

# **Education for Sustainable Development: Strategic Consultations among English HEIs**

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report contains the findings of a series of consultations and seminars at three English higher education institutions (HEIs), designed to identify the issues faced by HEIs with regard to Education for Sustainable Development. Developmental work by the Higher Education Academy's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Project and Subject Centres had uncovered a wide range of curriculum and research initiatives in UK HEIs, within and between disciplines. However, feedback from academics pointed to difficulties in achieving structural and strategic integration, in developing greater synergy between research, teaching and campus sustainability practices, and in maximising local and external engagement. It was apparent that further analysis at institution level would be informative and plans were made to consult with a sample of individual HEIs and to hold seminars at each of them, to inform future planning within the HEIs and to guide the strategic thinking of the ESD Project.

An initial sample of three HEIs was chosen as representative of different 'types' of UK HEIs and their different contributions to the sustainability agenda; each had a very specific angle of engagement over time. The University of East Anglia and University of Gloucestershire were selected as examples of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, while Harper Adams University College represents the smaller 'monotype' HEI, with its own specialist expertise. In Section 2, the consultation process is described, with brief profiles of each HEI and their strategic needs with regard to sustainability. Section 3 reports on the seminar discussions, the positive features identified and the challenges faced at each HEI. In Section 4, a comparative summary is provided, outlining the most significant issues that emerged consistently across the three HEIs. Finally, Section 5 contains the recommendations for consideration by the ESD Project and other organisations working across the sector. This report was compiled by the facilitators, Dr Colin Brooks and Dr Alex Ryan, and contains their analysis of the outcomes.

It is hoped that the findings will be of relevance to all those supporting the sustainability agenda in HE. One of the clearest messages to emerge was that the responses of HEIs to this complex and fast-moving policy agenda must be context-specific and guided by their local identities. It was apparent that HEIs need to engage with sustainability at different levels at certain points in time – and that their strategic needs therefore vary widely. The views of academics about the problems and opportunities were shared by the staff occupying other roles who took part, which highlighted the value of involving all parties in sustainability decision-making, from students and external partners to university governors.

Consideration of the place of sustainable development leads naturally into consideration of the wider benefits and methods of cross-institutional planning: it was evident that providing clear and costed support for sustainability at executive level is a significant priority for generating strategic coherence and ownership. Funding councils are quite properly concerned to avoid specific requirements in the area of ESD, but at sector level, within and between institutions, there needs to be encouragement to talk through difficult operational, educational and curricular issues, and to bolster confidence to make what can be quite complex organisational changes<sup>1</sup>.

It also emerged that there is a pressing need to gain more specific understanding about the skills implied in the term 'sustainability literacy' and the links that can be made with the implications of the Leitch report<sup>2</sup> and the enterprise agenda. Our recommendations are targeted towards further capacity-building and research activities, to provide the strategic information that is needed about student choices and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, one UK institution (not part of the present project) has appointed a leading environmental historian to a joint post in its department of History and its Business School.

<sup>2</sup> HMSO (2006) *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills*.

sustainability skills, and to provide support for senior management within HEIs in developing integrated organisational strategies and interdisciplinary initiatives for 'ESD'.

## **2. CONSULTATION METHODS AND HEI PROFILES**

These events were designed to bring together a range of participants, both interdisciplinary and cross-institutional. The intention was to take a 'whole institution' approach that would engage academic and non-academic staff, students and senior management in these discussions. In the first instance, a 'pilot' visit was made to the University of East Anglia (UEA), which provided the foundations for the series. We are extremely grateful to those present at the UEA event for their enthusiastic participation, which underlined the importance of involving all parties in the university community in these debates. Following the success of the UEA event, the series was developed and the process was adapted to the priorities of two more institutions: Harper Adams University College and University of Gloucestershire. The sections below outline the initial consultations that took place; these revealed specific areas in which senior managers could see the benefits of facilitated discussion, which then informed the format adopted for each event.

