, 1996; Holliday et al, 2002; Porter & Kramer, 2002, 2011; World Bank Institute, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2005; Vogel, 2006; Kotler & Lee, 2007; Szegedi, 2007; Tóth, 2007; Ligeti, 2008; Angyal, 2009; Boda, 2013; Győri, 2012; Braun, 2015; UN, 2015 a, 2015b; Radácsi, 2021) and enables them to participate in sustainability programmes in their respective workplaces.

The practical nature of the course is reinforced by the experience of professional guest lecturers from the world of business and from the civil sphere. Because of constantly emerging topics in the field, the subtopics and cases discussed during the course keep changing from semester to semester. That is why recent scholarly and economic articles are used as recommended readings besides the main course book.

Students' moral sensitivity is challenged, expanded, and developed through the interdisciplinarity of business ethics and education for sustainability by

integrating concepts and theories from different disciplines (economics, business administration, management, anthropology, psychology, etc.) (Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2012; Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017; Wamsler, 2020). Moreover, most of the students lack a BA degree in economics (as they are mostly engineers and lawyers), and thus the inclusion of their experience makes up a significant part of the course and contributes to lively debates.

17.3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Table 17–3

Learning objective dimension (UNESCO, 2017)	Operationalization	Competency referred to (Rieckmann, 2018)
Cognitive	Students will have knowledge of the basic comprehensive concepts, theories, facts, domestic and international contexts of business ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability.	Self-awareness competency
	They will be able to independently understand and internalise the latest professional knowledge in the field and apply it in their work.	Strategic competency
	They will know the role of sustainability management in corporate operations and its connection to other functional areas.	Systems thinking competency
Socio-emotional	Students will develop moral sensitivity and self-awareness about sustainability issues.	Self-awareness competency; Critical thinking competency; Normative competency
	They will be able to recognise ethical decision-making dilemmas and discuss them relying on substantive arguments.	Integrated problem-solving competency
	In making their decisions and communicating about this with others, they will take into account ethical norms, and keep aspects of social and environmental responsibility in mind.	Normative competency; Collaboration competency
Behavioural	Students will be able to consciously apply the accumulated knowledge of the field of business ethics and responsible corporate operation in real projects.	Critical thinking; Self-awareness competency
	They will act empathetically when meeting challenges of sustainability and participating in corporate sustainability programmes.	Collaboration competency; Normative competency

17.4. COURSE OUTLINE

Table 17–4

	Structure	Session focus
Session 1 (6 teaching hours)	Introduction, icebreaker, case study about Kiribati	Emotional relatedness to the topic
	Lecture – including a group discussion and self-reflection tasks	Concept and basic theories of business ethics and sustainability (e.g., triple bottom line) Case study – Unilever case from ISSUE Methodology book
	Group discussion	Usage of the I and we paradigm (Etzioni, 2003) concerning problems of tax payment
	Debate	Arguments concerning cheating, corruption and other topics based on deontology vs. consequentialism
	Lecture – including group discussions and tasks	Ethics and economy Ethical problems of mainstream economics The three pillars of sustainability Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
	Self-reflection task, following by group discussion	SDGs – What can I do? (personal ideas about achieving SDG 1,5 and 6 – one SDG from each pillar of sustainability)
Session 2 (5 teaching hours)	Lecture	Stakeholder theory
	In-class role play	Diversity task – different stakeholder groups' motivations, challenges, and expectations
	Group discussion	CSR definitions
	Lecture – including group discussions and tasks	Concept of CSR, ethical institutions
	Group discussion	Analysis of the values and principles held by the university based on our code of ethics
Session 3 (5 teaching hours)	Lecture – including group discussions	CSR on a national level
	Group discussion based on case studies	Best practice examples of national CSR initiatives
	Lecture – including a group task	Criticism of CSR
	Case study, self-reflection task	Case of WorldCom – Should and could I be a whistle-blower?
Course assignment	Students write a reflexive paper about a first-hand corporate or consumer sustainability experience	Sustainability related issue based on students' own professional or personal experience

17.5. TEACHING APPROACHES AND METHODS

Before presenting ethics and sustainability-related theories to the students, as a starting point, the teacher might want to use a case study about Kiribati for arousing students' interest. Kiribati is some small islands in the Pacific Ocean, halfway between Hawaii and Australia. It is the home of about 100,000 people. And these 100,000 people are slowly starting to pack because the ocean will engulf their country in the foreseeable future. Today, 100,000 are fleeing from one country to another, 100 million tomorrow and the next day… In the future, it may be our turn to move because of unsustainable environmental circumstances. Based on this reading and the follow-up discussion both cognitive and socio-emotional interest in the subject can be aroused. Some of the students question some of the information in the case study, others look up Kiribati online. In any case, joint thinking on the subject begins.

Another good starting task is using a Kahoot! test with simple-choice and true or false questions about different sustainability topics. Sometimes the data are shocking (e.g., How many litres of water do you need to make a pair of jeans? 10,000!), which can raise disbeliefs and different issues to discuss. The usage of these online polling tools makes it easier for the students to share their opinions at the beginning of the course. This innovative method helps students to open-up gradually.

