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Towards sustainability transformation education: A mindset course for decision-makers Developed by ESCP's STAR Centre

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Florian LÜDEKE-FREUND, Carolin WALDNER & Jessica BREUGH - ESCP Business School
Anastasia SHEVCHENKO - ESCP's STAR Centre

[Towards sustainability transformation education: A mindset course for decision-makers – Developed by ESCP's STAR Centre

Florian Lüdeke-Freund*

Carolin Waldner*

Anastasia Shevchenko**

Jessica Breugh *

ESCP Business School

Abstract

New ways of thinking and acting are required to push for the great sustainability transformation of business and society. To contribute to this shift, ESCP Business School's new STAR Centre is developing a novel mindset-oriented course for professionals. It aims to support executives and other decision-makers in their journeys towards contributing to truly sustainable value creation. In this Impact Paper, we reflect on the outline of this new course format, and show its relevance for and contribution to future-oriented sustainability education at business schools.

Keywords: Sustainability transformation; mindset course; STAR Centre; radical sustainability education; executive education

*Professor, ESCP Business School

** Development Director at ESCP's STAR Centre

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Introduction

In current times of climate change, loss in biodiversity, societal inequalities, and other sustainability-related issues, business schools are facing the major challenge of providing a meaningful, fact-based, accessible, and future-oriented sustainability education. An increasing number of business schools are therefore offering education, training, and coaching in the field of sustainable business (Jack, 2024). Typical offerings cover the basics of corporate sustainability management, sustainability reporting frameworks and tools, current developments in sustainability policies and regulations. Course designs vary significantly, ranging from full degree programmes (typically 1-2 years) to single modules in high-priced executive education programmes with varying timeframes as well as standalone workshops developed by universities, business schools, consultancies, and many other players to foster experiential and immersive learning (Christensen et al., 2007). In addition, various free and charged MOOCs are available ('massive open online courses' offered on digital platforms) with the intention of boosting cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning outcomes in the area of sustainability (Zint et al., 2022).

However, many business schools see the meaningful integration of sustainability into their curricula as a significant challenge due to a disputed legitimacy of the topic in business schools (Hommel and Thomas 2014), misunderstandings and underappreciation of educators (Jamali and Abdallah 2015), as well as missing guidelines for the design and implementation of sustainability education, despite its growing relevance in accreditation processes (Rasche and Gilbert 2015). As a result, sustainability education in business schools oftentimes only scratches the surface of sustainability, providing superficial information on niche topics, rather than increasing an overall sustainability literacy and developing students' mindsets in a way that allows them to face and deal with complex ecological and social issues. Hence, more radical approaches to sustainability education are needed. These include, for example, new areas of training, a focus on performative politics, anti-paradigmatic thinking, and civil disobedience as a source of inspiration (Laasch, 2024).

ESCP's STAR Centre

Academic sustainability centres, like ESCP's new Centre for Sustainability Transformation & Applied Research (STAR Centre), can help business schools deal with the aforementioned challenges of injecting sustainability into their teaching. Such centres, if designed well and not used as a sustainability fig leaf, can improve the legitimacy and validation of sustainability education and lead to an integration of sustainability into the curriculum, thus responding to the changing demands of students, accreditation agencies, and other important stakeholders (Christensen et al., 2007; Slager et al, 2020). By setting up centres and other new institutional settings, often called hubs, labs, or even whole departments, business schools can experiment with new ways of curating sustainability education and research, and also with new ways of positioning themselves on the educational market.

ESCP has set up a dedicated sustainability department with 25+ professors (as of 2024), which serves as a federal structure within which administrative and institutional-political issues are dealt with, and joint educational and research initiatives are launched and

coordinated across ESCP's six campuses.¹ ESCP's STAR Centre, launched in 2023, is a new platform within this department. It is developed along three main activity areas: research-practice transfer, new educational formats, and community building. The STAR Centre is meant to offer a 'lab' where professors, academic staff, and practitioners can experiment with alternative approaches to making research insights practically useful, offering inspiring and maybe even unorthodox educational formats, and building a lively community of people dedicated to the great sustainability transformation of the economy and society.²

In essence, the ambition is to create new bridges between academia and business, deliberately working in the often difficult-to-grasp grey area between science and practice, which often requires merging non-profit and mission-driven approaches with market-oriented and even profit-seeking activities. ESCP's STAR Centre has just been created, but it has already made various contributions to campus life and the business community with new communication and networking formats such as the 'STARbowl,' activities such as the 'Christmas Brunch' and the 'Catalyst for Sustainability' events, an essay competition for students, executive offerings together with HR experts, and much more.

