Communication for Sustainability (4 modules)

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Course Description:

Communication for Sustainability modules address several key gaps in how sustainability is commonly taught at university. Sustainability is often presented as a set of facts, frameworks, or goals, rather than as something that is actively shaped through communication processes. This course foregrounds how sustainability is explained, justified, questioned, and sometimes misrepresented through messaging, visuals, platforms, and narratives. It also gives students a critical approach to address greenwashing, equipping them with practical tools to identify weak or misleading claims, and to rewrite them in clearer, evidence-based ways. In addition, CSR is reframed from a branding exercise into a strategic practice that must align with stakeholders, operations, partnerships, and measurable impact. By grounding SDGs in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian cases, the modules also address the gap between global sustainability frameworks and local realities. Finally, the use of authentic tasks responds to the common disconnect between sustainability theory and professional practice.

These modules are important for university lecturers because they align sustainability education with the realities students will face after graduation. Most graduates will be required to communicate sustainability claims, manage stakeholder expectations, and navigate ethical and reputational risks, even if they are not sustainability specialists.

The modules support Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by embedding systems thinking, ethical reasoning, and stakeholder awareness into concrete activities rather than abstract discussion. They also increase student engagement and teaching credibility by addressing skepticism directly and using local, real-world cases that make sustainability feel tangible, contested, and accountable rather than idealistic or distant.

How to apply this course material into teaching?

Lecturers should treat this course as a practice-led, discussion-driven learning sequence, rather than a content-heavy lecture series. Core concepts such as CSR, materiality, stakeholder theory, greenwashing, and SDGs should be introduced briefly to establish a shared vocabulary, then immediately applied through local case analysis and authentic tasks. The lecturer's role is to *frame*, *scaffold*, and *challenge.* This approach sets conceptual boundaries, provides credible examples, and guides students to evaluate evidence and ethical implications. Teaching should consistently move between theory and application, using Vietnamese and Southeast Asian cases to test whether concepts hold up in real organizational contexts.

Which parts require direct instruction or theory explanation?

Direct instruction works best for foundational concepts that students may not have encountered before or may misunderstand. This includes defining sustainability communication, distinguishing CSR from sustainability strategy, explaining stakeholder salience and double materiality, outlining common forms of greenwashing, and introducing SDGs as a communication and accountability framework rather than a checklist. Short, focused lectures (10–20 minutes) are most effective here, particularly when paired with visual models, simple examples, and clear definitions that students can reuse in analysis and assessment.

Overall Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- **Explain key concepts** of sustainability communication, including CSR, stakeholder engagement, greenwashing, and materiality.
- **Critically evaluate sustainability claims** using ethical and evidence-based frameworks.
- **Design communication strategies** that align with authentic sustainability goals and avoid misleading practices.
- **Align organizational communication with relevant SDGs** to demonstrate broader societal impact.
- **Measure and improve communication effectiveness** through stakeholder feedback and data-driven evaluation.

SDG Integration: Aside from SDG 12 and SDG 17, the course doesn't explicitly address the Sustainable Development Goals. Rather, students are tasked with identifying how a variety of goals can be aligned within communication plans and strategies.

Contact: If you have any questions regarding this teaching resource, please contact the author via email: justin.battin@rmit.edu.vn

Module 1: Foundations of Communication for Sustainability

Module Description:

Module 1 introduces the core tools students will use throughout the course: stakeholder mapping, the CSR vs. sustainability strategy distinction, and materiality. Using recent readings plus Vietnam/SEA cases, students learn to judge whether sustainability messages are credible, evidence-based, and aligned with real impacts, or at risk of greenwashing. The pre-class task builds individual analysis, and the in-class activities turn that into shared patterns and practical skills.

This module is the foundation for everything that follows. Students reuse stakeholder and materiality thinking to evaluate CSR programs in Module 2, detect and correct weak claims in Module 3, and design authentic, SDG-aligned communication strategies in Module 4. The module sets the course's central habit: linking claims to evidence, audiences, and consequences.

Learning Objectives:

- Map stakeholders and concerns
- Distinguish CSR vs. sustainability strategy
- Explain materiality and communication consequences.

