

Evaluation of the impact of the Green Academy programme



Dr Andrew McCoshan and Professor Stephen Martin





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Introduction

The Green Academy is an organisational change programme. Launched in 2011 by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), it is designed to address one of the most important challenges facing higher education in respect of sustainability, namely how best to embed sustainable development into the overall student experience. The programme followed a number of HEA activities that had been taking place since 2005¹. That work, with discipline communities and individual academics, had revealed a wide range of activity occurring, but had also highlighted the difficulties in achieving structural and strategic integration of sustainability and developing greater synergy between research, teaching and campus sustainability practices.

The Green Academy was based on the HEA's wider Change Academy programme, designed to bring about organisational developments within higher education². It brought together small teams of staff, students and academics from eight universities to take part in a two-day residential meeting in March 2011, which was complemented by two meetings of team leaders, one in February to prepare the ground, and one afterwards in May to take stock of progress. Each university was requested to send a team of five to six individuals who were playing important roles in their institutions in the sustainability field. To ensure a balanced representation the teams were required to have at least one member from each of the following groupings: senior management (eg pro-vice-chancellor), students, operational staff (eg estates), and academic staff. At the two-day residential, the teams considered the business case for embedding sustainability in universities and in curricula, developed practical ways for taking forward sustainability within their institutions, and devised action plans. The residential included inputs from expert 'critical friends' from other UK institutions experienced in sustainability change in higher education institutions (HEIs). Participants then returned to their institutions to begin implementation.

¹ http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/esd/green_academy

² http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/change/change_academy

This report presents an evaluation of the effects of the Green Academy programme within seven of the participating institutions over the period from March 2011 to April 2012. It:

- assesses the impact on institutional practice in teaching and learning and curriculum review and development;
- evaluates the impact on wider institutional policy and practice;
- evaluates the effectiveness of the Green Academy process in contributing to wider staff participation in the change programme.

This evaluation complements the initial process evaluation completed in July 2011.

Evidently, an important feature of the Green Academy is the ambition of its objectives in relation to the scale of the inputs. The Green Academy has been designed to work by creating 'ripples' within institutions. It is by design a relatively small-scale intervention intended to have a large amount of leverage by creating change agents and building capacity in institutions for bringing about institutional change. In short, it is intended to have a catalytic effect.

In drawing judgements about the nature of progress, the evaluation took into account both the comparatively short period of time involved, the catalytic intention of the programme and the significant scale of the changes that participants have sought to bring about. In this respect, it is evident that much has been achieved in a small amount of time. Equally, much still remains to be done. However, this is only to be expected given the nature of the programme.

Information gathering for the evaluation consisted of a site visit to each of the participating institutions. Interviews were conducted with individuals involved in Green Academy residential and team leaders meetings, and with other key individuals involved in the ensuing developments. The limitations of this method are recognised, especially the inability to assess the extent of wider commitment to the changes taking place. The evaluation was carried out by two associates of the HEA between January and April 2012.

Structure of the report

The report begins by briefly discussing participants' views of the Green Academy process. While it was not the purpose of the evaluation to look in detail at the benefits of the process itself (as noted, this is covered by another evaluation), this provides a useful starting point for analysis. This enables the evaluation to shine a light on some important aspects of the Green Academy, which have been key to the positive effects it has subsequently had.

The main body of the report, however, is devoted to examining a range of impacts the programme has had within institutions. It discusses the ways in which Green Academy teams, on returning to the universities, have sought to change institutional strategy and the institutional narrative. It looks at how they have sought to engage with key constituencies, ie senior managers and students, encouraging and enabling them to engage with the precepts of sustainability and develop activities. It also considers the extent to which, thus far, the Green Academy has impacted upon patterns of resource allocation. Finally, the report examines the barriers that have been encountered, before presenting the conclusions and recommendations. Case studies of the seven institutions involved in the evaluation are available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/esd/green_academy. The case studies demonstrate in more detail some of the impacts that the Green Academy change programme has had on each individual institution. This report evaluates the more general impacts and influences of the programme on institutional strategy, curriculum reform and student engagement, but we would emphasise that this is a mere snapshot of a changing landscape as universities face increasing pressure to change their educational programmes to meet the needs of their students in the context of the complex social, economic and environmental trends of the 21st century.