By introducing a new course dedicated to mindset development, the STAR Centre seeks to push the boundaries of sustainability education in both the format in which the program is offered as well as the content that is covered by focusing on challenging individual mindsets towards sustainability and being the enablers of mindset transformations. In the following, we will explain the goals, target group, and design of the STAR Mindset Development Course and embed it into ESCP's sustainability curriculum. This new pedagogical format is currently being developed (as of May 2024) and will be introduced module-by-module, between 2024 and 2026.

The STAR Mindset Development Course: goals, target group, and design

The STAR Mindset Development Course is meant to help learners acquire a broader set of hard skills, such as specific knowledge about complex and natural systems, as well as soft skills related to their personal development, such as being able to identify and reflect on sustainability-related values and attitudes. The basic structure of the course, which will be outlined below, supports this educational goal, inter alia, by highlighting three distinct learning levels (personal, organisational, and systems level) and three pillars offering different types of skills and knowledge (from basic and factual to applied).

Although the course does not directly build on the European Commission's "Sustainability Competence Framework", it is reasonable to assume that the STAR Mindset Development Course contributes to developing the competencies outlined by the Commission in terms of embodying sustainability values, embracing complexity, envisioning sustainable futures, and acting for sustainability (see Bianchi et al., 2022).

'It Starts with Myself'

The aim of the Mindset Development Course is to inspire and educate decision-makers in the area of societal and organisational sustainability transformation. Through a pedagogical approach that starts with oneself, the course will help participants confront challenging and self-reflective questions about their own values, attitudes, and ways of working, before

¹ See <https://escp.eu/ethics-responsibility-sustainability-for-an-overview-of-escp's-initiatives-related-to-ethics-responsibility-and-sustainability>.

² See <https://escp.eu/faculty-research/research-centres/escpstar-for-further-details>.

moving to their role as members of social groups and organisations in which they serve as decision-makers. With 'decision-maker' we refer to any kind of person who has the possibility to take decisions about the developmental direction of an organisation (more details below). This does explicitly not just include C-level executives or heads of large departments. Potential participants could simply ask themselves: Do my daily decisions influence whether or not my organisation becomes more or less sustainable?

By starting from individual values, attitudes, and ways of working, the goal is to create an impact on the very individual level through personal growth and to provide the key skills and knowledge to become more self-aware, self-reflective, and self-accepting. The guiding principles of this approach are: 'it starts with myself', 'travelling with others', and 'developing myself and us'. Our pedagogical idea is that the initial educational offerings and interventions should create a solid foundation to help decision-makers connect their individual values and attitudes to their professional behaviour and impact on the organisational and societal level. Interestingly, this kind of self-development is hardly included in business schools' sustainability education. It lays the foundation for further educational offerings and interventions on two more levels - the organisation and the system - which will be further discussed below.

To get a better understanding of decision-makers current needs and demands for sustainability education, we conducted a market research survey with 81 participants and did additional in-depth interviews with 23 professionals. Moreover, we conducted three focus group discussions of around 120 minutes each, for which we used a semi-structured discussion guide.

Our research aimed at understanding the participants' perspectives on three major aspects. First, we wanted to understand which goals the new course should focus on in order to best respond to current challenges and demands. Second, we wanted to get a better idea of the potential target groups who would benefit most from the course. And third, we wanted to understand the optimal course design that would help decision-makers to commit to the course and to working on tasks beyond the face-to-face coursework, such as testing the new skills they learn and initiating real projects in their organisations as an additional outcome of the course.

