

The Association of Tourism in Higher Education

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# Guidelines

No. 10



**Shirley Eber**

**Integrating Sustainability into the Undergraduate Curriculum:  
Leisure and Tourism**

The Association of Tourism in Higher Education

## **Foreword**

This, the first Guideline to be published by the Association for Tourism in Higher Education, continues the series published by the National Liaison Group between 1993 and 2000. To recognise the continuity in the series it is numbered as Guideline 10. The Guideline, written by Shirley Eber, is one output from an ongoing collaborative project between a UK Government department - the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, an NGO - Tourism Concern, and a long standing member of the ATHE, the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University). Financial support for the project has also been provided by the LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism.

The topic of sustainability is not new to tourism studies. Over the past decade it has inspired the creation of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, the publication of many research articles and monographs and several named degree awards that link the words sustainable and tourism together. The topic also carries with it considerable controversy and this Guideline seeks to bring some clarity to the debate around learning and teaching about and for sustainability in the context of tourism higher education. It is therefore a welcome addition to the Guidelines series as a further advisory contribution towards framing a curriculum for tourism studies.

Dr Keith Wilkes  
Chair 2002  
ATHE

# **Guidelines for Integrating Sustainability into the Undergraduate Curriculum: Leisure & Tourism**<sup>1</sup>

*“I hope that all involved in the education of today’s business students will develop and implement sustainable development education strategies”*

Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1999

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the integration of sustainability into teaching the undergraduate Leisure and Tourism curriculum. It argues that such teaching, even in faculties other than specifically business-related, should be situated within the overall context of sustainability in business. This is because, in the real world, tourism *is* a business, and one with significant economic, environmental, socio-cultural and political ramifications. Thus, the emphasis is on the sustainability - in its broadest sense - of the business of tourism, rather than on the more limited topic of ‘sustainable tourism’.

These guidelines aim to encourage academic institutions to consider integrating sustainability into their undergraduate courses. The paper outlines the project on which these guidelines are based. It briefly discusses sustainability issues and the relationship between sustainability and business, particularly in regard to preparing students for the world of work. It then looks at the teaching of sustainability in business and tourism-related courses, its parameters, levels and contents. Some model modules are presented for consideration; the paper concludes with recommendations for those interested in implementing similar curricula.

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<sup>1</sup>These guidelines are based on a more detailed discussion contained in a report (June 2001) entitled: Sustainable Development Education in Leisure and Tourism Degree Courses. This report contains the outcomes of the first year’s work of this project, carried out at the University of North London Business School.

## **The Project**

With funding from DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) and LTSN (Learning & Teaching Support Network), and in partnership with the former University of North London (UNL) Business School, *Tourism Concern* initiated a 3-year project, aimed at integrating sustainability into the undergraduate syllabus, specifically as it relates to Leisure & Tourism degrees.

The recommendations to integrate sustainability have been accepted by the University and came into effect in spring 2003, and will be followed by on-going evaluation of the initiative. It is hoped that the success of this experience will provide an incentive for others to join the project.

## **Project Rationale**

The importance of tourism as a sector of potential employment and economic activity is reflected in the growth (by 450% between 1991 and 1998) of the number of institutions in the UK offering undergraduate tourism-related degrees (Airey & Johnson, NLG Guideline No.7, Feb 1998). The same report also finds that a mere 19% “of the prospectuses specifically refer to the inclusion of the ‘fashionable’ topic of ‘sustainable’ tourism...” This is disappointing, given the wide-ranging contributions of tourism – positive and negative – to the economic, social, cultural and environmental fabric and well-being of societies.

In discussing the design of curricula for tourism, John Tribe points to “the potential contest” that exists over their contents. This is due to

*“... influences which promote the tourism curriculum as a vocational one for commercial ends [including] the needs of employers, professional bodies, academics rooted in business departments... [and] influences which promote the tourism curriculum as one for non-commercial ends. For example host and environmental interests would promote a curriculum for sustainable and responsible tourism, and academics from critical subjects will promote a more open agenda for tourism studies.”* Tribe J (2000) NLG Guideline No.9

These guidelines show why integrating sustainability into the curriculum is important and how this apparent dichotomy can be resolved. As a comprehensive approach, sustainability taught *within* a vocational, business curriculum will address concerns for wider interests and introduce a “more open agenda” compatible with the achievement of commercial ends.