Feedback on the process of the Green Academy

Participants of the Green Academy were overwhelmingly positive about its benefits. Every Green Academy team reported that the effects had been highly significant in the development of sustainability. Depending on the institution, it was variously reported that things had happened faster, in a different way, across a broader agenda, or on a bigger scale than if the programme had not existed. As one informant put it:

“Our journey here started with joining the Green Academy programme.”

Another called it, “a brilliant opportunity”. Yet another said it was “an absolute turning point”: without the Green Academy “we would not have come up with the same solutions, and would be in a different place”.

What the Green Academy provided for each participating institution was an accolade: without exception, the fact that an institution had been selected for the Green Academy was publicised within the institution, helping to raise the profile of the sustainability agenda right from the start of the process and through the implementation work. For those institutions without a strong national or international profile in the field, participation was felt to be a particular prize, and was regarded as giving a seal of approval. For these institutions, participation was especially beneficial in placing their work in perspective; they report being able to see that they were not as far behind those institutions commonly regarded as being in the vanguard of developments.

However, regardless of the real or perceived position of an institution within the sustainability field, it is clear that the Green Academy had a significant impact by giving participants confidence to take forward their plans on their return. As one institution with a long track record of activity commented: “the Green Academy gave us confidence as an institution ... we had been overcautious before ... staff thought that education for sustainable development had no institutional bite”.

A key factor in the overall positive effect of the Green Academy on participants appears to lie in timing. Informants were unanimous that the Green Academy came at “just the right time”. It had perfect timing. Participation coincided with important developments in each institution, such as the renewal of strategic plans or the advent of a new vice-chancellor or pro-vice-chancellor with a strong commitment to education for sustainable development (ESD). Frequently, ideas about sustainability were being formulated for inclusion in strategic plans at the time of the Green Academy. Equally, however, it tended to coincide in many cases with an opportune moment in the longer-term development of institutional thinking about sustainability. Some institutions had been on a development path for some time, often with a sustainability agenda focused around estates and the development of the informal curriculum. For these institutions, the Green Academy was an opportunity to shape and implement a more holistic and strategic approach that tackles the issue of how to implement sustainability across curricula.

Participants identified a range of positive impacts of the Green Academy process:

- the opportunity to learn from others. Participants welcomed the fact that contributions were “really candid”. They learnt both what to do and, just as importantly to some, what not to do. “It really enabled you to get a feel for realities”. Participants were able to benchmark themselves against others, sometimes confirming that they were doing the right things and identifying areas where they needed to take action. One institution reported learning that they needed to involve students more;
- a good mix of people in the participating teams. The Green Academy specified the number of people in each team and that students should be included, while also allowing flexibility in composition. A number of participants commented positively on the inclusion of students and that they had been able to take the right mix of people for their purposes. However, some greater specification would be desirable in future and is a question worth asking: leadership levels were very variable among participants, and only one governing board member attended the residential;
- an opportunity to develop solutions to big issues. The Green Academy provided space to think. Although each of the Green Academy teams included a core of people who work together regularly in one form or another, it was commonly reported that they had seldom had time to think strategically, to consider the bigger picture above individual activities. In the words of one participant, it “deconstructed” the high-level objectives and helped to address the big questions. It enabled participants to understand the nature of ‘wicked problems’ and to see how every academic discipline could engage with them. It stimulated one Green Academy team into ensuring that in future they “try to head people off from doing the easy things”.

In relation to areas for improvement, possibilities identified include:

- the opportunity for more joint working between institutions at the residential meeting;
- more ongoing support to participants once they have returned to their institutions. (It was notable that the field visits that took place as part of this evaluation often provided Green Academy teams with an opportunity – often the first opportunity – to take stock of progress.)