Goals

According to the focus group discussions, the course needs to advance the participants' sustainability literacy as well as transforming their mindsets by targeting a development of the participants' skills and characteristics. This resulted in five overarching goals of the course:

- As the first and most prominent goal, the assumption emerged that **confidence** plays a key role in sustainability transformations. While the technical and operational aspects of sustainable business (e.g., product development, production processes, reporting, dealing with legislation, etc.) are typically handled by domain experts, the (un-)ability to take decisions beyond today's norms is a key driver and barrier to sustainability transformations. Taking such decisions requires confidence, a personal trait the Mindset Development Course should support.
- As a second suggestion, focus groups members argued that it is necessary to expand personal mindsets and individual **conscientiousness** in order to observe and embrace the complexity that comes with sustainability transformations. One of the participants stated that "humankind has to up their game, we have to become more complex thinkers". Therefore, the Mindset Development Course should support the ability of

sensing, accepting, and eventually dealing with complexity, for example by learning about systems thinking.

- As third goal, participants suggested that the course should provide a **toolbox** (e.g., practically useful frameworks, methods, and tools, also including case studies, scorecards, games, etc.) with applications that can be adapted to different contexts and thus help decision-makers to translate the content of the course directly into their daily businesses. Hence, the Mindset Development Course should provide practically useful and adaptable tools that complement the general skills taught in relation to confidence and conscientiousness.
- As fourth goal, participants suggested that the course should provide a **language** that is easily understood by the participants' surroundings (i.e., business partners, employees, investors, etc.), which helps to counter scepticism through facts and logic (rational level) as well as convincing stories (emotional level). This also includes the necessity to ensure up-to-date and positively provocative contents in the coursework. The Mindset Development Course should therefore offer factual knowledge but also emotional approaches to counter sustainability scepticism.
- As the fifth goal, the course should be *created by a community*, and should support the *development of a community*, to create legitimacy, authenticity, a shared identity and feeling of belongingness. A shared identity and feeling of belongingness can help participants to change their behaviours and avoid cognitive dissonance on the individual level, and also to enhance legitimacy and visibility for positive sustainability transformations. The participants also agreed that this community should be inclusive rather than exclusive so that it can attract a broad range of decision-makers. Hence, the Mindset Development Course should result from a community effort, while at the same it should help build a community of current and past participants, respectively alumni.
- With these five main goals, the Mindset Development Course aims at overcoming the sometimes rigid templates and processes of traditional education, such as fixed 1- or 2-year programmes, the need to obtain a certain amount of credit points, lack of experimental and transfer-oriented features, etc. By combining fact-based education on sustainability (i.e., sustainability literacy) with a development in the participants' values, attitudes, and behaviours towards sustainability (i.e., mindset transformation), we ensure that the course is unique and distinct from other sustainability courses already taught at ESCP and other business schools. This further allows us to position the STAR Centre as a platform and lab that supports the sustainability transformation of economy and society through innovative and high-quality transfer formats.

Target group

So, who should take a mindset course? The first answer of the focus groups was: 'everyone.' Upon further discussion, however, it became clear that the target group of the Mindset Development Course should be individuals who have the potential for a wider impact in their organisations and, by extension, on society. Hence, 'decision-makers' emerged as the most appropriate term for a target group. This includes individuals in leadership positions as well as those people who give shape to organisations, decide about future orientations and pathways of their organisations, across industries, the nonprofit sector as well as the political and public sector. More concretely, 'decision-makers' can include:

- C-level executives and top management teams that are challenged by increasing demands for sustainable business practices,
- individual managers and entrepreneurs aiming for sustainability-related certifications like B-Corp, and
- leaders and entrepreneurs seeking to integrate sustainability into their business models.

Hence, our understanding of decision-makers is much wider than C-level managers or heads of larger teams or business units. It can be a CEO as much as a person giving shape to a socially oriented non-profit organisation. Additionally, a team enrolment should be possible for corporations and small and medium-sized firms to foster collaboration and accountability within their organisation.

Design of the course

The course design is another novelty. It comprises mixed learning approaches that will maximise impact by increasing flexibility in terms of time, location and pedagogical innovations, blending in-person, on-campus, off-campus, online, offline, hybrid and potentially even virtual reality experiences. Beyond this, we aim to push participants in and out of their comfort zones through experiential and experimental learning as well as activities showing the good and the dark sides of sustainability, empowering participants to use their influential roles and positions to instigate and manage sustainability transitions in their organisations and beyond.