## **Sustainability**

Since the term ‘sustainable development’ was coined by the Brundtland Report (Our Common Future) in 1987 and internationally agreed at the Rio Summit in 1992, it has been much debated by the UN and international forums, by academics, scientists, NGOs, public sector institutions and agencies, and increasingly, by private businesses. Most emphasis has been on the *environmental* aspects of sustainability since the global effects of mis- or over-using the earth’s natural resources are hard to ignore (albeit contested in some scientific circles). However, even in its initial formulation, the concept of Sustainable Development was always broader and more far-reaching, and stresses the interdependence of the natural environment with economy and society - the “triple-bottom-line”.

In this wider sense, sustainability is a comprehensive and inclusive approach, and an on-going process. The triple-bottom-line framework encompasses a broad spectrum of issues which includes, for example, natural, economic, social and cultural diversity, equity and human rights, globalisation and localisation, and corporate and individual citizenship and responsibility.

## **Sustainability and Business**

Though these broader parameters are neither uncontroversial nor easy to achieve, it is undeniable that Sustainability Development has found its way onto many business agendas. The following Shell advertisement is only one example:

*Human Rights. None of our business? Or the heart of our business?*

*Profits and principles: is there a choice?*

*Human Rights. It's not the usual business priority. And for multinational companies operating in developing countries, it could be tempting to dismiss it; to call it a socio-political issue rather than a business one, and hope it just goes away.*

*At Shell, we are committed to support fundamental human rights and have made this commitment in our published Statement of General Business Principles. It begins with our own people, respecting their rights as employees wherever they work in the world. We invest in the communities around us to create new opportunities and growth. And we've also spoken out on the rights of individuals – even if the situation has been beyond our control. It's part of our commitment to sustainable development, (author's emphasis) balancing economic progress with environmental care and social responsibility. In today's business environment, we don't pretend there are any easy answers, but we continue to stay involved. Because making a living begins with respecting life.*

Anyone who keeps abreast of current affairs cannot help but be struck by the persistence of debates around sustainability topics, including ethics, transparency and responsibility, while a range of companies and corporations, whether small, medium or large, are learning and talking the language of sustainability. Whether this is interpreted as a marketing ploy or “greenwashing” for competitive advantage, or as a genuine change in management practice, is a moot point. Simon Zadek explains it as a response to consumer dissatisfaction and demand:

*“On one hand, business is in the limelight of increasingly concerned public scrutiny. The popular media carries daily fresh allegations of its misdemeanours. An outpouring of books, pamphlets, films and conferences challenge and debate its social and environmental performance. Grassroots, anti-corporate demonstrations adorn the street outside city offices, and regularly surround meetings of the world's leaders and major international institutions. On the other hand, recent years have seen the emergence of the philosophy and practice of ‘corporate citizenship’. Corporations have sought under this umbrella to gain broader trust and legitimacy through visibly enhancing their non-financial performance. Today, the focus is shifting from philanthropy to the impact of core business activities*

*across the broad spectrum of social, environmental and economic dimensions represented by the vision of sustainable development.”*

Zadek S (2001) The Civil Corporation

There is a lively debate about the extent to which business and the sustainability agenda are compatible. The arguments came to the fore in January 2002 in regard to the former director of Greenpeace, Lord Melchett, who took up an advisory post with Burson Marsteller, a PR firm whose “core business”, according to environmental activist George Monbiot, is “defending companies which destroy the environment and threaten human rights...” In Monbiot’s view, Melchett’s move is an act of betrayal, and part of the threat facing “environmentalism... [which] is in danger of being swallowed up by the corporate leviathan” (Guardian, 15 Jan 2002), rather than as a potentially useful contribution to the adoption of Corporate Social Responsibility by big business.