Impact on institutional strategy

Universally, the Green Academy process galvanised all participating teams to return to their institutions to tackle the issue of how to make sustainability part of institutional strategy. Two features stand out as shaping the context for this work. First, institutions were typically in a situation where the articulation of sustainability issues within curricula was extremely scattered and disparate, and extremely rare outside of academic disciplines with a traditional interest in the subject. Secondly, much sustainability-related activity had often been estates-led.

These features posed a number of challenges. The prior focus on the environmental aspects of sustainability and on physical works around campus has meant that the Green Academy teams have focused much attention on pushing the wider definition of sustainability, which includes economic and social aspects. The challenge here has been to promote these ideas across the curriculum and to engage with disciplines that, if not opposed to the idea, do not necessarily place it high on their agenda for a variety of reasons (an issue to which we return below).

Another challenge facing Green Academy teams is that often they did not have a clear and systematic picture of provision within their institutions. Indeed, some reported that their work since participating in the Green Academy has revealed that more activity is taking place than envisaged. The response has been to try to understand current patterns and also to identify opportunities for engaging with staff in academic disciplines beyond the 'usual suspects'. Some have conducted surveys, some audits, but systematic approaches have been the exception rather than the rule.

These challenges notwithstanding, the Green Academy teams have had a significant impact in the last year on getting a wider definition of sustainability embedded into institutional strategy. Some institutions have identified the sustainability agenda as being one of their unique selling points. This tends to be a particular feature of new institutions looking for a distinctive feature in an increasingly competitive arena for students. Where wider institutional changes are taking place, sustainability is being used as a 'glue' to bind new structures together. In some cases, the shift in thinking at institutional level has been profound. As one Green Academy team leader put it: "In mid-2010, I wouldn't have dreamt a chapter in the strategic plan was possible". However, in all cases the Green Academy has, in the words of one informant, "given a boost to be more explicit about education for sustainable development in the strategic plan". In one institution, the initiative developed around sustainability is seen by senior management as being "incredibly valuable to delivering the strategic plan as a whole", including, for example, the development of local community partnerships.

An inherent risk recognised by all the Green Academy teams is that the breadth of a sustainability agenda that embraces economic, social, political as well as environmental matters increases the likelihood that it becomes "just wishy-washy strategy". All the teams have therefore recognised the need for a commitment to sustainability in strategic planning to be coupled to bottom-up, organic growth. This is important to ensure that there is not just compliance but genuine commitment. As a consequence, it is evident that the Green Academy teams have divided their time in the first year of implementation between ensuring the embedding of sustainability in strategy and in stimulating activities 'on the ground' within curricula.

Approaches to embedding sustainability in the curriculum

One of the positive impacts of the Green Academy commonly reported by participants is that they came to realise that the approach they adopt should be tailored to their institutional context, and that there was no one right or wrong way to do things. As a result, during the last year a variety of approaches have been adopted to embedding sustainability within curricula. These approaches combine varying degrees of compulsion and encouragement. For one institution, sustainability

is regarded as so important to the future of institution that the new strategy requires each faculty to offer one new undergraduate and one new postgraduate course related to sustainable development for the 2013 student intake, and sustainability will need to be embedded into 15% of all student experiences. This approach is part of a wider strategy that seeks to validate what people are already doing and engage staff in innovative ways of doing things, generating good practice examples for others to use.

Another institution is in the course of developing an elective in sustainability that would “at a stroke ... put sustainability at the heart of the undergraduate curriculum”, since it would be only one of a handful of electives available. This elective would not be coded as a science or humanities subject in order to demonstrate that it ought not to be pigeonholed within one discipline or another. It will also be taught by a team involving at least one academic from science and one from business studies.

Other institutions have explicitly rejected the idea of sustainability being compulsory on the basis that it does not lead to genuine buy-in. One institution said that the Green Academy had made them realise the importance of “getting alongside academics”. This institution had previously had a system of optional modules, but there was no incentive for departments/faculties to encourage students to take cross-disciplinary subjects like sustainability. They rejected the idea of compulsory module since, while this may be compulsory to students, they did not make it compulsory for staff and so it would remain unembedded. The course of action now, following the Green Academy, is to work with departments to demonstrate the relevance of sustainability to their discipline and to work out how it can fit with departmental cycles of course validation/revalidation. Funds are available within the framework of a planned initiative to support staff time to develop new curricula and teaching and learning. This institution has found sustainability to be “a wonderful catalyst for reframing the curriculum”.

