

# **Greening the Journalism Curriculum:**

## **Impact of a Pilot Module on Sustainability and its Implications for Curriculum Development**

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Education: Assessment of a Pilot Module, *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*.**



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# Sustainability Education (SE)

1. Schools
2. Tertiary Institutions
3. Community education
4. Interpersonal communication
5. Public meetings / seminars / presentations
6. News media

- Unintended
- Indirect





# Criticisms of media coverage

1. Lack of quantity in coverage
2. An inherent appetite for disasters and catastrophes
3. Sensationalism - conflict / controversies
4. News as entertainment
5. Incidents & events rather than issues
6. Inability to handle uncertainty
7. Distortion and Inaccuracies
8. Lack of depth – informs but does not educate
9. A lack of “empowering” information
10. A focus on indicators of problems, rather than its underlying causes or its accumulative effects
11. Rarely address how problems can be avoided or possible solutions
12. A lack of international aspects
13. A lack of reflection of the multidimensional aspects of environmental & sustainability issues
14. Bias towards environmental groups
15. Bias towards industry and business
16. Quantitative balance - misinformation
17. Lack of balance – sporting events / car reviews do not discuss environmental impacts.

# A Step Forward...

Education on  
sustainability  
for journalism  
students

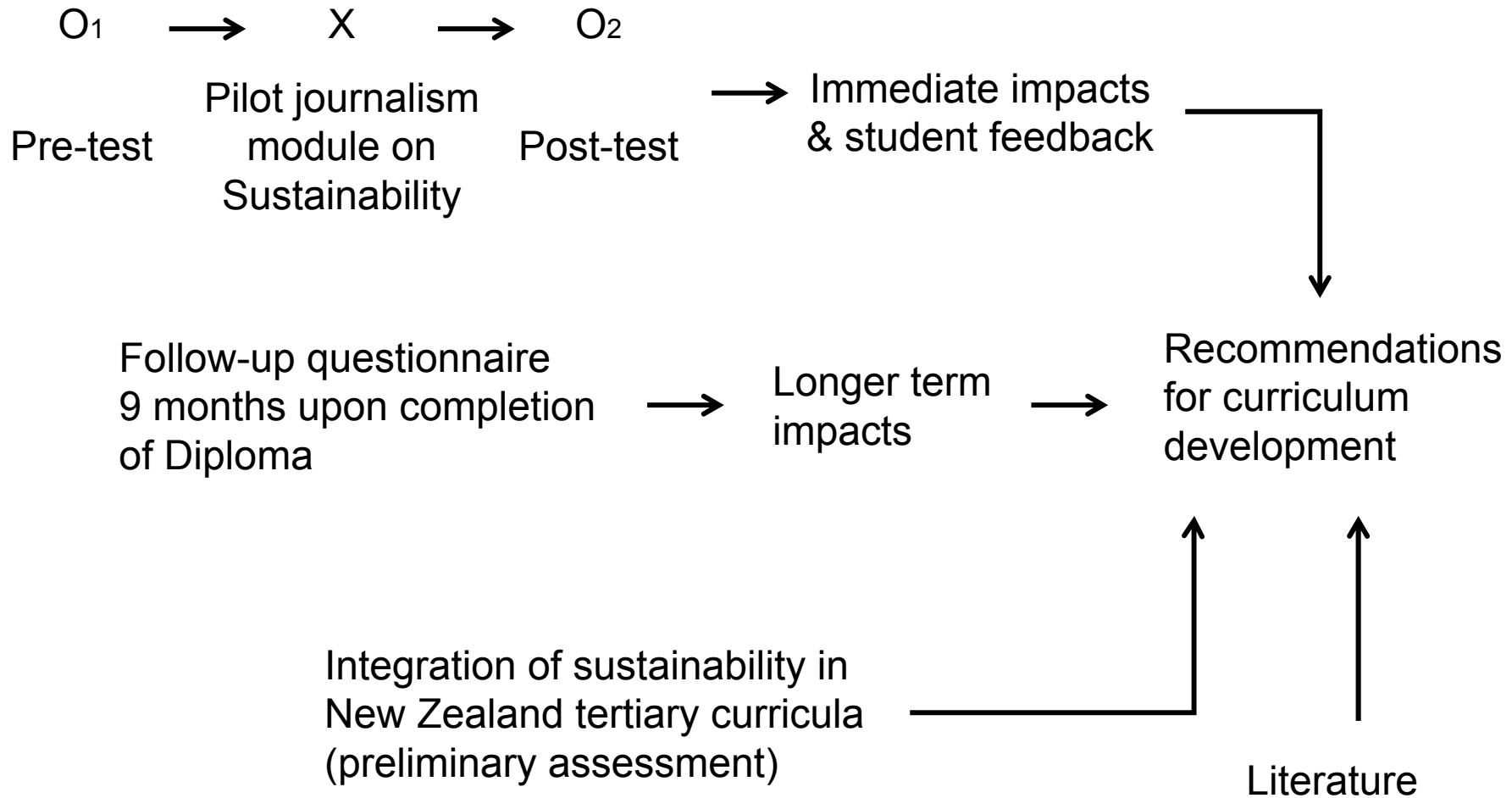


Build  
journalists'  
knowledge



Improvements  
to media  
coverage

# Overview



# A Pilot Journalism Module on Sustainability

1. Added to the curriculum of UC's *Graduate Diploma in Journalism* programme in the academic year 2005
2. 4 one-hour presentations by guest speakers over 4 subsequent weeks - Helen Beaumont (PCE); John Peet (UC); Guy Salmon (Ecologic Foundation) and Jeanette Fitzsimons (NZ Green Party).
3. Speakers provided a variety of perspectives on environmental and sustainability issues in New Zealand.
4. Each session was followed by a half-hour discussion with the students.

# Conceptualisation, development and implementation of the module



Professor Ian Spellerberg  
(Environment, Society and Design Division, Lincoln University)



Mr. Nick Early  
(Restore NZ Ltd.)



Associate Professor Jim Tully  
(School of Political Science and Communication,  
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# Methodology

1. Assessment Method: One-group Pre-Test/Post-Test Design ( $O1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow O2$ )
2. Hypotheses
  - H1: Increased understanding of sustainability
  - H2: Increased interest in reporting sustainability issues
  - H3: Increased beliefs about the importance of sustainability
3. Data Collection: Semi structured interviews – recorded & transcribed verbatim and self-administered questionnaires.

4. Total number of students: 19

5. Response Rate: 58%

6. Data Analysis: Ordinal data - non-parametric statistics - Mann-Whitney U Tests (independent samples), Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test (related samples), McNemars Test

7. Longer term assessment: self-administered questionnaire via email – 9 responses

