Sustainability in Continuing Education Programmes in Economics and Business Education

The Perspective of Programme Directors, Graduates and Employers (Summary)

Context and objectives

In the context of WWF Switzerland's *publication* on the integration of sustainability in continuing education programmes at Swiss higher education institutions, this master's thesis examines the factors that shape the integration of sustainability into CAS programmes in economics and business education. It does so by adopting the perspectives of participants, employers, and programme directors. With the objective of gaining deeper insights into the experiences, decision-making criteria, motivations of these stakeholders, the study is guided by the following research question:

What factors influence the integration of sustainability into CAS programmes in economics and business education?

To address this main question, three sub-questions were formulated:

- What influences the design and content of continuing education programmes, particularly regarding sustainability?
- What are the motivations and expectations for choosing CAS programmes, and what role does sustainability play in that?
- How do employers perceive the importance of sustainability competencies in hiring and professional development?

Methodology

The thesis follows a qualitative research approach. Three interview guides, one for each stakeholder group, were developed and refined through pre-tests.

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was used to conduct 24 semi-structured interviews with programme directors, participants, and HR professionals/CEOs. Within each group (n = 8), interviewees were further differentiated by institutional type (university vs. university of applied sciences), company size (large firms vs. SMEs), and programme focus (sustainability vs. non-sustainability focus).

The interviews were conducted between September and November 2025, primarily via Microsoft Teams, but also in person or by phone, and lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed locally using NoScribe. German and Swiss German interviews were transcribed into standard German, while interviews conducted in English were transcribed into English. To ensure accurate translation of Swiss German passages and to avoid transcription errors, all transcripts were double-checked by manually comparing them with the corresponding audio files. During this step, company names and other personal references that could allow identification were anonymised.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, combining concept-driven and data-driven coding. Deductive main categories were derived from the interview guides and applied across the transcripts using MAXQDA, after which inductive subcategories were developed to refine emerging themes. Both within-group and cross-group comparisons were conducted to identify patterns across stakeholder groups. Data were analysed in their original languages and later translated into English for reporting, with attention to potential translation bias.

Key results

Programme Design and Sustainability Integration

Programme directors develop their programmes in close response to current market trends and participants' expectations. The far most mentioned expectation and criterion for programme design and content is practical relevance. CAS programmes must offer applicable methods, and real-world relevance to attract and retain participants. Many lecturers therefore work in the economy and bring practical expertise to the courses. This appears to be even more pronounced in programmes at universities of applied sciences. In sustainability focused programmes, sustainability competencies play a role in the selection of lecturers, whereas in other programmes this is not a criterion. This difference was also noted by a participant in a non-sustainability focused programme, who remarked that among the lecturers "the fundamental spirit for sustainability seemed to be lacking."

Sustainability is generally seen as important and relevant in all three stakeholder groups but has repeatably been labelled as "a difficult topic at the moment". Several sustainability focused programmes mentioned difficulties filling their courses or reaching the critical target group, as this quote of a director of a sustainability focused programme exemplifies: *"At the moment, or more this year in particular, sustainability has lost a great deal of importance. We see this both in the registration numbers and among the participants themselves. They are currently struggling with other problems, even though they are already interested in sustainability when they register for such a course. Many are intrinsically motivated and would pursue it anyway, but they have to put out fires elsewhere, with exports, with customs issues (Translated from German)"*.

Another programme director had the impression that some participants initially enrolled because sustainability was viewed as important but are now more inclined to choose, for example, AI-related courses instead.

This is mirrored in the pressures companies are experiencing. In the production sector, current economic conditions are challenging the very existence of some companies. This is felt especially through increased commodity and electricity prices and heightened price sensitivity among customers. Large companies also mentioned uncertainties due to changing regulations. The data suggests that sustainability is valued when it is linked to economic benefits. This influences the way sustainability is taught to resonate with participants; *"Many leaders still think in strictly business-economic terms, that's really what I observe. And that means it's difficult to achieve anything on a moral basis. If I come in with the moral hammer, it's completely ineffective (translated from German)"*. As programme leaders of non-sustainability focused programmes further noted; "*The challenge is that certain participants still feel that it is a trade-off, i.e. that it is not possible to pursue a sustainable business model or strategy without this subsequently having a negative impact on the company's profits or development*" (*translated form German*) or "*some participant feel that circular economy is not economically feasible (translated form German).*

On the other hand, where resources have already been invested in sustainability particularly in sustainability focused companies or large organisations, there has not been a fundamental shift in the interest in becoming more sustainable. However, there appears to be a tendency among some firms to invest fewer resources and to implement sustainability more cost-effectively. Companies with sustainability "in their DNA" emphasised that the question is not *whether* sustainability will regain importance but *when*.

