

Sustainable development in higher education: Consultation on 2008 update to strategic statement and action plan

Summary of written responses

Background

1. In June 2008 we published 'Sustainable development in higher education: consultation on 2008 update to strategic statement and action plan' (HEFCE 2008/18). This was both a progress report and an updated strategic statement and action plan¹. We received 93 responses from higher education institutions, organisations and individuals, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of responses received

	Received
1994 Group	7
GuildHE	6
Million+	10
Russell Group	11
University Alliance	14
Non-aligned higher education institution	9
Other organisations	29
Individuals	7

2. Three seminars were held in July as part of the consultation process. A report of these seminars is available on the HEFCE web-site².

3. This document summarises the key messages from the written responses. The written responses and consultation seminars have both informed the development of our revised strategy and action plan, 'Sustainable development in higher education: 2008 update to strategic statement and action plan' (HEFCE 2009/03).

¹ All HEFCE Publications are available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications.

² 'Report on sustainable development consultation seminars', available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Leadership, governance & management/Sustainable development.

Responses to consultation questions

Question 1

Do you agree that our vision (paragraph 21) is still appropriate and that the proposed objectives are sufficient to achieve this vision?

4. The majority of respondents agreed with our vision and objectives. Ninety-two per cent of respondents agreed that our vision is still appropriate with only 5 per cent disagreeing. Twelve per cent commented that research and business and community engagement should be explicitly referenced in the vision.
5. Some respondents asked how HEFCE will know when or if it has achieved its vision. A small number of respondents thought that a stronger rationale for why sustainable development is important was needed in the document.
6. Seventy-one per cent consider the proposed objectives to be sufficient to achieve the vision with 8 per cent disagreeing. While there was general agreement with the objectives some respondents included caveats:
 - the linkage between the vision, objectives and support roles is not clear
 - 6 percent commented that the objectives should be less ambiguous with a means of measuring progress
 - many references were made to HEFCE's leadership role with 11 per cent suggesting that the objectives should be more ambitious and challenging. This is shown through statements such as 'The University feels though that some of the proposed objectives should go further, to clearly indicate HEFCE's commitment and leadership to this area. Examples include: Objective a: Change the language from 'aim that it should become a mainstream part of university and college activities' to 'ensure it becomes a mainstream part of university and college activities' Objective c: Sustainable Development should stand alongside the other key HEFCE policies.'
7. It was suggested that sustainable development should become HEFCE's fourth major objective, alongside teaching, research and third stream activity: 'the objectives should be firmed up and made a core objective for HEFCE and sector, like commitment on widening participation'.
8. Respondents made several suggestions for additional objectives in specific areas, which included:
 - social and ethical issues including wider community engagement
 - learning and teaching
 - awareness raising and holistic approach
 - encouraging links between research and teaching practice
 - engaging all staff and students.

Question 2

Is the proposed action plan fully aligned with, and sufficiently complete to deliver, the vision?

9. Approximately 60 per cent of respondents stated that the proposed action plan fully aligned with, and sufficiently complete to deliver, the vision with 13 per cent disagreeing with this statement. Almost all respondents made suggestions for additional actions to be included in the action plan (questions 4 and 5). The non-prescriptive approach was strongly endorsed by almost all respondents but some felt that more 'sticks' would be helpful.

10. Eleven per cent commented that the actions should be focussed around time bound outcomes to portray a sense of urgency. One respondent commented 'the actions are aligned with the vision but are not sufficiently complete or tangible to deliver it..... 'review, investigate and consider' hardly constitutes a call to arms', while another said 'it [the action plan] offers a degree of flexibility while still retaining the core principle aims. This will enable institutions to approach this in their own way retaining their independence but following a core set of aims and objectives.'

11. Nineteen per cent of respondents considered that the action plan is not sufficient in the area of encouraging the educator role and asked for more targeted actions on education for sustainable development. One respondent stated 'we agree that Universities must model sustainability in practice, but their unique contribution to society is through their educational as well as research activities. This academic contribution is included in the statement above but not reflected in the action points identified in the document.'

Question 3

Which actions should take priority?

12. A number of consistent themes emerged from this question: education for sustainable development, sharing of good practice, carbon reductions, sustainable construction including BREEAM, benchmarking, procurement and leadership.

13. Forty-one per cent of respondents made direct or indirect references to prioritising action 1b³, involving curricula, pedagogy and education. The topics covered by respondents included:

- the duty of universities to improve the skills and knowledge of graduates
- a need to embed sustainable development into courses, curriculum and individual modules. Two respondents suggested using the QAA to do this
- a need to improve staff and academic training on sustainable development
- prioritising actions that focus on changing behaviours of all groups
- requesting assistance with providing suitable Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses on sustainable development.

