Education for Sustainable Development at the University of the West of England, Bristol

J.W.S. Longhurst¹ and G. Gough²,
¹ Assistant Vice Chancellor, Environment and Sustainability
² Lecturer in Education for Sustainable Development
University of the West of England, Bristol

Paper Presented at Influence, Implement, Engage: The triple imperative for ESD in HE

HEA Thematic Seminar Series 2013/14

Held at the Exhibition and Conference Centre
University of the West of England, Bristol

29th November 2013
Introduction

This paper describes the approach taken by UWE, Bristol to develop a comprehensive approach to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within the curricula of the University. Actions taken over a 20 year period commencing with environmental policies and actions initiated in the early 1990s and culminating in 2013/14 academic year in the new Sustainability Plan (1) are discussed. This plan mandates the curricula to provide exposure and opportunity for all students to engage in and understand the meaning of sustainable development within the context of their discipline of study. As part of the comprehensive approach initiated by UWE, a range of co-curricula activities providing ESD opportunity are available to all UWE students and particular emphasis is placed upon the sustainable development of the campus locations to provide ESD opportunities.

Unsustainable and Sustainable Thinking and Behaviours

This, the first contribution in the 2013/14 HEA Thematic Seminar is held in Bristol, Europe’s Green Capital designate for 2015 (2). The award is recognition of Bristol’s long-standing and internationally leading role in exploring and implementing initiatives on its journey to become a sustainable city. UWE is very proud of its role in supporting the Green capital bid (2). It is a cause for celebration but we must recognise the real problems global society is confronting and which provide the rationale for why HE must engage, influence and implement ESD.

The climate is changing adversely and society needs to adapt as well as seek mitigation. Water, energy and food security are all growing problems for an unsustainable global population living beyond the planet’s capacity to meet our demands. We cannot pretend that the environmental problems society faces are simple and amenable to easy policy fixes. They are not. They are complex, often systemic, and intractable and defended by powerful vested interests. Graduates, as citizens, need to appreciate the challenges and opportunities for change.

In 1991 David Orr in his paper “What is Education For?” said “Many things on which your future health and prosperity depend are in dire jeopardy: climate stability, the resilience and productivity of natural systems, the beauty of the natural world, and biological diversity. “ How did we get here? Well as Orr also said ‘It is worth noting that this is not the work of ignorant people. It is, rather, largely the result of work by people with BAs, BScs, LLBs, MBAs, and PhDs” (3).

If education is partly the cause of our environmental misfortune and the cause of our unsustainable lifestyles might it be a partial solution? In 1946 Albert Einstein said “a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels”. This has been paraphrased as “the significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them” (4). Voltaire said “No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking” (5). One thing universities are good at is thinking and to address these complex and intractable problems will require sustained thinking.
A Comprehensive Approach to Education for Sustainable Development

In the University of the West of England we have resolved to become the most sustainable university that we can. We do this not just for legislative compliance, although that is important. We don’t do this to save money, although that is attractive and helpful. We do the things we do because it is the right thing to do. However, it is not easy. The University is a large multi-site institution with approximately 30 000 students, some 3000 staff, and an annual budget of £220 million. There is a wide range of collaborative provision delivered overseas including important activities in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Nigeria and Cyprus. In addition, a regional Federation of collaborating FE Colleges in SW delivers UWE Foundation Degrees across south west England (6).

The purpose of the University is to advance knowledge, inspire people and transform futures. We recognise that Universities have an obligation to society to play their role in the journey towards sustainable development; we see this as being exercised through the generation and wise use of knowledge and through our public engagement and knowledge exchange activities. We accept the responsibility for supporting the achievement of a sustainable future.