One of the main factors influencing whether, but especially how, sustainability is integrated is the stance of the programme directors themselves. Directors who personally see sustainability as integral to business education are proactive in at least mentioning it in certain courses. Although sustainability is anchored in higher education institutions' strategies, this does not appear to have consistently translated to faculties or continuing education teaching. Some programme directors indicated that greater internal networking would be beneficial; *"Because in all continuing education programmes, you have people who are interested in the topic of sustainability and who would actually like to teach it. So right now, I think our team in particular needs to raise awareness among lecturers about these topics"* (translated from German).

Motivations and Expectations

Participants choose CAS programmes for a combination of professional, practical, and personal reasons. Across the data, the most common motivations include updating or deepening their expertise, closing knowledge gaps relevant to their current job, and pursuing career goals such as preparing for a MAS, EMBA, or a role change. Many emphasise the importance of practical, applicable learning and value programmes that offer space for discussion rather than purely theoretical or online formats. Networking and exchange with peers (or lecturers) from diverse sectors are also major incentives, often viewed as equally valuable as the course content itself. Additional factors include the reputation or proximity of the institution and prior positive experiences. Sustainability emerges as a primary motivation only for those enrolled in sustainability focused programmes. However, many participants even those from non-sustainability focused programmes state that sustainability should be integrated into all CAS programmes and embedded across modules rather than treated as a separate or optional element.

The findings suggest that participants are not interested in sustainability as an abstract concept, but rather in specific issues that are relevant to their everyday lives. This poses challenges as a programme director of a sustainability focused programme mentioned*; "the difficulty is that the topic is extremely complex. I hope that we can find a balance between reducing the complexity, which is necessary, but without becoming too trivial. And I think that's part of the difficulty, why sustainability has a difficult position in general education" (translated from German)*.

Employer Perceptions of Sustainability Competencies

Employers consistently emphasise that practical experience and transferable skills are more important than formal qualifications such as CAS certificates, even though these are generally well perceived. Several employers highlight the increasing importance of competencies such as collaboration, strategic thinking, critical thinking, systems thinking, and the ability to navigate complexity. However, these competencies are understood as general professional abilities rather than being tied specifically to sustainability. Sustainability specific knowledge and skills are typically expected only from designated specialists or in organisations with a strong sustainability orientation.

Recommendations

Strengthen the practical relevance of sustainability content in CAS programmes

Sustainability should be integrated in ways that align closely with the practical expectations and everyday realities of participants. Embedding it as a cross-cutting competence within existing curricula, through reflection, systems thinking and anticipatory perspectives creates space for participants to examine their own scope of action and to exchange with others. It is important to highlight the benefits and applicability of sustainability while acknowledging participants' scepticism regarding potential short-term trade-offs. This can be supported through the use of case studies from sustainable firms, relevant guest lecturers etc. When sustainability is presented through concrete tools, real-world cases and discipline specific applications, it becomes both relevant and accessible. Even for those who do not aim to become sustainability specialists, a shared conceptual foundation is valuable, as it enables more coherent communication and decision-making within organisations. Ultimately, sustainability should not be framed as an additional "green" element but as a core strategic competency essential for the long-term resilience and competitiveness of organisations.

Foster collaboration and strengthen institutional support for integrating sustainability

Establish more structured forms of internal (and where appropriate, external) collaboration such as cross-programme working groups, shared pools of sustainability-related teaching materials, or regular exchanges among lecturers. Such mechanisms would help distribute existing expertise more evenly and reduce the reliance on individual actors with a personal interest in sustainability. They also provide support for lecturers who might be open to integrating sustainability but lack the time or resources to do so. At the same time, these structures can remain flexible enough to respect that not all lecturers will want to engage deeply with the topic. Strengthening institutional backing in this way enables programme teams to integrate sustainability in low-threshold, discipline-appropriate formats, even when it is not the central programme focus, and helps avoid add-on solutions that feel disconnected from core content.

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