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Legitimacy Without Convergence

Sustainability Sensemaking in Business Education

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Abstract

This study examines how sustainability, as a legitimate but ambiguous institutional expectation, is interpreted and enacted within a Swedish business school. Based on seventeen semi-structured interviews with students, faculty, program directors, and other academic actors, the thesis adopts an abductive qualitative case study design informed by neo-institutional theory, sensemaking, and loose coupling. The findings show that sustainability is highly visible at the institutional level through strategy, accreditation, mission statements, and program framing, yet its educational meaning remains unsettled. Participants generally treated sustainability as expected and legitimate, but they attached different meanings to it depending on role, discipline, and position. Faculty often framed sustainability through reformist, instrumental, or critical orientations; program leaders emphasized legitimacy and coherence; and students described sustainability as unevenly encountered, often talked about more than taught. In practice, sustainability was enacted through dedicated spaces, additive incorporation into existing courses, and person-dependent initiatives rather than through a fully shared curriculum logic. The study argues that this unevenness is not simply a problem of implementation but the result of legitimacy without convergence: a formal institutional commitment that is interpreted through role-based sensemaking within a loosely coupled academic organization. By combining institutional theory with sensemaking, the thesis explains why sustainability can be sincerely valued, publicly visible, and still unevenly embedded in business education.

Keywords: Sustainability, Business Education, Sensemaking, Institutional Theory, Loose Coupling, Enactment.

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Conceptual Definitions

Concept	Definition
Sustainability	A broad and contested concept referring to environmental, social, and economic concerns, understood here as a legitimate but unsettled institutional expectation in business education.
Institutional expectation	A formally or informally recognized demand that is seen as appropriate and legitimate within the organization, even if its meaning is not fully specified
Sensemaking	The process through which actors interpret ambiguous situations and construct plausible meanings that guide action
Sensegiving	Efforts by actors such as managers or teachers to shape how others understand sustainability
Manager	An actor occupying a formal leadership position within the school, such as program director, dean, deputy head, or school board member.
Faculty	An academic staff member whose primary role involves teaching and research.
Hybrid-roles	Participants occupying two institutional positions simultaneously: "faculty–manager" refers to academics who also hold program director or administrative responsibilities; "faculty–student" refers to doctoral researchers who both teach and study.
Role-based sensemaking	The idea that managers, faculty, and students interpret sustainability differently depending on their position, responsibilities, and experience.
Loose coupling	An organizational condition in which central goals and local practices are connected but remain partly autonomous, allowing variation across courses and sections.
Decoupling	The gap between formal sustainability commitments and what is actually taught or experienced in practice.
Curriculum integration	The extent to which sustainability is embedded across courses, learning activities, and assessments rather than added as a separate topic.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

"Sustainability, as a word, it's very abstract, very unclear, very ambiguous... it has this kind of shape-shifting character." Nolan, Program Director, the Swedish Business School

Business schools occupy a distinctive position in contemporary society. As institutions that educate future managers, consultants, and organizational decision-makers, they are important sites where assumptions about the relationship between business and society are reproduced, stabilized, or challenged (Sahlin Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Rasche and Gilbert, 2015). The question of how business schools respond to sustainability is therefore not only a question of organizational rhetoric but also of what kinds of understandings and practices they help to produce.

Sustainability has become increasingly institutionalized in higher education. The UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) encourage business schools to integrate sustainability into education, research, and practice (PRME, 2008; Rasche and Gilbert, 2015). In Sweden, the Higher Education Act has since 2006 required institutions to promote sustainable development as a formal responsibility rather than a voluntary ambition (UHR, 2023). Business schools now operate in an environment where sustainability has become visible, legitimate, and difficult to ignore.

Yet institutional presence has not translated into coherent educational practice. Studies describe implementation as slow, fragmented, and difficult to sustain (Holmberg et al., 2008; Finnveden et al., 2020). In Swedish management education specifically, recent research identifies faculty commitment alongside persistent barriers, including definitional uncertainty, insufficient structures, and tensions between top-down expectations and academic autonomy (Batiste and Chang Rundgren, 2025). Formal commitment and everyday practice do not automatically converge. How, then, do sustainability expectations become translated into practice within organizations formally committed to them?

1.2 Problem Discussion

Research on sustainability in business education has well-documented the gap between institutional commitment and teaching practice. Studies across different national and disciplinary contexts show that sustainability may be accepted in principle but proves difficult to integrate meaningfully into established courses and programs (Maloni et al., 2021; Boström, 2020). This work has been valuable in identifying barriers and drivers of integration.

However, existing research has not yet fully explained why sustainability is enacted so differently by actors within the same organization, even where formal commitments are shared. Sustainability is a broad, ambiguous, and contested concept, open to multiple interpretations (Dixon and Fallon,

1989; Gray, 2010). When such an expectation enters an organization characterized by professional autonomy, dispersed decision-making, and disciplinary diversity, as universities typically are, it is unlikely to be received uniformly (Weick, 1976; Clark, 2001). Instead, it becomes interpreted. This interpretive variation, and the organizational conditions that shape it, constitutes the analytical problem addressed in the present study.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine how institutional sustainability expectations become interpreted and enacted within a business school and to explain why these processes produce differentiated understandings and practices.

To fulfill this purpose, the study aims to answer the following research question:

How do institutional sustainability expectations become interpreted and enacted within a business school, and why do these processes result in differentiated understandings and practices of sustainability in business education?

1.4 Delimitations

This study is subject to several delimitations. First, it is limited to one Swedish business school, which enables contextual depth but restricts transferability to other settings. Second, it focuses primarily on teaching and educational practice; where participants referred to research conditions or infrastructure, these accounts are included only insofar as they illuminate the organizational context shaping sustainability enactment. Third, it draws on seventeen qualitative interviews and does not aim for statistical generalization. Fourth, the theoretical framework combines neo-institutional theory and organizational sensemaking and does not systematically engage alternative frameworks such as practice theory or institutional logics.

1.5 Expected Contribution

The contribution of this study is two-fold. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of how sustainability expectations are interpreted and enacted within one Swedish business school, contributing to the growing but still limited literature on sustainability in Swedish management education. Theoretically, existing research has documented that sustainability integration is uneven and fragmented but has not fully explained why actors within the same organization, sharing the same formal commitments, interpret and enact sustainability so differently. This study addresses that gap by combining neo-institutional theory and sensemaking theory to explain not only whether sustainability is present in business education, but how and why its meaning and enactment vary across roles and organizational levels even where formal institutional commitment exists. In doing so, it offers an analytical framework that moves beyond documenting unevenness toward explaining the organizational mechanisms that produce it.

1.6 Study Outline

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive, and abductive design drawing on seventeen semi-structured interviews at one Swedish business school. It is organized into six chapters: 1) Introduction, 2) Theory, 3) Methodology, 4) Empirical Findings, 5) Analysis, and 6) Discussion.

2. Theory

This chapter reviews research on sustainability in business education, sustainability as an ambiguous institutional expectation, and sensemaking in educational organizations. It then develops the theoretical framework used in the analysis, combining neo-institutional theory, sensemaking and loose coupling to explain why legitimate sustainability expectations become unevenly interpreted and enacted.

2.1 Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes research across three interconnected bodies of work: the institutionalization of sustainability in higher education and business schools, the conceptual ambiguity and contested character of sustainability as an organizational expectation, and the sensemaking processes through which actors in educational organizations interpret and enact such expectations. Examining where these streams converge and where they leave questions unanswered illuminates the gap the present study addresses.

2.1.1 Sustainability in Business Education

Sustainability has become a central and institutionally expected concern in higher education, and business schools occupy a particularly exposed position in relation to these expectations (Martínez-Bravo et al., 2024). It is described as a legitimate and increasingly taken-for-granted expectation, articulated through strategies, accreditation frameworks, and public commitments that urge schools to demonstrate engagement with societal and environmental challenges (Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). This institutionalization has been accelerated by global concerns over climate change, biodiversity loss, and widening socio-economic inequalities, prompting critical reflection on business schools' historical role in promoting narrow economic worldviews (de Lange, 2013). At the same time, business schools are framed as influential actors capable of equipping future leaders with the knowledge and competencies needed to address complex sustainability issues (Batiste and Chang Rundgren, 2025).

Institutional pressures and responses

Studies show that business schools face both external and internal pressures to integrate sustainability (Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). Externally, frameworks such as PRME, accreditation processes, and ranking systems encourage institutions to signal alignment with responsible management agendas (Csillag et al., 2022; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). Internally, sustainability becomes visible through institutional strategies, mission statements, and curriculum reform projects that position it as a formal organizational priority (Godemann et al., 2023; Martínez-Bravo et al., 2024). In response, project-based learning and

experiential and interdisciplinary initiatives have been developed to foster transformative sustainability competencies, though much of this pedagogical literature remains prescriptive, describing what business schools ought to do rather than examining how sustainability is actually interpreted in specific organizational settings (Nguyen et al., 2025; Preuss et al., 2023). These reviews are largely descriptive, documenting what institutions have adopted rather than explaining how sustainability expectations are experienced and negotiated by the actors who encounter them in practice.

Decoupling patterns and critiques

Despite this growing prominence, sustainability integration in business schools is widely characterized as uneven, fragmented, and often symbolic (Maloni et al., 2021). A recurring pattern is that sustainability features strongly in institutional discourse while its presence in everyday teaching, assessment, and supervision is considerably more limited (Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). This disjuncture is frequently conceptualized as decoupling, in which formal commitments do not translate into substantive organizational change (Maloni et al., 2021). Several factors contribute to this gap. The autonomy and disciplinary fragmentation of academic institutions enable individual teachers and departments to interpret sustainability according to their own frames, making integration dependent on personal initiative rather than coordinated steering (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Edwards et al., 2020). Workload constraints, crowded curricula, and competing performance metrics such as research output further reduce incentives to prioritize sustainability in everyday curriculum work (Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). Disciplinary differences also matter: management and marketing courses are more likely to engage with ethical and societal dimensions, whereas accounting and finance courses tend to reference sustainability only marginally (Kurland & Melkamu, 2025).

Critical contributions draw attention to deeper tensions. While researchers note that sustainability frameworks often reproduce reassuring win-win narratives that obscure structural conflicts between profit maximization and ecological limits (Csillag et al., 2022), faculty members themselves describe these initiatives as legitimizing devices that permit business schools to maintain existing educational models while publicly claiming social responsibility (Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025). Taken together, the literature portrays a field in which sustainability has gained institutional legitimacy but remains unevenly enacted, shaped by external pressures, internal constraints, and divergent interpretations of what sustainability should mean in practice (Kurland & Melkamu, 2025; Munaro & John, 2025). These accounts, however, do not explain how sustainability expectations become concrete organizational cues, nor how those cues are encountered and negotiated differently by the actors who work there.

2.1.2 Sustainability as Ambiguous and Contested

Conceptual instability and divergent framings

Sustainability is widely recognized as a multidimensional and conceptually unstable term whose meaning shifts across epistemological, disciplinary, political, and organizational contexts (Munaro & John, 2025; Stough et al., 2018). Scholars consistently note the absence of a stable definition, describing it as simultaneously an environmental, social, and economic concern, as well as a normative aspiration encompassing intergenerational justice and long-term viability (Carew & Mitchell, 2008; Csillag et al., 2022). This breadth is both a strength and a liability: it allows sustainability to travel across institutional and disciplinary boundaries, attracting broad engagement, yet introduces definitional instability that complicates its operationalization and curricular integration (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Stough et al., 2018). Several authors note that sustainability functions simultaneously as a scientific, political, and symbolic construct, allowing divergent values and interests to co-exist under a single label (Annelin & Boström, 2024; Dziubaniuk et al., 2024). This makes sustainability what scholars describe as an essentially contested concept, one whose meaning cannot be fixed without foreclosing legitimate alternative interpretations (Carew & Mitchell, 2008). Attempts to stabilize it into a singular institutional definition risk excluding diverse stakeholder perspectives, as the concept derives much of its currency precisely from its interpretive openness (Bien & Sassen, 2020).