Module Activities:

Module 1 Pre-class activities

Purpose: To help students link sustainability communication theory (CSR, stakeholders, materiality, greenwashing) to real examples from Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Pre-class Activity 1: Reading: choose one article from each category:

CSR and Stakeholder Engagement
Kargbo, U., Terrence, B., & Palmer, T. B. (2025). Redefining Corporate Social Responsibility: The Role of Strategic Communication Practices. *Sustainability*, *17*(9), 4226. https://doi.org/10.3390/su17094226

Pham, Viet Anh (2025) "Recognition Over Performance: A Critical Review of ESG Practices in Vietnam" *International Review of Public Policy & Jurisprudence.* https://irpj.euclid.int/articles/recognition-over-performance-a-critical-review-of-esg-practices-in-vietnam/

Materiality and Digital Communication
Han, S., Liu, Z., Deng, Z., Gupta, S., & Mikalef, P. (2024). Exploring the effect of digital CSR communication on firm performance: A deep learning approach. *Decision Support Systems, 176,* 114047. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2023.114047

Famularo, J. (2023). Corporate social responsibility communication in the ICT sector: Digital issues, greenwashing, and materiality. *International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility, 8,* 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40991-023-00082-8

Greenwashing and Ethics

Vietnam Briefing. (2024). Greenwashing in Vietnam: Assessing legal consequences and future direction. *Vietnam Briefing*. Retrieved Aug 24 2025, from https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/greenwashing-in-vietnam-assessing-legal-consequences-and-future-direction.html

Persakis, A., Nikolopoulos, T., Negkakis, I. C., & others. (2025). Greenwashing in marketing: A systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s12208-025-00452-x

Pre-class Activity 2: Short written response

Write 200–250 words in total and post to the online class discussion forum before the session.

Pick one real-world case:
- Cocoon Vietnam: a local brand using transparent CSR campaigns (no animal testing, biodiversity).
- Vietnamese ESG recognition vs. performance gap: companies winning awards without clear net-zero targets.
- Greenwashing risks in Vietnam: firms making unverified environmental claims, with legal exposure under advertising and consumer protection laws.

Apply concepts from your readings:
- What insight does the reading give you about authenticity in CSR or materiality?
- Does your chosen case show aligned communication and action, or at risk of greenwashing?
- What stakeholder group (consumers, regulators, investors, communities) is most affected?
- What material topic (e.g. packaging waste, labor conditions, carbon emissions) is being communicated well, or not at all?

Module 1 In class-activities

Sharing Session

Goal: Turn individual pre-class responses into a collective understanding of stakeholder influence and materiality in Vietnamese/SEA contexts.

- **In groups,** choose select students to briefly share their pre-class answer
- **Identify overlaps.** Teams identify three stakeholders and top three sustainability topics appearing across their individual work.
- **Build a combined stakeholder map.** Using a simple salience model (influence/legitimacy/urgency), teams plot which groups must be engaged by companies to avoid greenwashing or credibility gaps.

- **Mini presentation (2 min per group maximum).** Groups briefly explain which stakeholder-topic combinations are most material and why they matter now.

Double Materiality

Goal: Help students understand how companies' impact on society/environment (inside-out) and risks to the company (outside-in) shape communication.

Instructor guided presentation: Use one Vietnamese example (e.g., Marou Chocolate or a large FMCG brand) to show how a topic like packaging waste is both impactful to society and financially risky if mismanaged.

Group response task: Each team selects one issue from their stakeholder work, and using the white boards identify:

- Impact on society/environment: what harm or benefit occurs if a company acts or fails to act?
- Risk to company: what regulatory, reputational, or market consequences might follow?
- Groups should briefly outline how this topic should be communicated to two different stakeholders (e.g., regulators vs. consumers).
- Class share-out: highlight how "double materiality" forces communication to become evidence-driven.

Rapid Fire Activity: Authentic vs. Superficial CSR Challenge

Goal: Make students practice identifying credible vs. questionable sustainability messages in the local context.

Instructor provides 3–4 short CSR messages (from real Vietnamese or SEA companies)

Samples could include:

- A beverage company claiming carbon neutrality without data.
- Cocoon Vietnam highlighting reusable packaging and animal-protection partnerships.
- A property developer pledging "green buildings" without referencing standards.

Groups classify each claim as:

- Authentic and well-supported
- Potentially misleading / vague
- High risk of greenwashing

Groups rewrite one weak claim into a stronger, transparent version using clear scope and measurable proof

Post-class Reflection

- Students address the following prompt: "What surprised you about how Vietnamese or SEA companies communicate sustainability? Where do you see the biggest credibility gaps?"
- Students write one key takeaway and one question for further study