### **2.1 University of East Anglia (UEA) – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

Our engagement with UEA took the form of an institution-wide seminar at which representatives from across the university were invited to reflect on the relationship between interdisciplinarity and sustainability. Initial consultation with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) identified the need for debate among the different areas of academic expertise within the institution and to harness this to established sustainability practices on the campus. UEA has a substantial profile in research, teaching and external engagement in two academic areas close to the sustainability agenda: Environmental Science and Development Studies. There was a desire for further interchange between these two disciplinary fields, as well as concern that other areas of expertise within the university were not being fully harnessed to the emerging sustainability agenda. The seminar was designed with brief presentations from these two prominent disciplines, senior estates staff, and those responsible for institution-wide curriculum management, followed by small group discussion and a final plenary. Forty participants attended, including the Vice-Chancellor and both Pro-Vice Chancellors, the Chair of Council, a range of academic staff and senior staff responsible for knowledge transfer, external business, organisational planning and educational development. Student Union representatives took part throughout the day and in the plenary panel, as did invited external guests from the Leadership Foundation, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and C-SCAIPe: the Centre for Sustainable Communities Achieved through Integrated Professional Education (a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning [CETL]).

### **2.2 Harper Adams University College (HAUC) – 16<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

We approached HAUC with a view to understanding the issues facing a specialist institution with practical expertise relevant to the sustainability agenda, in terms of its strong focus on graduate employability and skills, and its growing track record in the development of sustainable technologies. Consultation with the Head of the Crops Group and the Business Development Manager revealed that HAUC was about to revise its sustainability strategy and wanted to gain input from staff to inform the future trajectory of the institution. A seminar was designed to engage representatives across the institution and 35 members of staff attended, including the Principal and a College Governor, the Farm Manager, Business Development Manager and Office Services Manager. Colleagues from various academic disciplines were joined by the Director of ASPIRE: Advancing Skills for Professionals in Rural Education CETL (located at HAUC), the Curriculum Development Officer, the Student Union President and two undergraduate students on sustainability placements, plus a colleague from HAUC's Turkish partner university. A summary of the issues and action points was provided for senior colleagues to inform their revision of strategic documentation.

### **2.3 University of Gloucestershire (UoG) – 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2008**

At UoG, after initial discussion with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, our consultation process involved the Dean of Teaching and Learning Development and the newly-appointed Director of Sustainability. Their primary aim was to maximise the university's existing profile in sustainability by encouraging further discussion among the university senior management with regard to the strategic integration of research, teaching, knowledge transfer and estates. An immediate priority was to discuss ways to build on existing curricular activities and to harness these to the newly-developed Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy. Together we designed a seminar to engage members of the Senior Management Group in these discussions, with the aim of highlighting the most beneficial activities to date and any unresolved issues of concern for future planning. The seminar was opened by the Vice-Chancellor and involved 20 senior members of staff, including the Deputy Vice-Chancellor; those responsible for estates management, research and knowledge exchange, ICT and library services; and a number of Heads of Academic and Professional Departments. As a result of the process, a strategic report was compiled for colleagues at UoG for presentation to the university executive in support of further strategic developments.

### **3. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES WITHIN EACH HEI**

This section contains summaries of the findings at each HEI, based on the initial consultations and the main topics of discussion at the seminars. These notes provide an analysis of the main features and achievements of these institutions with regard to sustainability, as well as the pressing issues at stake and the areas highlighted for caution and concern in each case<sup>3</sup>.

#### **3.1 University of East Anglia (UEA)**

UEA has an extremely strong international research profile in Environmental Sciences, together with a number of related institutes, including the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and the Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment. The university had recently secured a substantial award from the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) for "Carbon Connections", an initiative to generate carbon reduction technologies and behavioural change, with various sub-projects operating in collaboration with local business and community partners. Its Development Studies profile is also prominent and wide-ranging, with an active consultancy unit. The institution has a reputation for interdisciplinarity, with programmes and modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels that engage students across the social and natural science boundaries.

