

OLENA MAKSYMETS*

Ukrainian forest sector competitiveness through the incorporation of sustainable development aspects into an MBA in Forest-related Industry Program

Abstract. Sustainable development (SD) awareness continues to rise within the general public and is being extensively incorporated within academia, institutions, and business. As it is impossible to reach the needed level of awareness without adequate education, cooperative education partnerships should be established. The paper reveals the survey results and outcomes concerning the need for developing and implementing an industrial (Forest-related Industry) Master in Business Administration (MBA) program at the Ukrainian National Forestry University. The content of such a proposed program was also discussed. It was found that by developing and communicating the understanding about the connections between sustainability and business, companies can enhance their value, measure and manage change, and drive improvement and innovation. Considering the increasing demand for MBA programs it is crucial to implement sustainable development aspects into each proposed course. A hypothesis was made that sustainable development aspects are important both for the MBA program and for the industry. The paper concludes with a proposal of possible partnership and benefits for both academia and the forest-related industry in Ukraine.

Keywords: cooperative education partnerships, MBA in Forest-related industries, sustainable development in MBA program, business and sustainable development, Ukraine

1. Introduction

Cooperative education partnerships between industrial companies and universities are becoming increasingly common in response to fundamental challenges facing both sectors [Hing & Breen 2002]. S. Hase indicates that “cooperative education partnership is a partnership between an educational institution and an

* Ukrainian National Forestry University, Lviv, Ukraine, Department of International Business Management, e-mail: alyona.maksymets@gmail.com, phone: 38 095 536 43 37.

industry in which education and training is jointly developed and delivered for the principal benefit of employee and employer” [Hase 1997]. According to John Codd the primary goal of education policy is to enable learners to acquire the skills and abilities required for them to perform more effectively, more productively, within a changing global labor market [Codd 2005] and hence to perform more competitively. David R. Powers, Mary F. Powers, Frederick Betz and Carol B. Aslanian [1988] discussed partnerships between businesses and higher education from the standpoint of effects on higher education traditions, policies and practices; business productivity and competitiveness; and opportunities for leadership.

An ever-greater number of companies become more concerned about their competitive position, recognize the need to adopt new technologies and strategies, improve training of their employees, maintain the image and make their operations more sustainable. At the same time, governments, stock exchanges, markets, investors, and society at large are calling on companies to be transparent about their sustainability goals, performance and impacts [GRI 2013a]. Sustainable development awareness continues to rise within the general public and is being extensively incorporated within academia, institutions and business. By developing and communicating their understanding about the connections between sustainability and business, companies can enhance their value, measure and manage change, and drive improvement and innovation [GRI 2013b]. And with all these changes higher education should play important role in the new corporate development.

For the university, the key benefits include improved educational offerings; enhanced university reputation in the discipline and cooperative education partnerships; additional student fees and economies of scale; funds for discipline development and research and consultancy opportunities.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a concept that became popular after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Agenda 21, an outcome of this summit, identified education as a key component in achieving any sustainable development goals [UN 1992]. Significant progress has been made in meeting many development challenges and in 2030 Agenda it is emphasized on the need for all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles [UN 2015].

2. Methods and materials

In this paper we used qualitative case study methodology in order to get the description of the attitude of different groups of respondents towards new indus-

trial MBA program [Baxter & Jack 2008; Hyett, Kenny & Dickson-Swift 2014; Merriam 2009; Stake 1995; Yin 2003].

The methodology should be considered when: the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions; you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; or the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context [Yin 2003].

The case was the cooperative education program – MBA in Forest-related Industry at Ukrainian National Forestry University. The data were collected through personal interviews and online survey. Responses were gained from 65 respondents: owner of the company (3.6%), top management/CEO (7.1%), middle manager (35.7%); senior specialist/team leader (7.1%), specialist (21.4%); students (25%). So the majority of the respondents were business representatives (49).

The questionnaire was developed for a more extensive study, so the questions relevant to this paper focused on attitude of respondents to the industrial MBA program as well as their understanding of its content.

