

## TEACHING SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM. A RESEARCH AMONG ROMANIAN MASTER STUDENTS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Daniel Badulescu<sup>1</sup>, Alina Badulescu<sup>2</sup> and Csaba Csintalan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1) 2) 3)</sup> *University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania*

E-mail: dbadulescu@uoradea.ro; E-mail: abadulescu@uoradea.ro;

E-mail: c\_csintalan@yahoo.com

---

### Abstract

The importance of education for sustainable development has enjoyed unanimous recognition for long time, but only recently it becomes increasingly obvious that education for sustainable development is not only about acquiring values, theories and knowledge. Education for sustainable development should encourage students to think in original and innovative ways and raise questions about their involvement and responsibility in a sustainable future world. This paper focuses on investigating issues related to the attitude of master students in Business Administration from a public university in Romania toward sustainability and the extent to which universities offer knowledge and skills regarding sustainability in the most appropriate forms and methods, in accordance with the requirements of economic and social practice and, not least, with the expectations of younger generations. We have used a survey-based research, which revealed specific attitudes and preferences of the investigated young people, indicating the main challenges faced by the education for sustainability and the directions towards it must be oriented.

**Keywords:** sustainability education, tourism, master students, Romania

**JEL Classification:** Q56, I23, A23.

---

### Introduction

The challenges of changing the pattern of economic development and the shift toward a more sustainable and eco-friendly development of our society and planet needs first of all a shift in our way of thinking. Nevertheless, education has to play a central role in shaping the attitude necessary to make this shift, and this raises many challenges on the role of higher education institutions (HEI) in orientation towards sustainability of attitudes and perceptions of younger generations.

This paper presents the results of a surveyed-based research carried on among master students in Business Administration, trying to reveal how young people, future employees or entrepreneurs involved in the business sector think about the necessity and way to “teach sustainability”, which are the limitations and how we, as educators, have to change our way

of thinking and adapt to students' needs. Moreover, scholars and policy makers involved have to adapt themselves and adapt the curricula and the contents to address sustainability issues in everyday life and in the companies. In the field of hospitality and tourism is estimated that academic programs unsystematically conglomerate theoretical knowledge with generic management elements and on the job formation, so topics related to ethical or responsible behaviour are treated in a theoretical and generalizing manner without to focus on the individual behaviours and beliefs. It is thus necessary to revise the academic curricula to cover all key aspects of development, i.e. economic, social, environmental, and, more recently, ethical sustainability in the subjects taught and in the content and teaching method.

The paper is organized as follows: in the first part we focus on the theoretical background and presenting previous similar researches, in the second part we present the research methodology, in the third part we discuss the findings and results, and in the final part we conclude.

### **1. Literature review**

Analysing how learning processes are adapted to the requirements of sustainable development, UNESCO Report "Education for Sustainable Development" (UNESCO, 2011) supports the development of key skills for sustainable development practices, which are participatory learning and the cooperation between higher education institutions and business environment. The authors suggest that education for sustainable development has to go beyond simply acquiring values, theories and knowledge. Education for sustainable development should encourage students to put critical questions and think in a practical and innovative manner.

In a large research regarding students' attitudes and skills for sustainable development, conducted for five consecutive years within UK universities, Drayson, Bone and Agombar (2012) and Drayson (2015) found that HEIs and the business environment accrue the highest expectations regarding preparation for life and career. The education system is considered the main vehicle for accessing knowledge on sustainable development, although the level and structure of knowledge are somewhat unsystematic and asymmetrical, with theoretical emphasis on preserving the natural environment and ethics, and neglecting knowledge and practical skills for sustainable business development. However, students clearly prefer to change the course content in the sense of combining theoretical knowledge with social and environmental skills, being reluctant to overload programs and courses with extra content on this subject.