Put within a wider political and ideological context, the arguments can be summarised as follows:

*The centre left has accepted capitalism as the hard-wiring of national and global economics. But it wants to explore how capitalism can work for the common, rather than solely the corporate and individual good. To the socialist left, such policies are at best palliatives, at worst hypocrisy... [it] sees humanitarian or ethical globalisation as an empty concept, serving only as a cover for western, specifically American, power.*

John Lloyd (10 Dec 2001) New Statesman

## **Teaching Sustainability**

Since sustainability is gaining credence in the modern business environment and the debates around it are current and vigorous, it is surely incumbent upon the academic community to enable students to contribute usefully to its development. In the UK, the inclusion of subjects such as Citizenship and Sustainable Development within the schools’ National Curriculum lays the groundwork for extending the debate at tertiary level. Preliminary research carried out in this project indicates that within higher education, sustainability is mainly taught

within the framework of degrees in development, geography and environmental studies. While this reflects, perhaps, the endeavours of aid and development agencies, international and non-governmental organisations and pressure groups to pursue a sustainability agenda, it omits the important and emerging issue of the relationship between teaching sustainability and business.

## **Teaching Sustainability and Business**

The inclusion of sustainability in the business curriculum is intended to encourage students to engage with the important issues, rather than to push any ‘politically correct’ line (even if there were agreement about what that was!). Far from being a ‘dry’ topic, teaching experience shows that students find it exciting to see how these issues are relevant not only to their everyday lives as consumers and citizens, but also in relation to their potential futures as employees and/or employers or managers and entrepreneurs in the business world. Given that many young people are well aware of (or participate in) grassroots actions in support of anti-capitalist, anti-war, anti-globalisation or environmental movements et cetera, students would surely benefit from critical engagement with the debates surrounding them.

The sustainability approach aims to produce well-rounded graduates equipped to enter the world of work. In addition, it is a comprehensive approach that furthers student-centred learning, critical faculties, and the sort of crucial transferable skills that are increasingly advocated in higher education. These include the ability:

- to employ analytical and critical thinking
- to manage information
- to argue and communicate effectively
- to develop respect for the diversity of people, cultures and environments, and for social justice, equity and human rights
- to foster personal responsibility and citizenship.

## **Teaching Sustainability and Tourism Business**

Tourism in higher education is overwhelmingly taught as a vocational topic and within business and/or management schools; of 145 academic institutions offering tourism or leisure and tourism degrees, 106 are in business or management (UCAS, 2001). This reflects the fact that tourism in the real world is primarily a business, and an important one in the context of sustainability because it clearly epitomises and illustrates the ‘triple-bottom-line’ – the interactions between the economic, environmental and social (including cultural and political) spheres. Thus, the teaching of sustainability in tourism focuses not on something called ‘sustainable tourism’ but rather on ‘sustainability and tourism business’ which can only be properly understood within the context of ‘sustainable business’. It is important for students to grasp the broad principles and debates in general and then to apply them to whatever business or pathway they chose to specialise in – tourism and related subjects such as travel, leisure, hospitality, events management, the arts and cultural industries and sports development.

## **Parameters of Sustainability Teaching**

Research within this project indicates that the majority of existing courses or modules in areas relating to “sustainable business” are postgraduate, limiting the debate to those students who continue education beyond graduation. Teachers of undergraduate students may well argue that the arguments are sophisticated and that students need to acquire basics knowledge and skills (which are already limited by competition for curriculum time and space), before they can grasp complex interrelationships. While it is recognised that teaching sustainability to undergraduates is no easy task, the relevant issues and themes can be elicited from and in reference to students’ own experiences, and developed in a progressive fashion (see models below).

Teaching sustainability is also potentially demanding on staff, since it requires a holistic and multidisciplinary approach. It encompasses a

broad range of disciplines, including aspects of economics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, natural science, politics, as well as business and/or management. The delivery of sustainability thus necessitates institutional support for academics, including opportunities for staff development and the provision of comprehensive bibliographic and other resources (such as audio-visual and IT equipment, expert guest speakers and visiting lecturers).

