

The Sustainability Challenge: Wisdom and Learning for the Future of HE Curricula

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Abstract

As sustainable development issues continue to rise up the agenda, suggesting the need for rethinking our present patterns of life, the UK HE sector has responded with examples of ground-breaking research and excellent corporate practice. At the same time, demand for sustainability-linked curricula appears to be increasing among students, whilst employers are in need of graduates who will be able to meet complex sustainability challenges in all professional and business contexts.

Progress on the curriculum in relation to sustainability has to date been slow. The imperative seems clear, but the sheer complexity of sustainability issues raises various issues for senior managers and academic leaders seeking to integrate sustainability within academic development processes and learning opportunities.

The field of *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) is geared towards systemic change to ensure that the future of excellent academic practice will include the sustainability imperative. Therefore, those processes that ensure the quality of academic provision have been recognised as a key strategic arena for the pursuit of ESD and its goals for integrated sustainability education and learning.

This paper explores these strategic needs to reorient graduate skills and capabilities, by progressing ESD through the functions of quality assurance and enhancement, based on a HEFCE LGM-funded project on the topic. Practical, conceptual and philosophical dimensions are considered together, to embrace three key levels of academic change: sectoral, institutional and individual.

Paper

Recent public reports have pointed to serious deficits in the range of skills and capabilities required to ensure more sustainable futures and to connect sustainability more explicitly with the national skills agenda (ASC, 2007; UN, 2008; BIS, 2008). To address this imperative will require focused effort to reorient HE curricula in ways that best enables graduates across academic subjects to tackle the challenges and complexities of sustainability. HE institutions are being encouraged to take the lead in this area, in line with their civic responsibilities and scientific endeavours, so that graduates are able to address sustainability issues in all professional and business contexts. A UUK working group declaration on this topic states:

“The HE sector in this country is a major contributor to society’s efforts to achieve sustainability –through the skills and knowledge that its graduates learn and put into practice...” (UUK declaration of intent on Sustainable Development, 2010)

Although the HEFCE has quite properly avoided direct intervention in relation to the curriculum, its reviews and action plans have been fairly direct in setting out a vision

whereby 21st century graduates will develop suitable awareness, understanding and competence with regard to sustainable development, insisting this should become 'an integral and not a bolt-on activity' for HE institutions (HEFCE, 2008, p.38).

So much seems clear, but considerable confusion remains. 'Sustainability' or 'sustainable development' is a negotiated and contested concept; while pathways towards more sustainable patterns of life are difficult to establish and occupy shifting ground. At HE level, the most valuable types of sustainability learning and education can develop from specific programmes or modules, or simply from the use of examples of sustainability and unsustainability. Invariably this requires critical pedagogies; it may also be prompted by informal and social learning experiences. Further levels of complexity pertain: some disciplines or professional programmes appear to be more remote from sustainability issues, and as sustainability education is holistic in orientation, both students and educators need encouragement to forge links between academic programmes and their professional and personal life choices and interests.

The field of *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) has gained in prominence in its efforts to nurture this type of work within HE, particularly under the auspices of the United Nations Decade of ESD (2005-2014). Studies have shown that ESD has slowly begun to enter mainstream HE teaching and learning, with some increase in both pace and scope in recent years (Blewitt & Cullingford, 2004; Hunting & Tilbury, 2006; Jones, Selby & Sterling, 2010). At the same time, demand among students appears to be increasing: the UCAS/Forum for the Future *Future Leaders Survey 2007-08* indicated that two thirds of students seek the integration of sustainability in HE curricula and 42% expect that sustainability-linked learning will enhance their future employability. However, as the work of the HE Academy ESD Project has shown, ESD developments tend to take place as fringe projects and at grassroots level, amongst individual academics. The implications of ESD for senior managers and academic leaders have yet to be embraced at the organisational level, less still at sector level in relation to wider processes for quality teaching and learning.

ESD urges change across HE curricula, which raises specific leadership challenges within institutions. To safeguard strategic change, principles of ESD would need to become integrated within structures of academic governance and routines of academic practice. Tactics to integrate ESD in core academic functions of HE institutions can take various forms, both informal and formal. Yet every institution, regardless of profile and mission, uses common mechanisms to maintain the quality of its provision. These processes are a consistent point of focus for encouraging ESD curriculum development sector-wide. Consequently, quality assurance and enhancement is critically important in exploring ESD and academic leadership. Indeed, quality processes have been positioned as key mechanisms to drive curriculum change for ESD within HE institutions (Morris & Mason O'Connor, 2008).

To understand the significance and implications of shifting curricula towards more integrated engagement with sustainability requires attention not just to individual academic practice, but also organisational context and sector level mechanisms. This paper explores the parameters, issues and questions surrounding a HEFCE LGM-funded action learning project whereby changes of academic practice to progress ESD are being pursued in five very different HE institutions. It also explores

questions of capacity-building and involvement at sector level, as the project seeks dialogue and consultation with agencies such as the QAA and HEA, as well as educational think tanks, scientific organisations, learned societies and key informants from business and industry.

Ultimately, sustainability education and learning proposes far more than simply sectoral, institutional or individual changes. The overarching imperative for humanity to live within its ecological limitations provides an impulse to refashion the philosophy, purpose and practice of HE, to improve the integration and effectiveness of its contribution. It is incumbent upon educators in the early 21st century to rewrite the idea of a university; as educators such as Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Amartya Sen (1999; 2009) have urged, this means pragmatic and accessible articulation of approaches to disciplinary and transdisciplinary learning that enable fuller realisation of human capabilities. At base, ESD resists passive and compartmentalised modes of learning; it involves revitalisation of educational principles, bringing benefits far beyond the obvious reach of the 'ESD' agenda itself.

This type of development requires accommodation to new and often uncomfortable truths and 'wisdom', as well as a creative approach to leadership that demands the type of collegiality compromised by a dominance of 'predictability' and audit. It recognises the overt uncertainties of our ecological, political and financial climate and prompts the reconnection of HE functions of discovery, integration, application and teaching as proposed by Ernest Boyer (Boyer, 1996). It is also resonant with the type of widespread and holistic curriculum change under way at HE institutions as diverse as Melbourne, Hong Kong and Aberdeen. Ultimately, the ESD agenda proposes a certain attitude to wisdom and learning, as against the inculcation of 'knowledge' or accumulation of 'information'. It suggests an understanding of learning attuned to Gregory Bateson's work and a view of the ecological system as a meta-capability, necessary for the exercise of central human capabilities (Holland, 2008). As John Dewey observed:

"Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not 'in' that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil. It is of them, continuous with their energies, dependent upon their support, capable of increase only as it utilises them, and as it gradually rebuilds from their crude indifference an environment genially civilised." (Dewey 2002: 296)

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