Next stage of the study was conducted through the discussions and interviews of business representatives during the Seminar-presentation “MBA in Forest-related Industry”. The seminar was held on the 9th of June 2015 at Ukrainian National Forestry University. It was developed and conducted in cooperation with the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Uppsala, Sweden) and with the support of the Swedish Foundation for international cooperation in research and higher education (STINT).

Questionnaires and interview transcriptions were analyzed using content and thematic analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Substantiation of the project

Cooperative education partnerships between industries and universities are becoming increasingly common in response to fundamental challenges facing both sectors [Breen & Hing 2001] and especially in modern conditions. According to Simon Marginson [1993; 1997] education can take the form either of a public good that is non-marketable or of an individualized positional good that is subject to competition, exclusion and sale for profit.

Glenn R. Thiel and Nell T. Hartley [1997] stated that the idea of colleges and business coming together through cooperative education programs not new and not geographically limited. Also they proved that it is necessary to constructively question the current value of such programs and to expand the dialogue concerning the strategies to reengineer them [Thiel & Hartley 1997].

Strong relationships between educational institutions and industry are fundamental to the cooperative education [Flemin 2012]. But there are significant challenges to cooperative education partnerships through a lack of funding, understanding of the meaning and purpose among different stakeholders and motivations for participants of such educational programs [Beggs, Ross & Knapp 2006; Flemin & Hickey 2013; Martin & Leberman 2005; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto 2008; Weis & Smith 2005].

As it is important for companies to conduct their activities responsibly and in a sustainable way, universities should develop programs giving opportunities for current and future managers not only to get new skill and knowledge, but also adequately address sustainability aspects in their managerial practice. Considering increasing demand for MBA programs, from our point of view, it is important to incorporate SD aspects into each course proposed within the program.

The hypothesis of the research – sustainable development aspects are very important both for the MBA program and for the industry's competitiveness.

Fundamental challenges facing forest-related industries in Ukraine and the higher education are leading to the development of cooperative education partnerships. Thus it is important to study the demand for partnership programs and study the benefits expected by participating industry and university. In this paper we describe the case study of the possible international university-business partnership.

We describe one of such potential partnerships and review possible benefits, which in theory should occur to the partners. This partnership should be the MBA in Forest-related Industries – the venture between Department of International Business Management, Division of Forest Products and Markets and the management of forest-related industries in Ukraine.

The project started in 2013 when the Department of International Business Management (Ukrainian National Forestry University, Lviv) together with the Department of Forest Product (SLU, Swedish University of Agricultural Studies, Uppsala) decided to apply for the initial collaboration grant to STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education).

The working hypothesis was that the MBA in Forest-related Industries program should be designed for Ukrainian businessmen and incorporate both theoretical and practical background of how to make forest-related industries in Ukraine more productive and profitable (managerial and economic pillars) and at the same time oriented on sustainable development and bioeconomy aspects (environmental and social pillars).

Within the market approach, education is viewed as a product and schools are seen as being similar to small business firms [Codd 2005]. And this is the area where the knowledge and expertise from European countries was needed.

The aim of the joint project was to start the collaboration and study the demand for the new Program – Master in Business Administration in Forest-related Industries. And it was determined that the integral part of this program should be sustainable development.

Activities to achieve the target for joint project were:

- exchanging experience in teaching regarding forest sector with special attention to SD aspects,
- development of new courses and educational materials for MBA in Forest-related Industry program,
- guest lectures of Ukrainian teachers at SLU and Swedish teachers at UNFU (also lectures by business representatives and consultants in the forest industry),
- short-term exchange visits of students from Sweden and Ukraine (with possible defense of Master Thesis in partner-countries).

Such cross-country cooperation is considered to become not only helpful for Ukrainian industry to be more competitive and recover from crisis, but also favorable for the development in Baltic Sea region, as forest products are traded a lot within the region. Biomass as energy source is one of the top issues in the region [Maksymets & Lonnstedt 2015]. Clear cutting in Ukraine (as the consequence of poor managerial skills) and unemployment in the sector directly affects the entire Baltic Sea region (rivers, mountains, air, illegal trade etc).

