

What sustainability means to students and ways and means of engagement

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Sustainability has come a long way in the last ten years or so. It has moved from the outer margins of political correctness to the mainstream of public policy making. The popularity of this conference is symbolic of that change in status. And it is reflected in a range of other ways: some of our biggest companies advertise their commitment to sustainability; the government asserts its importance in a range of policy spheres, including education; and international organisations proclaim it as a key performance target of international development and co-operation. These days, every organisation and company wants to be seen to be doing its bit for sustainability.

At one level, this is little more than a shallow marketing image. When companies whose core business is the mining of oil or coal claim they are also champions of sustainability we have entered a Tardis-like world in which rhetoric and reality live in parallel universes.

But at another level the growing profile and influence of sustainability is not just empty rhetoric. Within the HE sector, there are good reasons to acknowledge the progress that has been made.

Ten years ago, the verdict of the Khan report – the report of a government panel on sustainable development – was very critical of the sector. Progress towards higher standards of environmental management and the promotion of sustainable development was, and I quote, 'patchy and superficial'. Just six years ago, when People & Planet began its Green Electricity campaign – a modest forerunner of the current Go Green Campaign – the number of universities that were buying some green electricity could be counted on one hand.

Since then, the Higher Education sector really does seem to have recognised that, both as a sector and as a society, we have no alternative but to adapt to the imperative of sustainable development. The sector has organised itself more effectively to achieve improvements in environmental management, and reductions in its carbon emissions. This is beginning to be reflected in a range of indicators.....and it is also reflected in the Green League.

This year People & Planet published its second Green League and there is clear evidence that high quality environmental management is no longer confined to three or four star performers. In a number of key areas more than half of the universities and colleges in the Green League are achieving good results. The most significant improvements are in the adoption of systemic environmental management policies and the appointment of dedicated staff. It is an obvious thing to say, but having the right policies in place and people with the responsibility, the resources and the status to drive up standards across the whole institution is the bedrock upon which systemic improvements – whether in terms of energy efficiency, water usage and innovative transport plans – can be based.

So, I think we can all agree that there have been improvements - but there is still a long way to go.

Let me give one example. While almost all universities have a publicly available environment policy of some sort, only 12 – less than 10% - picked up full marks in this year's Green League, for a regularly reviewed policy with clear time-bound targets in specific areas of environmental management. A challenge for the coming year will be to convince universities to review their existing commitments, and then approve ambitious and comprehensive policies. *Those policies must become the basis for changes in practice.* Because Going Green – which is the term we use in People & Planet for the alignment of policy and practice around the principles of sustainable development – is fundamentally about transforming practice. The whole point is that business-as-usual is simply not consistent with sustainable development and we have to change in a very wide range of ways. We have to change as individuals; and we have to play an active role in changing the institutions we work for or lead. If universities do not have their own clear and ambitious strategy for Going Green, all the evidence suggests they will not be playing their part in addressing one of the most critical problems of contemporary society.

Another priority is to continue to strengthen the sector's capacity for delivering sustainable development. This means appointing dedicated staff with the status and authority to get things moving. The 2008 Green

League shows that there are still 51 universities with no full-time staff member dedicated to environmental management. This means little or no capacity, in a significant proportion of the sector, for policies to be developed and implemented and performance improvements to be achieved.

Third, an absolutely critical way of extending and deepening an institutions commitment to sustainable development is to build support for a new initiative from others on campus whose behaviour will need to change. For however good they are, environmental managers on their own will find it very hard to change an institution. Those managers will need to gain the support of a wide range of others.

This requires effective communication. Policies are useless if most staff and students do not know about them. Investing time in talking to and gaining the active engagement of unions and their members – by which I mean not just student unions but also lecturers unions and staff unions – will be essential if we are to succeed in transforming behaviour and in ensuring that changes endure. My conversations with union representatives of one kind or another lead me to think that much more could be done to build up a powerful coalition in favour of change.

The Green League 2008 records commendable progress towards better environmental management and lower carbon emissions. With few exceptions those achievements are a credit to the hard work of committed staff and students over a long period of time. To convert these individual improvements into truly sectoral change, however, this hard work needs to be complemented by government leadership and a national carbon reduction strategy for the HE sector as a whole. The first reports and seminar papers urging the HE sector to play a transformative role in the transition to sustainable development were written more than ten years ago. It has taken us a very long time to make modest improvements. In that time the science of climate change has changed dramatically. We now know in ways that we didn't ten years ago about the causes and likely impacts of climate change. We also know that we are very close to hitting a threshold of greenhouse gas emissions that could trigger yet more devastating change. Our knowledge of the risks we are running from a business-as-usual approach demands urgent and collective action. Across the HE sector it is imperative that we collectively create a culture of sustainability – not attainment of targets in one or two selected areas, not award-winning progress by a dozen universities while the rest can't be bothered to change.

The development of a sector wide strategy would be a new way of advancing the sustainability agenda. A sector wide strategy will be essential if we are to transform the performance of the entire HE sector, and if we are to avoid having a situation of winners and losers. A national strategy will complement the plans that each individual university produces, and ensures that sustainable development becomes a collective priority.

At People & Planet we believe that the key to success in developing a sector-wide strategy is in developing a process which brings together all principal stakeholders to develop a strategy in a collaborative way. It's not about one group of institutions setting standards for others to meet. On the contrary, it is about all of us recognising that within a few months Parliament will pass the Climate Change Bill. And when it becomes law, there will be a binding obligation on the government to drive down carbon emissions by a given percentage year after year. The Climate Change Bill will bring fundamental changes to the policy landscape because it will require steady and incremental change.

