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# Sustainability in a Law Programme – Why, How, and For Whom?

Marja-Liisa Öberg

marja-liisa.oberg@jur.lu.se

## **Introduction**

Higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to address global sustainability challenges by embedding sustainability across disciplines. At Lund University, this imperative extends to all faculties and programmes, not just those traditionally associated with environmental or social issues. Legal education, while often seen as an abstract or conservative subject, is no exception.

In fact, the legal field is uniquely positioned to contribute to sustainable development through governance, regulation, and policy enforcement. The legal profession plays a pivotal role in translating sustainability goals into actionable frameworks. At the same time, the complex challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, and social injustice have far-reaching implications for the law itself. These challenges affect the entire spectrum of legal practice – far beyond environmental law – and demand that legal frameworks become more dynamic and responsive. They also require that future lawyers are prepared to engage with and help shape these developments. Integrating sustainability into legal education in a systematic and comprehensive manner is therefore imperative.

More specifically, as sustainability becomes an increasingly critical concern, legal education must ensure that future lawyers are equipped with the competencies needed to navigate and influence the evolving legal landscape. This transformation aims not only to enhance the relevance of legal programmes but also to prepare students for roles that support sustainable development across legal practice, the corporate world, the public sector, and policymaking.

This article relies on experiences from the ongoing transformation of the Master in European Business Law (MEBL)<sup>1</sup> Programme at Lund University's Faculty of Law, which aims to integrate sustainability throughout the programme in a structured and comprehensive way. Whereas this particular case is situated in legal education, the challenges, strategies, and reflections presented here are relevant across Lund University's wider educational landscape. They address fundamental tensions shared by many disciplines: how to reconcile academic depth with societal relevance, and how to prepare students for meaningful professional roles in a rapidly changing world.

The process of integrating sustainability into a law curriculum involves rethinking and restructuring the curriculum of the programme as well as of each individual course to incorporate sustainability-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes at every stage of learning. The transformation is guided by three central questions: *why* should sustainability be integrated? *How* can this be done effectively? And, *who* is the target – what kinds of professionals are we educating? These questions provide a foundation for building a legal education that is both comprehensive and adaptable, and that supports the university's broader sustainability commitments.

## **The need for sustainability in legal education**

The question of *why* sustainability should be integrated into legal education begins with a recognition that legal systems are instrumental in implementing and enforcing sustainability policies. Lawyers must be equipped to understand the implications of legal decisions in environmental, social and economic contexts. Law serves as a powerful tool for holding governments, corporations, and individuals accountable for sustainability commitments. Embedding sustainability in legal education enables students to appreciate the law's potential to drive meaningful change across governance, business, and civil society. This, in turn, fosters legal professionals who are capable of critically engaging with sustainability issues in diverse legal contexts.

At the same time, it is important to approach the development of legal education critically. As global concerns like climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality grow more urgent, legal education must evolve while avoiding the trap of wishful thinking about what law alone can accomplish in terms of sustainability (Fisher 2021). Legal education should cultivate an understanding of both the power and the limits of

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<sup>1</sup> From the academic year 2026/27, the programme will be called Master in European Economic Law.

law in solving societal and environmental problems. Future legal professionals must be aware of their potential roles – as mediators of societal conflicts within the judicial system, contributors to policy formation in the government, and actors within corporate systems – while also recognising the constraints within which they operate.

Globally, sustainability is increasingly seen as an essential element of modern legal education. As universities develop sustainability-focused programmes (Brundiers et al. 2021), law schools are expected to respond in order for legal education to remain relevant in a shifting educational landscape. Beyond aligning with academic trends, integrating sustainability is vital (O'Brien et al. 2013) for preparing future leaders with the competence and skills to engage with environmental, social, and economic transformation.

In addition to external pressures, change in legal education is driven by internal imperatives from within the legal profession (Dernbach 2011). Law forms the backbone of society and shapes not only governance and justice, but also our collective response to sustainability challenges through regulation, advocacy, and innovation. Preston (2023) argues that in order to effectively address these challenges, law must evolve and adapt, staying relevant in a complex and interconnected world. Yet, law also faces limits. Sustainability-related issues often arise in "hot situations" (Callon 1998; Fisher 2013) – contexts marked by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid change. Law, by contrast, tends to favour "simplicity, certainty, and stability", which provide predictability (Preston 2023:432). To remain effective, law itself must adapt. Law must, in Preston's words, "become hot".

