

**Developing leaders for sustainable development: An
investigation into the impact and outcomes of a UK-based
Masters programme**

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...integrating sustainability thinking and practice into organizational structure is not a trivial task and requires a vision, commitment and leadership.
(Azapagic, 2003: 303)

In an interview before his untimely death the management scholar Sumantra Ghoshal suggested many management practices that have evolved in the last two and a half decades have had little regard for concepts such as sustainable development (Bernhut, 2004). Indeed, organisations seem to lack leaders with a vision for sustainability (Giampalmi, 2004) and UK business schools pay little attention to issues surrounding sustainable development (Coopey, 2003). From a more general perspective it has been suggested that for society to accept transition to a sustainable agenda there needs to be a change in the mindset and values of society's leaders and that the logical source of this change is higher education (Johnson and Beloff, 1998). A UK-based masters programme provided by a charitable organisation based in the UK called Forum for the Future is tackling this shortfall.

The Masters course in Leadership for Sustainable Development has been running since 1996 and defines sustainable development as - 'A dynamic process which enables all people to realise their potential and improve their quality of life in ways which simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.' (Forum for the Future, 2007). The programme has three core elements:

- Academic understanding of leadership and sustainability

- Work-based learning involving high-level placements in six sectors of society: environmental or development campaigning organisations, national government, local or regional government, business, finance or regulatory institutions and media
- Skills and personal development based around leadership development and team-building

All three areas constitute a circular experiential learning process which involves project work (management simulations, problem-solving and decision-making tasks as well as work-based projects), facilitated review (centred on exploring feelings and emotions to develop emotional intelligence) and theoretical input (academic lectures and coursework).

The programme has now had over 100 graduates working in a diverse range of organisations ranging from large blue-chip companies to governmental and community organisations. The main thread of the programme is a series of challenging placements undertaken within a wide range of organisations – each one designed to stimulate reflection on practice and catalyse learning from experiencing new and diverse settings. Early in the programme, each cohort of twelve also attends an experiential leadership development course designed to stimulate self and team reflection, and to provoke deeper understanding of the practice of leadership. The programme's purpose has been to develop knowledgeable and purposeful leaders who will make a real impact on the sustainability agenda.

Other programmes offering formal education on leadership and sustainable development are available (e.g. Johnson and Beloff, 1998; Shinn, 2005). There is, however, a lack of evidence as to how much these programmes have an impact on

students. The research reported in this paper addresses this dearth by conducting a qualitative study into how a programme of this nature has impacted on participants.

Research Aims

This paper focuses on the benefits of the programme for the participants in terms of their ability to operate successfully in their chosen work and make a contribution to the sustainable development agenda. Leadership, in particular, is regarded as vital in building a sustainable future into the twenty-first century and this leadership should have a working knowledge of various functions, *of* and *in* organisations, and an understanding of the relationships between these functions (Giampalmi, 2004; Reid *et al*, 2002; Welford and Ytterhus, 2004). This is important given the argument that being proactive with respect to sustainable development may mean different things in different organizational contexts (Vredenburg and Westley, 1999).

Recent research reported by Burgoyne (2006) has suggested that leadership development has three main outcomes; confidence, pause for reflection and networking. This research had the opportunity to corroborate these claims. In addition, recent research (Gill and Edwards, 2003; Edwards and Gill, 2005; Edwards and Turnbull, 2005; Turnbull and Edwards, 2005) also suggests that experiential learning does have a positive impact on the development of leadership skills. Indeed, there is evidence that college student leadership can be developed (Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt, 1999).

Furthermore, other recent research suggests a combination of work-based learning, conceptual ideas and social interaction as the basis of effective leadership development (Bentley and Turnbull, 2005). The programme uses a combination of all

the above techniques to develop the leadership ability of students with a particular emphasis on sustainable development.

In addition, the literature suggests a model of the change process for sustainability; awareness, agency and association (Ballard, 2005). 'Awareness' refers to the awareness of what is happening and what is required, 'agency' refers to the ability to find a response that seems personally meaningful and 'association' refers to association with other people in groups and networks. This research also considered this model in evaluating the level of impact graduates were having on the sustainability agenda.

Research Methodology

The research was designed to evaluate outcomes of the programme at the individual level. Outcomes evaluation focuses on changes in attitudes, perspectives, behaviour, knowledge, skills, status or level of functioning (Marzano, 1993; Schalock, 2001; Stake 1967; W.G. Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

This study has used an inductive approach. We elicited autobiographical stories from 15 interviewees and 2 focus group attendees, and having transcribed their stories we analysed and coded these thematically. The interviewees were volunteers who had signed up to be interviewed at the previous Alumni event.

