



## Postgraduate Certificate in Sustainable Business

### Group Project Topics

#### **Working with others – the prospects and pitfalls in pursuing impact for sustainability**

**Ken Caplan**

As companies increasingly look to work with others to strengthen their sustainability credentials, are such relationships helping them to become more sustainability minded or letting them off the hook? Businesses are under increasing pressure to work pro-actively with non-business actors to enhance their operations and ensure accountability. However, as roles and relationships evolve, is this making companies more accountable for their actions? Or is it allowing them to co-opt external stakeholders and thereby deflect responsibility for their impact? Are companies using these mechanisms to unduly influence policy and regulations in which there is a clear conflict of interest? This group shall focus on the changing environments in which companies are operating and the shifting expectations of them vis-a-vis their "partners" and external stakeholders.

#### **Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Sustainability**

**Dr Nicky Dee**

Much is spoken about innovation as a mechanism to deliver solutions for sustainability. In reality the bulk of innovation by existing firms is incremental, and new ventures face challenges scaling up. This group will build on Dr Nicky Dee's research across a range of areas in the field of innovation for sustainability, including: scale up and commercialisation of new ventures (in new and existing firms); industrial transformation; start-up 'ecosystems' including access to finance and business support (in both developed and developing countries). We will explore topics of most relevance to the group. Possible topics for the group research include 'David vs Goliath – building productive relationships between corporates and ventures', 'The role of corporates in start-up ecosystems', 'Examining business models that support growth in ventures with a sustainability purpose', 'Channelling innovation through prize competitions, accelerators and incubators'.

## **Rethinking value - (how) can we reconcile business growth and sustainability?**

**Elsbeth Donovan**

Discussions about business and sustainability often throw up questions around growth, and how it is possible to reconcile economic growth with the physical limits of the earth's ecosystems. What does this mean for business? After all, how many companies / organisations announce that they are planning \*not\* to grow? A credible response to these questions requires an exploration of the nature of growth and development, and the implications for business. Is it still possible for business to grow and increase profit, whilst simultaneously reducing (or at least stabilizing) physical throughput? Does a focus on increasing \*value\* rather than financial growth help to shift the debate? How can we progress proposals for 'dematerialization' or 'decoupling' growth from consumption? This group will engage with some of these debates, exploring what this might mean for developing new measures of success for business for example, or a new way of thinking and talking about growth, development and value.

## **Buried treasure? Exploring sustainability as a driver of revenue**

**Oliver Dudok van Heel**

Early engagement around corporate sustainability was based on managing risk and reducing costs. While it helped drive the agenda and raise awareness of some key issues, it did not engage a majority of individuals within companies. Whilst critical questions remain around the primacy of growth as the current dominant paradigm, it is argued that the ability to fully engage companies around sustainability is by aligning sustainable outcomes with revenue generation.

In recent years, examples of companies embracing sustainability and generating competitive returns has grown, ranging from start-ups that are now global enterprises to Fortune 500 companies making a conscious strategic shift towards sustainable revenue generation. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals are offering a clear framework for companies to identify opportunities to deliver sustainable financial value which has led to greater business engagement.

The group will explore how companies can grow revenue through a focus on sustainability, where the greatest potential lies, what barriers might exist, and what this might mean for the relationship between growth and sustainability.

## **How can we build organisational strategies that result in sustainable development?**

**Paul Turner**

How can we build organisational strategies that result in sustainable development? Short term priorities, the drive for profit and share price growth can result in organisations (including financial institutions) paying lip service to calls for more environmentally and socially responsible business practices. And yet, an increasing number of organisations are embracing these challenges and have implemented strategies to create shared value – the elusive triple bottom line – in a way that enables them to seize the opportunities and manage the risks. What sets them apart? Why aren't all organisations recognising the need to change the current models? Is there a flaw in the business case, lack of visionary leadership, or are there other issues in play?

## **The role of business in society**

**David Rice**

Is the business of business, business, as Milton Freedman wrote? Or should and can business have a higher calling and contribute to society in more ways than simply commercial ones? Can a business be ethical? Can a business be motivated beyond commercial concerns? What is the role of an oil or coal company in dealing with climate change? What is the role of a pharmaceutical company in fighting malaria in poor countries? Can a water company help bring clean water to a developing country? How does a publicly owned company take its shareholders with it if it wants to contribute more to society, or does our model of company structure and shareholder value mean business is pushed to unsustainable actions? The Group can explore any aspects of the role of business in society, researching cases and models.