A substantial amount of discussion was devoted to the problem of deepening the interdisciplinary engagement, for example by creating further provision to integrate the expertise in Environmental Sciences and Development Studies. There were also concerns about areas of expertise within the university that were not yet integrated into existing interdisciplinary initiatives related to sustainability, for example in Landscape and Local History (and within the Centre of East Anglian Studies). The significant practical challenges involved in implementing an interdisciplinary vision within the overall range of programmes were a particular focus of these discussions, for example in relation to the idea of creating a university-wide undergraduate module. It was noted that there were particular difficulties in terms of recruiting students and staff with suitable academic backgrounds for the type of interdisciplinary work required for effective sustainability learning. This raised the question as to whether such study was more appropriate and most fruitful at postgraduate level.

Another significant feature of the university's profile is in estates management and the campus has various buildings that have attracted international recognition due to the sustainable construction principles incorporated into their design. The seminar had specific input from the estates division, who

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<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, a level of significant detail from these discussions cannot be represented here, but a complete record of the seminar discussions has been provided to those colleagues with whom we consulted at each institution, for internal use in the furtherance of their strategic objectives.

articulated their 'long life, loose fit' approach to construction, procurement and biodiversity on campus. Carbon emissions on the university estate have seen a per capita reduction of 55% on the 1990 baseline and a further reduction of approximately 70% is anticipated with the introduction of a new biomass gasifier CHP unit (the first of its type in England). It was noted that students are keen to engage in projects connected to the campus environment and that this potential has yet to be fully harnessed, particularly via the creation of further synergies with the "Carbon Connections" projects supported by the HEIF award.

The question of marketing UEA in line with the 'green' agenda was also raised. There was some caution about narrow 'branding', but in view of the university's research strength, its reputation for nurturing academic pioneers in Environmental Sciences, and its supportive estates practices, moves in this direction are under way. Staff commented on the problems of confidence that threaten progress on sustainability: there was a sense that students often became pessimistic when faced with global inequities and overwhelmed by the complexity of sustainability decision-making. Student representatives expressed their need to integrate disciplinary perspectives and gain 'real-world' experience via internships, to develop the confidence and rhetorical skills to deal persuasively with complexity and uncertainty.

### **3.2 Harper Adams University College (HAUC)**

At HAUC, discussions focused on the development of sustainable technologies and knowledge transfer, the means of improving estates practices, and approaches to student skills development and professional practice. One of the most important parameters for these discussions concerned the relatively small size and the particular local setting of the institution. This raised certain challenges in terms of sustainability practices, for example in the quantity of students and staff who drive to the campus. At the same time, the institution has a particularly strong profile in terms of the technologies used and developed on site, such as its biomass energy generator and a further project to develop an anaerobic waste digester that would enable considerable progress towards the target of generating renewable energy for the entire campus.

The practical and technical expertise of HAUC is reflected in its pedagogic approach, which is strongly geared to employability and the practical application of knowledge. HAUC hosts ASPIRE: the Advancing Skills for Professionals in Rural Education CETL and every student undertakes a year-long placement, giving them a unique connection to issues of practice and production. Professional bodies are closely involved in the creation of programmes, there are active links to industry research and development divisions, and feedback from employers pointed to the confidence, pragmatism and entrepreneurial attitude of HAUC graduates. Particular modules with direct connections to sustainability issues have been incorporated into existing programmes; for example Conservation of Natural Resources, a second year module offered to students on Agriculture and Countryside and Environment programmes.