However, we also acknowledge that to accomplish these ambitious goals, the programme itself will require participants who commit to their development through daily mindset challenges, designed for the busy schedules of the movers and shakers of the industry. Time taken with fellow participants would hence focus on interpersonal interactions and development, and be set in diverse learning environments (not just in the lecture hall). Embracing ‘nugget learning,’ the participants can also choose models on the go, explaining different areas of sustainability and their application to the business world. They will need to be fine with being uncomfortable and being challenged through provoked discussions.

One of the main goals of the Mindset Development Course is to sensitise for, make transparent, and advance individual thinking patterns, which prepares the ground for change on the organisational and systemic levels. A special feature of the Mindset Development Course is this ambition to connect the very personal ‘nano level’ with the intermediate organisational ‘micro’ and ‘meso’ levels and eventually with the planetary ‘macro’ level of wider ecological and social systems. Our pedagogical assumption, and more or less explicit ‘theory of change,’ is that solving macro-level problems of unsustainability - such as the ways in which we produce and consume - have their roots in the individual. ‘It Starts with Myself’ is hence more than just an emotional claim. It is a conviction that we will turn into a new course design and pedagogical conception. The course format will therefore include a multi-level structure, including interventions on the individual, organisational, and systems levels:

1. **Personal level** interventions are necessary as some of the key drivers and barriers of sustainability transformations have their roots in the mindsets of people. While sustainability transformations involve policies, infrastructures, and many other material and institutional aspects, these all are driven or blocked by the ways in which we conceptualise and perceive ‘reality,’ i.e. the paradigms, worldviews, assumptions, emotions, etc. that frame the decisions and behaviours of people.
2. **Organisational level** interventions are essential to reflect the reality of the participants as decision-makers in organisations and businesses. Given that these individuals lead, motivate, and inspire people within their own organisations and beyond, and that they shape organisational routines and practices and decide about future pathways of their organisations, the coursework needs to enable transferability between the individual mindset and the organisational reality.

3. **Systems level** interventions are important as individual mindsets and resulting decisions and behaviours, including organisational practices, are subject to diverse contexts and environments (e.g., private life, business life, cultures, social groups) and diverse systems (e.g., economy, society, industry, natural ecosystems). Hence, the systems level must be considered at the same time and in direct connection to the individual and organisational levels.

Another main goal of the Mindset Development Course is to provide accessible and up-to-date contents that help practitioners learn easily. To support this goal, every module will consist of a limited number of basic inputs in form of self-paced learning exercises like video lectures and study materials, combined with live sessions with the respective module teacher(s). The time required to complete one module is approximately 4 to 6 hours, split between video lectures, individual tasks, applied case studies and live sessions. Additional course work may be allocated depending on the content of the module. The total duration of the course will depend a lot on the amount of additional activities, respectively projects and challenges, that teachers will offer and participants will be willing to commit to.

As we want to be mindful of the participants' time and commitment, we decided to organise the different modules into three pillars, which build on one another. The first pillar aims to offer a basic learning opportunity that is accessible for everyone (free of charge, for example as an open MOOC format) to allow a broad audience to consume fundamental sustainability knowledge on all three levels (e.g., basic inputs on self-development, main organisational paradigms, and system-level frameworks such as 'Planetary Boundaries'). For more committed participants, we additionally offer a more comprehensive version of the course, beyond its basic contents, i.e., a premium version for which participants will have to pay (e.g., including synchronous sessions on campus, field trips, or company visits).

To continue the learning process, participants of the second and third pillar will learn about advanced methods and tools that help to translate their new knowledge and skills into practicable outcomes (e.g., how to align inner work and outer work, multi-stakeholder collaborations, and more advanced systems theories). This will include the possibility for participants to make real experiences, to get feedback from their peers (co-students, co-workers), and to reflect on their experiences and feedback based on trying to apply certain tools in their daily work (e.g., tools to improve collaboration at work or to develop new business models together with innovation teams).

We will structure all three pillars as a 'journey' of approximately six to nine months, based on participant-specific projects (e.g., a challenge they face in their organisation), which will include regular reflection meetings with participants where they can share what they have learnt, how they transferred it into their daily business, what challenges they faced, etc. This will be supported by moderated group discussions, peer coaching, and – upon request – one-to-one meetings.