In responding to the challenges posed by sustainable development we have addressed the sustainability of our campus locations. An important step in this process was the development a dedicated Sustainability Team in the Facilities Service (1). This team is led by the University’s Sustainability Manager and takes responsibility for initiating, managing and monitoring those aspects of the sustainability performance related to waste management, energy management, travel planning and biodiversity amongst others. These initiatives are ensuring sustainable management of our current and future estates. We recognise that the education of students, future graduates, represents the biggest opportunity for a university to encourage awareness and action for the development of a more sustainable future. Hence we have systematically addressed the place of education for sustainable development in our curricula. We are progressively infusing sustainable development into the formal curricula of all undergraduate and post graduate provision. To do this we have established a policy framework and from this plans and strategy to support sustainable development have evolved. These have been implemented into the business of the university both in our educational role and in the management of our estate. This approach is overseen by a high level University Sustainability Board, chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, and action is devolved to services and faculties to embed sustainable development into their business decision making. Success factors here include strategic leadership from the Vice Chancellor and senior managers, establishment of a cross university research and knowledge exchange institute and a multidisciplinary staff group tasked with promoting education for sustainable development and overseeing its implementation into the curricula.

This is a change management process with all the attendant problems of change management. However, we are making progress, we have been addressing this since the early 1990s, actions were formerly expressed in our Environmental Strategy, then...
the Sustainability Strategy 2007–2012 (1) and now superseded by the new Sustainability Plan for the period 2013-2020. The new plan is working its way through the approval process and will be signed off by the Vice Chancellor, the Chair of the Board of Governors and the President of UWESU.

We are committed through the plan to ensuring our students - future graduates – are exposed to the ideas of sustainable development in their programme of study. In our view it is important that sustainable development is contextualised within the discipline the student is studying. We also provide opportunities for students through co curricula volunteering and other public engagement activities in the field of sustainable development. A variety of internship and placement opportunities are available to enable real world learning in enterprises of various types and sizes. A particular feature of the UWE approach is the dedicated Green Internship Scheme with an annual Green Intern of the Year award.

The University sees its role in education for sustainable development as being about the contribution that can be made through learning and teaching. Key to this is the development of skills, knowledge and values that promote behaviour and approaches that support the goal of reconciling human needs with the environmental limits of the planet.

So where have we got to in our journey towards becoming a more sustainable university?

- The new University Strategy 2020 (7) commits to promoting education for sustainable development within the curriculum and to enhancing our sustainability performance.
- Our Teaching and Learning Strategy explicitly places education for sustainable development in the curriculum.
- Our new Sustainability Plan promotes education for sustainable development through the curriculum.
- Our education for sustainable development Action Plan sets out the aims and KPIs and ascribes accountabilities and responsibilities.
- We provide support and training to help all academic staff integrate education for sustainable development into the curriculum.
- We review and report on progress towards the integration of education for sustainable development into the curriculum.

Each year we audit our progress and in the 2011/12 academic year we calculate that 71% of our UK domiciled students engaged with the subject of sustainable development within the context of their discipline. We have nearly completed the calculation for academic year 2012/13 and we expect a percentage score in the high

80s or low 90s. There is still progress to make here but we think this is an encouraging position. In our annual surveys we find that there is a widespread engagement of academic programmes in the exploration of sustainable development and its meaning in the discipline. This engagement is either introductory or specialised according to the specific needs of the individual discipline or programme. In every Department of the University there are modules exposing students to some or the entire context of sustainable development.

In 2007, in order to promote and encourage academic engagement in education for sustainable development the university created a cross university group Knowledge Exchange for Sustainability Education (KESE). The group is charged with promoting, encouraging, challenging and leading the education for sustainable development agenda in UWE. Some 70 staff are engaged in this network drawn from the four faculties of the university. In meeting the responsibility placed upon it KESE is has developed and is overseeing implementation of the university wide Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan (8).

The university conducts an annual survey of progress in the departments, reports on achievements against the Sustainability Strategy and Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan, provides resources for staff to use in the curricula and contribute Education for Sustainable Development sessions in the Academic Development Programme for new academic staff. An annual Education for Sustainable Development staff development day is a summer fixture in the KESE calendar. In Semester 2 of 2013/14 we will be launching a new cross UWE seminar series to explore Education for Sustainable Development practices and, as a precursor to that series, we are delighted to host this event, the first of the HEA thematic seminars on Education for Sustainable Development.