According to Dey (2008) and McKercher et al. (2014), academic programs in hospitality and tourism have difficulty in raising the awareness and preparing students for a responsible and sustainable behaviour. The weakness seems to be related to curricula, focused largely "on employment-related training and generic management education" (McKercher, et al., 2014, p. 456). Typically, the link between an individual action and the consequences of these actions is not highlighted; the topics on ethics, sustainability, responsible behaviour and the like are too general, with no focus on individual. Therefore, the reform of the university curricula should take into consideration addressing this issue at the individual level, as long as corporate and social approaches do not seem to have achieved their intended objectives.

On the other hand, Aloj Totàro and Simeone (2001), Mifsud (2010), Zsoka (2013), Badulescu et al. (2014), Roşca (2017) consider that the inclusion of subjects such as

Environmental Education, Ecology or issues of sustainable development in curricula has had a positive effect on the environmental awareness and ecotourism involvement of young generations. Young people agree that the value of natural and cultural heritage, especially in regions and areas where tourism plays a significant role in local economy, should be strongly considered when deciding on exploitation and protection of natural resources for touristic purposes. Meanwhile, students believe that the actions of the individuals, groups of volunteers or sustainable entrepreneurs are insufficient if they are not supported by governmental projects and initiatives on large scale and on long-term.

Analysing the effects of education for sustainability in HEI, researchers argue that students with higher academic performance prove to possess a better knowledge of sustainability-related concepts, they consider the sustainability criteria when purchasing products and are even willing to pay slightly higher amounts for buying green products (Jeong, et al., 2015), although it affects their lifestyles as consumers (Kagawa, 2007), (Zsóka, et al., 2013), (Sammalisto, et al., 2016).

The process of training academics who teach subjects related to sustainability undertakes a greater importance. According to Cebrian and Junyent education for sustainable development orients the trainers on acquiring knowledge and practical skills related to nature and natural sciences, but not on other types of learning or values such as ethics, taking personal responsibility, “attitudes towards sustainability and the management of emotions among their future primary school students” (Cebrián and Junyent, 2015, p. 2768).

Thus, education for sustainable development needs to focus on the creation of a more integrated, comprehensive and complex vision, based on the interdependence of social, environmental, economic and cultural aspects (Cebrián and Junyent, 2015, pp. 2781-2783). Andersson et al. (2013) examines whether the participation of teachers in education courses designed to provide the tools necessary for teaching can generate pro-sustainable development opinions and norms among the future teachers. Unlike McKercher et al (2014), who consider that including issues related personal responsibility and sustainability has not had a significant impact on the personal response, compared to those attending courses with no references to these topics, Andersson et al. (2013) have discovered positive results among those who participated, compared with those who did not participate in these courses, for almost all the analysed attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, the teacher students who had already had beliefs and an interest in sustainable development became more enthusiastic and more convinced that these things must be sent (delivered) to the youth, including the idea that a more efficient environmental protection and sustainable development should be imposed through more authoritarian forms of government (Andersson, et al., 2013).

## **2. Research methodology**

The present paper aims at investigating attitudes and beliefs concerning the education for sustainability among students in Business Administration, by using a survey-based research. As a first step, a questionnaire consisting of 25 questions was designed and then administered (as paper and pencil type and on a voluntary basis), during February 2016, to 93 master students from the public university in Oradea, Romania. The survey method used was the guided survey, which allowed us to include in the sample representative respondents, better corresponding with the research aim. The students who have participated in the survey were registered as master students, both in their first and second

year, on two business administration master programs offered by the university, i.e. Tourism and Hospitality Economics and Business Administration (Romanian acronym: EAATIO) and Regional Business Administration (Romanian acronym: AAR).

The addressed questions investigate issues such as: effectiveness of knowledge related to sustainable tourism, how higher education enables shaping sustainable attitudes and behaviours, but also various issues regarding students' future career, such as interest and motivations for an entrepreneurial career, attitudes toward sustainability practices in the case of starting their own business etc. The questionnaire also collected data concerning age, gender, matrimonial status, residence, occupational status.