This ambiguity becomes particularly visible across organizational roles. Executives tend to frame sustainability as a strategic priority aligned with institutional goals and external reporting requirements (Basheer et al., 2025), while teaching staff interpret it through disciplinary lenses, emphasizing environmental protection, social justice, or economic competitiveness depending on their professional background (Carew & Mitchell, 2008; Edwards et al., 2020). Students frequently associate sustainability with environmental issues or compliance obligations, and some regard it as peripheral or insufficiently connected to their future roles (Allel & McCowan, 2025; Reid et al., 2009). These divergent framings reflect differences not merely in knowledge, but in identity, position, and the organizational demands each actor faces (Basheer et al., 2025; Edwards et al., 2020).

Ambiguity as resource and barrier

Teachers frequently report difficulty translating broad sustainability goals into concrete course content and assessments, producing a pattern in which sustainability is treated as an elective add-on rather than a cross-cutting principle embedded in core course design (Munaro & John, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). Curriculum documents often reflect this, using aspirational language without specifying learning outcomes or assessment criteria (Munaro & John, 2025; Stough et al., 2018). From an institutional theory perspective, conceptual openness allows organizations to signal alignment with sustainability expectations without making disruptive structural changes, enabling decoupling (Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). Edwards et al. (2020) show that this same flexibility

undermines coherence and at the same time, sustainability can mean sufficiently different things to different actors that coordinated enactment becomes difficult. They further argue that sustainability therefore operates not only as a contested concept but also as a contested institutional practice, one whose meaning and implications are continuously negotiated rather than given in advance (Carew & Mitchell, 2008; Edwards et al., 2020).

While the literature richly documents this ambiguity across sectors and stakeholder groups, considerably less attention has been paid to how competing meanings of sustainability unfold within day-to-day curriculum and teaching decisions inside a single business school and how actors in different roles construct distinct and sometimes incompatible understandings of what sustainability requires of them in practice.

2.1.3 Sensemaking in Organizational Contexts

Research on sustainability in higher education increasingly draws on sensemaking perspectives to examine how actors within universities and business schools interpret, negotiate, and enact sustainability expectations in their local contexts (Benn et al., 2013; Bien & Sassen, 2020). Sensemaking is commonly traced to Weick's work, which treats organizing as an ongoing process through which people retrospectively interpret ambiguous situations and act on plausible meanings rather than objective certainty (Weick, 1995). In Weick's account, sensemaking is grounded in identity, enacted through interaction with the environment, and shaped by cues, social context, and ongoing interpretation (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Edwards et al. (2020) demonstrate that sustainability does not enter organizations as a fixed agenda; it becomes meaningful through the interpretive work of actors who draw on their identities, disciplinary commitments, and positional interests to construct an understanding of what sustainability requires of them.

Actor sensemaking across roles

Sustainability expectations are therefore not simply implemented once they enter educational institutions; they are interpreted, translated and sometimes resisted. Prior research shows that actors in different organisational positions draw on their roles, identities and disciplinary backgrounds to construct what sustainability means in practice (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Edwards et al., 2020). Senior leaders often attempt to stabilise this meaning through sensegiving, framing sustainability as compatible with existing strategies, accreditation demands and institutional logics (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Mukhi, 2023). Yet such efforts do not automatically generate convergence. For faculty, sustainability may also be experienced as an externally imposed agenda, a challenge to disciplinary norms, or a constraint on academic freedom and course-level autonomy, thereby generating resistance rather than alignment (Annelin & Boström, 2024; Bien & Sassen, 2020).

Sensemaking is intertwined with identity and institutional position. Executives tend to frame sustainability as a holistic institutional responsibility, while teaching staff interpret it through the

practical concerns of disciplinary fit and workload (Annelin & Boström, 2024; Dziubaniuk et al., 2024). These interpretive differences reflect the distributed authority and loosely coupled structures characteristic of universities, in which central sustainability strategies do not directly determine how sustainability is understood at the level of individual courses and programmes (Basheer et al., 2025; Tridapalli & Elliott, 2024). Sustainability's conceptual openness reinforces this dynamic by enabling actors to draw selectively on meanings aligned with their identities, producing divergent and sometimes incompatible understandings of the same institutional agenda (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Edwards et al., 2020).

Preuss et al. (2023) demonstrate that undergraduates engage with sustainability through recognizable stages of sensemaking rather than acquiring a fixed body of knowledge. Empirically, they find that most students are able to scan a broad range of sustainability concepts but struggle to move towards deeper interpretive engagement and action-oriented reflection (Preuss et al., 2023; Sundermann et al., 2022). Business students may express general support for sustainability but tend to revert to profitability and cost compromises when confronted with actual decision-making trade-offs (Gawel et al., 2022). This reflects a broader trend in which students continue to view sustainability through the dominant economic reasoning and profit-driven core values of business education (Reid et al., 2009).

Everyday curriculum and teaching practices

Godemann et al. (2023) and Nguyen et al. (2025) show that sustainability content is more frequently present in elective or specialized modules than in core disciplinary subjects, producing patterns of tokenistic integration in which sustainability may appear as a single lecture or isolated assessment task rather than as a cross-cutting principle. These patterns are shaped by the disciplinary identities and personal commitments of individual teachers, whose interpretations of sustainability and its relevance vary considerably and are not reliably shaped by institutional strategies (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Tridapalli & Elliott, 2024). Integration is frequently dependent on individual champions; when such actors leave or shift priorities, sustainability practices can fade or disappear, illustrating the person-dependent and fragile character of enactment in loosely coupled academic organizations (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Mukhi, 2023).

These studies describe what happens to sustainability in education, but not how it happens. They do not examine how actors in different organisational positions make sense of the same expectations, nor how those different sensemaking processes combine to produce the uneven enactments documented in the literature.

2.1.4 Synthesis and Identified Gap

The literature portrays sustainability in business education as both a pervasive institutional expectation and a contested practice. Business schools are pressed to demonstrate engagement

through strategies, accreditation frameworks, and public commitments, yet integration into core curricula remains partial and uneven, often dependent on individual champions rather than coordinated organizational steering. Conceptual work shows that sustainability is an essentially contested concept whose ambiguity supports broad legitimacy but complicates operationalization and allows symbolic enactment. Sensemaking studies add that sustainability becomes meaningful through the interpretive work of managers, teachers, and students, who mobilize distinct narratives and frames depending on their roles, identities, and disciplinary commitments. Yet these three bodies of work have largely developed in parallel rather than in dialogue with one another.

Several questions therefore remain insufficiently addressed. Few studies trace how institutional sustainability expectations become concrete organizational cues in higher education or examine how those cues are interpreted differently by actors occupying different roles within the same setting. Existing frameworks around barriers and drivers do not fully explain why sustainability is understood and practiced so differently by actors who share the same formal institutional commitments. A perspective combining institutional theory and organizational sensemaking offers greater explanatory reach, attending both to the structural conditions that shape sustainability expectations and to the interpretive processes through which those expectations are given meaning and translated into practice.

This study addresses that gap by examining how institutional sustainability expectations are interpreted and enacted within a single business school and by explaining why these processes result in differentiated understandings and practices of sustainability in business education.

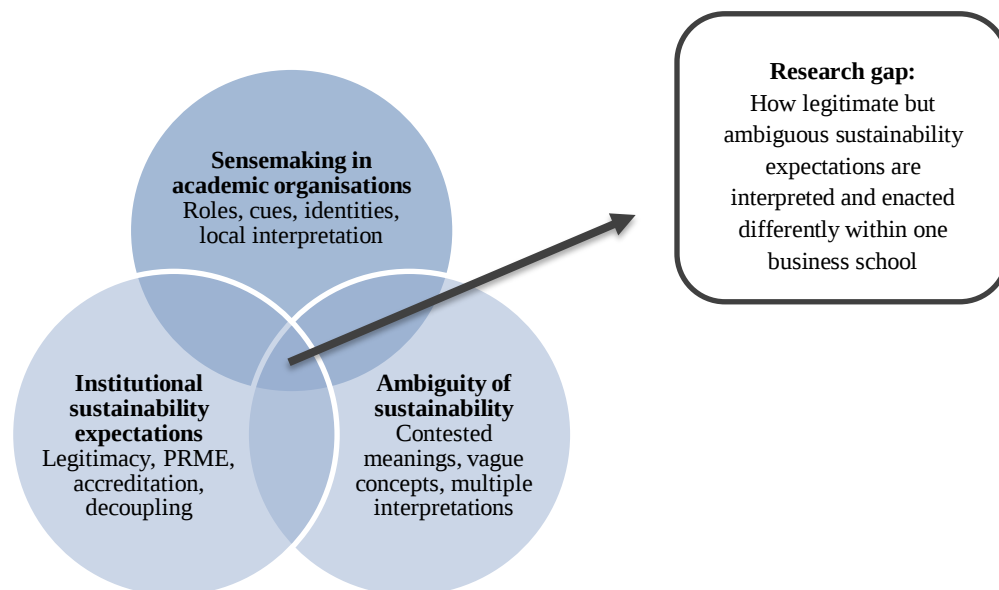


Figure 1. Identified gap in the literature: explaining differentiated sustainability enactment in business education.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The literature review has shown that sustainability in business schools is subject to growing institutional pressures, is conceptually ambiguous, and is unevenly enacted in practice. While existing research identifies the phenomenon and documents its patterns, it does not fully explain how uneven enactment is shaped and perpetuated. To address this gap, this study draws on neo-institutional theory, sensemaking theory, and loose coupling. Together, these perspectives explain why sustainability becomes a legitimate institutional expectation, how it is interpreted differently by actors in different roles, and why these differences persist across the organization.

2.2.1 Neo-Institutional Theory: Legitimacy, Adoption and Decoupling

Neo-institutional theory explains why organizations adopt formal structures, commitments, and language in response to pressures in their wider environment. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that such structures are often adopted not mainly for efficiency, but to signal legitimacy and alignment with accepted norms. In business education, this helps explain why sustainability becomes visible at the level of strategy, accreditation, and institutional rhetoric before its practical meaning in teaching is fully defined.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) extend this argument by showing how organizations respond to external pressures. In business schools, pressures from accreditation bodies, professional frameworks such as PRME, and peer institutions mean sustainability may be adopted as a legitimate commitment even when its educational implications remain unclear.

This can lead to ceremonial adoption, where sustainability is formally embraced while its practical enactment remains limited (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A related concept is decoupling, which refers to the gap between formal commitments and actual practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this study, decoupling captures the discrepancy between institutional sustainability claims and what is actually taught and experienced in the curriculum. Neo-institutional theory therefore explains why sustainability becomes institutionally visible, but not how different actors interpret and enact it in practice.

2.2.2 Sensemaking Theory: Interpretation, Identity and Meaning

Sensemaking theory addresses how actors interpret ambiguous issues and construct meanings that allow action to proceed. Rather than simply implementing formal expectations, actors notice particular cues, connect them to existing frames of reference, and produce plausible understandings of what is happening (Weick, 1995). This makes sensemaking especially relevant for sustainability, which is a broad and contested concept open to multiple interpretations.

Three aspects of sensemaking are particularly important for this study. Weick (1995) identified several properties of sensemaking, and three are especially relevant here. First, sensemaking is identity-grounded: how actors understand sustainability depends partly on who they are and what

responsibilities they hold. Second, it is cue-based: actors attend to selected signals rather than all available information. Third, it is oriented toward plausibility rather than one objectively correct interpretation (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This means that managers, faculty, and students may all encounter the same institutional expectation but make sense of it differently.

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) further distinguish between sensemaking and sensegiving. While sensemaking concerns how actors interpret an issue, sensegiving refers to attempts to influence how others understand it. This is relevant here because sustainability meanings are shaped not only individually, but also through managerial messages, programme directors, course design, and pedagogical choices. Sensemaking theory therefore helps explain how sustainability becomes meaningful in different ways across roles and positions.

2.2.3 Loose Coupling: Structure and the Persistence of Unevenness

Loose coupling helps explain why these different interpretations are able to coexist within the same organization. Weick (1976) describes educational organizations as loosely coupled systems in which units are connected, but retain substantial autonomy. Institutional goals and formal strategies therefore do not automatically determine what happens in local teaching practice.

This is particularly relevant in business schools, where faculty autonomy, disciplinary differences, and decentralized course design create space for variation. Sustainability may be emphasized strongly in institutional strategy while remaining fragmented, selective, or dependent on individual teachers in the classroom. Loose coupling thus explains why uneven enactment is not merely a temporary failure, but a structural feature of academic organizations.

It is important to distinguish loose coupling from decoupling. Decoupling refers to the gap between formal commitment and practice, whereas loose coupling refers to the organizational condition that allows such gaps and local variation to persist (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A useful supporting concept is translation, which highlights how ideas change as they move across contexts. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) describe this as translation: ideas are not simply transferred unchanged, but are interpreted, modified, and reshaped as they move across organizational settings. In this study, sustainability can be understood as translated differently as it moves from strategy into programs, courses, and teaching practices.

2.2.4 An Integrated Analytical Lens

Taken together, the framework suggests a connected mechanism. Neo-institutional theory explains how sustainability becomes established as a legitimate but underspecified organizational expectation. Sensemaking theory explains how actors in different roles interpret that expectation differently. Loose coupling explains why these different interpretations can persist without being fully reconciled across the organization.

Given the abductive nature of this study, this framework was not applied as a fixed template but developed iteratively in dialogue with the empirical material. The framework therefore views uneven sustainability integration not simply as an implementation failure, but as the outcome of a particular organizational configuration. Institutional pressures make sustainability visible, actors construct different meanings around it, and the loosely coupled character of the business school allows these meanings to be enacted in different ways. This analytical lens guides the interpretation of the empirical material in Chapters 4 and 5.

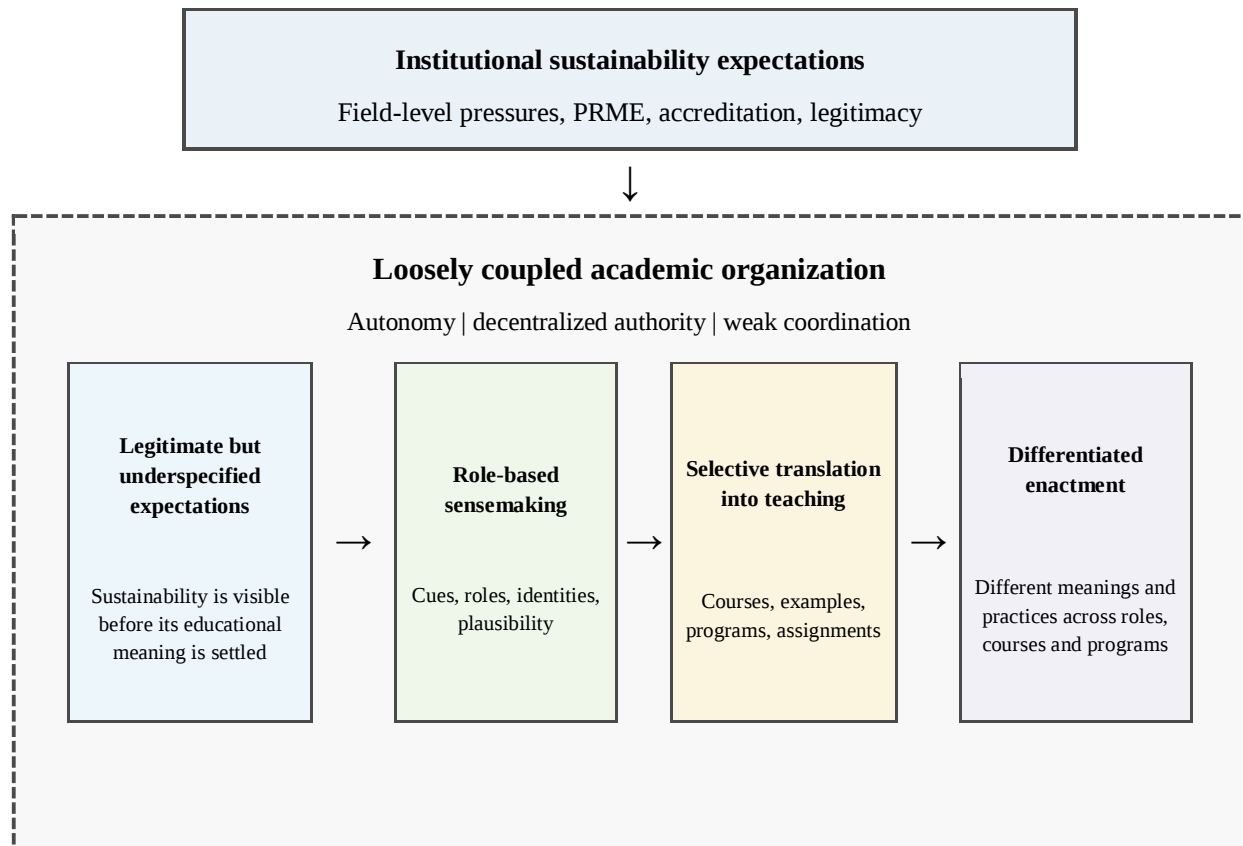


Figure 2. Integrated theoretical framework: from institutional sustainability expectations to differentiated enactment.

3. Methodology

This chapter guides the reader through the scientific approach adopted in the study (3.1), the data collection process (3.2), the data analysis method (3.3), and a discussion of the study's quality and ethical considerations (3.4).

3.1 Scientific Approach

3.1.1 Research Approach

This study examines how actors at the Swedish Business School make sense of sustainability in their roles and practices. Since the research question concerns interpretation rather than measurement, the study adopts a constructivist, interpretivist and abductive approach.

Ontological position: This study adopts a constructivist ontology, which holds that reality is not singular or objective but is actively constituted through the meanings and interactions of social actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Scotland, 2012). Sustainability in business education is therefore not treated as something that either exists or does not exist. Rather, it is understood as a social construction, that takes different shapes depending on who is looking, from which institutional position, and through which interpretive lens. This ontological stance is directly aligned with the study's theoretical framework: neo-institutional theory understands organizations as embedded in socially constructed normative fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), while sensemaking theory treats meaning itself as the primary object of inquiry (Weick, 1995).

Epistemological position: Consistent with this ontological foundation, an interpretivist epistemology is adopted. Interpretivism holds that knowledge of the social world cannot be obtained by observing it from the outside as a neutral fact, but only by engaging with the subjective meanings that actors assign to their experiences (Bell et al., 2019; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). This position is especially fitting here, given that the research questions ask how different role groups make sense of sustainability, a question concerned with interpretation rather than measurement. As researchers, we acknowledge that our own understanding of the participants' accounts is itself an act of interpretation and that the findings produced are a co-construction between the empirical material and our theoretical lens (Gioia et al., 2013).

Research logic: Abductive reasoning

This study applies an abductive logic rather than a purely inductive or deductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses or entering the field without theoretical pre-understanding, abduction allows the analysis to move iteratively between empirical material and theoretical framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In practice, this meant that patterns noticed in the interview data prompted a return to theory, while theoretical concepts sharpened attention to new aspects of the empirical material. This iterative

movement makes the analytical process genuinely responsive to the complexity of the phenomenon, rather than forcing data into predetermined categories.

3.1.2 Research Case

This research focuses on one Swedish business school, referred to throughout as the Swedish Business School, and is designed as a single, in-depth case examination. Case study research is well suited to producing a contextually grounded understanding of complex processes, particularly when the aim is to answer how and why questions about phenomena unfolding in real-world settings (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995).

The school was selected on the basis of theoretical considerations rather than convenience (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It operates under a formal legislative requirement to integrate sustainability under the Swedish Higher Education Act (UHR, 2023) and is a signatory to the Principles for Responsible Management Education, with sustainability formally embedded through mission statements, strategic objectives, and external accountability mechanisms. At the same time, it operates with a substantially decentralized academic structure in which course content and pedagogical design rest primarily with individual faculty rather than being governed through centralized mandates. This combination, formal institutional commitment on one hand and decentralized autonomy that leaves integration largely to individual initiative on the other, makes the school analytically productive. It concentrates in one setting the tension between formal sustainability commitment and decentralized enactment that the study seeks to examine, and reflects the loosely coupled organizational character identified as typical of universities more broadly (Weick, 1976; Clark, 2001).

The choice of a single case reflects the study's priority of depth over breadth. By focusing on one institution, it becomes possible to examine how the same organizational context produces different and sometimes incompatible interpretations of sustainability depending on where in the school a person is situated (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The aim is analytical generalization in Yin's (2018) sense: developing theoretically grounded explanations that illuminate similar dynamics in other business schools, rather than making statistical claims about frequency or distribution.

3.2 Data Collection

This section describes how the empirical material was generated through semi-structured interviews. It outlines the interview design, pilot interview, interview guide, participant sampling, and interview setting.

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because the study seeks to understand how students, teachers, hybrid-role participants, and program managers make sense of sustainability in their organizational roles and practices at the Swedish Business School. This format is well suited to exploring participants' meanings, interpretations, and experiences in depth while maintaining focus on the research question (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). An interview guide with open-ended questions was used, but the order and wording were adapted to each participant, enabling the researchers to follow up on unexpected formulations, probe for concrete examples, and pursue contradictions within accounts.

3.2.2 Pilot Interview

A practice interview was conducted with one faculty member from the Swedish Business School who did not participate in the main study in order to assess whether questions generated detailed responses and whether the interview remained within a manageable length (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Following the practice run, two adjustments were made. Questions were reworded to invite accounts of actual teaching situations rather than general reflections on sustainability, and questions about institutional expectations were repositioned later in the interview to allow rapport to develop first. The pilot interview was used exclusively as a test and was not included in the analysis.

3.2.3 Interview Guide

The interview questions addressed three interconnected areas. The first concerned institutional expectations and signals, asking how participants became aware that sustainability was something the school expected, whether through program documents, institutional communication, accreditation processes, or colleagues' expectations. The second concerns the meaning of sustainability, including how participants defined it and connected it to their role, discipline, or area of study. Questions were framed without presupposing that sustainability was unproblematic, creating space for critical and pragmatic framings alongside affirmative ones. The third area concerned enactment in practice, including how sustainability appeared in individual courses, program design, and everyday decisions, as well as how participants perceived any gap between what the school officially committed to and what occurred in practice.

3.2.4 Participant Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to capture a range of perspectives within the Swedish Business School. Participants were not selected to represent a larger population (Patton, 2002; Flick, 2018) but because of the roles they occupied and the relevance to how sustainability expectations are interpreted and enacted. Three primary groups are included: managers, who engage with sustainability through strategic planning and curriculum governance; faculty, who make day-to-

day decisions about incorporating sustainability into their teaching; and students, who encounter the outcomes of those decisions in their learning experience.

Several participants occupied hybrid or intermediate positions. Faculty members who simultaneously held program director roles, such as Aslan and Nolan, were attentive to institutional dynamics neither purely managerial nor purely faculty participants would encounter in the same way. One participant combined doctoral researcher and teaching responsibilities with a student perspective. These hybrid positions were retained as analytically distinct, as intermediate roles produced illuminating vantage points on the tensions the study examines. The student group spanned bachelor, master, and doctoral levels. One student participant held a formal governance role in the student association, providing an institutionally embedded perspective; another had since moved into a professional HR role, offering a retrospective view from practice. Initial participants were identified through the school's website and internal program information. Snowball sampling was then used to reach participants offering different or complementary perspectives (Miles et al., 2014). Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, with new interviews largely confirming existing interpretive patterns rather than introducing new understandings (Hennink et al., 2017). The sample is weighted towards faculty and managerial voices, reflecting the study's focus on those who interpret and enact institutional sustainability expectations. Student accounts were included to surface divergences between institutional intent and lived educational experience. This asymmetry is acknowledged as a limitation in section 6.4. In total, seventeen in-depth interviews were completed. A detailed overview of participant profiles is provided in the Appendix.

3.2.5 Interview Setting

The interviews were conducted between February and April 2026 via in-person and online video conferencing. Prior research indicates that video interviews can produce data quality comparable to face-to-face interviews while offering greater accessibility (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Irani, 2019). Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English, the working language of the Swedish Business School. All participants gave informed consent for recording, and recordings were transcribed verbatim (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Participants were informed of the research purpose and their right to withdraw at any point and were assured of anonymity throughout. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in the transcripts and in all subsequent chapters.

Both researchers were present in every interview. One led the conversation while the other took notes and observed. After each interview, both researchers independently recorded their initial impressions and early interpretive ideas before comparing notes. These reflective memos supported the later stages of analysis and helped maintain ongoing awareness of how the researchers' assumptions might be shaping their reading of the material.

