UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Business Strategy for Sustainability

2526-1-F7603Q002-F7603Q00201

Aims

The module introduces students to the strategic challenges and opportunities that sustainability poses for contemporary business. It begins by framing key concepts of strategic management, alongside policy frameworks and treaties defining sustainable development, situating business strategy within planetary boundaries. The course then examines how firms can build and sustain competitive advantage amidst the challenges of climate change, biodiversity decline, and human rights issues along global value chains, before turning to management approaches, tools, and practices that support sustainable business. Specific topics include business modelling for the circular economy, sustainable and responsible innovation, sustainability certifications and voluntary standards, sustainable supply chain management and human resource management.

Knowledge and understanding
At the end of the course the student will have a fundamental understanding of:
• Key concepts of strategic management and their interplay with sustainability challenges and planetary boundaries.
• The main frameworks, treaties, and policy debates shaping corporate sustainability (EU, international, national).
• Business models, tools, and practices for circular economy, eco-innovation, and social innovation.
• The role of sustainability standards, certifications, supply chains, and HRM in shaping competitive advantage

Applying knowledge and understanding
At the end of the course the student will be able to:
• Analyse a company's sustainability strategy using theoretical lenses and policy frameworks discussed in class.
• Evaluate how sustainability challenges (climate change, biodiversity, human rights) impact corporate strategy and operations.
• Apply concepts of sustainable business modelling and innovation to real-life case studies and projects.
• Develop critical comparisons between "substantial" and "symbolic" approaches to sustainability in corporate contexts.

Making judgements
At the end of the course the student will be able to:

• Critically assess the credibility and effectiveness of firms' sustainability commitments and certifications.
• Identify and evaluate trade-offs, inconsistencies, and opportunities in corporate sustainability strategies.
• Judge the alignment of corporate practices with material sustainability issues and planetary boundaries.
• Formulate independent, evidence-based opinions on the strategic role of sustainability for long-term competitiveness.

Contents

• Evolution of sustainable development, sustainability, CSR and ESG concepts across international, EU, and national frameworks
• Contemporary sustainability challenges (climate change, biodiversity, human rights, planetary boundaries) and their implications for strategy and operations across global value chains
• Business models for sustainability: circular economy, eco-innovation, and social innovation
• Sustainability standards, labels, and certifications, and their role in competitiveness and market positioning
• Human resource management, leadership, and organizational culture for sustainability

Detailed program

• Strategizing within planetary boundaries: business and sustainability challenges. Frameworks and debates on sustainability constraints for corporate strategy.
• Competitive advantage within a changing climate. Climate change as a strategic challenge: state of climate, mitigation, adaptation, and implications for competitiveness.
• Business and biodiversity: from conservation to regeneration. Corporate impacts and dependencies on biodiversity; risks, opportunities, and regenerative strategies.
• Corporate social responsibility and the protection of human rights. Policies, standards, and due diligence processes to ensure responsible business conduct.
• Business modelling for a circular economy. Frameworks, challenges, and opportunities for circular business models.
• Innovating for sustainability. Sustainable, eco-, and social innovation as levers of competitive advantage.
• Sustainability standards and certifications. Certifications and labels: typologies, scopes, credibility, and strategic use.
• Sustainable supply chain management and procurement. Key sustainability challenges within global supply chains; strategies for responsible procurement.
• Human resource management and sustainability. Managing internal stakeholders: HR practices, employee engagement, and organizational culture for sustainability.

Prerequisites

A basic knowledge of strategic management, innovation management and concepts of competitive advantage. Familiarity with sustainability issues and international policy frameworks is helpful but not required.

Teaching form

• Instructor-led lectures with interactive discussion based on previously assigned readings
• Case histories
• Practitioner lectures
• Assignments in small groups

Textbook and teaching resource

- Recommended book:
  Hahn, R. (2024), Sustainability Management – Concepts, Instruments, and Stakeholders from a Global Perspective. Pearson, 2nd edition, ISBN-10 1292482567

• PPT slides used during lectures
• Additional readings (e.g., articles, book chapters, reports) made available by the lecturer on the e-learning website of the course.

Semester

I semester (October - January)

Assessment method

Students will receive one final mark out of 33 for the 12 ECTS Business strategy and Advanced Corporate Finance for Sustainability course (33/30 is 30 e lode meaning summa cum laude). Students' evaluation is based on three components:

1. Class participation (5/33: 2.5 for strategy and 2.5 for finance) - Active participation in class discussions, case analyses, and interactive exercises is an integral part of the learning process. Students are expected to engage critically with the topics covered, read the assigned readings in advance of classes, and contribute constructively to class debates.
2. Group project (14/33: 7 for strategy and 7 for finance) - The objective of the group project is to develop critical analytical skills by analysing a company's strategy, governance and financing with respect to sustainability issues. The project consists in analysing the sustainability strategy of selected companies by applying key concepts and theoretical lenses and evaluating the company's corporate finance approach through the lens of sustainability frameworks discussed throughout the course. Two groups (A and B) will analyse the same company's sustainability strategy with diverse objectives: (1) Group A's aim is to prove that the company is implementing a «substantial» sustainability strategy, thus emphasising the most «material» sustainability initiatives and actions, while also showing strong integration of ESG factors into its financing, governance, disclosure, and risk management. (2) Group B's aim is to prove that the company is adopting a merely «symbolic» stance on sustainability, thus emphasising inconsistencies between the company's «material» sustainability issues and the actions implemented or communicated, and arguing that ESG integration in corporate finance is limited, compliance-driven, or inconsistent. During presentation of the group projects, the rest of the class will discuss which group did the best job in supporting their case/thesis. The list of companies will be provided by the course teachers during the course. Each group will autonomously search for all relevant information by consulting the company's resources (e.g. sustainability reports, institutional website etc.) to develop the analysis.
3. Final exam (14/33: 7 for strategy and 7 for finance) – The final exam consists in a written exam based on

multiple-choice questions. The final exam covers the content of both modules of the course Business Strategy and Advanced Corporate Finance for Sustainability

Office hours

Niccolò Todaro: Monday - Wednesday, after scheduling an appointment via phone or e-mail.

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE | RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION | PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS