

Advanced Exercises in Corporate Sustainability

Welcome to Advanced Exercises in Corporate Sustainability! This course is designed to explore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities companies face when integrating sustainability into their strategies, operations, and stakeholder relationships. By examining real-world case studies, and engaging in interactive activities like simulations and group projects, you will develop a nuanced understanding of the strategic, ethical, and operational dimensions of corporate sustainability. The course aims to equip you with critical thinking skills and practical tools to analyze corporate sustainability challenges and propose actionable solutions for driving transformative change in businesses. Through a combination of case discussions, simulations, guest lectures, and collaborative group work, this highly interactive course emphasizes active participation, teamwork, and the application of theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios. By the end of the semester, you will have honed your ability to assess corporate sustainability challenges through a strategic lens and articulate innovative approaches to align business practices with global sustainability goals.

Session 1 – Introduction (in class)

What are the fundamental principles and frameworks that underpin corporate sustainability? In this session, we introduce key concepts and theories in corporate sustainability, focusing on its strategic, ethical, and operational dimensions. We explore the role of businesses in addressing global challenges, the interplay between corporate responsibility and profitability, and the importance of aligning sustainability practices with stakeholder expectations.

This session sets the stage for the course by establishing the analytical frameworks and 'rules of the game' that will guide our case discussions and critical evaluations throughout the semester.

Session 2 – The Trade-off Game (asynchronous)

The "Tradeoff Game" invites you to step into the shoes of a tech startup CEO in an immersive business simulation. You become the CEO of FlexBird, a rapidly increasing tech startup. As the founder and CEO, your challenge is to expertly "balance profit and purpose," navigating limited resources to satisfy both investors and stakeholders.

Session 3: Tata Motors: Corporate Social Responsibility in India (in class)

What is the role of business in addressing social challenges in emerging markets? This session discusses Tata Motors' response to India's unique CSR mandate under the Companies Act of 2013. We examine the company's efforts to align its longstanding philanthropic legacy with measurable social impact, such as its skills development programs. The case highlights the balance between corporate profitability, legal compliance, and the moral imperative to address pressing societal needs in one of the world's most inequitable markets.

Session 4 – Tesla, Inc. (in class)

How does visionary leadership drive innovation and reshape industries? This session explores Elon Musk's leadership approach and its role in positioning Tesla as a transformative force in the automotive sector. We will analyze Tesla's contributions to advancing sustainable mobility through electric vehicles and renewable energy solutions, as well as the strategic challenges and ethical considerations the company faces.

Session 5 – Guest Lectures on “Corporate Sustainability: The human perspective” (in class)

Prof. Dr. [Nicolas Deuschel](#), Universidad Carlo III de Madrid: Sometimes sustainability doesn't fail because people don't care—but because they're too exhausted to care anymore. In this session, we follow Debora, an executive coach working with a U.S. government-owned bank ([HBR link](#)), as she helps teams make sense of 15 overlapping change initiatives, all launched with good intentions. Along the way, we uncover something often overlooked: that successful change isn't just about strategy—it's about how people are wired to respond to it. We explore a five-step method that helps leaders build mental flexibility through what's called a paradox mindset—so even those who aren't naturally wired for change can still engage with it. The session offers practical insights into making sustainability efforts stick—without burning people out.

Prof. Dr. [Laura Zimmerman](#), IE University Madrid: How can companies harness behavioral insights to promote sustainable consumption? We explore the consumer perspective on sustainability by examining decision-making processes, nudges, and choice architecture. We analyze strategies that incentivize sustainable behavior, discuss the conditions under which such approaches benefit both companies and consumers, and evaluate real-world examples of effective nudging. The session provides a critical understanding of how subtle interventions can steer consumer choices toward sustainability while enhancing corporate value.

Session 6 – Merck: Managing Vioxx (in class)

What happens when a company's product, once seen as a groundbreaking innovation, becomes the center of a global controversy? In this session, we analyze Merck's decision-making during the Vioxx crisis, focusing on the ethical, strategic, and reputational risks faced by the company. Through the lens of CEO Ray Gilmartin's leadership, we explore the complexities of balancing corporate values, patient safety, and financial considerations in a high-stakes environment. The case highlights the challenges of managing risk, maintaining trust, and making decisions amidst conflicting evidence and public scrutiny.

Session 7 – Pepsi Inc.: Establishing a Role in a Sustainable Society (in class)

What responsibilities do corporations bear when their products contribute to societal challenges? This session examines the role of PepsiCo in the obesity epidemic, focusing on the ethical and strategic implications of its product offerings. We will evaluate the company's responses to stakeholder pressures, and discuss the effectiveness of these efforts in addressing public health concerns while balancing corporate performance objectives.

Session 8 – Chiquita Brands International: Navigating Trade and Political Risk (in class)

How do businesses navigate complex political and trade environments while addressing corporate responsibility concerns? This session explores Chiquita Brands' historical legacy as a controversial player in the global banana market and its struggles with European Union trade policies. We analyze Chiquita's strategic responses to protectionist policies, its lobbying efforts, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding its historical operations in Latin America. The case illustrates the interplay between corporate strategy, political economy, and corporate reputation in international business.