3.3 Data Analysis

The following sections present the data analysis method (3.3.1) and the analysis process (3.3.2).

3.3.1 Data Analysis Method

The interview material was analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data. A theme captures something significant in relation to the research question and reflects a pattern of meaning recurring across participants (Boyatzis, 1998). In this study, thematic analysis was used to examine how participants across different organizational roles made sense of sustainability at the Swedish business school. The method was chosen for its flexibility, suitability to interpretivist research, and capacity to produce rich accounts of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004).

The analytical approach was abductive, combining inductive responsiveness to the data with deductive engagement with existing theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The theoretical framework, drawing on Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory, Weick's (1976) loose coupling, and Meyer and Rowan's (1977) neo-institutional theory, guided what to attend to in the data without predetermining what would be found.

3.3.2 Data Analysis Process

The analysis unfolded in four iterative stages, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Stage 1 involved familiarization with the data. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and both researchers read through the full set of transcripts multiple times before any coding was carried out, writing analytical memos to capture first impressions, recurring ideas, and moments of internal contradiction within participants' accounts. The aim was to develop familiarity with the material and remain conscious of how the researchers' own assumptions might shape their reading of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lempert, 2007).

Stage 2 involved generating initial codes. Transcripts were coded systematically using concise labels applied to analytically relevant segments. Both researchers coded independently before comparing codes to resolve discrepancies and establish a shared understanding of the material (Miles et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). Coding was applied at both the semantic level, capturing the surface meaning of what participants said, and the latent level, capturing the underlying assumptions within their accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Stage 3 involved constructing themes. Initial codes were grouped into thematic categories by identifying patterns recurring across multiple interviews and participant types. These categories were developed with attention to how participants constructed the meaning of sustainability and how those constructions related to their role, position, and disciplinary background. The researchers moved iteratively between emerging categories and the theoretical framework, refining

themes for coherence and relevance, and merging or setting aside categories that did not contribute to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Stage 4 involved reviewing and defining themes. Themes were reviewed across the full dataset to confirm internal coherence and distinctiveness, then compared systematically across managers, faculty, hybrid manager-faculty participants, hybrid student-faculty, and students. Particular attention was directed towards cases where the same formal institutional commitment was interpreted in different terms by participants in different positions. For instance, managers described coherent curricular integration, while students in the same programs described sustainability as absent or fragmented. These divergences were treated as primary empirical material rather than noise, as they pointed directly to the interpretive processes the research question addresses. The final themes and their analysis are presented in the following chapter. Figure 3.2 provides a partial extraction of the coding process, showing how selected initial codes were developed into broader themes and connected to the central analytical dimension. Moreover, a partial coding example is provided in Appendix E.

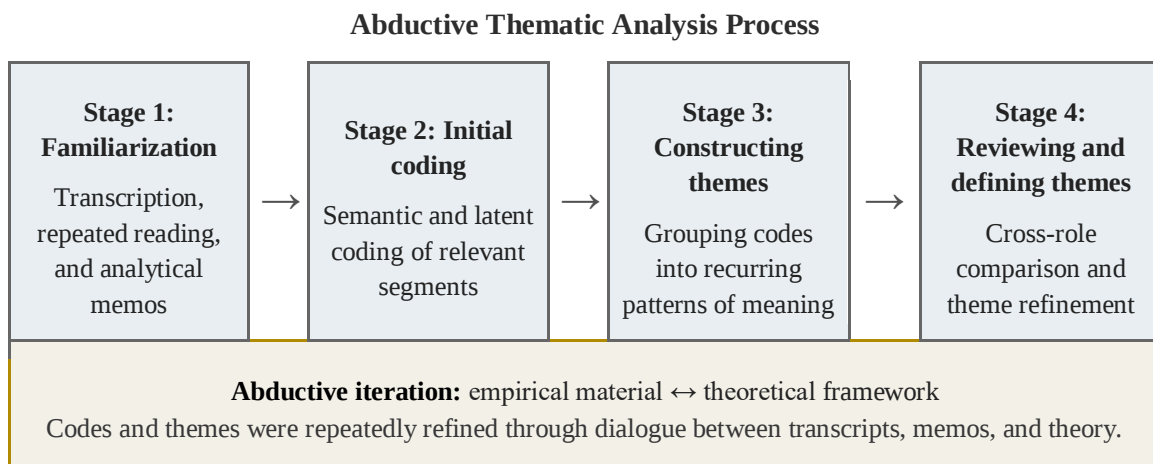


Figure 3. Abductive thematic analysis process from familiarization to cross-role theme refinement.

3.4 Quality of the Study

Assessing the quality of qualitative research requires criteria suited to its focus on meaning and interpretation rather than the standards appropriate to quantitative research (Flick, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). This study applies to the four trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.4.1 Credibility

Credibility concerns whether the researchers' interpretations of participants' accounts are plausible to those participants and to informed readers familiar with the setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To strengthen credibility, both researchers were present in all interviews, enabling immediate comparison of interpretations and reducing the risk that one researcher's assumptions would shape the material unchecked (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The inclusion of participants across multiple institutional roles strengthened credibility, as patterns identified in one group's accounts could be examined against accounts from other positions within the same setting (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

3.4.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings may prove meaningful in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study does not claim that the patterns observed at the Swedish Business School will replicate elsewhere. However, sufficient contextual detail has been provided about the research setting, participants, theoretical framework, and analytical process to allow readers to assess whether the mechanisms identified, legitimacy without convergence, role-based sensemaking, and selective translation under conditions of loose coupling, are likely to be relevant in comparable institutional contexts. The theoretical contribution is intended to have analytical applicability beyond this particular case, as business schools sharing similar structural characteristics face the same basic organizational conditions (Yin, 2018).

3.4.3 Dependability

Dependability asks whether the research was conducted in a consistent and traceable manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All methodological choices, including the interview guide, sampling strategy, and analytical stages, have been documented throughout this chapter. Both researchers participated in all stages of data collection and analysis, and the research design was reviewed regularly by an external supervisor whose feedback prompted ongoing reflection on whether the conclusions were genuinely grounded in the empirical material.

3.4.4 Confirmability and Researcher Positionality

Confirmability concerns whether the findings reflect the data rather than the researchers' prior expectations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both authors bring a prior interest in sustainability in higher education to the study, which provided motivation but also carried a specific risk: given the study's focus on symbolic and partial sustainability integration, there was a possibility of foregrounding critical voices while underweighting accounts that described genuine and sincere engagement. To address this, both researchers independently coded all transcripts before comparing interpretations, ensuring that analytical decisions emerged from dialogue rather than individual preference (Nowell et al., 2017; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Analytical attention was also explicitly directed towards participants who described sustainability in reformist or affirmative terms and

towards evidence of substantive integration, such as the dedicated sustainability programmes and the red thread initiative, to ensure the analysis reflected the full range of orientations present in the material. Contradictions and unexpected findings were noted and retained rather than resolved prematurely.

3.4.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the research purpose, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent, including permission to record, was obtained before each session (Bell et al., 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Participants are referred to using pseudonyms throughout, and no identifying information has been disclosed. Audio recordings were stored securely and deleted after transcription in accordance with GDPR regulations. During the interviews, care was taken not to signal the researchers' own views in ways that might constrain participants' responses, so that critical, contradictory, and politically divergent perspectives could be expressed and freely (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings generated through seventeen semi-structured interviews and a review of publicly available institutional sustainability documents at the Swedish Business School. It moves from the broader institutional context to participants' understandings of sustainability, then to how sustainability appeared in courses and teaching, and finally to the organizational conditions shaping this work. Theoretical analysis of these patterns follows in Chapter 5.

4.1 The School as Context

The empirical data was generated at a publicly funded business school in Sweden, hereafter referred to as the Swedish Business School. The School operates as a department within a larger research university and is organized across subject-based sections in business administration. Course content and pedagogical design are substantially decentralized: faculty members and course directors retain considerable autonomy, while broader program goals are coordinated through committees, section meetings and formal boards.

Sustainability is formally embedded in the school's institutional identity. As a PRME signatory, and as part of a university with a sustainability policy, the school connects business education to social responsibility and sustainable development through its mission, vision, program descriptions, accreditation processes and public communication. Across the interviews, sustainability appeared not as an unfamiliar issue, but as something already expected within the organization.

4.2 Sustainability as an Institutional Expectation

Participants consistently described sustainability as already present within the institution: embedded in strategy, visible in program descriptions, reinforced through accreditation, and connected to the school's public identity. At the same time, they also described sustainability as broad, vague and not fully defined.

4.2.1 Sustainability in strategy, mission and accreditation

Aslan, a faculty member and program director, described sustainability as a live strategic commitment:

“When it comes to the institutional level, of course, there are certain expectations, certain dynamics that influence how we do sustainability. Sustainability is one of the,

still, I think, strategic priorities, even of the university. We have some alignment of our vision and mission with sustainability.

He had also been involved in compiling PRME reports, which required the school to document sustainability-relevant activities every second year. The process was open-ended, or as he says: *“in a very unstructured, or, I mean, non-standardized way,”* but still created a recurring expectation that sustainability-related work should be accounted for.

Melina, a former head of department, similarly described sustainability as formally embedded in institutional governance. She recalled how external reviews had reinforced the centrality of teaching:

“We had periodic reviews of the department’s environmental work, and during one of those reviews the consultant emphasised that our most important sustainability contribution was in teaching.”

Simon, deputy head at the time of the interview, connected sustainability to accreditation and university-level policy:

“The university has an overall policy, and they have some accreditation programs for sustainability, and in order to keep those accreditations, all departments need to follow some standard routines.”

4.2.2 Sustainability in program descriptions and curriculum framing

Participants also noted sustainability’s visibility in how the school presented itself to students and external audiences. Ava, a faculty member and program manager, observed that the school “claims a sustainability focus in program descriptions,” while also noting that actual teaching was largely left to course directors. Simon, a faculty member and manager, described formal curriculum ambition in broader terms:

“We have decided to not have a specific course in sustainability. Although we have a few courses with ‘sustainability’ in the title, we said that this is so important, so we cannot just take up the topic in one course, and it has to colour everything we do and has to be included in all courses in one way or another.”

Melina, a faculty member and manager, described a longer trajectory from isolated course content to normalized presence:

“We started having a course in business ethics and sustainability in 2005, I think. And at that time, it was very eye-opening when you started talking about these issues. It

was something completely new, and it was an area that was very underdeveloped, but now sustainability is interwoven in every course, more or less.”

4.2.3 Sustainability as a hygiene factor

The sharpest formulation of sustainability as an institutional expectation came from participants who described it as a baseline requirement the School could no longer avoid. Melina, a faculty member and manager, put it directly:

“I see it more now, like a hygiene factor, actually. That’s something everyone expects and that we have an obligation to teach.”

Sami, a doctoral researcher with teaching responsibilities, independently used the same language:

“I think right now the idea is that sustainability is a bit of a hygiene factor, so we kind of all need to talk about it. We all need to present it. We all need to make our students aware of it in some way.”

For both participants, sustainability was not described as optional. It had become part of what a contemporary business school was expected to address.

4.2.4 The vagueness at the heart of the expectation

At the same time, participants repeatedly described sustainability as difficult to define. Nolan, a program director, captured this most explicitly:

“Sustainability, as a word, it’s very abstract, very unclear, very ambiguous, very vague, and it has to be added to words as an adjective, so it modifies a lot of words: sustainable development, sustainable growth, sustainable business, sustainable capitalism. It has this kind of shape-shifting character.”

Aslan, a faculty member and manager, similarly noted the absence of a binding definition:

“There is no, really, binding definition of sustainability, so you can define it relatively narrowly or relatively broadly.”

He explained that this affected even PRME reporting, where a broad definition could include *“everything that somehow relates to the SDGs,”* while a narrower definition would include only *“a couple of people.”* Sami also pointed to the absence of a formalised school-specific definition, stating: *“I don’t think that’s been formalised yet.”*

Taken together, these accounts show that sustainability was strongly present in the School's institutional language and strategy, while remaining open in meaning: expected and legitimate, but not consistently specified as a pedagogical object.

4.3 Different Understandings of Sustainability in Participants' Roles and Accounts

Participants described sustainability in relation to their own work in different ways, shaped by role, discipline, teaching responsibilities and proximity to the student experience. Four patterns were especially visible: sustainability as an active personal and critical project, cautious or conditional integration, a normalized background expectation, and an uneven student encounter.