The greatest challenge for improving student learning in sustainability was considered to be the restricted range of expertise within the institution. Its particular structure forced individuals to take responsibility for developing an overall view, rather than devolve responsibility for certain dimensions to other specifically-qualified academics (as might be possible in a larger university). Teaching provision about the ethical and philosophical dimensions of sustainability can be restricted, for example in relation to issues of corporate social responsibility and political matters. This was considered to be a significant challenge, although it was clear that students are enthusiastic about engaging with these issues. Expertise in sustainable technologies was not yet being reflected in programme provision and this was viewed as an opportunity that could be harnessed via the creation of a module geared to HAUC's technical innovations and strong profile in agricultural engineering. Those present agreed that one of the most pressing needs was for an internal map to log the range of expertise of staff, to ensure that staff from all sections of the institution could find their appropriate niches within an inclusive institutional strategy.

Various issues emerged in relation to the institution's local context and, in this respect, the contrast between rural and urban life was a distinct undercurrent. One regional partner for the planned waste digester, Advantage West Midlands, was understood to have a distinct focus on urban regeneration, despite its official regional remit which includes a number of rural areas. Student attitudes to their own sustainability practices were considered to be problematic; there were comments that many students at

HAUC were from rural backgrounds and that at times they had difficulty in understanding the implications of urban culture for the sustainability agenda.

Since the seminar was geared specifically to the revision of HAUC's existing sustainability policy, a series of action points was agreed towards the end of the session. The immediate priorities identified were the mapping of staff expertise and sustainability components in the existing curriculum, and further awareness-raising among staff and students to promote sustainability practices on campus (with the priorities being enhanced recycling and transport solutions). Developmental issues concerned the balance of investments targeted at sustainability technologies over the medium and long term; ways to increase consultancy activities and to generate rural training and employment opportunities; and the need to create further mechanisms for problem-based and interdisciplinary learning, particularly via group project work.

### **3.3 University of Gloucestershire (UoG)**

The UoG seminar had a distinct purpose, having been designed to take place among the Senior Management Group alone, rather than a wider range of staff and student participants. The event was focused in this way due to the strategic range and depth of the initiatives being undertaken, in order to embed sustainability more comprehensively into the 'core culture' of the institution. UoG also has a strong background in sustainable estates management, having been one of the first universities to gain ISO 14001 status in recognition of its environmental performance in building construction, energy use, waste management, procurement and curriculum. This profile in estates practices was considered to be a good platform, although uncertainties in the external climate were beginning to cause some concern and the complexities of managing an organisation spread across five campuses were also noted.

The university has a history of curricular initiatives for sustainability, generated by individual enthusiasts at 'grass-roots' level, particularly in Languages, Architecture, Tourism and Business studies. It was agreed that this 'bottom-up' approach had been an essential principle in terms of ownership and academic credibility. Pedagogic innovations for sustainability featured as one of the most significant and positive achievements at UoG to date, particularly since there have been useful synergies with other teaching and learning initiatives (such as the Centre for Active Learning CETL). These achievements had been recognised in the publication of a collection of essays: *Greener By Degrees: Exploring Sustainability through Higher Education Curricula*<sup>4</sup>. The academic continuity of some of these earlier activities had been affected by subsequent changes to the curriculum and the expertise base (a situation by no means unique to UoG) and there was some concern about the effects of such changes on student perceptions and engagement.

It was acknowledged that earlier innovations had taken place largely without explicit consolidation at institutional level and that this was now being operationalised in order to secure the process of integrating sustainability across the curriculum. Harnessing sustainability principles to the new learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) strategy was an operational priority at the time of the seminar and it was noted that earlier explorations with regard to including sustainability in validation and review processes ought to be revisited. Colleagues were clear about the continuing professional development (CPD) implications of such an approach; to engage staff in this way would present challenges in some subject areas where there was varied experience in sustainability issues among teaching teams (and perhaps little precedent to draw upon at sector level, via collegial support within the disciplinary community). Questions of academic autonomy figured in these conversations about the extent to which formal sustainability provision should be a requirement across the institution. This was understood to be a matter for ongoing debate as the academic agenda takes shape, particularly since UoG is adopting a comprehensive and innovative approach in terms of academic strategy.