# Results

*Mann-Whitney U Tests* found no significant differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) between groups of students when potentially confounding factors (media work experience; prior experience in writing environment stories; prior training or education in sustainability) were taken into account.

Equivalence at pre-course stage – for understanding of sustainability and interest in reporting.

# Impact on Understanding

1.  $H_1$  supported - significant increase ( $p=0.03$ ) in the pre-to-post scores for the *Degree of Understanding Scale*.
2. Five (45%) - change largely attributed to the module.
3. Six (55%) - other contributing factors (discussions with family & friends and information from the news media) - *history effects*.
4. Self-reports - 10 (91%) said that the module enhanced their understanding & knowledge of new areas.

5. Most important messages gained from the module:
  - 3 (27%) - the cross-cutting nature of sustainability.
  - 7 (64%) - the urgent necessity for public information.
  
6. How they would apply what they learned to their area of interest in reporting:
  - 8 (73%) - seek a sustainability viewpoint in a story.
  - 2 (18%) - unsure how they could do this for sports or politics.

# Impact on Interest

1. H<sub>2</sub> not supported (Exact p=0.187); but, pre-to-post increase in score for 55% of students.
2. Qualitative examination of responses further revealed this increase in interest.  
Pre: *“No. I do not know enough about the issue of sustainability”*  
Post: *“It has made me more aware, and I have more confidence to report on environmental issues. Before, I wasn’t confident. I would definitely be interested to report on environmental issues.”*
3. Self-reports - 9 (82%) said module did affect their interest.
4. What journalism area they would like to specialise in - only one indicated environment journalism; career prospect for an environment reporter was limited.

# Impact on personal beliefs

1.  $H_3$  not supported ( $p=0.125$ ).
2. Self-reports - 7 (64%) believed the module did affect their personal beliefs because of improvements to understanding and awareness
3. Qualitative examination of responses revealed impacts on personal beliefs to be indistinct.

# Longer term impact

1. Two had reported on sustainability issues
2. One applied what she learned to news stories.
3. Others explained:

*“...none of the stories I have covered so far have had anything to do with sustainability. If I was given a story on some form of sustainability, I would definitely go back to the module on sustainability from last year...”*

*“Crime reporting doesn’t really pertain to sustainability. I have not come across any issues in my round that require me to use the things I learned in last year’s module.”*

*“Sustainability doesn’t really relate to sports. [What I learned]...hasn’t been needed in sports.”*

# Integration of sustainability in NZ journalism curricula

1. Self-administered email questionnaire - course co-ordinators of 9 journalism schools (33% response rate)
2. Curriculum content (online) checked for courses on environmental or sustainability issues – preliminary assessment.

# Greenness of the NZ Journalism Curricula?

1. *National Diploma in Journalism* (6 institutions) - no distinct courses.