Where the sustainability agenda has thus far been strongly estates-led, there has often been a focus since the Green Academy on ways of developing connections between informal and formal curricula. Such an approach is also advantageous where academic autonomy is particularly strong. Clearly a consideration here is that accreditation can be important for stimulating take-up, and this was reported to be especially significant with adult students who have limited time for informal curriculum activities owing to their domestic and employment commitments.

Where estates have not been in the vanguard of developments, they may need to take steps to catch up in order to support the newly developing curriculum offer with informal learning opportunities.

Regardless of the strategic approach being taken to sustainability across the curriculum, all institutions have identified a range of curriculum and teaching and learning opportunities with academic staff. Indeed, many schools, departments or faculties had been doing education for sustainable development without realising it. Green Academy participants report finding fertile ground for their work. Across all institutions, Green Academy participants have been working closely with students and staff to think about sustainability in relation to their disciplines. Activity is now being brought to the surface, labelled and made more coherent by removing overlaps and filling gaps. For example, one business school will move its Business Ethics module into a new sustainability elective once it comes on stream.

Developing the institutional narrative: profile raising and communication

“ESD’s not out there. It’s not in people’s sights.”

A key concern of the Green Academy teams has been to raise the profile of sustainability. Clearly, this varies from institution to institution. For some, sustainability activity has been quite visible on campus for some time through recycling schemes, high profile ‘green’ capital building programmes and cycling schemes. However, even in these cases, there has been work to do with regard to developing an institutional narrative around the wider definition of sustainability, and, as already noted, without exception the Green Academy was widely publicised within every institution as part of the profile-raising process. In the words of one participant, the Green Academy has been used to “move ESD above the radar”. In some cases raising the profile of the agenda within an institution was a key reason for doing Green Academy; sometimes, while the Green Academy team knew that their institution was doing well, the institution itself did not.

An important challenge as part of developing the institutional narrative has been to tackle stereotypes. Participants often reported that sustainability was typically identified with particular subjects rather than being seen as relevant to all disciplines. The word 'green' was also seen as problematic with negative perceptions related to the word. One institution referred to the Green Academy 'team' but not the Green Academy 'project' for these reasons. In discussing sustainability with academic departments, Green Academy team members reported coming across concern that it was "all about tree hugging modules".

Green Academy teams have discovered that how the message is communicated is as important as the message itself. A range of methods has been deployed:

- discussions have been held with key committees;
- profile-raising events have been held;
- presentations and discussions have been held with faculties, with programmes of faculty visits being inaugurated;
- case studies have been generated, often with a focus on subject areas that would not normally be associated with sustainability in order to demonstrate its widespread applicability.

Teams have reported the need for the institution to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability visibly on campus, as well as in curricula.

Whether these methods of engagement and enabling strategies have been well developed is a moot point. Much of the work of those involved in the Green Academy prior to the event had been through informal channels, and while a level of formality has been added on to this, informal networking still appears to be an important component. That said, some institutions have undoubtedly developed a compelling sustainability narrative as part of their strategic communication process and sustainability is now part of their brand: one of their unique selling points.

Impact at senior management level

A critical part of the work of the Green Academy teams has been to engage with heads of faculties and heads of departments. This has been an important part of both strategy implementation and narrative development. The key challenge has been to convince managers of departments/faculties that have not traditionally focused on sustainability that it is as important for them and their students as anyone else.

If sustainability is to be successfully integrated into curricula, rather than being a bolt-on activity focused on the environment that could take place on the margins of curricula, senior and middle managers need to receive a more systematic and formally organised message. Heads of faculties and departments are key gatekeepers and so engaging with them is vital. Some teams have launched programmes to systematically engage with faculties, involving seminars and presentations. Others have charged heads of faculties with the job of ensuring that each department identifies the role it can play in respect of sustainability. Much depends, however, on the coherence between departments or schools within faculties: where there is strong coherence it is possible to have a faculty-driven approach.