There was much discussion about seeking institution-wide agreement on the principles needed for coherent strategy, particularly in relation to community engagement and knowledge exchange. It was thought that the 'fine grain' of ethical, political and economic decision-making involved in these matters would need further contemplation, and that this was relatively uncharted terrain for any university, causing

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<sup>4</sup> Edited by Carolyn Roberts & Jane Roberts and published by University of Gloucestershire (2007).

uncertainties about the means of achieving an appropriate strategic balance. It was recognised that the university would need to further clarify the nature and benefits of its sustainability research and consultancy expertise for presentation to business and community partners. Tensions between local and global engagement were recognised as politically and economically loaded, particularly considering the need to generate further business via the international market. A great deal of discussion concerned the local context and the need to synthesise sustainability strategies with lifelong learning initiatives, given the historic lack of HE provision in the region. The promotion of 'sustainable communities' was identified as a fundamental priority at institutional, individual, local and global levels, but it was agreed that achieving these various longer-term aims would take time and experimentation. The new United Nations University Regional Centre of Expertise (which has a remit on public engagement for sustainability) status was seen as an important vehicle to initiate developments in this area.

#### **4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC ISSUES**

A number of items recurred across these three case studies and the different HEI 'types', as features for consideration by any HEI planning the further development of its sustainability profile, and regardless of differences in local context and academic expertise. These are listed as separate items below, although there are clear interconnections between them.

##### **4.1 Academic Rationale**

One significant debate that surfaced at all three events concerned the degree to which 'sustainability' can be a required point of strategic engagement within the curriculum. Some academics view the ethical subtext to sustainability as a benefit, whilst others see it as a potential compromise to academic freedom. Curriculum management issues arose in relation to debates over compulsory versus optional provision and in the degree to which institution-wide sustainability education could be enshrined in validation, assessment and quality processes. Additional concerns were raised on various fronts: there are disciplines where engagement with sustainability is currently limited or negligible, and disciplinary migration, market shifts and course closures often frustrate sustainability initiatives. Academic credibility is essential for securing ownership and permanence, but the instability and flexibility of definitions of 'sustainable development' means the concept is also easily co-opted to various interests. Awareness of this possibility, together with the conceptual variability of the concept, means that solutions with regard to the depth and formality of embedding remain a matter for decision by each HEI. ESD will flourish when it resonates with the academic interests of faculty members and the logic of academic development: this is already the case for a wide range of staff and disciplines.

##### **4.2 Economic Rationale**

The reconciliation of 'economic development' and 'sustainable development' was understood to be one of the most complex questions facing HEIs, and a matter for consideration in academic, ethical and pragmatic terms. Financial drivers were crucial for all three HEIs, all of which could see the benefits of 'branding' in relation to sustainability initiatives but for the most part remained cautious about the consequences of such explicit moves. First, the fact that effective environmental management strategies are becoming increasingly commonplace across the sector reduces the scope for distinctiveness of practice. Second, the conceptual porosity of sustainability, its ethical subtext and its changeable remit, lead to considerable caution with regard to changing academic strategy at institutional level. International recruitment also featured prominently in these discussions of economic imperatives; inevitable compromises were identified over financial investment, in relation to the local/global balance of strategic and resource commitments. The relative benefits of distance learning initiatives, overseas delivery and UK-based international students were discussed, as was the potential for 'hidden agendas' in global recruitment being harnessed to the sustainability agenda. At all three seminars, there was evidence of a desire to engage further at local and regional levels, finding effective ways to link economic development to community development, and to enhance the civic role of the HEI.