The description of the sample is as follows: most of students (i.e. 68%) are enrolled in the master program of Tourism and Hospitality Economics and Business Administration (EAATIO) and the rest (i.e. 32%) in Regional Business Administration (AAR) master program, while the distribution by years of study is relatively balanced (i.e. 56 % in the first year and 44% in the second year).

The respondents are mostly female (69%) and single (92%). Nearly half of respondents (i.e. 48%) have their residence in a city, and the rest resides in small towns (23%) and rural areas (29%). As occupational status, most of the respondents are employed in the private sector, full-time (60%) or part-time (5%), followed by those who are not working, being full time students (17%). A relatively small proportion of the respondents (i.e. 10%) are active entrepreneurs, and 8% of the respondents are employed in the public sector.

### **3. Results and discussion**

In terms of their future career, the surveyed students are quite clearly oriented towards an activity in the real economy sector, i.e. about 43% want to be entrepreneurs, and 38% to work as employees in private firms, and the rest intend to work either in the public sector (11%), to continue their studies (8%) or unspecified (2%). Among the present and intended entrepreneurs, over two thirds are considering a business in tourism (perhaps, not exclusively) and most of them see it as developing in a sustainable manner.

Questioned on the necessity that education for sustainable development should be actively incorporated by universities, over two thirds of the respondents (i.e. 68%) "strongly" consider that it should be included in curricula and 22% "to a moderate extent". Beyond the positive aspect, we must consider that the responses follow a desirable pattern and, especially, that the question is, at this stage of research, general and non-specific, with no specific reference to the number of subjects proposed, to the content of the courses or to the ratio between the hours allocated to theoretical knowledge, respectively, to practical activities related to sustainable development.

In this regard, the second question assumes an explanatory role, trying to find out what students really want (or believe it would be useful) to learn / be taught on sustainability, with direct reference to tourism.

The analysis of responses (see Table no. 1) shows that the vast majority of students are consistent in their general options expressed about the content and the general orientation of the university syllabi, i.e. displaying a greater openness to the requirements of the real business sector and a more applicative knowledge about sustainability. Thus, the skills of coping and solving practical situations cumulate (as "partial" and "total" agreement altogether), an impressive score of 88%, and "the efficient use of resources" cumulate 79% of the responses. It is also important to combine short-term objectives with long-term

objectives in companies operating in tourism (30% totally agree and 35% partially agree), although the effective manner of this conciliation is still confused and mostly declarative.

**Table no. 1. What do you think students should learn about sustainable development in tourism? (agreement with the item, as % of the responses of the surveyed students)**

	Strongly disagree	Partially disagree	Partially agree	Totally agree
Skills of adapting and solving practical situations	3%	9%	26%	62%
Ethical issues and personal responsibility associated to tourism	21%	27%	33%	19%
Global vision on the effects of tourist activities on the environment and human communities	24%	19%	37%	20%
Efficient use of resources	10%	11%	48%	31%
Combining short term objectives with long term objectives of companies operating in tourism	15%	20%	35%	30%

However, we cannot state that educational, ethical and awareness-related effects of tourism activities on the environment and on human communities, and personal responsibility, are looked down upon by the respondents. Although they ranked significantly lower than previous options, the aggregate score of “total agreement” and “partial agreement” slightly exceeds 50% of the responses. It indicates that either these issues are not taught in an integrated manner in the assembly of knowledge and relationships between the environment and economic (sustainable) development, or the academic approach is formal and does not stimulate practical actions. Finally, it may indicate that sustainability is (still) an overrated concept in the academic environment, and it cannot find an equivalent response from the business environment, government policies or even informal education.