Team members have had the task of demonstrating to managers the relevance of the agenda. Many identified good practice examples as having an important role to play on the basis that "if they can do it, so can you". Many Green Academy teams have focused deliberately on developing activities in disciplines or sub-disciplines that would, on the face of it, seem unlikely to engage with the sustainability agenda. As one informant commented, "once people saw they could do it within the discipline, it took off". At the same time, barriers remain. One strategy to cope with academic objections has involved avoidance: creating a critical mass of engaged managers means that even the most recalcitrant eventually reach the position where they don't want to miss out.

Enabling students

Along with engaging with senior managers, there has been a focus on students. At the very least, this

has involved a recognition of their importance in developing sustainability activities, but it has also involved the development of ways of enabling students to support change.

As noted, the Green Academy included the involvement of students deliberately and this had the effect of raising their profile as key players. For some student participants in the residential, the Green Academy also developed their perspective on sustainability as a topic and on their potential role. It has enabled them to speak more confidently about the subject. In one institution, students presented a proposed curriculum to academics who were reported to be very impressed by the fact that demand was being articulated by them. One student Green Academy participant was given the task of launching their institution's strategic plan to stakeholders and took it upon themselves to stress the importance of sustainability.

Students have an important role in stimulating demand for sustainability, and many institutions are developing ways of harnessing this demand and enabling students to play a more active role. In one institution, the Students' Union gathered views on ten possible elected pathways: three were popular, including sustainability. This popularity is reflected in the amount of time and resource students' unions dedicate to sustainability with posts or parts of posts being dedicated to sustainability.

Students have sometimes been key to developing the informal curriculum on campus. They have often been led or facilitated by university sustainability teams based in estates departments. This demand is now extending beyond sustainability as subject matter into sustainability as a means of developing new teaching and learning methods. Students were reported to want sustainability to be discovery-based rather than fact-based, with learning through activity. This resonates with the more general trend in higher education towards recognising students as 'co-producers' of curriculum and learning rather than as consumers.

Notwithstanding these trends, the extent to which comprehensive and well-developed strategies for student engagement have been put in place so far is a moot point.

Impact on resources

There is very little evidence up to this point of the Green Academy having a major influence on the way in which resources are allocated or on the scale of resources dedicated to sustainability. This may, of course, reflect the current financial situation. In general, little in the way of central funding has been released to support a major uplift in activity undertaken by Green Academy participants themselves, and curriculum development work has taken place as part and parcel of normal activity. This is not necessarily a matter for criticism since one of the underlying principles of sustainability is not to do more, but to use the same resources differently. Nonetheless, it is worthy of note that in most cases sustainability was still being done "on top of everything we do". Perhaps the situation is best captured by one Green Academy team leader who said that he had "no team other than the rest of the University".

This is not to say that new resources have not been released, but it has tended to be small-scale. The resources that have been made available have been to release staff time. In the main there is still heavy reliance on various temporary and short-term arrangements. For example, in one institution a student did a project on competition in sustainability courses between HEIs; in another two, postgraduate interns are in place to support staff who want to develop their curricula. A head of department has, since October 2011, been devoting half their time to helping in the development of new curricula.

Barriers

Despite the progress Green Academy teams have clearly been able to make, barriers remain.

Participants identified the following barriers:

- lack of time;
- lack of resources;
- the perpetuation of stereotypes surrounding sustainability;
- faculty and discipline silos that make the idea of jointly developing courses anathema to some staff;
- the difficulty of positioning education for sustainable development alongside many other competing interests;
- the need to avoid the communication message becoming overcomplicated;
- the need for staff development so that they feel comfortable they have the requisite expertise to teach students;
- finding ways to keep up the momentum.

Conclusions

The Green Academy process armed small groups of individuals with confidence and fresh perspectives that enabled them to return to their institutions and make strategic interventions. The resource devoted to the Green Academy was minuscule in comparison to the task, and therefore the scale of the impacts achieved is all the more remarkable: during the last year Green Academy teams have made significant progress in a short space of time. Thanks to the Green Academy, institutions have been able to do things more quickly, in different ways, across a broader front, and/or on a bigger scale, depending upon the institution. By any measure, the Green Academy can be judged to have been highly cost-effective.