Within this course a combination of different teaching approaches and methods is used. In the online form, different web-based tools and platforms are used for sharing resources and enabling group activities (e.g. CooSpace, MS Teams, streaming systems, Kahoot!, Padlet and Mentimeter). The basis of the course is established by lectures paving the way for a common understanding of the different concepts of the field (Bligh, 2000). These lectures are only 15–20 minutes long, so it is not difficult to maintain the attention of the audience. In a normal case, lectures are held in the classroom, but in the case of online or hybrid teaching the lectures can be recorded and uploaded for the students in advance, so they can come prepared for seminars/workshops with some basic knowledge and information. In this sense, flipped classroom (Lundin et al., 2018; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015) can also be used in addition to, or instead of, ordinary lectures to increase learning experience of students (Awidi & Paynter, 2019; McNally et al., 2017).

After the lecture part there are different forms of activities, so lectures can be used in a recurring way during seminars for sharing newer and newer pieces of information. Sometimes short videos from other sources (e.g., TED talks) are used instead of self-prepared lectures. For example, the first lecture is an introduction to basic concepts like ethics, sustainability, triple bottom line, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the problems of mainstream economics,

one-dimensional vs. multi-dimensional value-creation, GDP vs. well-being vs. happiness (Győri, 2012; UN 1987, 2015a, 2015b).

Sometimes debate (Cotton & Winter, 2010) as a teaching method can also be used to reflect on the content that has been covered, e.g., in the case of using different ethical argumentation theories and practices. One student can get the task for arguing based on deontology (which theory suggests actions are good or bad according to a clear set of rules), while the other one has to use consequentialism (suggesting that an action is good or bad depending on its outcome) (Tóth, 2016). From these discussions and debates even an in-class role play (Rao & Stupans, 2012) can emerge, e.g., we have a teaching case study where representatives of a company's numerous departments should elaborate a solution for a business issue where reputational risk has emerged (Ramšak, 2021).

Collaborative learning (Kirschner, 2001) is repeatedly used where students participate in small-group activities and share their knowledge and experience in corporate sustainability tools and processes. As students have some working experience, they have different pieces of information to share and to discuss with each other. That is why using case studies or short articles for generating group discussions (Wamsler, 2020) is a useful and effective method for teaching about business ethics issues including different stakeholder needs, the management's decision-making principles and processes, or the relative importance of SDGs in various business sectors. The different answers and suggestions can be gathered by online tools like Mentimeter or Padlet, which help to visualise similarities and differences between various opinions.

Reflective exercises are based on the work and life experiences of the students. All of them have encountered sustainability issues before, but by getting to know the sustainability vocabulary, concepts and trends, they can rethink the cases and their role in each of them. For example, during the diversity task, they raise their previous issues related to discrimination or ethical HRM tools and try to find better solutions together. This continuous reflectivity causes ethics and sustainability to guide their decision-making and activities more strongly than ever before.

17.6. EXERCISES

Diversity Roleplay

In this exercise different groups of students simulate a company situation and discussion. The imagined groups consist of the following employees of a local subsidiary of a multinational company:

- Employees (leaders or experts) who work locally, but do not speak the local language, but the primary language of the multinational company.
- Employees composed of a specific ethnic minority group
- Employees with disabilities – it is up to the group whether they are homogenous in their disability (e.g., blind or physically disabled) or there are different types of disabilities within the group
- Female employees

First, the groups should separately elaborate (in classroom or via Padlet) their expectations towards the company and towards other employees; identify the group's contributions to the value creation of the company; and the challenges faced by each group during everyday operations and activities.

Second, all groups present this information to others. Group discussion is moderated by the teacher about the challenges of meeting stakeholders' expectations. Potential solutions concerning different viewpoints can be formulated.

Through this exercise, students are expected to learn that stakeholders can and should have expectations, but they have to articulate them. Beside their expectations, they also have responsibility for contributing to value creation. Even though all the groups focused here are employees, they have very different expectations and furthermore many other stakeholder groups with their own diverse expectations. For this reason, harmonising different needs is not an easy task and requires a lot of discussion, balancing and accepting of compromises.

Definitions for Corporate Social Responsibility

In this activity, after listening to a short lecture about some general points of corporate social responsibility (and prior to the actual lecture on the topic), different CSR definitions (EC 2001, 2011; Kindler & Zsolnai, 1993; Boda & Radácsi, 1996; Holliday et al., 2002; Porter & Kramer, 2002, 2011; World Bank Institute, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2005; Vogel, 2006; Kotler & Lee, 2007; Szegedi, 2007; Tóth, 2007; Ligeti, 2008; Angyal, 2009; Boda, 2013; Győri, 2012; Braun, 2015; UN, 2015a, 2015b; Radácsi, 2021) are distributed to students on slips of paper.

Students should pursue to identify:

- The given definition in relation to the moral case vs. business case categories.
- Origin of the definition (at least the continent, but it is even better to identify the country of origin).
- The year (or at least the decade) of the publication of the definition.