In summary, the Mindset Development Course will encompass three levels: the mind, the organisation, and the system; and three cross-cutting pillars: basic, advanced, and tool-focused learning. The following figure displays the content matrix of the course that reflects the horizontal levels and vertical pillars of the course design. With this structure we ensure that each single module offers meaningful and consistent learning experiences within the broader context of the full course.

	Basics (free)	Advanced concepts (premium)	Tools and practices (premium)
<i>Personal Level (Mind)</i>	<i>It Starts with Myself</i> <i>Goal: Understand the importance of inner work and self-development</i>	<i>Travelling with Others</i> <i>Goal: Understand the importance of outer work and joint development</i>	<i>Developing Myself and Us</i> <i>Goal: Learn about tools for inner and outer work</i>
<i>Organisational Level</i>	<i>New Types of Organising and Organisation</i> <i>Goal: Learn about alternatives to traditional organisational paradigms</i>	<i>The Power of Networks</i> <i>Goal: Reflect on the value of multi-stakeholder collaboration</i>	<i>Developing New Business Models</i> <i>Goal: Learn about tools and skills to develop alternative value creation logics</i>
<i>Systems Level</i>	<i>Living on a Finite Planet</i> <i>Goal: Embrace and accept the absolute limits of our systems of survival</i>	<i>Complex Systems Thinking</i> <i>Goal: Reflect on the conditions, consequences, and change of absolutely limited systems</i>	<i>Dealing with Complex Systems</i> <i>Goal: Learn about tools and skills to navigate and design complex systems</i>

Contributions to sustainability education at ESCP

ESCP already offers a broad range of full sustainability programmes, including the Specialised Master of Science Programmes on ‘International Sustainability Management’ and ‘Sustainability Entrepreneurship & Innovation,’ as well as CSR-, ethics-, and sustainability-related core courses and electives in most programmes on Bachelor, Master, and Executive level. The proposed Mindset Development Course complements these offerings with its focus on professionals, respectively decision-makers, and its ambitious integration of mindset-, organisation-, and systems-level development components.

The structure of the course with its three learning dimensions and three pillars will help to position STAR as a unique platform that supports the sustainability transformation of economy and society through innovative and high-quality transfer formats and learning experiences. Furthermore, we hope to make the following contributions to ESCP’s sustainability education:

- Developing values, attitudes, and behaviours that support responsible management and entrepreneurship and empower decision-makers to thrust their organisations and industries forward.
- Challenging and transforming decision-makers in key areas such as setting goals for their organisations, managing natural resources, dealing with social issues including social wellbeing and social justice, and many more.

- Revisiting the concept of time and the challenge of short-term vs. long-term orientation.
- Understanding systems thinking and focusing on collaboration and engagement to understand the power of collective action, community engagement, and interdisciplinary or intersectoral approaches to solving sustainability-related issues on local and global scales.
- In the era of ‘cancel culture’, short attention spans, and instant gratification, contributing to developing awareness, empathy, resilience, and adaptability.
- Offering decision-makers practical tools to navigate uncertainties and challenges that emerge with complex, multi-faceted, and often insoluble challenges of sustainability transformations.
- Boosting the confidence in decision-makers to tackle challenges that are completely new to them and for which they will need the support from co-workers, business partners, customers, and society, while knowing that the desired outcomes are highly uncertain.

Conclusion

With the multi-level and multi-pillar approach to sustainability education described in this paper, the ESCP STAR centre aims at going beyond ‘typical’ sustainability education for executives by increasing an overall sustainability literacy and developing participants’ mindsets in a way that allows them to face key future challenges through their business models. This also aligns with more radical approaches to sustainability education (Laasch, 2024), as it allows for and encourages anti-paradigmatic thinking (e.g., through fundamentally scrutinising the structure of existing economic systems, the role of businesses on our way to more a more sustainable world, as well as the responsibility of decision-makers to lead towards the required transformations), even if this means challenging the status quo of our individual mindsets, the structure and governance of our organisations, the set of established industries, and the cultural tissue of society.

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