

Sustainable development in higher education

Report of the consultation seminars

1. In January 2005 we published 'Sustainable development in higher education: consultation on a support strategy and action plan' (HEFCE 2005/01) which was circulated to all HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and to other agencies and bodies. Written responses have been made by the sector and an analysis is available on our web-site <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lgm/sustain/>.

2. As part of the consultation process, we arranged four seminars in Manchester, Birmingham and London, to gather additional information and, importantly, to begin a dialogue with institutions about the sustainability agenda. This report summarises the feedback from those seminar which, with the written responses to the consultation, has helped inform our thinking.

3. Prior to and during the seminars we invited sector representatives to record on video a project or activity in their institution that aimed to achieve sustainable development. Following a presentation by HEFCE, these video clips were used in the seminars to stimulate discussion. Institutional leaders then provided different perspectives and comments about their involvement with sustainable development, and the issues it raised. Participants broke out into facilitated workshop groups of about 10-15 people.

4. The events concluded with a lunch where individuals could network and continue informal discussions. This arrangement proved successful and participants were positive about the opportunity for further networking in future.

5. Most groups were facilitated by participants, and main points were recorded from the discussions. The groups were asked to report back key issues to all participants, before a concluding question and answer session with a panel. Each group had a brief, and some set questions to address. Three main areas of response emerged:

- barriers to achieving sustainable development in institutions
- enablers that might address and overcome barriers
- current activity in institutions, or broader sustainability agenda issues.

6. We asked open questions, which encouraged a wide variety of responses and stimulated considerable discussion. Participants often focused on particular aspects of the consultation or an issue raised by a key speaker. Because of this we decided to capture opinions using the headings 'barriers' and 'enablers' to achieving sustainable development', and a more general category of 'current activities and other comments'.

7. Some factors were regarded by different respondents as both enablers and barriers. These included special funding for sustainability, metrics and monitoring, and institutional 'champions'.

Barriers to achieving sustainable development in institutions

8. One of the main barriers to achieving sustainable development was seen as the definition of sustainability and sustainable development, and associated jargon. Participants referred to the term as 'fuzzy'.
9. A related problem was the perceived breadth and complexity of sustainability issues, which were seen as inhibiting progress. Taking a wide view of related comments, there was inertia due to trying to make sense of the 'abstract' and then moving to 'do-able' projects.
10. Some participants considered that sustainability is merely 'fashionable'. Others regarded sustainable development as 'specialist', 'multi-layered' and 'complex', requiring expert knowledge to make good decisions.
11. Institution size was also an issue. It was considered harder for small institutions to engage with the sustainable agenda. However, some thought it was difficult for larger research intensive institutions too, with the Research Assessment Exercise cited as favouring more traditional subjects rather than cross-disciplinary concepts.
12. Conflicting priorities, especially after the introduction of variable fees in 2006, were considered to be a barrier, because the introduction of a market and competition for students might compromise sustainability objectives. One example given was a potential future drive to attract foreign students over UK students.
13. Uneven starting points could make it harder for high performing institutions to demonstrate progress. It is for this reason that our strategy and action plan emphasise that institutions should start from wherever they can, and however they feel they can best progress.
14. Further observations referred to the need for long-term planning to achieve sustainable development, with proper consideration of capital and operating costs when making investment decisions. These could include the extra up-front cost of sustainable buildings, even if there were long-term savings. Participants felt the allocation of HEFCE funding and other resources seemed to hinder sustainable development because institutions often need to respond quickly to a call for proposals, or because the time frame for spending is short and unable to reflect sustainable objectives.
15. Special HEFCE funding for sustainable projects was also seen as a possible barrier, although some felt it was helpful. Participants argued that funding should be more mainstream and less burdensome in terms of reporting and monitoring. Again there were divergent views about metrics and monitoring. Some participants said that monitoring was a difficult and time-consuming process and works against sustainable development. Others felt that, without monitoring, achievement and progress cannot be measured.
16. Practical skills at the right levels, lack of time, and restrictive structures and cultural gaps in institutions were cited as barriers. It was felt that they resulted in a poor dialogue and co-ordination in institutions, leading to a lack of commitment from everyone in developing a sustainable agenda.

17. One of the toughest barriers seemed to be the curriculum, often described as being crowded already with little scope for additional development. Some participants referred to courses in which, due to their content and purpose, it would be difficult to embed sustainability into their teaching. This issue is complex but there seems to be evidence that some academics are already incorporating sustainability in the teaching of a range of subjects, as well as institution-wide developments in this area.

18. More general comments referred to the structure of the economy as being unsustainable, with the pre-eminence of 'choice' being a major stumbling block to sustainable development. Contradictory government signals, the drive to achieve value for money and competitive procurement (through large and remote contracts), and the different economic and geographic constraints of the local context (resulting in different methods and outcomes), were all recorded as barriers to achieving sustainable development. Again these are difficult issues to address, but there was sufficient support, and current examples of sustainability work in the sector, to suggest that the agenda can be developed in a meaningful way.

19. Further barriers cited were the proposed strategy itself, which some considered too light touch and 'not enough'. It was pointed out that the strategy also lacks an international or global perspective. Student behaviour was referred to as a barrier, linked mainly to consumer and transport issues. Finally, governors and vice-chancellors were mentioned as possible barriers, usually because of existing non-sustainable agendas, or through an unwillingness to change.