After all this guesswork, students should explain their own opinion on the definition by answering to the following questions:

- Is the definition appropriate?
- Can you agree with the definition?
- How could the definition be improved?

Through a group discussion, more than 20 different CSR definitions will be extensively discussed. The teacher can explain the different viewpoints and approaches regarding CSR (business case vs. moral case, multinational company vs. SME approach, explicit vs. implicit CSR, PR/communication vs. real commitment, etc.) The history and development of the concepts can be presented and this way regional and other differences can be understood (e.g., US vs. European approach and regulation, developed vs. developing countries). Also the names of the main organisations and scholars of the field become familiar to students.

The pool of definitions can be adjusted to changes in CSR. Competing terms like sustainability, social impact, circular economy, etc. can also be included. After this sensitisation and awareness raising discussion, the lecture on CSR will be much more understandable and easier to remember.

17.7. ASSESSMENT

For assessment, students should write a reflective paper (100 %) about an ethical issue which they have experienced during their professional life or as consumers. They should use their theoretical knowledge, tools and concepts as a framework for the analysis of the situation. In this way they can rethink and structure the case – maybe formulate a future good solution to the specific problem. This approach gives space to self-directed and creative learning as students have to think about a specific problem which somehow touches them, has importance for them. The use of theoretical aspects of the literature is not the main part of the assignment, it is rather used as a lens for investigating the chosen problem, so students' own examination and analysis are much more important (Győri & Mosolygó-Kiss, 2019).

This final task can be interpreted as a self-reflective task (Cotton & Winter, 2010). Students can examine their as well as their colleagues' and leaders' role and decisions in the specific situation based on the theories, methods and tools taught to them during the course. This way it is possible to achieve a higher level of cognitive, behavioural and socio-emotional competences on sustainability.

17.8. PREREQUISITES

Required prior knowledge from students:

- This course is not open for every student; it is embedded in the Postgraduate Specialist Training Programme at a business school. Even if there are no pre-requisites, students come to the course with professional experience, which gives the teacher the opportunity to activate students and deal with different subtopics.

Required instructor and competences:

- Lecturer (business ethics, CSR, sustainability), and guest lecturers (with related practical experience)

Required tools:

- Web-based collaboration platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Stream, CooSpace, Padlet, Kahoot!)

17.9. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Baritz, S. T. (2014). *Three-dimensional economy – Is management possible if based on virtue ethics?* PhD dissertation draft in English, Corvinus University of Budapest. http://phd.lib.uni-corvinus.hu/793/4/Baritz_Sarolta_Terez_ten.pdf
- Budapest Business School (n.d.). *Budapest Business School Code of Ethics*. https://uni-bge.hu/en/bbs-code-of-ethics
- European Commission (2014). *Corporate Social Responsibility National Public Policies in the European Union – Compendium 2014*. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/corporate-social-responsibility-national-public-policies-european-union-compendium-2014
- Frank, R. H. (2004). *What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Frank, R. H.; Gilovich, T.; Regan, D.T. (1993). Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7(2), 159–171.
- Freeman, R. E. & McVea, J. F. (2001). A Stakeholder Approach to Strategic Management, *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.263511
- Frey, B. S.; Osterloh, M. (2005). Yes, managers should be paid like bureaucrats, *CESifo Working Paper*, No. 1379, Center for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute (CESifo), Munich. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/18743/1/cesifo1_wp1379.pdf

- Győri, Zs., Khan, Y. and Szegedi, K. (2021b). Business Model and Principles of a Values-Based Bank—Case Study of MagNet Hungarian Community Bank, *Sustainability*, 13(16), 9239.
- Kardos, P. (2016). *The Effect of Beliefs in Free Market Ideology and Nationality of Companies on Justice Demands, Action Intentions and Emotions in Response to Corporate Transgressions*. PhD dissertation draft in English, Corvinus University of Budapest. http://phd.lib.uni-corvinus.hu/922/3/Kardos_Peter_ten.pdf
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- Tóth, G. (2007). *The Truly Responsible Enterprise*. KÖVET, Budapest. https://kovet.hu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Truly-Responsible-Enterprise.pdf
- United Nations (2015a). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E
- United Nations (2015b). Sustainable Development Goals. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

Other online resources:

- ISSUE – Innovative Solutions for SUstainability in Education (n.d.) 21-Day Challenge- Offline Document. https://www.scribd.com/document/521303435/ISSUE-21-Day-Challenge
- ISSUE – Innovative Solutions for SUstainability in Education (n.d.) Green Office Guidelines. https://www.scribd.com/document/521501583/ISSUE-IO5-Green-Office-Guidelines
- ISSUE – Innovative Solutions for SUstainability in Education (n.d.) Methodology book. https://www.issue-project.eu/toolbox/methodology-handbook

17.10. GENERAL TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Teaching Business Ethics is not about rigor evaluation or exams, it is about raising awareness to the biggest challenges of our times. Using the knowledge, the everyday and professional experience of the students are crucial. Teacher only has to systematize the information which pervade our lives.

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