

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: ESD: Strategic Consultations among English HEIs
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AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to look at the issues surrounding sustainability and interdisciplinarity in the curriculum, as well as to those wishing to replicate an interdisciplinary discussion series.

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.

RATIONALE

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.

THE APPROACH

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 the full report (downloadable below), the consultation process is described, with brief profiles of each HEI and their strategic needs with regard to sustainability. It also contains reports on the seminar discussions, the positive features identified and the challenges faced at each HEI. A comparative summary is provided, outlining the most significant issues that emerged consistently across the three HEIs. Finally, recommendations are made for consideration by the ESD Project and other organisations working across the sector.

THE OUTCOMES

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 .

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 and the enterprise agenda. Recommendations made are targeted towards further capacity-building and research activities, to provide the strategic information that is needed about student choices and sustainability skills, and to provide support for senior management within HEIs in developing integrated organisational strategies and interdisciplinary initiatives for 'ESD'.

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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:

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. 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.

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.

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.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available from:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/esd_EnglishHEIs.pdf