

### A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: Experiencing Sustainable Development

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#### AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to link course modules with community volunteering in the area of sustainable development. It also reveals a process used to build university support in the area of ESD.

#### SUMMARY

This project focused on embedding SD in the undergraduate Geography and Environmental Sciences curricula at the University of Brighton through structured and supported opportunities for experiential learning. The project centred on the development, delivery and evaluation of a credited module through which students engage with an identified voluntary agency, business or community group that are undertaking actions in the field of SD. The intention was to create enhanced ESD learning opportunities for students; to raise capacity in terms of networks of University of Brighton staff and university-community linkages; and to compile evidence on the impact of this learning on sustainability literacy and employment of undergraduate students.

#### RATIONALE

The focus of the project on learning opportunities beyond the formal curriculum builds on emerging understanding of the notion and practical development of 'sustainability literacy' that stresses the importance of connecting learning to real-life situations, of learning leading to changed values and behaviour and the centrality of an holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities of SD. In addition, recent literature has exposed the potential over-emphasis of ESD activities on understanding environmental problems rather than on identifying

and implementing actions. Substantial environmental sustainability education has also been found to occur 'informally' through student voluntary work, engagement with NGOs and through membership of student groups. It is widely understood that experiential learning such as facilitated through this project is often some of the most emotionally affective and therefore likely to lead to the changes in values and behaviour essential to sustainability.

The project built on an earlier piece of research that included an audit of sustainable development teaching within the School of the Environment carried out with funding from the Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre for Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES). This had revealed a substantial range of SD-related materials and notions within the current learning and teaching for students of Geography and Environmental Sciences programmes, for example, but some limitations in terms of the integration of these learning opportunities (such as across different levels of their programme and in terms of linkages between academic courses, the university estate and extra-curricular activities) and the dominance of particular kinds of pedagogy. Through that research, opportunity for further embedding of ESD at the University of Brighton was identified in terms of the development of an existing module, offered from another Faculty of the university but not widely engaged in on behalf of students of the School of the Environment. This was a module entitled 'Community and Personal Development' that was principally studied by students of programmes in sociology and psychology and was delivered by members of the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP). At the time of the launch of this project, this team was interested in developing its remit (historically in social marginalisation) into SD more widely. The project was also timely in that the University of Brighton had just confirmed its SD Policy and senior staff of the institution were keen to support emerging networks between staff with interests in curricula developments relating to SD.

#### THE APPROACH

As a means towards enhancing communication about and uptake of opportunities for student-community engagement in actions towards SD, an afternoon workshop was held in the university in the first week of the new academic year. This was attended by students, interested staff and 14 representatives of local voluntary, community and statutory groups.

The basic framework of the module is that students are responsible for finding and engaging in 30-50 hours of voluntary activity with their host organization. All students were to engage in a number of workshops within the university and reflective assignments were associated with the assessment of the module. Through the course of the project, new materials were developed as part of the delivery of the workshops to engage students in the contested debates around the meaning of SD and to reflect on where and how their particular host organisation was looking to contribute towards SD.

A core activity of the project was to assess the impacts of opportunities for experiential learning on student sustainability literacy and the role of the specific module in enhancing social capital in this arena within the university and in terms of university-community linkages. Towards this end, in addition to standard University of Brighton systems for monitoring and evaluation of modules, two guided feedback sessions were undertaken with students to capture their experiences and learning through the module.

## THE OUTCOMES

Whilst a small number of students of the Geography and Environmental Sciences programmes had taken the Community and Personal Development module as it existed formerly and as an option, through the activities of the project, 34 students of the Faculty were able to take the new module, either as a 10-credit (one semester duration) or a double option (through the year for 20 credits). These included students of the BSc Honours programmes in Product Design, Biomedical Sciences and Biological Sciences, which had not previously engaged with this module.

Another significant outcome was the development of a network of contacts locally who are working in the area of sustainable community development.

## TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- Substantial activities through the project were centred on monitoring the impacts of the development of sustainability literacy. Whilst there was no attempt within the project to establish baselines nor impact indicators, the substantial focus group work with students, the module evaluations and interviews with community partners, all provided insights to the learning processes, the knowledge and skills being developed and the values underpinning the decisions of students in their current learning and future employment choices, i.e., their developing sustainability 'literacy'. It could be noted that in choosing to engage in the module as an option within their courses, students have demonstrated a core characteristic of sustainability literacy in that they have a degree of understanding of the need for change in the way that things are done individually and collectively. Through the module, students made reference to further learning in this respect.
- The majority of the students taking the module were in the final year of their various courses and had clear comments to make regarding whether they felt the module had been useful in terms of employability and/or career choices. Whilst some felt it had had no impact, for others the module had evidently provided a substantial prompt for thought in this regards. However, it is also evident that there are competencies in sustainability that the students are developing but which they are not yet identifying as relevant to their employability. This confirms the need for academics to work with students, careers advisors and employers to clarify what it means to 'to be able to practice and promote sustainability in the workplace' as identified by Cade & Tennant's in their 2005 *Graduate Employability for Sustainability* .

- The time needed to effect commitments are often beyond the 'notional hours' of validated modules.
- Different placements can require quite varied levels of 'commitment' from students.
- Students can feel obliged to extend their commitments to a project/organisation and encounter conflict with other university commitments.
- Mutual expectations of the host organisation and the student need to be clarified early in the partnership.
- Course leaders need to be better informed as to the module aims/objectives and contribution expected within specific courses.
- Materials and schedules (for multiple courses) need to be communicated clearly online.
- Students of different courses approach common assessment tasks with different skill levels and knowledge.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The complete final report (with full references):

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/esd\\_elliott.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/esd_elliott.pdf) (PDF 116KB)