3.2. Survey of MBA importance to the forest-related industry

The results of the survey showed that more than half of the respondents knew about MBA programs in general and 44.1% had an idea about such opportunities. Also the majority (52.9%) expressed a willingness to study within any MBA program (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the awareness about MBA programs in general

Answer	Results (% of respondents)
Yes, I know about it	52.9
I have a general idea	44.1
No, I don't know anything about this	3.0

Source: own elaboration.

The industrial orientation of the Program was considered as a benefit: 43.8% of the respondents agreed that it will give an opportunity to get a deeper un-

Table 2. Answers of the respondents to the question “Is industrial orientation of the Program important to you?”

Answer	Results (% of respondents)
Yes, it will give opportunity to get deeper understanding of business process	43.8
Yes, it will give better insight of industrial peculiarities	50.0
No, it significantly narrows the possibilities	3.1
No, it reduces the image	3.1

Source: own elaboration.

derstanding of business processes and 50% agreed that it will give them a better insight of industrial peculiarities (Table 2).

The major factors influencing the decision to study within MBA program were: progress in career (41.2%) and establishing their own company (32.4%) (Table 3). Also getting better results on the current position were important for respondents (23.5%).

Table 3. Answers of the respondents to the question “Why it is important to study for an MBA degree from your point of view?”

Answer	Results (% of respondents)
For establishing your own company	32.4
For the progress in career	41.2
For better results on the current position	23.5
Other	3.1

Source: own elaboration.

The most important outcome from MBA program was seen as improvement of leadership skills and development of managerial competencies and getting knowledge and experience necessary for successful work (39.4%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Answers of the respondents to the question “What can be the most important outcome from studying on MBA?”

Answer	Results (% of respondents)
Skills and experience necessary for successful work	39.4
Improvement of leadership skills and development of managerial competencies	48.5
Expanding horizons, learning about people’s experience	12.1
Other	3.1

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5. Answers of the respondents to the question “With which of the following statements do You agree?”

Answer	Results (% of respondents)
Any MBA is prestigious and will help in a career	60.6
I’m interested in the diploma only of a certain school because it has positive reviews	15.2
MBA itself is not that important as the developing critical thinking and establishing new connections during the study	15.2
Disagree with any of the above statements	9.1

Source: own elaboration.

Any MBA program was considered as prestigious and helpful in a career by more than 60% of respondents (Table 5).

Also it was revealed that the most demanded courses are: Management of Production Processes and Quality, Industrial Marketing, Finance and Investing, Global Outlook of Forest Sector, Organizational Behavior, Value-Added Chains (incl. Logistics), Strategic Management, as well as Business Planning.

The most important factors for the respondents were the assistance of well-known coaches and specialists in educational process (9.26), highly-qualified teachers (9.23) and possibility to have internships abroad (9.14) (Table 6).

ESD will benefit the University and Department in developing MBA in Forest-relate Industries Program as the content of the program incorporating sustainability aspect was also important for the respondents. It should be stated that Ukrainian National Forestry University is the only higher education institution with forestry profile in Ukraine.

Table 6. Rating of some criteria importance

Criteria	Importance*
Distant learning	6.74
Mode of study	7.26
The cost of training	7.66
The specialization of study (industrial)	8.00
The content of the program (incorporating sustainability aspect)	9.09
The assistance of well-known coaches and specialists in educational process	9.14
Highly-qualified teachers	9.23
Internships abroad	9.26

* 1 not at all important, 10 is very important. The average value is presented in table.

Source: own elaboration.

During its history, the University has become a prominent center of forestry engineering and environmental economics education in Ukraine.

4. Structure of the MBA Program in Forest-related Industries

The structure of the MBA program in Forest-related Industries was further presented to the business representatives during the seminar held on the 9th of June 2015 at Ukrainian National Forestry University. On the basis of the discussions and interviews the content of the program was structured, refined and updated (Fig. 1).

The program should start with the course “Management of Production Processes and Quality” (ECTS credits – 7, workload – 210, contact hours – 90, self-study – 45, exam preparation – 75). Students should have basic knowledge in Economics and Management and experience in any field of operations. The module is designed to understand the importance of production processes and business operations. Students learn the tools and methods for managing production processes. As well they get the basic understand on how to apply them.