### **4.3 Civic Rationale**

The question of how to locate the civic role of the university was the focus of much debate at each HEI and was understood to be a crucial decision-making factor in relation to the balance of 'economic and sustainable development'. The tension between global and local engagement was noted above; whilst a number of people raised doubts about the carbon and the 'colonial' implications of overseas partnerships, these were sometimes offset against the value placed upon greater opportunities for global educational development. However, it was pointed out that since notions of 'service' are noticeably absent in the career and recognition structures of academics, there is less incentive at individual level to engage in educational initiatives in the local and regional community. The pressure to develop teaching and research without consideration of the sustainability principles involved was considered to be a substantial hindrance to innovation, particularly at 'grass-roots' level in the communities surrounding HEIs. It was thought that further consideration should be given to connections between ESD and strategies for local educational engagement in the form of lifelong learning, professional education, short courses and widening participation initiatives.

### **4.4 Student Engagement**

At all three HEIs, colleagues commented that student engagement with sustainability was varied and this was clearly a cause for concern<sup>5</sup>. An instrumental approach to employability in the light of rising tuition fees was held to be partly responsible, together with uncertainty about the demand for sustainability skills among employers. It was noted that students vary in the degree to which they accept sustainability agendas, and that their sense of optimism or pessimism about the environmental and economic future is likely to be a causal factor, affecting both their choices of programme and the degree to which they become involved with sustainability practices on campus. Participants underlined the need for students to be engaged in sustainability education in diverse ways; within and beyond the curriculum, on and off campus, formally and informally. There was a shared view across the HEIs that opportunities for student learning linked to campus sustainability practices had not yet been fully harnessed, nor had the potential for using Personal Development Planning (PDP) been fully explored. This perceived need to widen the range of educational interventions was underlined by the emphasis students placed on interdisciplinary experience in applied settings. The complexities of these issues of student engagement led to an overall sense of there being greater value in the creation of formal interdisciplinary programmes at postgraduate level, to mediate the potential problems of undergraduate student confidence and competence.

### **4.5 External Partners**

Questions of external engagement featured significantly, as an under-developed area of the HE sustainability agenda, particularly as it was recognised that at present, high academic status is still more easily achieved through established research routes. Among the HEIs, uncertainties were expressed about the development of knowledge exchange, particularly in collaborations with local community partners. Issues of local competition and mutual benefit needed further consideration in most cases, as did complex ethical decisions related to the sustainability principles espoused by different types and sizes of organisation. Local government and regional development agencies were considered to be a priority for further engagement in support of local communities and for enhancing the civic responsibilities of HEIs. The issues surrounding the Leitch proposals and the emergent enterprise agenda featured regularly in these discussions, in terms of creating useful synergies with other forms of local educational provision and the lifelong learning agenda. Employer engagement and work-based learning were prioritised, given the persisting questions about market demands and the prominence both staff and students ascribed to 'real-world' pedagogies for sustainability.

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<sup>5</sup> Although conditions are changing; it was reported to a recent HEFCE consultation that student engagement with (and expectations of) sustainable campus practices is developing faster than curricular provision.

## 4.6 Interdisciplinarity

Most of the academic and student contributors at these seminars were keen to stress the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability questions, and the need to foster skills for interdisciplinary decision-making and teamwork in students. The applied, ethical subtext to the sustainability agenda resonates with other interdisciplinary topics and, whilst there are concerns about the imposition of values (on both staff and students), there is agreement about the need to generate interdisciplinary provision for sustainability education. Organisational structures in HEIs were often found to be problematic, particularly in terms of segregated departmental budgeting and curriculum management obstacles. Issues at sector level were the source of considerable frustration, although there was acknowledgement of progress in the collaborative interdisciplinary award streams organised by the research funding councils<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, it was agreed that far more support is necessary to build capacity and to overcome historical problems, such as the disciplinary focus of Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) panels and the single discipline training of the majority of academic staff, which has repercussions for curriculum design, teaching and doctoral examining. Other problematic issues included the lack of interdisciplinary subject benchmarks (a matter to which the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] is returning) and the potential for inter-institutional collaborations to be thwarted by competition among HEIs.