Once defined the priorities of learning, the students’ attitudes and skills for sustainable development, the following question has investigated which are, in students’ opinion, the most appropriate teaching methods and tools (and therefore learning) of the elements of sustainability. Respondents were offered five alternatives, ranging from the theoretical content to practical skills and from academic subjects per se to extra-curricular initiatives, and asking for the respondents’ agreement with the proposed items (see Table no. 2).

The respondents are reserved about the over-sizing of the subjects with elements of environmental and social issues (i.e. 39% “partial disagreement” and 11% “strong disagreement”) and also on the possible emergence of new subjects or study modules, yet they appreciate the inclusion of practical skills in the content of existing courses (i.e. 82% of the respondents “partially” or “totally” agree with this statement, see Table no. 2). The way of teaching this topic and the skills and attitudes are also important, and, to some extent, atypical. Recognizing the role of the university as the main form of access to knowledge on sustainable development, the respondents tried to reconcile, in a pragmatic and innovative manner, the potential mismatch with the requirements of social practice and business environment. Specifically, 45% of the respondents “partially agree” and 35% “strongly agree”, that teaching and learning about sustainability has to be effectively implemented through extra-curricular activities initiated by faculties.

**Table no. 2. Which do you consider to be the most efficient / relevant methods of teaching and learning about sustainability? (agreement with the item, as % of the responses of the surveyed students)**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Partially disagree</b>	<b>Partially agree</b>	<b>Totally agree</b>
Including some aspects of environmental and social issues in academic subjects	11%	39%	29%	21%
Including specific modules related to social and environmental responsibility in the first years of study	16%	33%	29%	22%
Including some practical abilities in the content of existing subjects	5%	13%	48%	34%
Extra-curricular activities initiated by faculties, meant to develop pro-sustainability skills and attitudes	8%	12%	45%	35%
Supporting the initiatives of the students who want to develop pro-sustainability skills and attitudes	7%	11%	22%	60%

Moreover, the way of learning sustainability and developing social and environmental sustainability-oriented skills and behaviours has to be done by simply doing, as a “learning by doing” action, and by supporting student initiatives of this kind (i.e. 60% of the respondents “totally agree” and 22% of them “partially agree” with this item, see Table no. 2).

### Conclusions

Recent researches show that, despite of the remarkable progresses of the recent decades in teaching and learning sustainability in HEIs, students can join or explain with no trouble the objectives and principles of sustainability and responsible behaviour, but not as easily make the connection between the action of an individual or organization and its consequences for the environment and society. Therefore, the scholars and policy-makers alike inquire whether the effectiveness of the principles of sustainability in changing attitudes is limited.

The present paper aimed at investigating attitudes and behaviours concerning the education for sustainability, by surveying master students enrolled in two study programs in Business Administration at the public university in Oradea, Romania. Based on the responses, we found out that most students describe themselves as being interested in a career in the private sector, as entrepreneurs or employees, possibly in tourism. They have clear options, favourable to sustainability, reporting to both the university curricula, but also as consumers and future employees / entrepreneurs. In terms of education for sustainability, although they agree that sustainability-related issues have to be part of academic curricula and academic subjects, students do not agree with extra-subjects or extra-hours devoted to new theoretical chapters, courses or subjects, but rather they want practical activities, based on acquiring skills and useful knowledge on a “learning by doing” basis, on efficient management of resources and, to a lesser extent, of integrating elements of ethics, personal responsibility and attitudes regarding the social and environmental consequences of global development. Finally, students prefer to learn through extra-curricular activities, organized

within the faculty or the initiatives of students organizations, compared to the classical teaching/learning forms, i.e. additional subjects, courses, modules etc.

The revealed attitudes and preferences indicate a particular vision of younger generations, perhaps not always congruent with the academic vision on sustainability challenges in contemporary society and economy. Therefore, the research results enable us to conclude that the education for sustainability should not be limited to a “enriching” curriculum with additional references to the topic of sustainability, but to find specific and practical-oriented responses to the challenges of sustainable development, in terms of resources, motivations, contexts and practical actions to be conducted.