Towards the beginning of each interview we asked each interviewee to complete a timeline depicting significant dates and events that they believed had shaped their thinking and actions prior to coming on the course, as well as significant dates and events since leaving the course. The purpose of the timeline was to stimulate memory and reflection in the participants of our study. Our aims were to understand

how the participants constructed their choice of this programme, how they saw it fitting into their life trajectories, the triggers which led them to apply for a place, what they hoped to gain, and how their career plans and outcomes had been informed by their participation in the programme.

We also sought to understand how the graduates made sense of the experiences they encountered during the course of the programme itself, and the impact of different aspects of the programme on their current thinking and actions.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted by three different interviewers. The interviewers began with a common set of questions and then probed their respondents with further questions following each response. Each interviewer then coded the transcripts thematically in order to draw up a matrix of codes, which were then reapplied to each transcript.

Findings

The key influences on participants to join the programme

In order to evaluate the changes taking place at an individual level, we believed it important to establish a base line for each interviewee by seeking to understand their values and beliefs prior to embarking on the programme, and how they accounted for these. We sought to discover, for example, what it was that they pinpointed in their biographies that had influenced them to engage politically or socially with the sustainability agenda, and whether and in what terms the participants described the influence of their family or educational background. We sought to understand the origins of their interest in the sustainability agenda, and how they made sense of this for themselves.

We found that a combination of early age, family, school and university influences on participants had shaped their thinking and their environmental and social consciousness significantly. Many had early recollections of these early influences.

Family

Many respondents have been brought up with an understanding or love of the countryside, often as a result of a rural upbringing, and often reinforced by the influence of a family member. Most of the participant's parents were middle class, often teachers or academics, and many but not all had role modelled social or environmental awareness during their childhoods:

I think my family did a huge amount, growing up on a farm and being out and about doing things I was surrounded by nature and natural environment and open space.

I've been very influenced by my family, my father particularly. He's a teacher. We went to Wales a lot as children. It was a safe, happy place for him. He talked about the land. It was quite romantic I don't think he was pushing me but he was passionate about it. That's what he talked about. I certainly don't think he'd be too thrilled if I became an accountant.

In terms of my interests in the environment and human rights these had been throughout my childhood growing up I guess basically my parents were both very involved in their society and are both teachers – my sister and I were brought up to campaign for dolphins at about age six.

School

School experiences, and in particular the influence of specific teachers had also often fostered social and environmental awareness amongst the participants.

My advanced level geography teacher was very interesting. He may have been playing devil's advocate. I would have regular debates with him.

I was a keen biologist at school and had a very inspiring biology teacher who first got me into environmental issues. From there I went on to study biology at university, and at university I spent two summers in Cameroon trying to introduce bee-keeping.

University

Not only had these influences often led to specific university subject choices, it often led to their decision to engage in political activities when they progressed to university. The most common university courses chosen were geography, followed by science, engineering, and politics. For many, university represented the first opportunity to engage in political or environmental campaigning:

I did a degree in Environmental Engineering which looks at the problems of pollution especially in water and in air, and was about delivering healthy support systems to people.

Geography was my favourite subject at school and I did a geography degree up at Durham. It felt a natural step into the course. Geography is a very live subject - about people, the earth, and the planet. It wrapped me up and fired my imagination.

So I got involved with a student organisation and working a lot in Zimbabwe that was my first real experience where I totally changed what I wanted to do from Marine Biology to International Development.

Other Influences

Few of the participants mentioned political or world events as having been significant to them. Those that were mentioned were '9/11', the Gulf War, the emancipation of Nelson Mandela and the influence of the "Live Aid" event in 1985:

Things like the Gulf War – seeing the oil pluming across the Iraqi desert. That has left a very lasting mark on me.

I'm just about old enough to remember Nelson Mandela being freed.

I can remember the song [Live Aid] and being with my friend and listening to it in her kitchen, and thinking oh my God, what's going on? I must have been very young.