For legal education, "making law hot" means more than simply adding new content. It requires preparing students to understand and respond to the complex role of law in dynamic environments through an increased focus on sustainability-related skills, as discussed in detail in the next section. This pedagogical shift is not only about what students learn but also about how legal education aligns with the evolving demands of the legal profession. A shift towards sustainability in legal education has broader implications for the legal profession, which is increasingly called upon to address sustainability challenges through regulatory innovation and policy implementation. As sustainability becomes more embedded in legal frameworks, lawyers will need to interpret contracts, corporate governance structures, and regulations through a sustainability lens. Familiarity with concepts such as the circular economy, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards, and climate adaptation will be crucial in both public and private legal practice. The rise of climate litigation, in

which governments and corporations are held accountable for failing to meet sustainability goals, further underlines the importance of sustainability literacy. Law students must be familiar with relevant terminology and legal reasoning to contribute meaningfully to policy development, corporate accountability, and societal change.

These broader reflections have informed our own approach at the Faculty of Law at Lund University. We chose not to launch a new programme dedicated to sustainability. Instead, we opted to integrate sustainability into the existing MEBL programme. This decision was guided by a desire to future-proof the programme while avoiding the uncertainty and administrative and pedagogical burdens associated with creating entirely new structures, and by the value we place on the existing programme's reputation, coherence, and alignment with faculty expertise. Rather than overhauling the programme, we made a minor change to the programme title, revised the curriculum, and highlighted the sustainability components already present. These outwardly limited changes signal a shift towards sustainability while preserving the flexibility and integrity of the programme. More substantive changes will be implemented at the level of individual course curricula, coordinated by programme management.

## **Finding a balance between law and sustainability**

Building on the need to equip future lawyers with sustainability-related competencies, the second key question is *how* sustainability can be integrated into legal education in a meaningful and systematic way. Integrating sustainability into the curriculum of a law programme comes with double responsibility: achieving a genuine, comprehensive and systematic inclusion of sustainability-related knowledge, skills and attitudes while retaining the high quality and relevance of the programme as a programme preparing future legal professionals.

Sustainable development can be interpreted in different ways, ranging from ecological preservation to social equity, which must be reflected in legal education (Hopwood et al. 2005). A critical aspect of the task of integrating sustainability into a law programme is ensuring that sustainability is not treated as an isolated topic but embedded across different areas of law (for example, Weybrecht 2013), including, among others, private and public law, corporate law, human rights law, environmental law, EU law and international law. While some of these areas may have a more direct connection to sustainability, it is essential to explore and emphasise the relevance of sustainability

across the entire legal curriculum even in fields where the connection may not be immediately apparent.

Legal education must be adaptable, preparing students to work within evolving legal frameworks that respond to pressing global issues such as climate change and resource management (Preston 2023). This requires a shift in pedagogy, moving from traditional doctrinal approaches to interdisciplinary and systemic thinking. These competencies enable lawyers to interpret and apply laws in ways that advance sustainable development while upholding fundamental legal principles. The challenge lies in ensuring that sustainability becomes an organic part of legal education, rather than a peripheral or elective subject. This requires deliberate curriculum design that progressively deepens students' understanding of sustainability throughout their studies, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and ethical perspectives necessary for future legal practice.

It is crucial that legal training be aligned with sustainability competencies, ensuring that students acquire both legal reasoning skills and the ability to assess sustainability challenges holistically. An integration curriculum should equip future legal professionals with both technical legal expertise and broader sustainability competencies, such as systems-thinking, futures-thinking, values-thinking, strategic-thinking, interpersonal/collaborative skills and integrated problem-solving skills (Wiek et al 2011). The projected outcome of the exercise is students who can approach legal issues with a sustainability-oriented mindset (Galloway 2012). Skills that are central to legal practice, such as drafting legislation and contracts, negotiations, dispute resolution, counselling and litigation (Dernbach 2011) as well as competencies in ethics and values, critical thinking, basic numeracy and financial literacy, communication skills and empathy, information-handling and problem-solving, managing uncertainty, capacity to reflect on one's own reasoning strategies, and interpersonal communication skills belong to the core of legal competencies (*Setting Standards* 2013). They demonstrate substantial overlap with sustainability competencies and generally blend well with the latter indicating that the task of integrating sustainability into a law curriculum is not an overly complex one.