## 5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This project has engaged a diverse sample of UK HEIs; they have proved to be highly informative case studies and we think that the findings merit further consideration across the sector. This process has highlighted various themes at organisational level, in the tensions between academic, economic and sustainable development. In particular, we heard of the difficulties faced by faculty when dealing with 'mixed messages'; there was sound economic sense and excellent civic justification for involvement with regional agendas, but these usually involve project-based, interdisciplinary and group-work, which appears to be at odds with the current incentives of the RAE. ESD is dependent upon the professional skills of faculty, but to achieve its full potential, it requires faculty to go beyond the skills implicit in the division of labour model. Single discipline-based notions of faculty expertise represent a sizeable strategic challenge for coherent ESD in terms of recruitment and curriculum planning at organisational level, which underlines the need for further capacity-building at sector level.

These institutions were seeking to focus their engagement by emphasising different areas of expertise: embedding sustainability within learning, teaching and assessment strategies (UoG); developing interdisciplinary programmes targeted to sustainability (UEA); and promoting graduate employability and sustainability skills (HAUC). The need to protect academic autonomy and to encourage ownership of the agenda in individual HEIs and at all levels of the organisation was evident, particularly in decisions about the depth and nature at which sustainability becomes embedded in the formal curriculum. The issues arising from the Leitch report present an opportunity for those seeking to promote 'sustainability literacy' in dialogue with economic imperatives, and to elicit clearer articulation of the skills desired by future employers. Postgraduate students in particular can make valuable contributions to policy-making in both public and private sectors during placements, but there is still considerable uncertainty about levels of market demand for sustainability skills (a problem also noted in the HEFCE strategic review referenced above).

These seminars underlined the value of making space and time for 'whole institution' discussions, since organisations often benefit from the momentum that gathers around sustainability initiatives. This can lead to further cross-institutional developments and help to embed activities, so they are less vulnerable when founding 'enthusiasts' migrate to other institutions (another issue underlined in the HEFCE strategic review). Sustainability requires HEIs to engage effectively at local and regional levels, developing stronger

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<sup>6</sup> However, the question remains as to whether further progress will require sustainable development to be a distinct category in the research funding and assessment process, a point highlighted in the recent *HEFCE Strategic Review of Sustainable Development in Higher Education in England* (January 2008: Policy Studies Institute, PA Consulting Group, Centre for Research in Education and the Environment, University of Bath).

links with city and county councils, regional development agencies and community organisations. It was evident that collaborative, community-engaged research and knowledge exchange must be enfolded within the HEI strategy, as part of its rationale for civic engagement, rather than a separate matter.

In all the HEIs, questions of competition across the sector were a significant issue; the tensions between having a 'unique selling point' and sharing good practice were clear, even at estates management level. Serious concerns have been expressed about the increasing focus on the immediacy of economic output from research activities. Emphasis was also given to the need for concerted action to promote interdisciplinary sustainability research and to increase academic capacity for interdisciplinary teaching. These interdisciplinary problems (and their civic dimensions) are reflected in the wider educational context and must be taken up when questions of progression and lifelong learning are considered, for example in the creation of the new 14-19 diplomas. Positive action on these issues will help to resolve the uncertainties that appeared in these consultations in relation to employer demands and employer engagement, local and regional partnerships and knowledge exchange for sustainability (uncertainties which may now increase in various ways, in the light of the recent policy decision over Equivalent or Lower Level Qualifications [ELQ] funding).

Further progress has been made by all these institutions since the series concluded and some examples are cited here. At UEA, a new MBA programme in Strategic Carbon Management has been launched, which draws on expertise from a range of schools and uses novel pedagogic interventions, such as student consultancy projects to assist local businesses. HAUC has addressed one of the immediate estates issues identified during their seminar, by recruiting a Recycling Officer to encourage and implement more comprehensive recycling activities on its campus. UoG has developed an institutional vision and strategy for sustainability: *Promising Futures - 2008-2012*. The strategy seeks to integrate sustainability and ESD across all its major areas of activity, in anticipation of significant changes over the coming years.