Political and environmental conventions such as Prague, Kyoto and Montreal were also mentioned. Indeed, political, social and environmental issues were a much greater influence on them when they encountered them first hand. Since most claimed to have comfortable, middle class backgrounds, this begins to explain the huge influence of their gap year activities on their consciousness and engagement. Almost all the participants had taken a gap year. These activities, whether domestic work or overseas projects, stirred strong feelings in almost all our interviewees about injustice and inequity, environmental destruction, and the dominance of the capitalism and global business:

I had a year working for the Health and Development Department in Tamil Nadu. There were a lot of things I experienced which compounded my experience of sustainable development. I learned the impact of bad planning and bad decisions – the impact of political or financial decisions.

When I was doing a gap year I worked on a conservation job in the Falklands for five months . . . you can see all the crap basically that washes up from the sea to beaches - flotsam and jetsam from all around the world that ends up in this pristine place.

What I did was to join the Prince's Trust Volunteer Scheme. That intense twelve weeks really sort of afforded me some perspective and a chance to look at what I wanted to do . . . that was a bit of a shock to the system but a very valuable one.

Programme Outcomes and Impact

Personal Impact

The value of the programme was invariably constructed initially in terms of personal impact. This was wide-ranging, and included greater interpersonal awareness, self-confidence, self-belief, social skills, broader vision and deeper understanding. A consistent message was that the programme represented excellent preparation for the world of work, a preparation that had not been provided by their undergraduate university education:

The course allowed me to think of different ways of how to take the initiative.

I think I'm more able to take an overview and to understand and be sympathetic to what people have to say. Through that you almost get

automatically elevated to a very important member of the team. You become the hub for everyone. They kind of want to talk to you.

If you want to talk to any individual or organisation or sector you really need to think about speaking in their language and speaking to them from a position that they will listen to.

I was more able to understand the different ways people see and do things. That makes you more able to communicate with them more effectively.

This preparation for work and life also included the opportunity for graduates to learn first hand what type of organisation they might want to join after completing their Masters. Often being forced to undertake placements not of their choosing taught them a great deal and frequently changed their views and perspectives completely.

Learning from Placements

Even those graduates who had been placed in organisations which were not their first choice had generally found them to be more useful than expected. As preparation for future career choices, the placements were also felt to have been essential for discovering what types of organisations suited them best and stimulated them. Often these discoveries were a revelation.

They also spoke of the enormous value of learning about how organisations work, and the wider networks within the sustainable development arena:

I took a lot from all of the placements. The generic thing that you get from all of them is an awareness of organisational structure and how different sectors and segments are relating to each other.

I've been in BP now for two years and I probably learned 80% of how the organisation works during my one month placement.

I learned that if you want to talk to any individual or organisation or sector you really need to think about speaking in their language and from a position that they will listen to.

Networks and networking skills

Almost without exception, the graduates volunteered that one of the most enduring legacies of the programme for them have been the networks that they developed during the programme, the people they had met and worked with, and the networking skills that they had learned and practised during the programme.

Some graduates said that they had found the emphasis on networking difficult to accept at the time, but had come to value the importance of this skill once they had embarked on their careers.

Some cohorts are still meeting at least once a year. Other industry-based groups of alumni graduates are also meeting for specific purposes. These networks are considered by many to be essential for their work, and by others as inspiring. There are, however, advantages and disadvantages of creating such tight-knit networks. For example, while the network is an excellent opportunity for peer support, there could be a lack of diversity, which may lead to group being distanced from organisations they wish to influence.

I realised subsequently the extreme power of networking. It has helped me to develop my ideas, get funding, make friends, and just put everything together. It's just been pure networking. It's unbelievable.

I can go to a conference and confidently network around and come back with leads for new funding bids for the institute and that kind of thing...the experience from the programme has made me more rounded.

The programme gives you an invisible framework that I can then use. I've got a much different view of the world now. There is no way that I would have been accepted onto the PhD had I not been able to live and breath the rhetoric of sustainable development and the kind of passion and understanding behind that.

Leadership skills

The majority of the participants in our study are not yet in senior roles in their organisations, but already many are finding ways to exert their influence. Many were able to point to specific learning taken from the leadership development component of the programme, and interestingly some had found that this learning had begun to make more sense since beginning their careers.

The messages taken from the programme varied from person to person, and the value was described in terms of what they have been able to use since leaving the programme. For one graduate it was about learning to question, for another it was about the Learning Cycle, another pointed to the art of self-reflection. Many remembered learning to give and receive feedback. Once again building self-confidence was a common theme, this time in relation to the skill of leadership. Some felt that they had not yet had the opportunity to put the learning into practice. Others echoed this, suggesting that since many graduates had joined the programme straight from university, the course may initially have assumed too much managerial and leadership experience.

