

Practical consequences of MBA Ecological Economics – Reflections on Experiences after 4 years

Ingebrigtsen, Stig; Ingulfsvann, Are; Jakobsen, Ove; Nystad, Øystein

Bodø Graduate School of Business/University of Nordland

At Bodø Graduate School of Business courses in ecological economics have been offered to students for almost 20 years. In addition to courses aimed at fulltime students we have developed a part time MBA in ecological economics, which consists of a variety of different subjects. The program, which started in 2010, aimed at students with a bachelor degree and at least 2 years' experience in various professions. As the third class of students is well underway with their studies it is time to conduct an evaluation of the studies relevance with respect to both content and pedagogy.

In this article we focus on different, but closely connected questions, firstly, we will penetrate the connection between previous education and professional experience on the one side and, on the other side, their motivation to take a three-year master's degree program in ecological economics. A tentative problem statement is who choose education in ecological economics and what kind of knowledge are they searching for? Secondly, we investigate to what extent the master's degree in ecological economics has had significance for their individual development, both personally and as a practitioner in their work situations. Thirdly, we draw some conclusion concerning how to develop the courses to be more relevant for the students.

To elaborate on these questions we have structured the article in the following way:

In the first part we focus on question one. We will give a brief characterization of the students applying for the MBA in ecological economics, referring to their educational and professional background. We will also give a brief description of the different subjects included in the program. In addition to standard courses such as; economics, accounting and management, the MBA program in ecological economics consists of; circulation economics, eco – philosophy, social banking, environmental management, industrial ecology, and ethics in business. The different courses in the study program have different basis; In Circulation economics we focus on the relationship between economy, nature and society. In accordance with the principles found in the ecosystems, economic processes are described as circular. Circulation economics provides a comprehensive representation of ecological economics as a dynamic, holistic process where all forms of economic activities are interpreted in context of principles found in ecosystems and social systems. Eco-philosophy focus on the ontological and ethical frame of reference for economic activity. The students are encouraged to reflect on their implicit worldview and values and to what degree the interconnectedness between humans and nature have consequences for economic practice. Topic discussed are e.g., the deep ecological movement, production and consumption ideologies, the environmental crisis, different views on nature and problems related to nature and economy and a shift from economics growth to quality of life.

Social banking discussing how banks could play an active part in developing ecological economic within societies characterized by high quality of life. To reach this end the students must have knowledge about the function of in money, credit and interest and how the banks are a part of the circulation in economics. The main part of the course is directed to how the social banks are functioning in practice, what ideas they build on and how money are used to realize opportunities within social and environmental sustainable projects.

Environmental management and CSR is a practical course where different systems for environmental management in private and public sector are presented and discussed. Environmental management systems are presented as tools to enable the students to work systematically with improvement of the environmental performance in their organization.

Industrial ecology gives the students insight in how ecological thinking can change and develop the production processes in a sustainable manner. They look at the principle of sustainable development, industrial symbiosis and ecosystems – how different businesses are organizing their activities to support each other and use what normally would be waste.

Ethics in business develop insight in different ethical theories and ethical challenges which is relevant in business today, both nationally and globally. The outcome is that students should be able to identify, analyze and suggest well-founded solutions on environmental and social problems. The course is arranged by the faculty staff at Business Ethics Center at Corvinus University in Budapest.

Ecological economics is described as a transdisciplinary field of science. In accordance with Max-Neef (2005) we differ between weak and strong transdisciplinarity, and argue that the different subjects in the MBA program should be interconnected holistically. We will have a special focus on challenges connected to the integration of the three traditional courses. To understand ecological economics we acknowledge that the students must have general insight into the different fields of mainstream economics and business administration.

To reach this end methods in pedagogy are of great importance. Hence, in addition to focus on the content of the different courses we will also focus on methods in pedagogy which is used in the different courses, eg. lectures, work-shops, dialogues, films, artistic presentations.

In the second part of the article we focus on research question two. Based on information gathered by students evaluations of the courses, a quest back study and interviews we will reflect on the course content, where we elaborate on the different courses and discuss the relevance for the students concerning their practical issues and tasks in e.g. farming, industry, public administration, NGO's and as consumers. To dig deeper into this complex topics we will use the student master thesis as a source of information to explore the practical applicability of academic skills in ecological economics.

Referring to research question three the last section of the article focus on how to develop the MBA program in ecological economics to be more relevant for the students. We have an assumption indicating that the differences concerning motivation for applying to the MBA program are closely connected to individual characteristics amongst the students. There are information indicating that ecological economics seem to be of more interest to people with experience from practice, than for people without experience from practical jobs. One possible explanation is that people having experiences from situations where mainstream economic theories fail are searching for alternative explanations.

The article concludes with some reflection on how the MBA program in ecological economics could be developed both concerning content and pedagogy to be more relevant and more meaningful for the students in their work to introduce changes from mainstream economy to ecological economic in their different fields of practice.

References:

Max-Neef, Manfred A. (2005): Foundations of transdisciplinarity, *Ecological economics* 53 (5-16)