4.3.1 Sustainability as an Active Personal and Critical Project

For some faculty members, sustainability was not a topic added to teaching but something central to their professional identity. Javad, a faculty member in marketing, described this directly:

"I am a critical marketing scholar, so sustainability sort of attaches to everything that I do, everything that I teach."

He described wanting to "*plant a little critical seed*" in introductory marketing courses, especially before students moved into more instrumental parts of the curriculum. Jana, a faculty member, described her commitment differently, less as institutional pressure and more as a personal obligation shaped by the urgency of sustainability problems. She explained that she did not feel "*an institutional pressure*" as much as "*real life pressure*," and linked this to educating future business practitioners because business could be "a big lever" in addressing sustainability problems.

Aslan described a parallel orientation in his business-and-society teaching, where sustainability was connected to tensions in capitalism, corporate profit maximization and dominant win-win narratives. Kosha added a pedagogical condition, arguing that students first needed "*generic capacities like critical thinking and critical reflexivity*" before sustainability could be engaged with in depth. Karen, a faculty member in accounting, arrived at a similar critical position from a different disciplinary angle. He argued that the dominant win-win narrative in sustainability discourse was "*foolish or even bad for sustainable development*" and that the school had an "*obligation to maintain a critical debate about what sustainability means and not buy that on face value.*"

For these participants, sustainability was connected to how they understood the purpose of business education and the kind of critical capacity students should develop, though the sources of

that commitment differed: critical intellectual identity, personal urgency, and disciplinary concern about how sustainability could be co-opted.

4.3.2 Sustainability as Cautious or Conditional Integration

Other participants described sustainability as important but dependent on context. Hora, a faculty member, explained that she included sustainability-related themes in her teaching but was careful about pushing students toward a fixed normative position:

“The theories and models I teach can be used for promoting sustainability, but they could also be used for the opposite, so I sort of leave that to the students.”

Sustainability entered her courses through project themes, cases and discussion, but not as a predetermined conclusion. At the same time, Hora’s account was not simply neutral. She also described tension in teaching within a system she increasingly questioned, at one point saying that she could feel like a “hypocrite” because of the gap between what she taught and her own doubts about the system surrounding business education.

Aslan described a similar caution at program level. Requiring sustainability in every course, he argued, was “hard to say the least, or even impossible,” partly because “not everybody is a sustainability expert.” He also described an earlier attempt to restructure the bachelor’s program around sustainability as “a bit overambitious and not really necessary.”

These accounts did not reject sustainability. Rather, they described it as something that had to fit course aims, available expertise, disciplinary expectations and student reception.

4.3.3 Sustainability as a Normalised Background Expectation

A third pattern was sustainability as something that had become ordinary rather than novel. Melina described the shift from an earlier period, when sustainability was a new and eye-opening issue, to a present in which it had become more routine:

“At that time, it was very eye opening when you started talking about these issues. It was something completely new... But now sustainability is interwoven in every course, more or less.”

Simon described the institutional aspiration that sustainability should “colour everything we do,” while Sami described a pragmatic approach in which sustainability functioned as a baseline assumption. From this perspective, sustainability was no longer a distinctive or radical addition. It had become part of what teaching at the School was expected to include, although participants differed in how far they believed this expectation had been realised in practice.

4.3.4 Sustainability as an Uneven Student Encounter

Students described sustainability differently from faculty and managers. Their accounts focused less on institutional commitments or pedagogical choices and more on what they actually encountered during their studies. Lona offered the sharpest formulation:

“We talked about sustainability in all courses, but it was not taught; we just talked.”

She could recall examples such as greenwashing and sustainable products, but these often appeared through class discussion rather than structured teaching. Raha, who had studied sustainability more explicitly during her bachelor’s degree, described a specific gap at master’s level:

“As a student who had already learned this on the bachelor’s, I actually kind of missed it in my master’s.”

Sana made a related observation about visibility, noting that some sustainability-related resources and initiatives at the business school were not clearly communicated to students:

“I think maybe many of my classmates did not even hear about that.”

Faculty accounts added a further dimension to the student-side picture. Jana described growing classroom resistance connected to broader political developments, recalling students dismissing DEI as “bullshit” in a way she had not experienced five years earlier. She connected this to a societal shift that she felt was making sustainability education harder to sustain. Sustainability was therefore not only unevenly encountered by students but, in some settings, actively contested in the classroom.

4.4 Sustainability in Courses and Teaching

The interviews showed three structural patterns in how sustainability appeared in actual courses and programs: dedicated sustainability spaces, sustainability added to existing courses, and person-dependent threading across programs.

4.4.1 Dedicated Sustainability Spaces

The most developed form of sustainability teaching appeared in dedicated curricular spaces. Nolan described an undergraduate program built explicitly around business, ethics and sustainability:

“Together with Aslan, we established that program, which is a concrete institutional structure that supports issues around sustainability.”

He also noted that this program had formal backing in the School's strategy. Aslan, who co-directed the program, described how sustainability shaped his business-and-society course, not as an additional topic but as part of the course's organising logic:

"I sort of enact sustainability in a way that very much conforms with my understanding of sustainability."

Ava stressed that structural placement mattered:

"You cannot introduce something as important as sustainability at a later stage in the education; you need to do it early and you need to sort of set the premises."

These accounts show that sustainability could become a central educational concern when given dedicated space, early placement and program-level support.

4.4.2 Sustainability Added to Existing Courses

Outside dedicated spaces, a more common pattern was sustainability entering courses as an addition to existing teaching rather than as part of the original course design. Ava described this directly:

"Course directors do their normal courses the way they would normally do them, and then at the end they add."

This typically meant a guest lecturer, a sustainability-related case, or additional readings appended to an otherwise unchanged course. Student representatives had raised concerns about this pattern, calling for sustainability to be integrated into the general curriculum rather than treated as a concluding module.

Hora described a more reflective version of the same pattern. She updated her course content in response to wider developments and chose sustainability-related project themes, while acknowledging that some colleagues viewed sustainability as outside the remit of business administration or as something being imposed on them.

4.4.3 Person-Dependent Threading

Reza, a faculty member in accounting, described an arrangement between dedicated program design and simple add-on teaching. A former colleague had created a cross-course arrangement in which she visited every course, gave a lecture on sustainability and ensured that at least one examination question engaged with the topic. This created a thread across the program, but it was sustained by one person rather than embedded in a shared structure.

After she retired, the structured thread weakened. Some course-level traces remained, but the broader coordinating force faded. This case shows that sustainability integration across multiple courses was possible but that its continuity was not self-sustaining.

4.5 Organisational Conditions Shaping Sustainability Work

Participants described several organisational conditions that shaped how sustainability could be taught and sustained. These concerned academic freedom, decentralised decision-making, leadership change over time and practical constraints.

4.5.1 Academic Freedom and Autonomy

Several participants described academic freedom as central to how sustainability was handled in teaching and research. Aslan noted considerable freedom in research, with sustainability work depending heavily on individual interest and initiative because there were no strong incentives or supporting structures such as organised research groups. Simon described a similar pattern in teaching. The School had decided that sustainability should be included across courses, but course development remained delegated to sections, and individual teachers retained substantial autonomy over design and delivery.

4.5.2 Decentralised Decision-Making

Participants repeatedly described course and program decisions as decentralised rather than directed from above. Melina explained that section heads and professor representatives were responsible for course content, while program changes required approval through the educational board and the school board. Reza confirmed that each department decided how much sustainability to include and that no dean issued direct instructions about how much sustainability should be taught. As a result, integration could differ considerably between sections such as finance, accounting, marketing and management.

4.5.3 Leadership and Change Over Time

Leadership changes were described as affecting the prominence of sustainability. Melina described sustainability as more strongly promoted during certain periods, especially when particular people in management roles actively supported it through strategy work, environmental groups and accreditation processes. After leadership changed, the emphasis shifted. Reza's account of the retired accounting colleague illustrated the same dynamic at course level: sustainability work could gain strength when carried by a committed individual and weaken when that person left.

4.5.4 Support and Constraints

Participants also described practical and organisational constraints. Simon noted that the School operated within the broader structures of the university and that some areas were easier to influence than others. Aslan described limited organisational support for sustainability research despite the topic's strategic visibility. Sami pointed to the absence of a formalised school-specific definition and suggested that a more explicit institutional strategy would help teachers understand what sustainability should mean in practice.

4.6 Summary of Empirical Findings

The empirical findings show that sustainability was strongly present at the Swedish Business School, but not in one stable form. At the formal level, it appeared in strategy, program descriptions, accreditation routines, PRME reporting and public institutional identity. Participants repeatedly described it as expected, normalised and difficult to ignore, while also describing it as vague, broad and open to different meanings.

These different meanings shaped how participants related to sustainability in their own work. Some described it as a critical intellectual project central to their professional identity; others as something to be included carefully where it fit; others as a normalised background expectation. Students described something different: sustainability encountered unevenly across their education, present in discussion but not always in structured learning.

These differences were reflected in the curriculum. Sustainability appeared in dedicated programs and courses, as additions to existing teaching, and through arrangements that depended on particular individuals to sustain them. The organisational conditions of the School, including academic freedom, decentralised decision-making, leadership changes and reliance on individual initiative, made sustainability possible in some places but uncertain across the curriculum as a whole. Overall, sustainability was visible across the School, but it appeared differently across roles, courses and organisational contexts.

5. Analysis

This chapter explains why sustainability, although institutionally visible and broadly endorsed within the Swedish Business School, is interpreted and enacted unevenly. Rather than treating this as a simple implementation failure, the analysis shows that sustainability enters the School as a legitimate but unsettled institutional expectation: actors recognise that sustainability matters, yet attach different educational meanings to it. The chapter develops this argument through five steps: legitimacy without convergence, role-based sensemaking, selective translation into teaching, loose coupling, and analytical synthesis.

5.1 Legitimate Expectation, Unsettled Meaning

5.1.1 Sustainability as an Expected Institutional Concern

The empirical material shows that sustainability had become normalised at the Swedish Business School before it had become pedagogically specified. Participants rarely treated sustainability as something whose presence still needed justification. Instead, they spoke from within an organisational context where sustainability was already expected to be acknowledged, displayed and accounted for. The analytical starting point is therefore not whether sustainability was present, but what kind of presence it had: legitimate before it was coherent.

Neo-institutional theory helps explain this condition. Organisations adopt formal structures, categories and commitments not only because these improve internal practice, but because they signal conformity with wider field-level expectations and secure legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In business education, sustainability and responsible management have become part of the institutional vocabulary through which schools demonstrate relevance, responsibility and alignment with societal expectations (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). PRME commitments, accreditation frameworks and public sustainability language therefore attach sustainability to institutional appropriateness before they specify what it should mean pedagogically.

The description of sustainability as a “hygiene factor,” used by both Melina and Sami, captures this condition. It signals not deep pedagogical consensus, but a minimum condition of credibility: something that must be present because its absence would be difficult to defend. This resonates with research showing that business schools may adopt sustainability commitments while their core educational practices remain unevenly transformed (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016).

Yet legitimacy did not determine content. Sustainability is broad and contested, able to accommodate ecological limits, social justice, economic viability, managerial reform and critiques

of growth, while remaining difficult to operationalise (Dixon & Fallon, 1989; Gough & Scott, 2003; Carew & Mitchell, 2008; Bien & Sassen, 2020). In business education, this openness is consequential because sustainability sits close to contested questions about responsibility, markets, capitalism and the purpose of management education itself (Csillag et al., 2022). The School's sustainability language therefore carried a structural tension: it enabled institutional alignment, but did not specify one pedagogical project.

5.1.2 Visibility Without Shared Meaning

The critical pattern in the empirics is not absence but ambiguity. Participants did not only describe sustainability as present; they described it as semantically open in ways that allowed multiple, and sometimes incompatible, versions to coexist under the same institutional label. Nolan's description of sustainability as having a "*shape-shifting character*" captures this instability. Sustainability could mean sustainable development, sustainable growth, sustainable business or sustainable capitalism. It could refer to progressive change, but it could also refer to sustaining existing arrangements.