The module should be designed to understand the importance of production processes and business operations. Within this course students should learn the tools and methods necessary for managing production processes.

Semester I			
Management of Production Processes and Quality	Industrial Marketing	Finance and Investing	Global Outlook of Forest Sector
7 ECTS	7 ECTS	8 ECTS	7 ECTS
210 90/45/75	210 110/55/45	240 150/50/40	210 110/60/40
Semester II			
Organizational Behavior	Value-added Chains (incl. Logistics)	Strategic Management	Business Planning
8 ECTS	7 ECTS	8 ECTS	8 ECTS
240 120/65/55	210 120/60/30	240 120/70/50	240 120/70/50
Semester III			
Corporate Project		Master Thesis	
10 ECTS		20 ECTS	
300 -/300/-		600 60/540/-	

Figure 1. Structure of the MBA program in Forest-related Industries

Source: own elaboration.

As well they get basic understanding of how to apply them. Main topics that are covered within the course:

- responsibilities and possibilities of production (operations) manager within the forest-related enterprise considering sustainable development aspects,
- production management on different types of forest-related enterprise,
- peculiarities of operating systems of forest-related enterprise with the emphasis on sustainable development,
- importance of Quality Management (ISO 9000, ISO 14000 etc) on forest-related enterprises,
- state-of-art tools applicable in production and quality management on forest-related companies,
- case studies concerning the way companies meet operational challenges and be competitive.

Module content: Industrial solutions (analysis of competitive advantage of the enterprise in forest-related industry); Production and Operations Management (fundamentals of all operations functions within business); Quality management (impact of quality management on business performance in forest-related industry); Production systems – application of principles to different areas and fields in operations management in forest-related industry.

Next course is “Industrial Marketing” (ECTS credits – 7, workload – 210, contact hours – 110, self-study – 55, exam preparation – 45). Students should be familiar with main trends on the global forest products market, understand the peculiarities of the production and distribution process within forest-related industries and also they should be able to prepare presentations in PowerPoint. The module is designed to give students information about the principles of industrial and applied marketing, as well as international commercial transactions.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- understanding of basic market forces influencing the development and shifts on forest products markets with special attention to sustainable development,
- understand the influence of unemployment, inflation economic growth/crisis on market development and shifts,
- the role of stakeholders on the development of marketing strategy for forest-related companies including environment protection organizations, wild-life saving funds, sustainable forest management organizations etc.,
- development and implementation of market strategies as the integral part of business strategies of the forest-related enterprises with consideration of sustainable development aspects.

Module content: Applied Marketing (understanding of basic market forces of supply and demand in different competitive conditions, application of marketing tools and methods in forest-related industry); Industrial Marketing (understand the market forces influencing forest-related industries, develop and implement

marketing strategies); International Commercial Transactions (understand the basic commercial relations and transactions within the forest-related industry).

Before starting the course “Finance and Investing” (ECTS credits – 8, workload – 240, contact hours – 150, self-study – 50, exam preparation – 40) students should know the basics of Economics, Financing and should be able to work with MS-Excel. This module is designed to impart knowledge, skills and experience to understand the fundamental principles of finance and investing. It focuses on aspects which are relevant for decision-making. The module is divided into two parts, delivered correspondingly in the 1st and 2nd semester of the study.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- detailed evaluation of and controlling of costs and analysis of financial performance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability reporting and global reporting initiative (GRI),
- financial budgeting, choosing financial sources and working capital management,
- financial forecasts based on accounting data,
- investment decisions based on different investment criteria according to CSR, sustainability reporting and GRI,
- application of financial tools and methods in the decision-making process of managerial finance.

Module content: Corporate Finance (financial tools and methods in decision-making, risk-return relationship, diverse financing alternatives using data from real financial statements); Financial Management (assessment of financial security and stability using different methods and tools, differences of assessment in various countries within forest-related industry); Managerial Accounting (controlling methods and tools, principles of controlling, CSR, SD reporting and GRI); Investment Management (evaluation of investment projects using diverse investment tools).