## **Levels of Sustainability Teaching**

Sustainability can be integrated into the curriculum in a graduated and progressive way throughout the (usual) three-year duration of an undergraduate degree. In addition, opportunities for exploring sustainability issues can be explored if students undertake work placements (between 2<sup>nd</sup> and final years). The module outlines below are not meant to stand alone but should be supported by integrating sustainability into existing modules, courses and programmes where appropriate and feasible.

The suggested schemes are as follows:

- First level: introduce and explore the basic issues concerning sustainability in general, and as it relates specifically to business (module entitled: “Business in Society” or “Business and Society” or “Sustainability in Business”)
- Second level: develop and refine the issues covered in 1<sup>st</sup> year as they apply to the particular business pathway (module here entitled: “Sustainability in Tourism Business” or “Tourism Business in Society” or “Society and Tourism Business”).
- Final level: apply the issues explored and developed in the first two levels; this module (entitled “Solutions, Tools and Techniques for Sustainability”) aims to provide students with the bases of applicable skills for entry into the world of business.

### Desired learning outcomes:

Each of the three-level courses have desired learning outcomes (not detailed here) specific to particular contents and level; taken as a whole, however, these are united by overarching purpose and principles.

The principal learning outcomes<sup>2</sup> include:

(first level) understanding and appreciating...  
(second level) analysing and applying...  
(third level) critically appraising and evaluating...

- the interdependence of major systems
- the needs and rights of (present) and future generations
- the value of diversity
- the need for precaution
- the limits to growth
- the role of the business community in promoting sustainable development
- the wide range of sustainable solution tools and techniques currently available
- sustainable development-related legislation, policy and control mechanisms
- the role and meaning of social responsibility

## **Contents of Sustainability Teaching**

The following models indicating the contents of sustainability teaching are not intended as definitive schemata for module or course design. The structure of modules and programmes will depend on institutional variables, including: existing course contents, opportunities for change or amendment, overall priorities, financial and other resources et cetera. It is recommended, however, that ‘sustainability’ modules or courses should be core or obligatory rather than optional, in order to ensure that they are not marginalised and that all students have some exposure to the issues. Thus, sustainability debates must take place within the context of defining, analysing and understanding the place and roles of business within society as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> These are based on the sustainability criteria used by Forum for the Future in their HE21 project which surveyed the Higher Education business curricula in order to assess the current status of Sustainable Development Education and to take business educators’ views on appropriate sustainability learning; for details see [www.he21.org.uk](http://www.he21.org.uk)

## **Proposed models:**

Two models for each level are proposed below; the contents of models (A) and (B) cover similar topics but differ in emphases. The frameworks correspond to a 13-week (one-semester) course.

### **First Level:**

The following models serve as an introduction to sustainability issues.

#### **Model A:**

- bases and background to sustainability
- sustainability and business
- sustainability principles “triple-bottom-line” framework
- sustainability principles and business
- environmental aspects
- environment and business
- economic aspects
- economics and business
- social/cultural/political aspects
- society and business
- culture and business
- politics and business
- overview: triple-bottom-line and business

#### **Model B:**

- introducing sustainability
- sustainability contexts
- sustainability principles
- the business case for sustainability
- global and local business
- sustainable change in business
- social justice & equity in business
- citizenship – individual and corporate
- diversity & international business
- human rights & representation in business
- ethical investment & accounting
- ethical marketing
- overview

## **Second level:**

The topics outlined above are applied to the context of tourism business (and/or travel, leisure, hospitality etc.)