Preston (2013) has compiled the two categories and identified six essential skills for climate-conscious legal practice: legal reasoning, imagination, intra-disciplinary thinking, inter-disciplinary thinking, multi-jurisdictional awareness, and ethics. These competencies build on traditional legal education but expand its scope by equipping students to work on complex, transnational sustainability issues. A particular focus lies on interdisciplinary competence which is essential to tackle sustainability problems

which often require collaboration between legal professionals, policymakers, scientists, and economists. For successful sustainability integration, a law curriculum must, therefore, provide opportunities for students to engage with other disciplines to foster an integrative approach to legal problem-solving.

Further, it is crucial that sustainability-related topics are interwoven throughout the curriculum rather than confined to specific courses. This means integrating sustainability across substantive, procedural, and ethical dimensions of law. As noted by Jēkabsons and Ratniece and (2024), sustainability should not only be taught as a theoretical concept but should also be embedded in legal analysis, case studies, and practical training. This integration requires a rethinking of traditional legal education structures. Courses in fields such as, but not limited to, constitutional law, environmental law, corporate law, EU and international law should incorporate sustainability perspectives to make the topic an integral part of the curriculum. Further examples include mock trials and moot courts, legal clinics and sustainability-oriented internships. Altogether, these practical sustainability-related training opportunities will strengthen the students' ability to critically assess legal frameworks from a sustainability perspective, identifying both the possibilities and limitations of existing laws as well as law as an instrument, in addressing environmental and social challenges.

At the MEBL programme, sustainability perspectives will be embedded in core courses including, but not limited to, EU constitutional law, internal market law, competition law, intellectual property law, contract law, trade law, and law and technology. In addition, various active learning methods such as negotiations and moot court exercises will help students gain practical experiences to develop their capacity to critically assess legal frameworks through a sustainability lens. They will enable the students to identify both the opportunities and the limitations of current legal systems in addressing environmental and social challenges.

Finally, the question of *who* is the target of sustainability integration addresses and balances the needs of different stakeholders in legal education. Should one focus on training sustainability-informed lawyers, or legally informed sustainability experts? The key is to meet both demands without sacrificing the rigour of the transfer of core legal skills. Law students increasingly expect sustainability to be incorporated into their studies, reflecting broader societal awareness of environmental and social issues. At the same time, employers seek professionals who are not only legally proficient but also capable of navigating sustainability-related legal challenges. The demand for

sustainability expertise is growing across multiple sectors, from corporate law and human rights advocacy to environmental litigation and global governance.

Moreover, it is important to recognise that legal education prepares students for a wide range of roles beyond traditional legal practice. Graduates go on to careers in business, public administration, policymaking, and leadership across many domains. Integrating sustainability into legal education must therefore reflect an awareness of the varied career paths students may pursue and the diverse ways they can contribute to sustainability transformations.

## **Conclusion**

Integrating sustainability into legal education is essential for preparing the next generation of lawyers to address the complex challenges of a rapidly evolving world. While acknowledging its limitations, law constitutes a crucial mechanism for driving sustainable development. Future legal professionals must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and ethical awareness to navigate the intersection of law, policy, and sustainability.

Sustainability transformation requires a deliberate and systematic approach to curriculum design to ensure that sustainability is embedded across legal disciplines rather than treated as an isolated topic. By fostering interdisciplinary thinking, critical analysis, and practical problem-solving skills, legal education can produce graduates who are not only proficient in law but also capable of shaping sustainable solutions in their various professional roles.

At the MEBL programme, this process is already well underway. Through curriculum mapping, faculty dialogue, and engagement with alumni and external stakeholders, we are working to ensure that sustainability competencies are meaningfully integrated and progressively developed throughout the programme. These efforts reflect a broader institutional commitment to preparing students not only for today's legal challenges but also for the evolving demands of sustainability-oriented legal practice.

Ultimately, integrating sustainability is about more than just adapting a curriculum – it is about redefining the role of legal education in shaping a just, equitable, and sustainable future. It is equally about understanding the significance of legal education in society beyond the confines of the 'legal profession'. Law programmes have a responsibility to train professionals as well as future local, national and international



leaders who can uphold legal principles while addressing urgent environmental and social challenges. By embracing this responsibility, legal education can contribute meaningfully to a legal profession that is both forward-thinking and committed to sustainability.

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