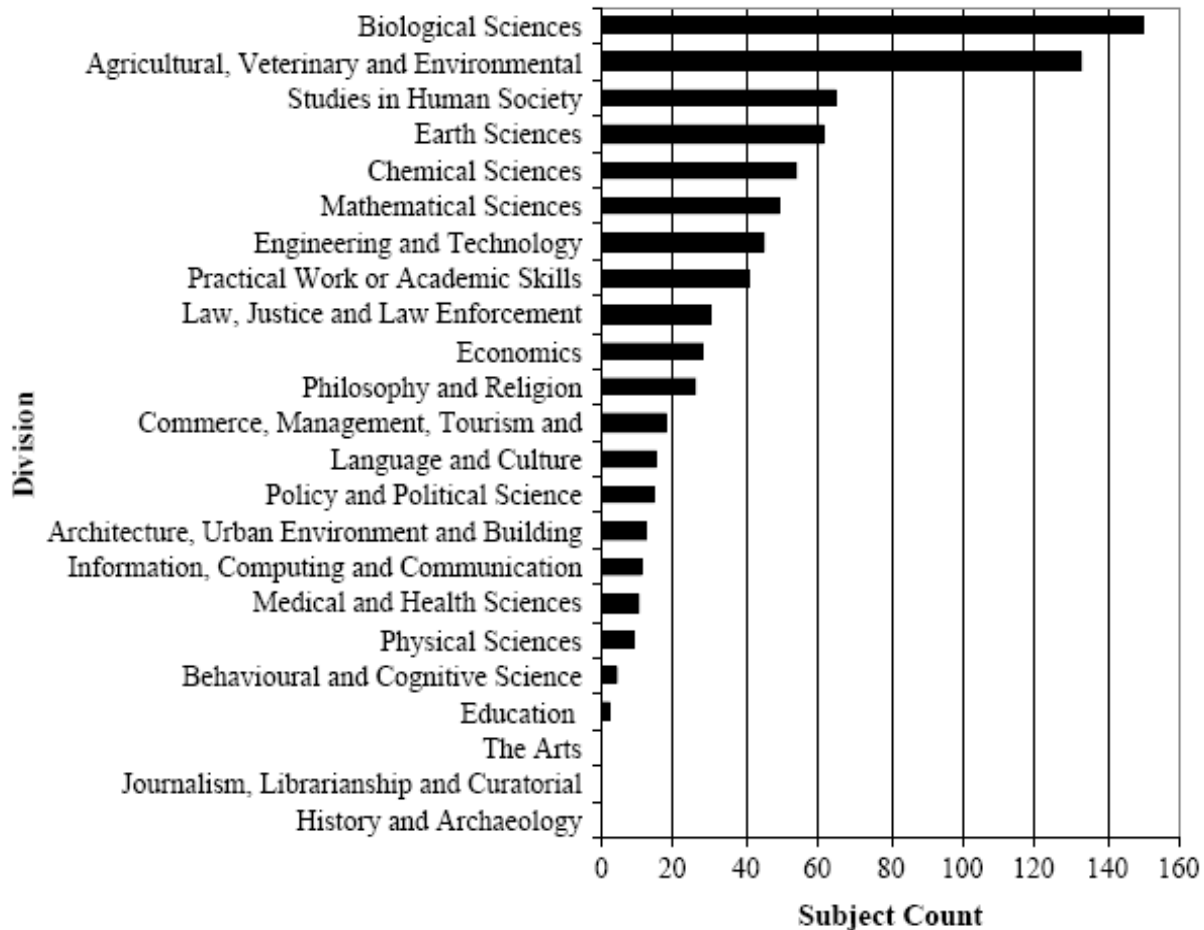
2. May appear implicit within courses:

*“There is no formal class module planned, as we have unit standards we teach to. However, it is an area that students pick as a round and as such stories are done on sustainability issues. I talk about it as a general round when we are talking about rounds though.”*

3. *Graduate Diploma in Journalism* (3 institutions)

University of Canterbury - pilot module on sustainability 2005

Massey University - 15-credit course on “Env.& Sc.Journalism.”



Source: Sherren, K. (2006), "Reflections on sustainability in Australian University coursework programs", *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 400-413.

# Designing a Journalism Module on Sustainability (JMS)

## 1. Practical component

- Session on the practical aspects of reporting.
  - Session by a trained journalist.
1. Examples of news excerpts and suggestions on how they might be framed differently to better reflect sustainability (Keating, 1994) .
  2. Real-world assignments – better interpreters for public understanding (Friedman, 1979)
  3. Experiences of nature - Younger generation journalists, city-bred and little direct contact with nature – sceptical of traditional environment journalism (Krönig, 2002).