This is consistent with the literature on sustainability as an essentially contested concept, where different actors can legitimately use the same term while attaching different normative, practical and political meanings to it (Carew & Mitchell, 2008; Stough et al., 2018). The point is not that actors lack knowledge of sustainability. Rather, the same term accommodates different and sometimes incompatible intellectual projects. Some interpretations make sustainability compatible with existing business education; others use it to question the assumptions of business education itself. This semantic openness allows sustainability to travel widely through the organisation, but it also prevents the term from stabilising one shared educational object.

Nolan's own teaching vocabulary illustrates this tension. Even a program director connected to one of the School's most developed sustainability structures did not necessarily use sustainability as his primary pedagogical vocabulary, but translated it into concepts such as justice, fairness and critical questioning.

Javad's account makes this tension analytically visible from another direction. He described sustainability as functioning like a fantasy in institutional life:

"It functions as a fantasy that legitimises us to continue doing more or less exactly what we have been doing for several decades."

The force of this observation is not only critical. It identifies a mechanism. Sustainability's legitimacy makes invoking it a form of alignment, even when the depth, direction or critical content of the educational practice remains unclear. In Meyer and Rowan's (1977) terms, formal categories can become decoupled from core activities. In this case, however, the gap is also semantic: the School does not simply have a sustainability commitment that may or may not be

implemented; it has a sustainability vocabulary whose meaning is unsettled before implementation begins.

5.1.3 Legitimacy Without Convergence

The pattern that emerges can be described as legitimacy without convergence. Sustainability is widely accepted as legitimate, but this legitimacy does not generate a shared understanding of what sustainability requires educationally. Actors are not simply failing to enact the same sustainability agenda. In many cases, they are enacting different understandings of sustainability education under the same institutional vocabulary. For some, sustainability means preparing students for ESG demands, reporting practices and responsible business roles. For others, it means cultivating critical reflection on capitalism, consumption and ecological limits. For students, it may appear as greenwashing, scattered discussion or an expected but weakly structured component of business education.

This matters because it shifts the explanation for uneven enactment. Existing research often explains weak sustainability integration through implementation barriers such as crowded curricula, limited expertise, lack of templates, disciplinary fragmentation and faculty resistance (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025; Tridapalli & Elliott, 2024). These barriers are present in the material. However, the empirical accounts suggest that the difficulty begins earlier. Before sustainability can be integrated, actors must first establish what kind of educational object it is. The problem is therefore not only that formal commitments fail to reach practice. It is that institutional sustainability language reaches actors before its pedagogical meaning has been settled.

This condition frames the rest of the analysis. Sustainability becomes institutionally necessary before it becomes educationally coherent. Its legitimacy makes it difficult to ignore, while its ambiguity leaves actors to decide what it should mean in relation to their role, discipline, course or learning trajectory. Uneven enactment therefore begins before implementation, in the gap between institutional legitimacy and educational specification.

5.2 Role-Based Sensemaking of Sustainability

5.2.1 What Actors Notice From Where They Stand

Once sustainability has become legitimate but educationally underdetermined, the analytical question shifts from institutional adoption to interpretation. Sensemaking theory is useful here because it does not treat meaning as simply received from institutional language. Rather, actors

extract cues from ambiguous situations, connect them to existing frames and identities, and construct plausible meanings that allow action to continue (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In the School, sustainability did not become meaningful in one uniform way. It became meaningful through the particular cues actors noticed from where they stood.

Managers and manager–faculty actors tended to notice cues of legitimacy and organisational coherence: mission statements, program profiles, accreditation, PRME reporting and public identity. From this position, sustainability appeared as part of the School’s credibility, not only as a teaching topic. Faculty members noticed another set of cues: course identity, disciplinary expertise, curriculum space, academic freedom and student reactions. Sustainability therefore became a question of fit: where it belonged, how deeply it could be integrated, and what kind of sustainability a specific course could credibly teach. Students encountered sustainability through curricular traces, readings, lectures, assignments, examinations and examples, and judged whether these accumulated into structured learning. Sami’s boundary position made this differentiation especially visible, since he recognised sustainability simultaneously as institutional rhetoric, teaching expectation and fragmented student experience.

Role-based sensemaking therefore does not mean that each role carries one fixed opinion. It means that the same institutional expectation becomes a different organisational problem depending on where it is encountered: for managers, a problem of coherence and credibility; for faculty, a problem of disciplinary fit and pedagogical plausibility; for students, a problem of progression and structured learning. The result is not one shared understanding unevenly implemented but patterned variation in what sustainability becomes across organisational positions (Edwards et al., 2020; Dziubaniuk et al., 2024).

5.2.2 Reformist, Instrumental and Critical Framings

The cues actors noticed were connected to broader interpretive framings. In Weickian sensemaking, cues become meaningful when actors connect them to larger vocabularies through which action becomes plausible (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). In this study, three recurring framings appeared: reformist, instrumental and critical. These should not be read as fixed actor types. Participants moved between them depending on whether they spoke as teachers, program directors, researchers or members of the organisation. The framings are analytically useful because they reveal different assumptions about what sustainability should do within business education.

A reformist framing treats sustainability as a necessary development of business education. Sustainability matters because business practice, regulation, stakeholder expectations and public scrutiny have changed. From this position, business schools should update their programs so that students are prepared for contemporary responsibility demands. Melina’s account of sustainability as increasingly interwoven across courses and Simon’s description of sustainability as something

that should “*colour everything*” both reflect this logic. This framing broadens business education but does not necessarily question its foundations. Sustainability becomes part of institutional adaptation rather than institutional disruption, consistent with responsible management education as a response to field-level expectations (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016).

An instrumental framing makes sustainability meaningful through existing business categories such as ESG, branding, greenwashing, reporting, risk, reputation, regulation or market positioning. Hora’s account reflects this logic, as sustainability entered her teaching through project themes, cases and models that could be applied to sustainability-related issues without making sustainability the course’s central normative commitment. Reza’s accounting example points in a similar direction, where sustainability became teachable through reporting, measurement and examination questions. This framing makes sustainability teachable because it fits established business language, but it also narrows what sustainability education can do. The question becomes less “what kind of economy is sustainable?” and more “how do organisations respond to sustainability-related expectations?” This resonates with Csillag et al.’s (2022) argument that business schools often absorb sustainability into existing managerial and economic logics rather than using it to challenge them.

Critical framing treats sustainability not as an update to business education, but as a challenge to it. Javad expressed this most sharply when he said:

“It’s a little bit of a cliché, but I keep coming back to this quote by Frederick Jameson...”: “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”

For him, this captured the condition of business schools: ecological catastrophe could be acknowledged, but the end of capitalism remained almost unimaginable. This framing is also visible in Aslan’s rejection of simplistic win-win narratives, Kosha’s emphasis on critical thinking and reflexivity, and Karen’s critique of win-win sustainability discourse. In this framing, sustainability teaching must address power, distribution, ecological limits and the possibility that traditional business models are themselves part of the problem. The critical framing is therefore analytically important because it refuses the absorption of sustainability into managerial problem-solving and instead questions the assumptions that business education reproduces (Csillag et al., 2022).

These framings matter because they produce different curricular logics. A reformist framing supports integration as relevance, an instrumental framing supports cases and business applications, and a critical framing supports reflexive questioning of business education itself. The same institutional expectation therefore generates different educational objects, not because actors disagree over whether sustainability matters, but because they disagree over what it should do.

5.2.3 Fluid Framings, Tensions and Resistance

Sustainability did not produce a neat division between reformist managers, instrumental faculty and critical scholars. The more important pattern was movement across framings. This is consistent with sensemaking theory's view of identity as situated and ongoing: actors interpret issues differently as they move between roles and responsibilities (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Aslan illustrates this clearly. As a program director, he was concerned with coherence, program profile and the practical limits of integration. As a teacher, however, he adopted a more critical stance, challenging win-win narratives and presenting sustainability as entangled with capitalism and corporate profit maximization. These positions do not simply contradict each other. They reveal different sensemaking demands: the program-level role pulls toward manageability, while the teaching role opens space for critique.

Hora's account also complicates any fixed classification of actors. She could include sustainability cautiously in course projects, refuse to prescribe a single normative conclusion, and at the same time express personal discomfort with teaching within a system she increasingly doubted. Hora's account illustrates a further dimension: not movement between framings in different roles, but the simultaneous management of competing framings within a single teaching situation. It was a managed tension between pedagogical openness, student reception and personal unease. This is important because it shows that framings are not stable labels attached to individuals; they are contextually activated ways of making sustainability workable in specific teaching situations.

Student resistance adds a further layer. Hora's concern that some students might read sustainability-focused teaching as ideological, "*They will think we are communists*", shows that sustainability can threaten a particular business-school identity. When sustainability fits the identity of the responsible future manager, it can be accepted more easily; when it challenges the legitimacy of business models themselves, it becomes harder to absorb. This helps explain why critical forms of sustainability may remain difficult to stabilize in business education contexts shaped by managerial and market-oriented expectations (Csillag et al., 2022).

Finally, faculty do not only make sense of sustainability for themselves; they also shape how students are invited to make sense of it. A teacher who frames sustainability as ESG gives students one set of interpretive resources; one who frames it as justice, capitalism or ecological limits gives another. In Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) terms, teaching can therefore function as a form of sensegiving: an attempt to influence others' meaning construction around an ambiguous issue.

What the material does not show is an organizational moment in which these reformist, instrumental and critical framings are systematically compared, negotiated or required to converge. Instead, they operate in parallel across different courses, programs and conversations. This is not simply a matter of individual disagreement; it reflects the loosely coupled character of the academic organization, where institutional priorities can be visible at the center while remaining

mediated by local autonomy, disciplinary judgement and course-level decision-making (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990). The absence of any organizational moment requiring these framings to converge is not incidental, it is a feature of the loosely coupled academic organization examined in Section 5.4.

5.3 Selective Translation into Teaching and Curriculum

5.3.1 From Interpretation to Curriculum Form

If sustainability is interpreted differently across organisational positions, it also enters teaching in different forms. It does not travel from institutional strategy into the curriculum as a stable content area, but is translated into courses, programs, examples, assignments and pedagogical choices. Following Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), sustainability is not transferred intact but reinterpreted as it moves across organisational contexts. It becomes central in some spaces, attached to existing course structures in others, and experienced by students as unevenly accumulated across their education.

The distinction between sustainability as insertion and sustainability as integration is useful here. Insertion refers to adding sustainability into existing courses through cases, lectures or modules, whereas integration implies a more fundamental reworking of curriculum logic, progression and assessment (Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015). The empirical material suggests that the School contains both forms, but that they are unevenly distributed. Sustainability is not absent, but neither is it consistently integrated as a cumulative educational trajectory. This pattern resonates with research showing that business schools often struggle to move from formal sustainability commitments to deep curriculum transformation (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2025). The key mechanism is not absence of commitment but the conversion of institutional sustainability language into locally workable teaching decisions, a process that produces variation as its normal outcome rather than as a failure.

5.3.2 Dedicated Spaces and Bounded Depth

One way sustainability becomes educationally meaningful is through dedicated curricular spaces, including specialized programs, business-and-society courses, ethics modules and collaborations with sustainability-oriented research environments. In these spaces, sustainability has time, structure and legitimacy. It is not introduced as a short example within another topic, but becomes the object around which teaching is organised.

The Business, Ethics and Sustainability program described by Aslan and Nolan illustrates this form of curricular depth. In such spaces, sustainability can be addressed as an ethical, societal and political question, rather than only as a managerial or market-related concern. Dedicated spaces therefore solve one problem: they make it possible to teach sustainability with depth.

However, this depth is also bounded. Dedicated spaces do not automatically transform the wider curriculum. From a neo-institutional perspective, they may also function as visible evidence of sustainability commitment, allowing the School to demonstrate that sustainability is substantively addressed without necessarily requiring transformation across the wider curriculum (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). This explains how sustainability can be both substantively present and unevenly distributed. Dedicated spaces solve the problem of depth, but they may also contain that depth: sustainability becomes serious where it has a protected curricular location, while remaining selectively translated elsewhere.

5.3.3 Additive Incorporation, Expertise and Judgements of Fit

Outside dedicated spaces, sustainability more often appears through additive incorporation. It enters as a lecture, case, guest speaker, reading, exam question, project option or example within a course whose underlying structure remains largely unchanged. This form of inclusion should not be dismissed as insincere. In many accounts, it reflected teachers' attempts to make sustainability relevant without undermining the coherence of the course they were responsible for.