Each of these institutions is seriously committed to generating further interventions, both pragmatic and academic, in support of sustainability. Yet it is important to recognise the constraints on HEIs, by virtue of their organisational structures and functions, the estates legacies they inherit, and the mass education they must provide in an extremely competitive environment. Commenting on this project and the findings contained here, one Pro Vice-Chancellor who took part in the series was keen to draw attention to the need for support so that HEIs can develop collaborative approaches to the sustainability agenda:

*"We have succeeded in involving our students in many of our carbon reduction activities and it would be good if there was funding to do this across a number of universities. Involving students is a must... It would also be good if there could be financial support for pilot programmes for a number of HEIs to work together to make different contributions to joint 'sustainability targets'."*  
(quotation provided via personal communication)

The need to encourage a culture of collaboration is an important subtext to these debates about sustainability at organizational level and similar views have been expressed by academics at other HEIs: a number of senior managers have made it clear that they would welcome inter-institutional discussion of the issues presented here. Innovation already takes place within HEIs, and will continue to do so, but the scope for expanding such innovation across HEIs could be exploited to greater effect. Interdisciplinary programmes using the joint expertise of HEIs were mentioned earlier; it will also be worthwhile to encourage joint appointments and collaborative projects of the sort envisaged above. There is a clear sense among colleagues that the competition model will prove to be insufficiently flexible to provide the solutions that will be needed over the coming decades, so as to enable the optimum use of human, material and educational resources. The outcomes of HEFCE's current consultation on sustainability (expected late 2008) will be an important indicator for future strategic engagement, particularly in terms of synergy with national sustainability policies; collaboration between HEIs and employers; and the implications for the Research Excellence Framework and for interdisciplinary capacity-building at all levels.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are directed towards the various parties involved in planning and support on this issue, in relation to pedagogy, research, university management and sector-wide engagement.

### Recommendation 1: Capacity-building for Interdisciplinary ESD

Continued funding is required for the HE Academy ESD Project to undertake further activities to support pedagogic development (often interdisciplinary), working collaboratively across the HE Academy Subject Centre network and with a range of academic staff in different roles<sup>7</sup>. This would involve the ESD Project organising events to take forward the academic debates surrounding ESD within and across disciplines, and in providing 'seed' funding for pedagogic development projects to institutions. The assistance of HEFCE and other sector-level organisations is needed to build and support institutional and individual confidence, to ensure that the central place of sustainable development is fostered within both the academic map and the student consciousness.

### Recommendation 2: Supporting Organisational Change

The process of strategic organisational development is greatly enhanced by face-to-face discussions and it will be important to disseminate these findings among senior HEI managers, via existing networks at the HE Academy, HEFCE and Universities UK, and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This report will inform the development of events facilitated by the ESD Project in collaboration with these agencies, with a view to sharing good practice, stimulating strategic thought and producing valuable guidelines. In addition, explicit encouragement for sustainability-focused bids to HEFCE and to other institutional funding programmes (such as the Change Academy scheme at the Leadership Foundation for HE), would provide a supplementary supportive framework for institutions seeking to develop their sustainability strategies.

### Recommendation 3: Information-gathering for Sustainability Literacy

There is an urgent need for research to provide detailed, current information on the skills needs of employers and the demands of the graduate employment market in relation to 'sustainability literacy'. The input of HE careers advisers and of business networks, professional associations, Sector Skills Councils and other parties should be sought in this respect, so that clear and reliable information is generated about the ways that sustainability concerns guide student choices of institution, programme and vocation.

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<sup>7</sup> The HE Academy's Interdisciplinary Teaching & Learning Project, organised by John Canning at the Languages, Linguistics, and Area Studies (LLAS) Subject Centre, is a valuable partner in this respect, as are a number of the CETLs, many of which are adopting increasingly interdisciplinary agendas.