

## **Sustainability in the HE curriculum: the drivers and direction**

In February 2007 there was an international meeting in Amsterdam to discuss the implementation of education for sustainable development within HE curricula in Western European countries. The England position paper, submitted at the time, documented the authors' views of the positive and negative activities and processes affecting the embedding of sustainability in the curriculum (Sterling and Scott, 2007).

This mini piece of research has been conducted 14 months later to reassess the situation and this short summary outlines the results, focusing on current drivers and the direction of the ESD agenda.

The methodology adopted for this small project included a search of a sample of university websites, an overview of national documentation and an email to two JISC discussion lists (the EAUC ESD list and the Learning Development in Higher Education Network LDHEN list) followed by discussions and networking with colleagues.

The email responses were few: although there was much interest expressed in the project, only a few respondents actually answered the questions posed. However, colleagues who did reply provided some interesting and comprehensive responses.

A trawl of \*30% (n=32) of English University websites revealed that 65% had some environmental or sustainability information on the extranet. 31% had some form of policy or strategy which focused on campus and 28% had formal documentation which featured sustainability in the curriculum. Several institutions had centres, networking groups or sustainability newsletters.

### **Summary of ESD activity in the sector**

#### Positives

- ESD is being embedded into curriculum, although this remains patchy both between and within HEIs.
- There are an increasing number of centres, networking groups and sustainability newsletters emerging within HE.

Some examples are

- Aberdeen, [ACES](#)
- Cambridge, [Sustainability readers digest](#)
- City University London, [City's sustainability group](#)
- Bradford, [Ecoversity](#)
- Kingston, [C-scape CETL](#)
- Plymouth, [Centre for Sustainable Futures CETL](#)
- Gloucestershire [Centre for Active Learning \(CeAL\)](#)
- HEFCE (2008) have now published the results of a baseline study. [A strategic review of SD in HE](#)
- 17 of the 25 HEA subject centres now address ESD.

\*One in four universities was selected from the Universities UK (2008) list.

- The HEA report (Cade, 2008) [Employable Graduates for Responsible Employers](#) found that there is;
  - evidence of employer demand for graduates who possess sustainability knowledge and skills
  - a growing body of students who seek socially and environmentally responsible employers and universities.
- The HEA has recently awarded mini grants to encourage embedding sustainable development into policies and practices in the learning and teaching curricula.
- HEFCE have recently announced the 'Revolving Green Fund' which will provide approximately 30-40 million over the next three years to cut HEI's green house gas emissions. However, none of this funding is earmarked for curriculum.
- There have been several successful and well attended events and conferences on ESD and more are on the calendar
- The HEA ESD project have published the [ESD Interdisciplinary discussion series report](#)

#### Negatives

- The [HEA 2008-2013 Draft Strategic plan](#) (currently out for consultation) makes no mention of sustainability or sustainable development.
- Although some HEI's have sustainability strategies, others seem to place little or no importance on ESD at a strategic level, nor do they seek to publicise any 'green' credentials they may have.
- There is a noticeable gap between the sustainability agenda for campus and curriculum, greater emphasis being on the former.
- Even in the so called 'green' institutions there are pockets at all levels that do not appear to engage.
- Future funding for CETL projects remains uncertain.
- Some HEA subject centres have not yet embraced ESD.
- ESD requires interdisciplinary approaches which are often difficult to achieve.
- Students need high level skills and competencies to engage with the sustainability agenda. They need to be able to think critically, make value judgements, rationalise and make decisions for change. It is a moot point how far the HE curricular currently delivers these skills and competences.

HEI's are variable in their approach to sustainability in the curriculum. It may not be desirable to impose homogeneous content or pedagogy, but allow them to evolve and experiment (Gough, 2008<sup>a</sup>) There is evidence that most universities are embedding within existing modules across a wide variety of subject areas and some have developed bespoke modules for sustainability, either generic or within disciplines. For example, the University of Manchester's interdisciplinary SD module, shared between engineering and physical science and a Language and Ecology module at Gloucestershire which takes a transdisciplinary approach.

Interdisciplinary teaching is an essential ingredient of ESD (Brookes and Ryan, 2008) but is not always easy to achieve (Gough, 2008<sup>a</sup>). Sustainability can not be successfully added as a strand, it is not a bolt on. ESD should be aligned horizontally within policy or strategy. It must be "Interdisciplinary and holistic, embedded in the whole curriculum, not as a separate subject" (Martin, 2008).

Chalkley (2008) identifies the institutional 'silo' as a key barrier to successful integration. The lack of staff links, institutional timetabling, different and complex pedagogies within disciplines and the RAE exercise which is conducted under disciplinary headings, all restrict interdisciplinary teaching and research (Gough, 2008<sup>b</sup>).

Sustainability within many HEI's is fragmented between curriculum and campus (estates). They may have different approaches, with the drivers for campus change coming from legislation, accreditation, cost saving etc. while change to the curriculum requires the motivation and integrity of individuals. Policy and guidance is often aimed at either one area or the other. Organisations such as the EAUC are working towards linking curriculum and campus, utilising the expertise in each area to support and inform the other. Chalkley (2008) believes that 'we are all teachers now'. Academics need to work with estate managers linking sustainable institutional management with teaching. To establish this sort of culture change will take time. It is easier to start with energy efficiency projects than to forge new and possibly difficult liaisons with unfamiliar areas of the institution.

The HEA website is well populated with ESD publications and case studies and the subject centres offer guidance to support the integration of sustainability into the curriculum. However, it is financial resources that can make a significant difference in driving an agenda forward. The HEA ESD Project is confident that their budget will be renewed for the 2008-9 year, but the level of funding is currently unknown. This year their budget was restricted and limited their work to dissemination only. Despite this the project is very active, with 15 small research projects about to report, a series of seminars on interdisciplinary teaching and a national conference in 2007. However, the proposed 2008-2013 strategic plan (currently out for consultation) of the wider HE Academy (within which the ESD Project sits as a small part), makes no mention of sustainability or sustainable development. We await the outcome of the consultation process to see if the draft plan has acted as a catalyst to successfully rouse the champions within the sector. Furthermore, recent reports published by the DIUS, (A new university challenge, 2008; Higher Education for the Workforce, 2007) make no mention of sustainability either.

This piece of research has not revealed any new information about the sector. It is however, reassuring that the findings are in line with those reported in HEFCE's strategic review, published in January this year.

## **Conclusion**

The trawl of institutional websites found that a considerable number have some ESD focus and almost a third have documents on sustainability within the curriculum. Discussions with colleagues working in ESD in HE has provided a useful insight into the activities within institutions and their perspective on the direction of the sustainability agenda nationally. It is clear that without a strong lead from national agencies the ESD agenda will remain open to interpretation by institutions, faculties, programmes and individuals. In the view of many this is a positive approach, providing opportunities for experimentation and academic freedom.

Government agencies and departments have provided the lead for HEI's and their impact on the ESD agenda has been significant. HEFCE and other bodies have committed to SD and will hopefully continue to support the academic community while they test the pedagogy. It is therefore important that sufficient funding is available in the future.

As sustainability works its way into our HE teaching practice and curriculum, our concerns may need to focus on the skills and competencies required for ESD. Are our students able to self-reflect, work critically and effectively to deal with the issues that emerge? Such an aptitude requires a holistic approach, an ability to engage in deep learning processes, make value judgements and adapt and manage change. Despite all our efforts, if students do not possess these abilities, HEI's might find it difficult to produce sustainability literate graduates.

*"If we really want to bring about pro-sustainability behavioural change, then we have to encourage students and staff to provide the right conditions and infrastructure to support this desired behaviour, and then encourage, support and exemplify the direction we want to go in" (Cleary, 2007).*

Report for the Centre for Sustainable Futures  
Julia Dawson May 2008

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