14. There was a high level of support for the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) project and 17 per cent of respondents

³ 'We will review the work of the Higher Education Academy sustainable development-related Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the teaching baseline produced by the strategic review, to investigate the effectiveness of existing curricula and pedagogy, and how HEFCE can best support education for sustainable development.'

directly or indirectly referred to action 3b⁴. Suggestions here included developing the HEA ESD project as a 'hub' to support curriculum development in sustainable development and engaging other stakeholders, such as professional bodies.

15. Twenty-one per cent of respondents made direct or indirect references to prioritising the sharing of good practice within the action plan or referred to action 3c⁵. The topics covered by respondents included:

- a need to focus on improved joined up and integrated thinking within HE
- a continued need to publicise and widely circulate institutional success stories
- sharing good practice can help collaboration between institutions
- a need for learning and sharing of good practice from other countries and sectors.

16. Eighteen per cent of respondents stated that the actions surrounding carbon reductions should be prioritised. This included direct or indirect references to action 3f⁶ (18 per cent), 3g⁷ (15 per cent) and 3h⁸ (11 per cent). The emphasis tended to be on the need to establish a 'carbon reduction culture' through agreeing suitable metrics for carbon. Other points covered by respondents included:

- the sector's work on carbon could underpin a national debate on carbon
- the sector should lead by example and act as an exemplar for the community
- a need to emphasise the economic benefit of carbon reduction for institutions
- a sector strategy on carbon and mandatory carbon reduction targets
- support for the Revolving Green Fund and further financial support in this area.

17. Ten per cent of respondents supported the introduction of some form of benchmark or mandatory reporting for sustainable development. The topics covered by respondents included:

- a need for specific targets and reporting – such as introducing BREEAM for new builds and refurbishments and further use of the Estates Management Statistics (EMS) for benchmarking

⁴ 'We will continue to support the work of the Higher Education Academy's Education for Sustainable Development Project and encourage the Academy and its Subject Centres to recognise education for sustainable development as a cross-cutting and priority programme area.'

⁵ 'We will continue to work with sector bodies to facilitate the building and dissemination of good practice by funding projects related to sustainable development through the Strategic Development Fund, Leadership, Governance and Management Fund and other appropriate funding streams.'

⁶ 'We will explore how we can create a carbon reduction culture and take action to assist the sector to play its part in meeting national climate change targets.'

⁷ 'We will establish a Revolving Green Fund to increase the implementation rate of energy efficiency projects and facilitate innovation in the management of greenhouse gas emissions.'

⁸ 'We will continue to support Carbon Trust's Higher Education Carbon Management Programme through participation on its steering group.'

- setting challenging and science-based metrics and targets for all areas of sustainable development
- requests for a self-assessment framework to benchmark the work of institutions.

18. In addition, 3 per cent of respondents stated a preference to either reward high achieving institutions on sustainable development or target underachieving institutions. The ‘carrot and stick’ incentives were seen by a number of respondents as a priority. Respondents stated that economics was often the ‘driving force’ and therefore action 4a⁹ will be helpful.

Question 4

Do you feel that there are any other sustainable development activities which HEFCE could help support?

Question 5

Are there any other ways in which you feel HEFCE could help promote sustainable development, in particular the non-environmental elements of the agenda? Views expressed need not be in the form of fully worked-up ideas.

19. A summary of the responses to these two questions is being presented together as some ideas were expressed under both.

20. It was commented that the action plan is heavily weighted towards environmental aspects, but there was general recognition that this is because these areas are better understood and often provide ‘quick-wins’. One respondent commented that the ‘current focus on environmental elements of sustainable development is considered appropriate in the current political climate’. However, another respondent felt that reference to political priorities was unhelpful: ‘[the document] should make it clear that sustainable development is itself a process of learning. The habits of challenging assumptions and looking beyond our ‘political priorities’ (i.e. the *raison d’être* of HE) are the very attributes that will sustain humanity in the long run.’

21. A small number of respondents commented that the strategy ignores some of the tensions which exist, for example international travel by students and staff and the view that a campus-based model of provision raises many sustainability issues in itself so the balance needs to shift to a greater use of distance learning. Several respondents felt that these should be recognised and guidance provided where possible.

22. Many suggestions were made for inclusion in the action plan, some were general areas or issues which the respondent thought needed addressing and others were specific actions. Respondents welcomed the focus on asking for non-environmental actions. Suggestions included:

- a. Collaborating with student organisations to encourage student led initiatives. It was commented that students are only conceived as recipients of learning and the action plan doesn’t address the wider student experience.

⁹ ‘We will explore and publicise the benefits of dealing with financial and reputational issues. Following this we will consider how HEIs can effectively exploit any reputational advantage.’