### **Model A:**

- Tourism business – “triple bottom line” framework
- Tourism business in global context
- Tourism business and development
- Tourism business and ethics
- Tourism business and stakeholders
- Tourism policy and planning
- Tourism business and the environment
- Tourism business and economy
- Tourism business and society
- Tourism business and culture
- Tourism business and community
- Tourism business and legislation
- Overview

### **Model B:**

- Global sustainability and tourism
- Sustainability contexts for tourism business
- Sustainability principles for tourism business
- The business case for sustainability in tourism
- Global and local tourism business
- Sustainable change in tourism business
- Social justice and equity in tourism
- Citizenship and tourism business
- Diversity and international difference in tourism
- Human rights and representation in tourism
- Ethical investment and accounting in tourism business
- Ethical marketing in tourism business
- Overview

### **Final level:**

Building on previous courses, 'Solutions, tools and techniques for sustainable tourism' deals with practical application.

### **Model A:**

- Sustainability solution tools and techniques
- Life-cycle/carrying capacity analysis
- Social auditing, impact analysis and reporting
- Cultural auditing, impact analysis and reporting
- Stakeholder analysis and conflict resolution
- Product stewardship and responsibility
- Local knowledge and participation techniques
- Sustainability legislation, policy and control mechanisms
- Administration and enforcement issues
- Corporate approaches
- National sustainability policies and instruments
- International policies and instruments
- Monitoring and assessment – overview

### **Model B:**<sup>3</sup>

- area protection
- industry regulation
- visitor management techniques
- environmental impact assessment
- carrying capacity calculators
- consultation/participation techniques
- codes of conduct
- sustainability indicators

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<sup>3</sup> This version is taken from Mowforth M & Munt I (1998) "Tourism and Sustainability, new tourism in the Third World" p.116. They group sustainability tools and techniques under the main headings as above, but each contains up to nine sub-groups; these can readily form the basis and contents of a relevant module.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations for other institutions interested in implementing similar objectives are based on the methodology used in this project:

- identify degree courses relevant to integration of sustainability
- collect data on content of existing courses/modules
- distribute questionnaire to teaching staff in order to assess the actual content, gaps in and opportunities for including sustainability in existing topics/modules, by identifying: sustainability concepts and solutions already being taught sustainability concepts and solutions which staff consider relevant to their topics or modules  
the feasibility of integrating sustainability concepts and solutions into their topics and modules
- interview respondents after completion of questionnaires in order to clarify responses and further the debate
- integrate the results of the above into institutional/departmental review processes
- assess provision for sustainability content and opportunities in students' work placement experiences (student questionnaires) and post-graduation opportunities
- compile indicative bibliographies to support the integration of sustainability into existing topics/modules
- adopt new sustainability courses/modules into the syllabus
- support staff in delivering existing and new courses/modules by holding conferences, seminars, workshops, development days and by suggesting appropriate guests (internal and external) to contribute lectures
- ensure that sustainability is made explicit in publicity material, showing how university/department is a trail-blazer in the field.

## **Sustainability in the Tourism Curriculum - Workshop Feedback:**

A workshop was held (11 April 2002) in order to obtain feedback from academic practitioners to the Guidelines. Participants were invited to examine the contents of the model sustainability modules, and to consider the obstacles to and opportunities for implementation of a sustainability curriculum in their own institutions.

Nineteen academics from 14 HEIs attended the workshop - a self-selecting group interested in and knowledgeable about sustainability issues. Many of the participants already teach sustainability-related modules and/or courses in different faculties or schools which offer a range of tourism-related undergraduate degree courses such as tourism (or international tourism) management as a single honours degree or combined with hospitality and/or leisure management and/or business.

Participants were sent the Guidelines paper to read prior to the workshop where presentations were kept to a minimum. Participants were asked to comment on both content and implementation, individually and in group discussions, by completing worksheets which presented an outline of the six modules as outlined above. They were also asked to indicate which of the two models per level they preferred.

### **Model preferences:**

	Level One		Level Two		Level Three	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
Model preferred	15%	50%	8%	30%	25%	17%
Mix of both	20%		42%		33%	
N/A	15%		20%		25%	

## **Feedback on model contents:**

### Level One:

For Level One, half the participants expressed a preference for Model B, which they considered more “holistic and coherent in approach” and “appropriate for Level One” than Model A. In incorporating a “broader framework than the triple-bottom-line” approach of Model A, Model B was thought more interesting, engaging and challenging. However, reservations were expressed about whether it was too early to include topics such as ‘ethical investment and accounting’ and ‘ethical marketing’ at this stage, though case-studies could be usefully used to illustrate ethics. Opinion was that Model B “could be easily integrated into a business school or within an interdisciplinary course”.