## 2. Sustainability's multidimensionality

- Students' post-module realisation of the cross-cutting nature of sustainability.
  - Uncertainty about the connections between sports & sustainability
1. Special session to build students' skills in identifying sustainability aspects in stories and detecting indistinct links between sustainability and human activities.
  2. Multidimensionality of sustainability - relevant to a variety of news reporting areas; but, in the newsroom, sustainability matters are typically assigned to the environment reporter - JMS or sustainability across the curriculum?

### 3. Sustainability's ambiguities and misconceptions

1. A standard consensus on the exact meaning of sustainability unlikely.
2. Journalists may not be able to clearly or consistently articulate its meaning in their reports.
3. Causes media scepticism towards the concept.
4. JMS should clarify meaning of sustainability, and provide a good understanding of its ambiguities – enabling future journalists to effectively question and integrate sustainability into their news gathering and reporting process.

## 4. Sustainability's international aspects

1. May be a tendency to focus on local issues in such a module
2. Most sustainability issues are global or transboundary in scope - journalists should be well educated on its international aspects.

E.g. how international trade policies might benefit some countries while causing environmental, social and economic unsustainability in others.

## 5. Journalistic objectivity and balance – a special challenge for designers of JMS

1. Objectivity and ‘quantitative balance’ problematic in environmental news, but are deeply embedded journalistic principles.
2. Some have proposed advocacy journalism
3. The alternative ‘weight-of-evidence’ reporting may offer a solution as it permits maintenance of journalistic objectivity and balance while providing the audience with a feel of where the truth might lie (Dunwoody, 2005) .
4. JMS should discuss the objectivity-advocacy debate and the ‘quantitative balance’ vs. ‘weight-of-evidence’ approach.

## 6. Textbooks and guides

1. No guidebooks or handbooks on reporting sustainability.
2. Sustainability – absent within most journalism textbooks.
3. Some changes – e.g. 3rd edition of *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook* (2003) included aspects of sustainability.
4. Reporting sustainability requires in-depth understanding. Relevant textbooks and handbooks may be timely, to serve as a reference for both journalism educators and working journalists.

# 7. Module time-frame

1. Journalism programmes often intensive – dilemma for course designers as teaching sustainability issues requires considerable time.
2. Time-frame may also be a problem when considering additional components such as real-world training
3. Duration of a JMS needs careful consideration and its contents should be well planned and concise.

## 8. Communication appeal in teaching

1. Three students found the module to be depressing.
2. The 'doom & gloom' approach (Webster, 2004) or the 'sick baby' appeal (Obermiller, 1995) – aims to increase concern about the problem.
3. Overwhelming people with negative information may result in counterproductive effects:
  - Indifference or denial (Webster, 2004).
  - Desensitisation (Nelson, 1998)
  - Helplessness (Levin, 1993)
  - Fatalism / anti-environmentalism feelings (Buchan, 2000)
  - A feeling that the problems are insolvable (Oskamp, 2000).

4. 'Well baby' communication appeal – potential positive impacts of individual action; instils a belief that something can be done (Oskamp, 2000).

*“However, I also think this was a good reaction as it shows how I really didn't know the extent of the damage that we have caused and thus they have woken me up to the fact that action needs to be taken now and we as journalists are in a powerful position to help make that change a reality.”*

5. A JMS could be made more effective by combining both types of appeal - awareness of problem severity and what they can do to make a difference as journalists.
6. The teaching of environment journalism may need to take into account theories and practices of effective communication.

## 9. Environment journalism: a viable career choice

1. Educational institutions need to emphasise how a JMS might strengthen students' career prospect as well as the institution's repute.
2. Link proposals to international initiatives such as the UNDES and the aims of the *Talloires Declaration*.
3. Awards that symbolise “public recognition of their professional contribution” (Leal & Borner, 2005).  
E.g. *Environment Canterbury Award for Excellence in Environmental Journalism* could aid reporter recognition.

# Conclusions

1. Most NZ tertiary institutions have not included sustainability as a significant component within their journalism curriculum.
2. Hence, most journalists entering the workforce may be ill-equipped to cover related issues.
3. This may be associated to the numerous reports expressing concerns over the inadequacies in media coverage of these issues in NZ .
4. Unreasonable to expect journalists to produce high quality reports without prior education.



## This study found:

1. Significant increase in students' understanding
2. Enhanced interest in reporting related issues.
3. Realisation that sustainability was an angle that could be incorporated in other areas of reporting.
4. Sensitised to the need for increased media coverage in order to enhance public awareness.
5. Potential for impact on future reports that students produce as journalists – improvements to news media coverage.

This study strengthens the argument of the necessity of JMS to improve the quantity and quality of related news coverage.

Inclusion of sustainability as a topic within the unit standards of the NZJTO may encourage stronger inclusion of such modules in journalism education.



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