Before starting the course “Global Outlook of Forest Sector” (ECTS credits – 7, workload – 210, contact hours – 110, self-study – 60, exam preparation – 40) students should know the basics of Economics, Marketing and should be able to work with MS-Excel. Forest management and use of forest resources varies greatly across the world, depending on factors such as the forest area, standing volume, type of forests present in a country, local social and economic conditions, history, traditions and government policies both within and outside the sector. Furthermore, forest management and use continue to evolve over time in response to changes in these external factors as well as changes in the characteristics of the resource.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- understanding and managing change in global forest sector with emphasis of sustainable development and sustainable forest management,

- changing context of global forest sector through sustainable development prism,
- impact of globalization on forest users,
- market and market forces for forest-related products,
- the forest sector with the environmental paradigm,
- capability development and strategic imperatives for forest sector.

Forest management is complex because forests can produce such a wide variety of goods and services. Many of these outputs can be produced simultaneously, but often there are also trade-offs between them, especially between the commercial and non-market outputs from forests. While the demands for these outputs varies between countries and over time, it is probably true to say that they are mostly increasing, leading to ever more complicated and difficult decisions for forest managers and policymakers wishing to satisfy these competing demands.

The next course is “Organizational Behavior” (ECTS credits – 8, workload – 240, contact hours – 120, self-study – 65, exam preparation – 55). Students should have basic knowledge in Management and be able to prepare PowerPoint presentations. The module is designed to provide students with the capability to manage different process in a diversified company’s environment.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- introduction to critical issues of managing human resources for companies both in domestic and in international environment, including CSR, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and WHS (Work Health and Safety),
- interpersonal communication skills, negotiation process, conflict management,
- challenges for managers dealing with such aspects as diverse workforce, productivity increase challenge, conflicts, motivation and loyalty,
- the importance of values for personal and companies success, awareness of ethical issues and moral values and their role company’s development,
- the importance of schedules and planning in time management, self-management,
- how to benefit from diversity, gain effective team using different tools and techniques.

Module content: Human Resource Management (competitive companies require appropriate tools, methods, structures, policies and strategies for managing their employees at every level of the enterprise); Interpersonal Skills (managerial success depends on how well the manager relates to the team; how to influence others and ensure the message that has been sent is received as intended); Leadership and Business Ethics (ethical and moral values; personal vs. corporate values, codes of ethic/conduct, the role of ethics in leadership in forest-related industry); Time management and Teamwork.

Before starting the course “Value-added Chains (incl. Logistics)” (ECTS credits – 7, workload – 210, contact hours – 120, self-study – 60, exam preparation – 30) students should pass such courses as Industrial Marketing, Global outlook of forest sector, Management of production processes and basics of Finance. Students should be able to operate in MS-Excel and make Power-Point presentations. The module is designed to give students understanding that in the process of strategy developing and attempting to secure a competitive advantage, it is important to note that a firm is not simply a “black box” into which raw materials go and from which products emerge.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- changing policies and strategic decisions,
- improving linkages among activities,
- altering market timing and production locations,
- establishing of stronger linkages between activities,
- development of relationships between business units,
- changes in the operations scale,
- addressing institutional factors such as regulation and product requirements.

Module content: Technology and the Value Chain; Relationships between Value Chain Activities; Control of Value Chain Activities.

The next course should be “Strategic Management” (ECTS credits – 8, workload – 240, contact hours – 120, self-study – 70, exam preparation – 50). Students should have successfully passed the program of the 1st semester to be able to participate in this module. The module is designed to give students understanding of organizational management activity that is used to set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, and also ensure that employees and other stakeholders are working toward common goals.

Module content: Competitive Strategy (develop and implement corporate strategies using the data from operations management, marketing and financial management); Key-Performance Indexes (KPI), Balanced Score-card (BSC) and GRI in developing company’s strategy (strategic methodologies and instruments; alternative strategic roadmaps, basic strategic techniques); Business Policy Corporate Strategy (strategic analysis, dynamic capabilities, key success factors).