We recognise that some students will want to explore sustainable development at their own pace outside of the formal curriculum. In order to meet this need the university is developing a student resource called Keys to Sustainability. This will be available to all UWE students in 2014. The resource will be delivered on-line via Blackboard and students will be able to work through it at their own pace. On completion they will have a certificate of completion and it will form a contribution to the new UWE Futures Award. It will also feature on their Higher Education Achievement Record.

In the summer of 2013 the University hosted an Erasmus Integrated Programme (IP) on Education for Sustainable Development. The IP was entitled “Exploring Hopeful Pathways towards Preferable Local and Global Futures”. More than 50 students, both UG and PG, and 17 academic staff from 9 EU countries spent two very full weeks at UWE working with UWE staff and students, exploring issues and challenges in sustainability (9). The students were assessed as part of the IP and every student passed the assessment and was awarded credit towards their programme of study in their home institution.

In pursuit of our sustainability goals we work closely with the Students’ Union. We are supporting the Students’ Union to develop a cadre of some 40-50 Green Leaders across the Departments and programmes of UWE. The Green Leaders will be
supported by a specially appointed Green Leader co-ordinator within UWESU. The university and Students’ Union will work together to provide training, resources for projects and, in exchange, we expect the Green Leaders to challenge us and to push us to do better in meeting our new Sustainability Plan’s aims and objectives. We want them to be critical and noisy friends.

UWE’s research and knowledge exchange activities support the goal of sustainable development. This work is led by a cross university Institute for Sustainability, Health and Environment with important contributions to new knowledge in the interlinked domains of public health, community development, carbon management, climate adaptation, environmental technology, air quality management, flood risk management and water security to name just a few (10). ISHE leads the innovative cross-university MSc Sustainable Development in Practice (11).

There is much more to do and we are progressively setting ourselves more ambitious targets. The university reports its progress and you will see a large amount of information and data on our web pages (1).

As a contribution to Bristol Green Capital 2015, UWE and the University of Bristol are together planning a major conference on ESD to take place in 2015. We envisage participation from universities in the family of previous Green Capitals and from those aspiring to the future title. We wish to learn from past successes and failures and we propose to build a network of HEIs across the Green Capital family.

The University is also committed to sharing its practices and the challenges we face within the sector. We are active in the Higher Education Academy’s Education for Sustainable Development Advisory Group and in the joint HEA - Quality Assurance Agency’s ESD Development group producing a reference point on ESD for use in the QAA Code of Practice. Our goal here is to support mainstreaming in the HE sector.

The University is embarking upon a major development of its Frenchay campus and expects to spend about £250 million over the next decade. The challenge with this ambitious Master Plan is to ensure that the investment in new facilities and buildings brings long term sustainability gains over the lifetime of the development (12). The new sustainable campus must also be a learning resource in its own right providing examples, inspiration and opportunity to explore education for sustainable development in a range of contexts.

Concluding Comment

This short paper has outlined the comprehensive approach of the university in responding to the challenge of creating a more sustainable future. The university is preparing its students for the challenges of the 21st century and no bigger challenge confronts them than that of sustainable development. In order to thrive and excel in this environment the disciplinary attributes of a graduate must be blended with those that are the result of engagement with, and understanding of, the challenges and opportunities posed by sustainable development.
References and Sources of Further Information

1. UWE Sustainability Strategy and Policy
   http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus/visionandmission/sustainability/sustainabilityaction/sustainabilitydocuments.aspx

2. Green capital http://bristolgreencapital.org/  Bristol Green Capital  and UWE

   innovations for global citizens. Available on-line at
   http://www.context.org/iclib/ic27/orr/

   http://entersection.com/posts/1025-albert-einstein-on-problem-solving


6. About the University http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus

   http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus/visionandmission/strategy.aspx

8. Knowledge Exchange for Sustainability Education.
   http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/ishe/ishework/sustainabilityeducation.aspx

9. Erasmus Integrated Programme news item

10. Institute for Sustainability, Health and Environment
    http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/ishe/aboutishe.aspx

11. MSc Sustainable Development in Practice
    http://courses.uwe.ac.uk/F8NA1/2014

12. New UWE Campus and Master Plan
    http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus/visionandmission/uwenewcampus.aspx