The thing that I regularly say when people ask me about the course is the only thing I genuinely think about every day is the stuff we did on the leadership development modules. In terms of being able to step back and achieve that critical distance within those kind of high pressured situations that's something that I've taken with me everywhere.

I learnt a lot on the leadership course but I think I use it more now than I did then Act, reflect and put into practice is a cycle I remember learning.

I'm aware of the nature of the contributions I am making and I kind of try to step back a lot of the time and try to understand what is going on. I think that helps me to be effective.

The leadership part of the programme totally changed the way in which I thought about making decisions, and the way I dealt with people in team situations.

Impact on the individual graduates' career success

One of the key aims of this research was to understand how the programme has affected the ability and success of individual graduates in their careers. The sections above have identified that personal skills, including networking and leadership ability have been an important element of the programme in supporting them to be successful after the course. Many pointed to the lack of preparation for work offered by their undergraduate courses, and their gratitude to programme for preparing them for organisational life. The level of influence of the graduates in their current jobs varied, but many were gratified that they were already playing a key role in their organisations and some were already able to influence policy:

I can work in government and work at a relatively junior level and still influence policies, which is amazing.

I'm sitting in the central environmental team of BP, which is the world's second biggest company. In that context I am quite a junior member but I have real influence on decisions. I have real impact and I'm working on some stuff which is potentially very exciting in terms of sustainability in the future.

My work is spent facilitating and trying to move forward a partnership for oil and gas producers. All the big companies, BP, Shell etc. are trying to put together a management system for an improved social and environmental impact assessment process...Within BP we've now taken on board this process which has been quite good.

Social Entrepreneurship

Most graduates are employed in NGOs, government or industry. Almost all of those interviewed felt that they were contributing in some way to the sustainability agenda. One graduate demonstrated a very clear connection between her experience on the programme and her chosen vocation as a "social entrepreneur" as illustrated in her story below.

We moved into our premises two hours ago! I've done all the development for it, and I did it unpaid for a year, part time. The aim is to make a profit, enough money to reinvest, nothing gets distributed to share holders, but we do sell carpets at affordable prices to homeless people, and we do aim to cover our cost and make extra revenue to expand. We manufacture carpet slippers out of our leftovers. I'd like it to replicate in lots of other cities across the UK.

I remember very clearly one lecturer mentioning the term social enterprise, and me going 'that's what I want to do. That's what I want to be.' Before that I always assumed I was going into the Civil Service or Politics. What I would like to do is to set up lots of social enterprises so this is just my first one.

The graduates' future ambitions

Most graduates felt that the programme had cemented their involvement with sustainable development, but many were uncertain about how they would take their commitment forward in the future. Idealism was still strong but this was tempered with a sense of realism and pragmatism that some felt they had gained from the programme. Some felt regret at having been confronted with the "realities" of the political and business world through the programme, which one graduate felt had "de-radicalised" him:

I feel tied into it [sustainable development] now. I don't think I could do something completely unrelated now.

I think that's really given me the confidence to go down a particular route and look for the opportunities within that route and explore it thoroughly. I don't think I'm a long way along the way yet. Who knows where the road will lead.

To some extent it has de-radicalised me. I'm not convinced that that's a very good thing. Before I did the course I wanted to work in NGOs and now I'm not sure if I could because I want to be able to work where I can actually see the wheels of power turning and make a difference and I think working in an NGO can possibly be very frustrating because you are banging on the doors from outside.

Discussion

This paper has focussed on the benefits of a work-based sustainable development Masters programme for the participants in terms of their ability to operate successfully in their chosen work and make a contribution to the sustainable development agenda. Key insights into what has influenced students to join the programme have been highlighted. This research has found that the programme has impacted on students in three key areas; personal development, networking and leadership skills.

With regard to personal development the findings show evidence of increased self-confidence, improved social and political skills, adaptability and a wider and deeper understanding of organisations and the way that graduates function. In addition, programme graduates saw the networks they developed within the programme, and their enhanced networking skills, as a vital benefit. Even those who resisted the importance of networking during the programme agreed that this skill was one of the most important for progressing the sustainable development agenda through their work. Most of the graduates spoke warmly of the network of programme alumni, and in particular the closeness of the support of the others in their own year.