- b. A framework for benchmarking performance. One respondent commented, 'like it or not league tables are with us, and HE institutions are being ranked and compared on their sustainability performance.....To ensure a fair evaluation and understanding of an institution's position, there is a need for a rigorous auditing framework and benchmarking system to provide a level playing field.'
- c. Sustainability should be included in the KPIs reported to the governing body.
- d. Institutions should be required to report in a systematic manner, one respondent commented that 'we would have no objection to including within the Financial Operating Review of the Statutory Accounts a statement on environmental and sustainable developments during the year.' One respondent suggested that institutions should be asked to include a paragraph on sustainable development in their annual monitoring statement submitted to HEFCE.
- e. A focus on an institution's role in its community: 'Universities are not maximising their opportunity as the 'social brain' in local and regional processes of ecological innovation, changing infrastructures, planning systems and ultimately consumption patterns across neighbouring communities. HEFCE should also be finding ways to communicate and engage with community led projects, and exploring the cultural barriers between HE and the community which exist in respect of engagement with the sustainability agenda.' Examples of how this could be achieved included 'work associated with sustainability in relation to local and regional strategies on community cohesion and social inclusion could be integrated into this agenda and worked through a university(s) stakeholder partnership model with strategic local area partnerships, RDA, Local and Regional Government etc' and through beacons of public engagement.
- f. Support for regional networks of HEIs to work together, which could include an initiative to encourage poorer performing institutions to partner with those which are more advanced. Several respondents suggested supporting the United Nations Regional Centres of Expertise in ESD to act as beacons or hubs of public engagement for sustainable development.
- g. Initiatives to encourage ESD such as influencing professional bodies; specific funding for academics to develop and promote ESD materials possibly through a Fellowship scheme; funding sustainable development courses through the ASN mechanism and advice on implementing a programme accreditation scheme. Comments included: 'HEFCE should work to ensure that sustainable development issues are not seen as external to other disciplines. The multi-disciplinary and holistic aspects of sustainable development need to be promoted so as to ensure they can be integrated across the entire curriculum and embedded in operational aspects' and 'HEFCE, HEA and QAA should explore the strategic opportunity to integrate sustainable development into institutional quality assurance and enhancement procedures.'
- h. Support, including funding, for staff development and CPD around sustainable development.
- i. There were several requests for further guidance in specific areas including: guidelines on whole institutional approaches to the 'sustainable university'; workplace well-being; ethical investment policies; corporate social responsibility;

on-site renewables; sustainable procurement; and the potential conflict between sustainable development and other agendas (for example internationalisation).

j. A central repository for advice and good practice along the lines of the JISC model or a sustainable development equivalent to the Equality Challenge Unit¹⁰.

k. Develop and disseminate mechanisms to help quantify and promote wider understanding of procurement decisions. One respondent commented that it would be useful to have definitions to assist in decision making, for example, from a sustainability view point is it preferable to encourage papers to be printed out or viewed on laptops?

23. The action plan is not intended to be a static document, setting out everything which HEFCE plans to do in relation to sustainable development. However, it should portray key plans for and commitment to promoting sustainable development within the HE sector. This was recognised by several respondents through comments such as 'it is sufficient for now but over time as the action plan matures and is addressed new initiatives could be added as they emerge'.

Question 6

Should there be a sector strategy for carbon management? If so what should it look like?

24. There was strong support for the development of a sector strategy for carbon with almost 70 per cent of respondents agreeing. Reasons given by the 16 per cent of respondents who did not agree included that carbon should not be considered in isolation from other aspects of sustainable development, that any strategy should be for institutions to decide themselves and that there is a lot of good practice in relation to carbon management already.

25. Many respondents commented that any strategy should include an agreed way of measuring carbon, for example an HE carbon footprinting tool, and be based on current good practice. The Carbon Trust's HE Carbon Management Programme was frequently cited as a good basis for a strategy.

26. Comments on what a sector strategy for carbon management should look like are being considered as part of HEFCE commissioned research to develop a sector target and strategy¹¹.

Question 7

Could the sector reduce carbon emissions earlier than the government target for 2050, for example 60 per cent by 2030-2040? How should we deal with interim targets?

27. Many respondents thought that appropriate information is not available to answer this question on whether the sector could meet the 2050 climate change target early. Around 45 per cent of respondents felt that the sector could meet it early compared to 7 per cent who didn't and 12 per cent who thought possibly. Some commented that the legacy of the estate would be a hindering factor and that institutions would need to receive significant capital investment to succeed. There was strong support for interim

¹⁰ www.ecu.ac.uk

¹¹ Further information is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/lqm/sustain/carbon/.

targets to measure progress and focus attention. It was suggested that these should be set in a similar way to those for the Carbon Reduction Commitment and take account of 'quick-wins' in the early years.