

Student perceptions of environmental citizenship

'Environmental citizenship' recognizes the link between our future and our care for the environment, and embodies a sense of responsibility leading to action on behalf of the environment (environmental behaviour or practices). These notions are integral to the concept and goal of sustainable development. The important role of higher education in the Education for Sustainable Development agenda is showcased in the UK by HEFCE's (Higher Education Funding Council for England) report 'Sustainable development in higher education' (2005/28). Within this agenda the 'GEES' disciplines (Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences) have traditionally been viewed as the 'torch bearers' of sustainable development education (Chalkley, 2002)

Our HE Academy (GEES Subject Centre) funded research project sought to explore student perceptions of 'environmental citizenship' and focused on three key questions:

- How do students perceive 'environmental citizenship'?
- How far do students engage in 'environmental behaviour/practices' (for example recycling, use of public transport)?
- What do students think of key environmental issues and environmental behaviours/practices?

Between December 2006 and April 2007 a combination of questionnaires (130 respondents) and seven focus group meetings were held with students from a range of different subject backgrounds and who were at different stages of their degree at a higher education institution in the UK. Preliminary analysis of findings suggests that students show a good basic knowledge of key environmental issues and a shared sense of what a good environmental citizen may be, derived both from their experiences in higher education, but also their background and upbringing. However, students often feel unable to put their environmental principles into practice, due to the constraints imposed by a university lifestyle (especially time and money) and a lack of facilities for recycling etc. This supports the findings of other research which suggests that 'environmental citizens are not produced merely by education, but by a whole range of factors with which education may interact' (Hawthorne & Alabaster, 1999: 40). Students in GEES subjects see themselves (and are seen by others) as sources of environmental knowledge, however the quantitative evidence from the questionnaire survey suggests that this interest in environmental issues may not always be borne out by their environmental practices. From listening to the student views and experiences we argue that in order to achieve HEFCE's vision, and to produce graduates who can become global environmental citizens, it is not enough to address sustainability issues only in the curriculum. It is also necessary to allow students to develop good environmental 'habits' while at university. This is particularly important as moving from home to university means for the first time many students are consciously able to make their own lifestyle choices. Thus it is imperative that the university infrastructure provides students with

the opportunity and encouragement to develop sustainable environmental practices and habits.

Further details of the project can be found on our website at: www.esci.keele.ac.uk/envcit

Some of these results were presented at the 2nd International Conference Education for Sustainable Development: Graduates as Global Citizens 10-11 September 2007, Bournemouth University. An online version of the paper is available here:

<http://sky.geocities.jp/globalcitizensprogramme/Paper.ZoeRobinson.html>

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