Not all graduates had accepted the relevance of developing leadership skills at the time, but many said they now draw extensively on the learning they took from the leadership modules. Many still use some of the ideas from this module in their work. The most often cited ideas were the importance of stepping back and reflecting to achieve a critical distance, giving and receiving feedback, understanding one's strengths and areas for development, adopting a cycle of practice and reflection, and the importance of learning self-control. A survey of alumni attending the annual weekend at the Leadership Trust asked 'what achievements are you most proud of?'

and 'how did the course help you achieve these?' The results confirmed the findings above and in addition showed that the alumni rated the ability to inspire and motivate others.

Three areas therefore emerged as having an impact on students: leadership development, work experience and networking. Firstly, leadership development based on experiential learning had an impact on both self-development (self-confidence and self-awareness) of individuals and the development of their relationship building skills (building respect and trust). Secondly, the experience gained in differing sectors of society through work-based learning impacted on the ability of graduates to have influence within and across organisations. This was owing to the empathy gained from differing views and opinions regarding sustainable development from differing sectors. The alumni survey in 2006 also showed that a deeper theoretical understanding of sustainable development was also an important component of course learning. This sound intellectual grounding complemented by confidence and awareness of cultures in different sectors was identified as a vital combination.

The alumni survey identified that the achievements the alumni were most proud of were setting up new businesses, developing new tools and techniques, and establishing new projects. It is noticeable that they are proud of new initiatives indicating that the ability to spot opportunities and to innovate were important skills that they developed. These skills were not explicitly identified as something the course gave them but they did recognise that the course emphasis on practical implementation and in particular the big group project were important.

Furthermore, the graduates felt they were better prepared for the world of work as a result of the programme. This was centred on a greater ability to understand what

they did and did not want to do after the course and they felt that they had developed skills that were transferable due to the different experiences in different sectors. The research also found that a significant factor impacting upon student learning occurred when a student went on a placement initially not preferred by the student.

While the findings herein support the Burgoyne's (2006) proposition that there are three outcomes from leadership development activities (confidence, pause for reflection and networking) this research provides evidence of deeper insights into these propositions. For example, the findings of this research provide evidence to support the suggestion that leadership development appears to increase confidence. This research, however, appears to be uncovering a myriad of constitutive constructs that include such concepts as self-awareness and self-control.

This research also provides evidence to support the process of leadership development that includes work-based learning, theory and social interaction highlighted earlier (Bentley and Turnbull, 2005) and the model of change for sustainable development that includes awareness, agency and association (Ballard, 2005). The findings of this research suggest that the programme responds appropriately to the call for leadership of sustainable development issues (c.f. Bernhut, 2004; Giampalmi, 2004; Reid *et al*, 2002) using this methodology.

The programme goes further, however, by stressing the importance of the leadership context in terms of ensuring that leaders that are being developed are knowledgeable about relationships within and between functions in and around organisations (Giampalmi, 2004). Our findings suggest that placements, in particular, hold the key to the development of contextually sensitive leadership ability. This is important given the argument that being proactive with respect to sustainable development may mean different things in different organizational contexts (Vredenburg and Westley,

1999). This paper provides supporting evidence for this argument and evidence that the programme develops leaders able to confront this type of complexity.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is clear that the programme has had significant impact at the level of the individuals, their career paths and their influence in their roles. It is too early to evaluate the impact on organisations, society and the sustainability agenda as most of the graduates are very early in their careers. A further study of graduate impact in 5 years is recommended. At this point it will become clear what impact they have had on the bigger sustainability agenda and how the graduates' careers have progressed.

Furthermore, this research project has been restricted to focussing on the participants themselves and their biographical accounts. It is recognised that this is not the complete picture, and that an understanding of their progress and leadership may be more fully gauged by extending the survey to work colleagues in their current organisations. This was beyond the scope of the current project, but this may be a logical next step. We also recommend that the next phase of research into the impact and outcomes of the programme will be at the level of the organisation (s) in which the graduates work or have worked. Having completed these two levels of analysis, the final level to be evaluated over the longer term will then be impact on communities /society.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that the programme is having an impact on its graduates and how they interact in organisations and sectors based on the sustainability agenda.

This research provides evidence to support the process of leadership development that includes work-based learning, theory and social interaction highlighted earlier and the model of change for sustainable development that includes awareness, agency and association. The findings of this research suggest that the Masters programme responds positively to the call for leadership of sustainable development issues using the three core elements highlighted earlier in the paper. The programme goes further, however, by ensuring that leaders that are being developed are knowledgeable about relationships within and between functions in and around organisations. It seems placements, in particular, hold the key to the development of contextually sensitive leadership ability.

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