Model A was criticised as following the “typical fragmentation” of usual modules, with “too much emphasis on the environment” and not enough attention to the social, cultural and political dimensions of sustainability; some also pointed to the omission of ethical debates in this model. Model A was also considered “too general” and “not closely linked enough to sustainability.” Overall, the outline as presented was thought “too repetitive”.

### Level Two:

Forty-two percent of participants preferred a mixture of models A and B, perhaps reflecting the modules or courses relating to sustainable tourism which they already teach; indeed, a number pointed out that many of the topics in both A and B would already be covered in other modules. Recommended was the inclusion at this level of an “underpinning on research methodologies” to equip students for Level Three, in addition to “at least an awareness of environmental, economic, social, cultural and political auditing.”

Of those participants who could decide between models A and B, one third expressed a preference for B. Included among their comments, several highlighted the need to deal with micro, small (SMEs) and local businesses (though the model outline does not specify business size).

Model A was considered too dense to be taught in one module, with “almost every subject constituting several hours of teaching”. Doubt was expressed whether enough relevant teaching material exists to deal with these topics.

#### Level Three:

For Level Three, one third of participants favoured a mix of models A and B; however, 25% did not express an opinion on either model, perhaps because this type of contents is the most innovative and unfamiliar in undergraduate courses.

One quarter of participants preferred the more-detailed Model A to the more open-ended Model B; they commented that more teaching material is available here than for other modules, but that a session on ‘environmental auditing’ is needed.

As explained in the Guidelines, the schema for Model B was deliberately left open-ended and participants filled in the ‘gaps’ by suggesting the following additional topics: corporate policy; energy use and waste management; staff training and education; community participation, education and training; sourcing of resources.

Also suggested were educational training within business and community, and the need to separate out stakeholder analysis and conflict resolution; the existence of teaching material for the latter (in relation to tourism) was also queried.

#### All three levels:

Overall, workshop participants thought it better to “embed sustainability principles into all or most modules” rather than introduce “stand-alone modules”, especially in a curriculum “where few modules are compulsory.” This would further “solve the problem of suitable levels.” Where topics are already covered in existing modules, these should be highlighted.

Participants recommended including context-based case studies into modules. They also advocated the incorporation of IT, a student and staff institutional audit, the highlighting of values and the inclusion of management as well as business aspects.

## **Implementation of modules:**

Participants pointed out that the implementation of the model modules could be “difficult” in light of the “different systems”, modules and courses operated by HEIs. Similarly, participants identified a “dilemma” about whether the modules should be core/compulsory or optional (the Guidelines recommends them as core).

Obstacles to implementing the modules at their own institutions included:

- Timetable and time constraints
- Cultural constraints and conflicting educational paradigms
- Organisational inertia and the difficulty of working with other faculties/schools (for extraneous expertise)
- Lack of resources, including staff, and appropriate teaching expertise

Opportunities and recommendations for implementation included:

- The need to get dean and/or senior management ‘on board’ to effect fundamental change in emphasis
- Highlighting those topics in the models which are already on the syllabus and integrating others into existing modules
- Using local and actual examples – the university, the lecture room – to illustrate sustainability; and encouraging fieldwork
- A sustainability curriculum is appealing to students and should emphasise relevance now and for their future careers

Three-quarters of the participants expressed an interest, either personal or on behalf of their institution, in being involved in the project; negotiations are underway to identify areas of collaboration, taking their needs, priorities and possibilities into account. Whatever comes of these discussions, their positive responses point to an encouraging recognition of the growing importance of sustainability in the tourism curriculum.

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**The Association of Tourism  
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PO Box 681  
Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7FZ  
Tel: 0775 9523103  
[www.athe.org.uk](http://www.athe.org.uk)