Enablers to help overcome barriers identified by institutions

20. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that students as agents for change and institutional 'champions' were prime enablers for sustainable development. Students are seen as key drivers for change, and their collective views and behaviour are already stimulating more sustainable activity at institutions, such as buying 'Fair Trade' goods and undertaking community-based activity.

21. Individuals as champions for sustainable development were regarded as key to changing 'hearts and minds', although there were reservations about the term 'champions'. 'Persuaders' was considered more apt by some participants, and there was a sense that this role should be broadened to include a wider group of people. The problem with an individual 'champion' was explained in terms of the danger that sustainability in an institution may be lost if that individual leaves.

22. Leading by example was a common theme in discussing the role of institutions in sustainable development. This had both an external and an internal focus. The culture and values associated with institutions were considered conducive to developing the sustainability agenda, but at the same time there was a need for space, courses and facilitation. Participants acknowledged that there is a growing awareness of sustainable development in institutions.

23. Good practice and dissemination to include 'inspirational information' were also needed. Metrics and monitoring were cited as enablers for sustainable development, with a

role for HEFCE in developing them. Rewards and incentives were also considered to be enablers, and HEFCE funding was seen to be helpful in developing them. But participants didn't only concentrate on the role of HEFCE in developing rewards and incentives. Other mechanisms mentioned included the Higher Education Environmental Performance Improvement (HEEPI) Green Gown awards (www.heepi.org.uk). Benchmarking tools could also be designed using the tools developed by the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS), a partnership of 18 universities and colleges developing green buildings, cutting emissions or improving curricula to achieve sustainability (www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/heps/).

24. Leadership by HEFCE was considered to be an enabler to overcome barriers: our strategy and action plan were felt to be useful, if they had 'teeth'. Participants thought that we should work 'upstream' with other stakeholder organisations and provide leadership on the sustainability agenda. The Government's sustainable development strategy was also considered helpful, especially as it included wider, cultural and social competencies in a more holistic interpretation of sustainable development.

25. Institutional links with local authorities, especially relating to planning and economic development, can differ between regions. These links are considered to cause problems in some areas due to tensions between sustainability and other regional agendas but in other instances can exert a positive impact. Participants suggested that a more outward looking and participative role for institutions in local and regional development would help the sustainability agenda. Community research into the impact of institutions on sustainability, with pilot funding to get communities involved, was also mentioned as an enabler.

26. Institutional corporate plans that would influence direction and curricula were mentioned as tools to achieve sustainable development, with 'quick win' projects to gain support within institutions.

27. Building on this, participants suggested that devolved budgets and involving more 'green' staff in decision making would also assist a realignment of institutional activity and sustainable development. There appears to be a lot of support for this among administrative and academic staff. Some argued that sustainable development should be a core business activity, at the heart of every institution. It was mentioned that international students and staff could help provide a global perspective.

Current activities and wider comments

28. There is currently considerable activity in the sector that is contributing to sustainable development. Much of this is in waste and energy management projects, or sustainable buildings. There are also some good examples of sustainable development in the curriculum.

29. In general this part of the consultation resulted in a more wide-ranging and general discussion. The need for research and good practice activities, with supporting development of whole life costing and business cases for sustainable development, were also discussed.

30. Small and practical steps to achieve sustainable development seemed the preferred method to achieve change, with an audit of current activity in the sector an important first stage. Participants felt that HEFCE should lead the development of new policy and initiatives, but that at the same time we should move towards building sustainable development into interactions with institutions. Suggestions included a 'sustainability statement' produced by institutions, and a 'sustainability health check' procedure.

31. An opportunistic outlook was considered to be important in identifying ways to move the agenda forward. Distance and e-learning were discussed as means to achieve more sustainable activity. Other positive measures to move towards sustainability included personal job descriptors with objectives for sustainable development, working with professional bodies to achieve sustainable curricula, socially responsible endowments and pensions, and a corporate approach to social responsibility.

32. More generally, some participants considered the strategy too ambitious. Some referred to a lack of a global or international focus. At the same time it was acknowledged that sustainability is a huge issue, but one that HEFCE should be involved with, including the curriculum. There is an obvious need for information and expertise; and HEFCE was identified as the facilitator for these at all levels, including links with the Government and its sustainable development objectives. Participants described the role for HEFCE as managing expectations and supporting continuous improvement in the sector.

33. To achieve change, participants recognised that a framework for action is needed but argued that sustainability is also about 'doing it'. This requires recognition of 'ground level' and individual contributions, a sense of urgency, and the engendering and maintenance of support and commitment. Participants were generally enthusiastic about the sustainability agenda.

34. There were ambivalent perceptions of HEFCE's role and the actions it might take to stimulate sustainable development. For example, some felt that there was a need for direct incentives and reporting requirements in our funding, whereas others argued for mainstreaming of funds and less intervention. Some comments seemed to imply that HEFCE should have more of a policing role, for example in checking compliance with energy and waste regulation requirements.

35. Participants talked of a need for greater recognition of the importance of governance in institutions as well as recognition of regional differences. They recognised that sustainable development is a cross-cutting, multi-disciplinary activity that needs more action and a move away from theoretical discussion.