Hora's account illustrates the practical judgement involved. Sustainability was included in her teaching, but not always as the central organizing theme. Her position was not that sustainability was unimportant, but that the theories and models she taught could be used in different directions. Aslan made a similar argument at program level when he suggested that requiring sustainability in every course would be unrealistic if teachers lacked expertise or if the topic did not connect meaningfully to the course. Sustainability therefore became something that had to be fitted to the course, not simply introduced because the institution valued it.

These judgements of fit are shaped by discipline and course identity. In marketing, sustainability may become greenwashing, ethical consumption or branding. In accounting, it may become reporting, measurement or disclosure. In management and organisation studies, it may become responsibility, governance, power or justice. These are all real forms of sustainability teaching, but they do not produce the same educational object. Sustainability is translated through the vocabulary of the course that receives it.

Karen's account illustrates that this translation is not neutral. From an accounting perspective, sustainability can be made visible through reporting, measurement and control, but these same tools may also narrow the way sustainability is understood. His claim that accounting can become "an enemy of sustainability" points to the risk that disciplinary tools do not simply carry sustainability into the classroom; they also shape and constrain what sustainability can mean. This deepens the argument beyond additive incorporation. Sustainability is not only added unevenly across courses; it is transformed by the disciplinary logics through which it is made teachable.

From a sensemaking perspective, this is not surprising. Teachers construct plausible ways of acting under ambiguity; they make sustainability workable within the existing logic of the course (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Courses are not neutral containers waiting to receive sustainability content. They already have theories, methods, assessments and student expectations attached to them. This explains why even committed faculty may produce partial integration. The mechanism is not simply resistance. It is the negotiation between institutional expectation and local pedagogical plausibility. Because those judgements are made locally, translation produces variation.

5.3.4 Talked About, Not Taught

From the student side, selective translation appears as uneven learning. Lona's distinction between sustainability being "talked about" and sustainability being taught captures the difference clearly. Sustainability may circulate in examples, discussions and course references without becoming a structured educational object. Teaching sustainability in the stronger sense would require concepts, progression, assessment and cumulative relevance.

This distinction matters because it shows that visibility does not automatically become learning. Preuss et al. (2023) show that students may recognize CSR and sustainability concepts while struggling to move toward deeper interpretation and action-oriented understanding. The present material suggests that this is partly a curricular issue. Students are given sustainability cues, but not always the structure needed to organize those cues into a coherent understanding. Sustainability can therefore be repeatedly visible while still failing to accumulate as a clear learning trajectory.

5.4 Uneven Enactment in a Loosely Coupled Organization

5.4.1 Academic Autonomy and Distributed Authority

The unevenness described above persists because sustainability is processed through a loosely coupled academic organization. The school's parts are connected, but central strategy does not directly determine local teaching practice. Weick (1976) describes educational organizations as systems in which elements remain responsive to one another while also preserving separateness. Orton and Weick (1990) develop this further by arguing that loose coupling is not simple disconnection, but a combination of connection and autonomy. This captures the school's situation: sustainability is visible at the institutional level, yet its curricular enactment remains mediated by program structures, course directors, disciplinary locations and individual judgement.

Academic autonomy was central in participants' accounts. Course design was largely located with individual teachers, course directors or sections rather than centrally mandated. This autonomy

enabled local depth, because committed teachers could develop serious sustainability teaching in ways that fit their expertise. At the same time, it weakened curriculum-wide coherence because the same autonomy allowed sustainability to remain unevenly distributed. The organizational form therefore both enabled and limited sustainability integration, aligning with research on disciplinary autonomy, local initiative and distributed authority in academic organizations (Clark, 2001; Bien & Sassen, 2020; Dziubaniuk et al., 2024).

5.4.2 The Red Thread as Fragile Coordination and Sensegiving

The clearest illustration of this organizational dynamic is the red-thread initiative described in the accounting section. Rather than leaving sustainability to appear only where individual teachers happened to find it relevant, the initiative created a more coherent line across courses. A former colleague visited every course, delivered sustainability-related teaching and ensured that examination questions engaged with the topic. This arrangement created a thread across the program, but it was sustained by a particular individual rather than embedded in a shared structural routine.

Analytically, the arrangement can be understood as a temporary tightening of loose coupling: it coordinated sustainability across courses without removing teacher autonomy (Orton & Weick, 1990). It also depended on continuous sensegiving, as one actor translated an ambiguous institutional expectation into course-level possibilities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Because this coordination had not become embedded in durable routines, it weakened when the actor sustaining it left, echoing research showing that responsible management education initiatives often remain fragile when they depend on individual champions rather than institutionalised structures (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Godemann et al., 2023; Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025).

Reza described this fragility directly:

“She was like pushing us in these questions, but now, when she is gone, it is like the area, so it is not.”

The red-thread initiative therefore reveals both the possibility and the limit of coherence in a loosely coupled academic organisation: coordination can be achieved, but it remains fragile when carried by individual initiative rather than durable organisational routines.

5.4.3 Tight in Discourse, Loose in Practice

The School can therefore be understood as tightly coupled in discourse but loosely coupled in practice. Sustainability is strongly attached to mission, vision, program language, accreditation,

external expectations and legitimacy. It is less tightly attached to course design, assessment, lecture content and student experience.

This pattern resembles institutional decoupling, where formal structures and commitments are adopted to secure legitimacy without necessarily transforming core activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In responsible management education, similar gaps have been observed between public commitments and educational practice (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Snelson-Powell et al., 2016). The present case shows how this gap is reproduced within the curriculum: not only through lack of commitment, but through local interpretations, disciplinary translations and weakly coordinated course-level decisions.

This configuration explains why apparently contradictory statements can all be true. Sustainability can be highly visible and pedagogically fragmented. It can be sincerely valued and still unevenly taught. It can be deeply integrated in some spaces and lightly inserted in others. It can function as both a legitimacy signal and a critical challenge. Differentiated enactment is therefore not noise around an otherwise coherent sustainability agenda. It is the pattern produced when an institutionally legitimate but ambiguous expectation is interpreted and translated through a loosely coupled academic organisation.

5.5 Analytical Synthesis

This chapter argues that sustainability in the focal business school is best understood as a legitimate institutional expectation whose educational meaning remains unsettled. Sustainability had become visible and difficult to dismiss, but visibility did not produce convergence. Actors broadly agreed that sustainability mattered yet interpreted differently what it required from business education. Differentiated enactment therefore begins before implementation, in the gap between institutional legitimacy and pedagogical specification.

The mechanism is mutually reinforcing. Institutional pressure makes sustainability necessary to signal; conceptual ambiguity prevents shared educational meaning; role-based sensemaking produces reformist, instrumental and critical framings; selective translation turns these framings into different teaching practices; and loose coupling allows those practices to coexist without reconciliation. Students' experiences are not separate from this process, but its accumulated outcome: sustainability can be repeatedly visible while still not becoming a coherent learning trajectory.

The answer to the research question is therefore not a single barrier, but a process. Institutional sustainability expectations become interpreted and enacted through distributed sensemaking under conditions of conceptual ambiguity and organizational loose coupling. This is why the same business school can display strong sustainability legitimacy while producing differentiated

understandings and uneven educational practices across roles, disciplines and programs. Figure 4 shows this mechanism by showing how institutional sustainability expectations move through role-based sensemaking, selective translation and loose coupling to produce differentiated enactment.

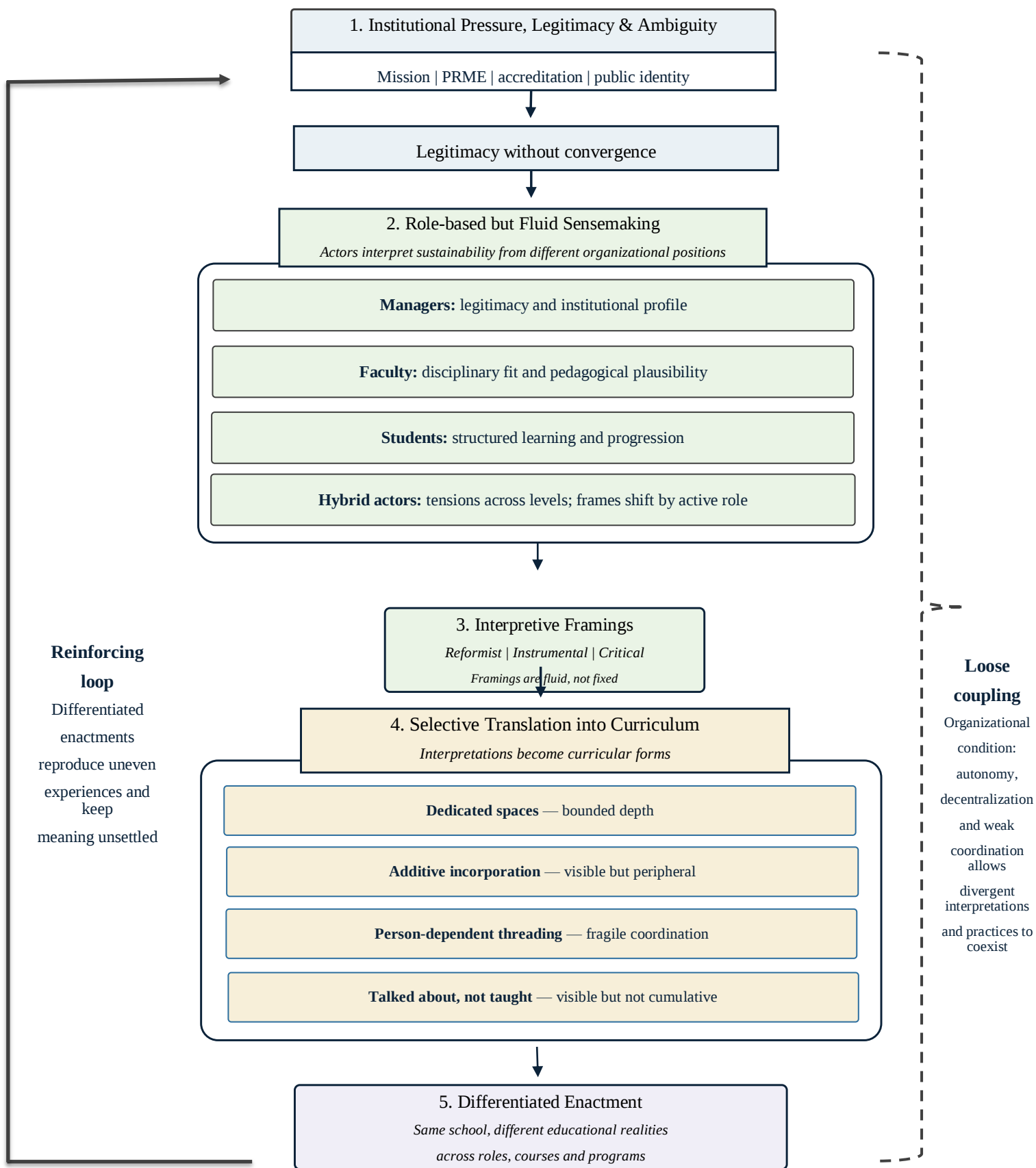


Figure 4. Mechanism of differentiated sustainability enactment: institutional sustainability expectations become interpreted through role-based sensemaking, translated selectively into curriculum, and sustained unevenly through loose coupling.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the research question and the broader literature on sustainability in business education. It first revisits the research question and summarizes the central mechanism developed in the analysis. It then discusses the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.

6.1 Revisiting the Research Question

This study examined how institutional sustainability expectations become interpreted and enacted within a business school, and why this produces differentiated understandings and practices. The analysis shows that the answer is not a list of barriers, but a mechanism.

Sustainability entered the Swedish Business School as a legitimate but educationally underdetermined expectation, attached to mission, strategy, accreditation, program language and institutional identity but not to shared educational meaning. Because it was expected yet to be conceptually open, managers, faculty, hybrid actors and students noticed different cues and produced reformist, instrumental and critical framings that were role-based but not role-fixed.