The main limitation of the study is related to the sample itself, which is limited to a single university and a single study field, and also to the fact that the research involves a single wave; consequently, a larger sample and several years of investigation would generate more reliable research results.

Nevertheless, the education for sustainability may become, even in an academic context, “hollow and insincere in the absence of practical and social action on site and perhaps beyond” (Buchanan and Griffin, 2010, p. 5). Universities need to adapt their current curricula to increase the emphasis on personal responsibility, of businesses and society, and businesses will have to deal more carefully in the future with the expectations and concerns of the consumers, requiring the government more effective measures in this area.

## References

- Aloj Totàro, E. and Simeone, A., 2001. Environmental and cultural tourism as a model of an economic sustainable activity - Sensibility and participation of Sannio University students. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, [e-journal] 2(3), p.238-249. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000005621>.
- Andersson, K., Jagers, S., Lindskog, A. and Martinsson, J., 2013. Learning for the Future? Effects of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) on Teacher Education Students. *Sustainability*, 5, pp.5135-5152.
- Badulescu, A., Badulescu, D., Bac, D. and Sipos-Gug, S., 2014. Attitudes and Intentions of Business Master Students towards Sustainable and Entrepreneurship. *Amfiteatru Economic*, 16(Special 8), pp.1110-1124.
- Buchanan, J. and Griffin, J., 2010. Finding a Place for Environmental Studies: Tertiary Institutions as a Locus of Practice for Education for Sustainability. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, 12(2), pp.5-16.
- Cebrián, G. and Junyent, M., 2015. Competencies in Education for Sustainable Development: Exploring the Student Teachers' Views. *Sustainability*, 7, pp.2768-2786.
- Dey, E., 2008. *Should colleges focus more on personal and social responsibility*. Available at: [http://www.aacu.org/core\\_commitments/documents/PSRII\\_Findings\\_April2008.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/core_commitments/documents/PSRII_Findings_April2008.pdf) [Accessed 12 February 2017].
- Drayson, R., 2015. *Student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development. Summary 3: Learning and using skills for sustainable development during higher education*, Heslington, York: The Higher Education Academy.

- Drayson, R., Bone, E. and Agombar, J., 2012. *Student attitudes towards and skills for sustainable development. A report for the Higher Education Academy*, Heslington York: The Higher Education Academy.
- Jeong, M., Jung, Y. and Koo, D., 2015. College Students' Perceptions of Sustainability: A Regional Survey. *Journal of Building Construction and Planning Research*, [e-journal] 3, pp.209-220. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/jbcpr.2015.34021>>.
- Kagawa, F., 2007. Dissonance in students' perceptions of sustainable development and sustainability: Implications for curriculum change, *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 8(3), pp.317–338.
- McKercher, B., Mackenzie, M., Prideaux, B. and Pang, S., 2014. Is the Hospitality and Tourism Curriculum Effective in Teaching Personal Social Responsibility? *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 38(4), pp.431-462.
- Mifsud, M., 2010. Maltese Youth and the Environment: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, 12(2), pp.110–128.
- Roşca, P.C., 2017. Exploring the Obstacles and the Limits of Sustainable Development. A Theoretical Approach. *Oradea Journal of Business and Economics*, 2(1), pp.91-98.
- Sammalisto, K., Sundström, A., von Haartman, R., Holm, T. and Yao, Z., 2016. Learning about Sustainability—What Influences Students' Self-Perceived Sustainability Actions after Undergraduate Education? *Sustainability*, 8, pp.1-16.
- UNESCO, 2011. *Education for Sustainable Development: An Expert Review of Processes and Learning*, Paris: Division of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development.
- Zsóka, Á., Szerényi, Z., Széchy, A. and Kocsis, T., 2013. Greening due to environmental education? Environmental knowledge, attitudes, consumer behavior and everyday pro-environmental activities of Hungarian high school and university students. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 48, pp.126–138.