Unambitious as this sounds, it has been beyond our collective capacity to date. The 2008 Green League shows some universities improving performance – in terms of water usage, carbon emissions, waste - with others merely maintaining or even worsening their impact. We cannot continue to rely on an approach that means that some institutions work hard at sustainability and do well, whilst others treat it as a desirable, but not very important, option. This is not an effective way to manage the transition to becoming a low carbon sector in a low carbon society. Some universities have made commendable progress – but they are a small minority. Less than twenty got a first in the Green League. Those individual efforts need urgently to be complemented by a sector-wide strategy.

So far I have spoken about sustainability exclusively from the perspective of environmental sustainability. In our day-to-day language the two terms are often used inter-changeably and there is a very real danger that sustainability is reduced to a one dimensional concept. This would detract from what sustainable development is all about – and our focus on improving environmental management cannot be at the expense of simultaneously promoting social and economic sustainability. If we fall into the trap of seeing environmental management as separate from, and unconnected with, social and economic development, we are betraying the very essence of sustainable development. Indeed, I suggest that by looking at sustainability through an economic lens we can in fact advance environmental sustainability.

In the Green League we have tried to incorporate economic sustainability in two ways. First, by the extent of a university's commitment to, and practice of, Fairtrade. And secondly, by the ethical investment of its financial assets.

Over 70 universities currently enjoy Fairtrade University status. This is only just over 50% of all universities and colleges, and is an indication of how far we have to go to incorporate economic sustainability into procurement and purchasing policies. Even in those universities with Fairtrade status, I wonder how rigorously it is applied – and by extension, what this says about how the sector uses its economic relationships to make the aspiration of sustainable development a reality. I don't think it is unreasonable to suggest that universities' purchasing policies could be used much more effectively as a tool to stimulate and support economic sustainability.

The ethical investment of a university's financial assets is another way in which it can put into practice its recognition that sustainable development has an economic dimension. A sustainably responsible investment strategy starts with a look at which bank operates your main accounts. If your university banks with the Royal Bank of Scotland, or one of its constituent banks – notably Natwest – you might well want to consider whether that arrangement is consistent with an institutional commitment to sustainability.

The Royal Bank of Scotland is a hugely significant funder of fossil fuel projects. Between 2001 and 2006, RBS provided over \$10 billion in loans to controversial oil and gas projects. Over the same period, it structured the loan agreements and acted as financial adviser on over \$30 billion of projects. The Royal Bank of Scotland is also a major funder of the dirtiest and most polluting carbon fuel of all – coal. In the two years to April 2008 recent research shows it was responsible for the provision of an estimated \$16 billion to coal projects and power companies.

That might be good for shareholders primarily interested in short-term gains – but it is bad news for making sustainable development a reality. It makes no sense for a university to do everything it can to cut its own carbon emissions if it invests its money – as a customer or as a shareholder – with a company which uses that money to support projects which by their very nature are locking us into the carbon economy for the next twenty, thirty or even fifty years.

RBS has a choice. It can continue on a business-as-usual basis, seeking to ignore the risks to global well-being that follow from its investments in the carbon sector. As institutional investors and customers, universities need to weigh those risks carefully. The more far-sighted may choose either to reduce or eliminate their exposure. Some may choose to use the power that being an institutional investor bestows to urge RBS to change its investment priorities. Instead of perpetuating the carbon economy, universities could help to persuade RBS to use its formidable corporate strength as a force for good. Instead of investing primarily in coal and oil, it could choose to take its climate impacts seriously and commit to switching financing to renewable energy projects.

Universities can play a powerful role in creating a society based on the principles of sustainable development. They can do this through the teaching, research and learning opportunities they provide; they can do it through the effective management of their physical estates. But they can also do it through ensuring that economic sustainability is a key criterion in the nature and extent of their economic relationships with the wider world.

These are not alternatives. They are all essential components of making a university a model of sustainable development. But in 2008 only 17 universities have an ethical investment policy. If universities want to be seen by their students to be doing more on advancing sustainable development, adopting state-of-the-art ethical investment policies could be a cutting-edge and collaborative initiative to take on.

To sum up: There has been real and practical progress in the last few years. Sustainability is no longer seen merely as the latest piece of jargon to be included in official reports. Our experience tells us that there is a small, but growing, group of staff in our universities whose dedication and commitment to the goal of sustainable development is shared by students in People & Planet's network of groups.

But the progress that has been made – in terms of scale and speed – pales in comparison to the threat to our common future which climate change poses.

We have to recognise that business-as-usual is a cop-out, not a sensible strategy for educational institutions which will train the next generation of business and political leaders.

There can be no excuse for inaction in the face of scientific advice which is increasingly clear about the need for a rapid and bold policy response.

Part of that response should be for each and every HE institution in this country to formulate a comprehensive and ambitious environmental management strategy which is primarily designed to drive down carbon emissions, not just another way to save money.

Collectively, we need to create a sector-wide strategy which will ensure that every institution plays its part, lead to irreversible change and contributing to a fundamental shift in organisational culture.

And finally, we need to use all the tools at our disposal. So far we have viewed sustainability solely through an environmental lens. We have failed to incorporate an economic dimension into our thinking and policy response. That needs to change, with the much more powerful application of economic tools – in purchasing and procurement and in looking at who your university banks with and what you are putting your money into.

Climate change poses a grave and imminent threat. But it is the ultimate consequence of thousands of little decisions, and a handful of major decisions, that every one here will make in the year ahead. As individuals, as employees, as consumers and as citizens with the right to tell our political representatives that you want them to take action, we can make sustainability a realistic policy objective.

Thank you.