Before starting the course “Business Planning” (ECTS credits – 8, workload – 240, contact hours – 120, self-study – 70, exam preparation – 50) students should have deep knowledge of Economics, Finance and Investment, Strategic Management, Industrial Marketing. They should be able to work with MS-Excel on the at least intermediate level. This module is designed to consolidate the previous modules. Different situations such as establishing a company and/or evaluation of business idea, decision-making within a company, buying and selling a company (business unit) are covered.

Main topics that are covered within the course:

- managerial thinking and making decisions under uncertainty and taking into account peculiarities of sustainable development imperative and forest products business,
- analysis of company's reports with further decision-making (including Sustainability reports and GRIs),
- evaluation of business ideas and setting up business plans,
- setting up a framework for successful establishment of new business in forest-related industry,
- application of discounted cash flow and capitalized earnings methods to evaluate mergers and acquisitions (M&As) within forest-related industry,
- developing practical approach to carry out M&As, assessing the key factors to successful M&As in forest-related industry.

Module content: Business Simulation (practicing managerial thinking in case studies and business games for the forest products companies); Entrepreneurship (developing, substantiating and implementing business ideas in forest-related industry); Merges & Acquisitions (evaluation of key issues in mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances in forest-related industry).

The final assignment after passing all obligatory courses is the Corporate Project (in the 3rd semester with 10 ECTS credits, 300 hours of workload all of which is self-study).

After completing theoretical and practical parts of the Master program students must prepare Master Thesis in the 3rd semester. 20 ECTS credits are given for the Master Thesis with 600 hours of workload, 540 of which is self-study and 60 are assigned for contact hours with scientific supervisor.

5. Conclusions

According to the result of the survey and discussions we can state that the Program should be designed primarily for students who are looking for careers as managers in the forest industry. The Program should be based on a strong background in business administration and aims at developing students' abilities to use analytical skills when solving real-world problems such as integrated resource management and sustainable development.

To complete the MBA in Forest-related Industries program, it is important to take a business strategy course (reflecting sustainable development issues), a business practicum/project internship.

The results of the survey, interviews and discussions with business representatives concerning their attitude towards MBA program in Forest-related industry

as well as its structure and content showed that the majority of proposed courses should include the environmental aspects. Reflection of sustainable development issues was considered important while conducting international business.

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Poprawa konkurencyjności ukraińskiego przemysłu leśnego poprzez uwzględnienie aspektów zrównoważonego rozwoju w programie MBA dla leśnictwa

Streszczenie. W powszechnej świadomości stale rośnie znaczenie zrównoważonego rozwoju, a jego idee znajdują odzwierciedlenie w działaniach świata akademickiego, urzędów i przedsiębiorstw. Ponieważ niemożliwe jest osiągnięcie pożądanego poziomu świadomości tych zagadnień bez odpowiedniego kształcenia, konieczne jest kreowanie partnerstwa i współpracy na rzecz edukacji. Artykuł ukazuje rezultaty badania dotyczącego potrzeb w zakresie stworzenia i realizacji programu Master of Business Administration (MBA) przeznaczonego dla przemysłu leśnego na Narodowym Uniwersytecie Leśnictwa Ukrainy. Uwagę poświęcono też treści tego programu. Ustalono, że gromadzenie i upowszechnianie wiedzy na temat powiązań między trwałym rozwojem a biznesem służy samym przedsiębiorstwom, prowadząc do wzrostu ich wartości, pomagając w zarządzaniu zmianą i będąc motorem racjonalizacji i innowacji. Zważywszy na rosnący popyt na programy MBA, bardzo ważne jest uwzględnienie zagadnień zrównoważonego rozwoju w każdym nowo projektowanym kursie. Aspekty zrównoważonego rozwoju są bowiem istotne zarówno dla programu studiów MBA, jak i dla leśnictwa, a partnerska współpraca między szkolnictwem wyższym a przemysłem leśnym byłaby obopólnie korzystna.

Słowa kluczowe: partnerstwo i współpraca w edukacji, MBA dla przemysłu leśnego, zrównoważony rozwój w programie studiów MBA, biznes a zrównoważony rozwój, Ukraina