Session 9 – Fairphone: Commercializing Radical Sustainability (in class)

Can sustainability be a core driver of competitive advantage in a highly competitive industry? In this session, we examine Fairphone's mission to disrupt the smartphone industry by embedding radical sustainability practices into its business model. We evaluate its attempts to balance commercial viability with its environmental and social goals, including challenges in its supply chain, marketing strategies, and product design. The case invites discussion on the complexities of operationalizing sustainability in a competitive landscape and the potential of transforming industries through sustainable innovation.

Session 10 - Levi Strauss & Co.: Driving Adoption of Green Chemistry (in class)

How can companies lead systemic change in their industries to address sustainability challenges? This session examines Levi Strauss & Co.'s Screened Chemistry Program, a pioneering effort to reduce hazardous chemical use in the apparel industry. We explore the strategic and operational challenges of scaling sustainability initiatives across global supply chains, the role of industry collaboration, and the tensions between competitive advantage and collective action. The case encourages critical thinking about leveraging innovation and partnerships to drive transformative change.

Session 11: Final Presentations (in class)

In this session, students will present the culmination of their group work, showcasing their analysis of a selected company and its sustainability challenges or opportunities. Each group will apply the frameworks and concepts explored throughout the course to assess how sustainability issues impact corporate strategy, operations, and stakeholder relationships. Presentations will include actionable recommendations for addressing the identified challenges or capitalizing on opportunities.

This session provides an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the course material, your ability to conduct in-depth analysis, and your skills in developing strategic recommendations. Presentations will be followed by a Q&A session, encouraging active engagement and critical feedback from peers and the instructor.

Course Prerequisites and Grading

- Attendance at the kick-off event and the final presentations is mandatory for successful completion of the course. During this event, you will not only receive important information about the course but also begin forming your working groups.
- This course is highly interactive, requiring full commitment to individual and group work on assigned topics and questions for every session. Your group members and fellow students rely on your support! Therefore, please review the syllabus carefully and make use of the kick-off session to clarify any doubts you might have. Dropping out of the course mid-way is a waste of your time and the time of your fellow student.

Grading

Based on the applicable examination regulations, the overall grade will be determined by calculating a weighted average of the following components:

Assignments:

To deepen your understanding of the cases and prepare for class discussions, you will be assigned specific questions for each session. These must be answered in advance and submitted via ILIAS prior to class. Over the course of the semester, you are required to successfully complete at least six assignments to pass this component. However, submitting additional assignments can positively impact your grade, as it demonstrates consistent effort and engagement with the material. Thoughtful and well-prepared responses are essential, as they form the basis of both your individual learning and the collective class discussion.

Case leadership:

Case discussion sessions begin with a short presentation of the case by the group designated as “case leaders” for that class. Throughout the course, you and your group will be responsible for presenting 1-2 cases, depending on the schedule. These presentations are a critical component of the course, as they serve as the foundation for the in-class discussion. Effective preparation and presentation are essential—not only to engage your peers but also to develop key skills such as critical thinking, public speaking, and the ability to synthesize complex information. Case leadership provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the material and to contribute meaningfully to the collective learning experience.

Final Presentations:

Each group is required to select a company and conduct an in-depth analysis of a specific sustainability challenge or opportunity the company faces. The goal is to apply the frameworks and concepts explored in the course to assess how sustainability issues impact corporate strategy, operations, and stakeholder relationships. Groups should also propose actionable recommendations for addressing the identified challenge.

Groups are free to select any company, with the following restrictions:

- No companies covered in class: You cannot choose any of the companies discussed in the course sessions (e.g., Tata Motors, Tesla, Merck, PepsiCo, Chiquita, Fairphone, Levi Strauss & Co.).

- For-profit companies only: The company must be privately or publicly owned and operate for profit. NGOs or government-owned entities are not permitted.

To ensure diversity in the presentations, each group must select a unique company and challenge/opportunity. Groups should communicate their selected company and topic to me by Session 9 to avoid duplication.

If you are uncertain about your chosen company or topic, I encourage you to reach out to me early for feedback. The earlier you consult with me, the more detailed advice I can provide.

Important Dates

Deadline for course registration	22.04.2025	Marvin
Kick-off and assignments of topics and groups	24.04.2025	9:00am in class
Deadline for course cancellation	07.05.2025	Marvin
Submission 1 st assignment: Trade-off Game	09.05.2025	ILIAS
Submission 2 nd assignment: Tata Motors	14.05.2025	ILIAS
Submission 3 rd assignment: Tesla	21.05.2025	ILIAS
Submission 4 th assignment: Merck	11.06.2025	ILIAS
Submission 5 th assignment: Pepsi	25.06.2025	ILIAS
Submission 6 th assignment: Chiquita	02.07.2025	ILIAS
Submission 7 th assignment: Fairphone	09.07.2025	ILIAS
Submission 8 th assignment: Levi Strauss	16.07.2025	ILIAS
Final presentations	24.07.2025	8:30 am in class