The Green Academy gave the impetus to participants to engage strategically with their institutions, getting sustainability embedded within strategic planning where before it had either been absent or confined to a narrower environmental definition. It has given individuals confidence to engage with senior managers, and to implement action plans to stimulate curriculum developments. It has heightened awareness of the role that students can play. It has also played a role in raising awareness of sustainability, in some cases supporting the development of a comprehensive sustainability narrative within institutions.

These are, though, early days, and it is to be expected that much remains to be done. Action in some areas has yet to take place in many institutions. Notably, the question of leadership remains to be fully addressed, with one or two exceptions. Participants at the Green Academy residential meeting were drawn from a wide range of management levels and positions, and vice-chancellors and governing board members were scarcely represented at all. Several informants drew attention to the fact that their involvement in the Green Academy was partly related to the appointment of a new pro-vice-chancellor who was more proactive in respect of sustainability than their predecessor. There was also a widespread recognition that leadership is required to, in the words of one PVC, 'stick it all together', rather than to create new institutional structures. It is important not to 'parachute' in on departments, but to create a 'movement', not least to counter the fact that strategy documents may well stay on bookshelves. Leadership is needed to open the doors for the individuals involved with day-to-day implementation of sustainability in the curriculum.

The evidence also suggests that systematic mapping of sustainability in the curriculum is not yet widespread, and, related to this, targets remain underdeveloped. With respect to mapping, this situation means that a number of institutions have relied on informal intelligence about what is going on to identify opportunities. This approach is quite understandable since the focus has been on getting activity started. Clearly, however, moving forward will require more systematic approaches to support the integration of sustainability into strategic plans. This is important particularly with regard to setting targets and monitoring progress, and especially where embedding

sustainability in the curriculum has not taken the form of electives or ensuring that every faculty/ department develops a sustainability programme (where monitoring will be comparatively straightforward). Where the approach has been more bottom-up, mapping and targeting arguably has a more important role to play in understanding what is going on. As one informant put it, “clear targets and deliverables are key to mature engagement”.

One useful vehicle that emerged from the programme was the development of an informal Green Academy participants network. A number of the team leaders have been in regular contact to share ideas, barriers, solutions and resources. Although this was not immediately initiated by the HEA, the overall approach, atmosphere and structure enabled this to be an indirect evolution from the programme. This could be encouraged in the future to make the programme more sustainable in the longer-term and less reliant on the HEA for resourcing, who can then progress with the next phase of Green Academy and other ESD work if this network is self-sustaining.

An important question for the institutions involved is: where next? How can the momentum that has been built-up be maintained? How can the achievements be rolled out more widely and in greater depth, really ensuring that sustainability becomes a part of everyday teaching and learning? How can progress in the areas identified above be made? Helping institutions to address these questions could be a useful function for the HEA itself.

With regard to the next cohort of Green Academy participants, are there any lessons from this evaluation to inform the next round? We would identify the following areas for consideration:

- the next round should take into account that the first round of participants appear to have been perfectly poised to benefit from it. Would the same model of team leaders meetings and a team residential meeting be as applicable?
- outside the original timescale of January to May 2011 and until the evaluation took place, there was no regular substantive engagement by the HEA with institutions. A longitudinal engagement with institutions alongside current provision might have helped to stimulate and consolidate progress. Given the early stages of curriculum reform, a further evaluation in 12 months' time or longer would be valuable in determining the degree of consolidation and the scale and momentum of the change process currently underway;
- while participants were overwhelmingly positive about the current Green Academy model, consideration should be given to providing more opportunities for different institutions to interact during the residential meeting;
- the lack of development to date in areas such as monitoring, evaluation and target setting suggests that it might be helpful to dedicate more time to these aspects, and to ensure they are built into the action plans that Green Academy teams take away from the residential meetings.

Contact us

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR

+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

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