These interpretations were selectively translated into dedicated spaces, additive incorporation and person-dependent threading, while loose coupling allowed them to persist without reconciliation. Differentiated enactment was therefore the outcome of an ambiguous legitimate expectation moving through distributed sensemaking in a loosely coupled academic organization.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

6.2.1 Beyond Barriers and Enablers: A Meaning-Level Account

Much of the literature on sustainability in higher education explains uneven integration through barriers and enablers, such as crowded curricula, weak coordination, limited resources, faculty resistance and lack of expertise (Lozano et al., 2015; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Batiste & Chang Rundgren, 2025). This study does not reject these explanations but shows that they are incomplete. Uneven enactment begins before implementation, at the level of meaning. Actors are not simply failing to implement the same sustainability agenda; they are often constructing different sustainability agendas under the same institutional label. The contribution is therefore to shift attention from what prevents integration to how sustainability becomes meaningful, teachable and actionable in the first place.

6.2.2 Legitimacy Without Convergence and Semantic Decoupling

The study also contributes to institutional accounts of decoupling. Neo-institutional theory explains how organizations adopt formal commitments to secure legitimacy, sometimes without transforming core activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This case confirms that pattern but adds a semantic dimension. Sustainability was coupled to institutional identity, strategy and legitimacy, but not to one shared pedagogical meaning. This can be understood as semantic decoupling: formal sustainability language circulates through the organization and secures legitimacy, while its educational meaning remains open and locally interpreted. Institutional theory explains why sustainability must be spoken; ambiguity explains why it can be spoken differently across the same organization.

6.2.3 Sustainability Sensemaking as Role-Based but Not Role-Fixed

The study further contributes to sensemaking research by showing that sustainability sensemaking is role-based but not role-fixed. Organizational roles shape what actors notice: managers notice legitimacy and coherence, faculty notice disciplinary fit and pedagogical plausibility, and students notice progression and structured learning. Yet actors occupying hybrid positions can move between framings. Aslan's program-director and teacher roles, Hora's simultaneous caution and discomfort, and Sami's boundary position all show that sustainability sensemaking is situated and fluid. This helps explain why sustainability does not converge into one curriculum logic even when actors broadly agree that it matters.

6.2.4 Loose Coupling and the Persistence of Differentiated Enactment

Finally, the study shows how loose coupling explains the persistence of differentiated enactment. Sensemaking explains how different meanings are produced; loose coupling explains why these meanings are not necessarily reconciled (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990). The red-thread initiative showed that stronger coordination is possible, but also that it remains fragile when dependent on one individual. The organizational form both enables and limits sustainability integration: it allows committed teachers to create depth, while weakening curriculum-wide coherence. The theoretical contribution of the thesis therefore lies in combining institutional theory, sensemaking and loose coupling to explain why sustainability can be legitimate, sincerely valued and still unevenly enacted.

6.3 Practical Implications

Although this study is explanatory rather than prescriptive, it has three practical implications for business schools seeking more coherent sustainability education.

First, schools should not assume that adding more sustainability content will by itself create integration. If unevenness begins at the level of meaning, then curriculum work must first make existing interpretations of sustainability visible. Managers, faculty, course directors and students may all agree that sustainability matters while attaching different meanings to it.

Second, sustainability should be treated as a program-level learning trajectory, not only a course-level topic. Students in this study described sustainability as present but fragmented: talked about, repeated and sometimes visible, but not always accumulated into structured learning. Business schools therefore need to consider how sustainability is introduced, developed, assessed and revisited across programs so that repetition becomes progression rather than recurrence.

Third, schools should reduce dependence on individual champions. The red-thread initiative shows that committed individuals can create meaningful coordination, but also that such coordination remains fragile when not embedded in routines. Schools therefore need roles, processes and follow-up mechanisms that make sustainability work less person-dependent, while still allowing disagreement about the contested meaning of sustainability to remain pedagogically visible.

6.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study of one Swedish business school. This enabled contextual depth and cross-role analysis within one institution, but the findings cannot be statistically generalised. The contribution is analytical rather than representative: the study identifies a mechanism that may be relevant beyond the case, but which should be examined in other settings.

Second, the empirical material consists primarily of semi-structured interviews. The analysis therefore captures how participants describe, interpret and make sense of sustainability, rather than directly observing classroom practices, assessment tasks or curriculum documents. A design combining interviews with classroom observation, syllabus analysis and assessment review would provide a fuller picture of the relationship between stated and enacted practice.

Third, the student sample was limited and the study captures one moment in an ongoing organisational process. Student participants cannot represent all programs or cohorts, and sustainability integration may change with new regulations, leadership shifts, accreditation demands, faculty turnover or curriculum reform. These limitations delimit the scope of the study rather than undermining its analytical contribution.

6.5 Future Research

Future research could examine whether legitimacy without convergence appears across business schools with different governance structures, accreditation pressures and degrees of curricular

centralization. Longitudinal studies could follow whether person-dependent initiatives become institutionalized or fade away, while classroom observation, syllabus analysis and assessment review could show how sustainability is enacted beyond interview accounts. Semantic decoupling could also be explored in relation to other ambiguous expectations in higher education, such as employability, internationalization or responsible leadership.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has shown that the challenge of sustainability in business education is not simply to make sustainability visible. At the Swedish Business School, sustainability was already visible in strategy, program language, accreditation, teaching examples and student expectations. The problem was that visibility did not produce shared meaning or coherent educational progression.

Sustainability became interpreted through role-based but fluid sensemaking, selectively translated into teaching, and sustained unevenly through a loosely coupled academic organisation. The result was differentiated enactment: sustainability was present, but not one thing. Understanding this matters because business schools cannot build coherent sustainability education only by signalling commitment or adding isolated content. They must also engage with the different meanings through which sustainability becomes teachable.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix A. Interviewee Sample

Participant	Role	Gender	Discipline / Area	Interview Format	Duration
Javad	Faculty	Man	Marketing	Online	48 min
Simon	Faculty and Manager	Man	Management	Online	56 min
Ava	Faculty, Manager	Woman	Management	Online	53 min
Aslan	Faculty, Manager	Man	Management	Online	55 min
Nolan	Faculty, Manager	Man	Management	Online	52 min
Sami	PhD student, Faculty	Man	Marketing	Online	47 min
Jana	Faculty	Woman	Marketing	Online	49 min

Hora	Faculty	Woman	Marketing	Online	50 min
Melina	Faculty, Former manager	Woman	Marketing	Online	53 min
Reza	Faculty	Woman	Accounting	Online	52 min
Karen	Faculty	Man	Accounting	Online	46 min
Kosha	Faculty	Man	Marketing	Online	47 min
Lona	Master Student	Woman	Marketing	In Person	49 min
Sana	Master Student	Woman	Management	In Person	51 min
Raha	Master Student	Woman	Management	Online	48 min
Roya	Master Student	Woman	Marketing	In Person	46 min
Amir	Bachelor Student	Man	Finance	In Person	45 min

8.2 Appendix B. AI Disclosure

AI Tools Used and How

During the preparation of this thesis, one AI-assisted tool was used: Perplexity AI. Its use was limited strictly to language editing, including grammar correction, spelling, sentence clarity, and minor stylistic refinement of already written text. All such suggestions were carefully reviewed and evaluated by the authors before acceptance. No AI tool was used for data collection, research design, literature search, analysis, interpretation, or the development of conclusions.

Contribution to Thesis Quality

The use of Perplexity AI contributed to improving the linguistic clarity and readability of the final text. By identifying grammatical inconsistencies and unclear phrasing, it helped ensure the thesis communicates the author's intended meaning with greater precision. This support was purely editorial in nature and did not affect the academic substance of the work.

Potential Risks and Measures Taken

The primary risk identified was the possibility of AI-generated language suggestions altering the intended meaning of academic arguments or introducing inaccuracies. To mitigate this, the authors reviewed every suggested change individually and accepted only those that accurately reflected the originally intended meaning. No AI-generated formulations were incorporated without critical evaluation.

Insights Gained

The experience confirmed that AI editing tools can serve a useful and ethically sound supporting role in thesis writing when their use is clearly bounded, transparently disclosed, and subject to consistent human oversight. The authors found that maintaining a clear distinction between language support and intellectual authorship was both practically achievable and necessary for academic integrity.

All substantive content, academic judgments, and intellectual contributions presented in this thesis are entirely the authors' own. The authors take full responsibility for the final text.

8.3 Appendix C. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This interview guide was used across all seventeen interviews. Questions were adapted to each participant's role, and the order was adjusted based on the flow of conversation. Not all questions were asked in every interview. The guide served as a flexible framework rather than a fixed script.

Block 1: Role and Background

- Could you briefly describe your current role, in terms of teaching, research, supervision, or program responsibility?
 - Which role gives you the clearest view of how sustainability shows up in your work?
- How has your background shaped the way you understand sustainability in a business school context?
 - Has that understanding shifted over time, and if so, what drove the change?
- Looking back over recent years, what have been the main pressures or moments that made sustainability an important issue at the School?

Block 2: Organizational Cues and Institutional Signals

- In what kinds of situations does sustainability actually come up in your work?
- Can you recall a specific recent situation where sustainability became especially visible or important?
 - What happened, and who was involved?
-
- Are there situations where sustainability is notably absent, muted, or avoided?
- How do you see sustainability positioned institutionally at the School?
- Do you see alignment between sustainability at the institutional level and what happens in classrooms?

Block 3: Interpretation and Meaning

- When you hear "sustainability in business education," what does it mean to you?
- When sustainability comes up in your work, how do you personally make sense of what it requires?
- What tends to count as a legitimate reason for including sustainability in business education here?

- Do you think sustainability is framed at the School as something that should integrate into mainstream business thinking, or as something that should challenge it?
- Do you think interpretations of sustainability differ systematically between faculty, students, and management?

Block 4: Tensions and Contradictions

- Do you experience sustainability as mostly compatible with the aims of a business school, or does it create tensions?
- When those tensions appear in practice, what usually happens?
- Do you think sustainability sometimes functions symbolically, as a label or legitimacy signal, rather than as a genuine educational commitment?

Block 5: Enactment in Practice

- In practice, what do you actually do when sustainability becomes relevant in your courses, supervision, or programme responsibilities?
- Can you describe a specific situation where sustainability required you to make a pedagogical or conceptual choice?
- How do students typically respond when sustainability is raised?
- Can you think of a situation where sustainability created discomfort, resistance, or difficult dynamics?

Closing:

- If you compare how you thought about sustainability when you started at the School with how you think about it now, what has changed?
- If you could change one thing to help sustainability be understood and practised differently here, what would it be?
- Is there anyone else you think we should speak with who would offer a genuinely different perspective on these questions?

8.4 Appendix D. Interpretive Framings by Participant and Role

Participant	First Role	Second Role	Discipline	Framing as the first role	Framing as the second role
Melina	Faculty	Former Manager	Marketing	Reformist	Reformist
Simon	Faculty	Manager	Management	Reformist	Reformist
Aslan	Faculty	Manager	Management	Critical	Instrumental
Nolan	Faculty	Manager	Management	Reformist	Instrumental
Javad	Faculty		Marketing	Critical	
Karen	Faculty		Accounting	Critical	
Kosha	Faculty		Marketing	Critical	
Ava	Faculty	Manager	Management	Reformist	Reformist
Jana	Faculty		Marketing	Reformist	
Hora	Faculty		Marketing	Instrumental	
Reza	Faculty		Accounting	Instrumental	

Sami	PhD Student	Faculty	Marketing	Reformist	Reformist
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Note: Framings are not fixed actor types. They reflect the dominant interpretive orientation observed in participants' accounts and are dependent on context. Several participants moved between framings depending on whether they spoke from a teaching, managerial, or program role.

8.5 Appendix E. Partial extraction of coding and theme development

Initial codes	Developed themes	Analytical dimension
- Sustainability as “hygiene factor” - Sustainability as expected baseline - Sustainability visible in mission, PRME and accreditation	Institutional signaling	Differentiated sustainability enactment <i>Sustainability becomes visible, interpreted and enacted differently across roles, courses and programs.</i>
- Sustainability as “shapeshifting” - No binding definition - Sustainability can mean different things	Semantic openness	
- Sustainability fitted to course logic - Additive incorporation - Course-level autonomy	Curricular translation	
- Sustainability “talked about, not taught” - Fragmented student encounter - Lack of cumulative learning	Uneven educational experience	

Table 8: Partial extraction of coding and theme development.