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A sustainable campus? Students' perspectives of informal learning about sustainability

Cotton, D

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University of Plymouth

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Name of key contact (project leader): Dr Debby Cotton
Department: Educational Development
Telephone: 01752 587614
Fax:
E-mail: dcotton@plymouth.ac.uk

Names of other staff involved: Mr Alan Dyer, Dr Jennie Winter

Title of project: A sustainable campus? Students' perspectives of informal learning about sustainability

Type of project : Case study

Aims of project:

Sustainability is an important issue in Higher Education and is increasingly embedded within the formal curriculum alongside the greening of university campuses and estates. The University of Plymouth has a strong reputation for sustainability, currently holding the top position in the People and Planet *Green League*. The university aims to embed sustainability throughout the university curriculum, community, culture and campus (University of Plymouth 2006). However, to date there has been little research which explores the student perspective of campus sustainability. Understanding the student perspective is necessary if educators are to establish if and how campus-based learning about sustainability takes place. This can help to develop and enhance existing learning opportunities, and encourage an inclusive and comprehensive approach to sustainability at the university. This project therefore aimed to:

- Identify the ways and extent to which aspects of the university campus impact on students' understanding of sustainability through informal learning experiences;
- Develop a guide for staff and managers at the university on how the campus can be better developed and utilised to enhance the student learning experience with respect to sustainability.

Background to project:

Whilst a major impact on student learning about sustainability is the role of the different curricula and pedagogies which they experience, it is clear that students will also be influenced by informal learning experiences and by what is known as 'the hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968). This incorporates the messages sent by an individual lecturer or an institution, often unconsciously, to students about how they ought to think and behave. A key way in which the hidden curriculum is made manifest is through the immediate physical environment of the institution. This might be illustrated by the extent of provision of recycling facilities and green spaces, or by access to safe areas to store bikes to support a green travel policy. The concept of informal learning is becoming an issue of increasing interest in higher education and is an area which is crucial to students' understanding of, and learning about, sustainability. What students learn from the context in which they are taught can have significant consequences on the way in which they make sense of sustainability. They may also be highly conscious of any aspects of non-congruence between rhetoric and reality (e.g. if the university's claim to be a leading sustainability HEI is not reflected in the reality of the campus environment). It is important that we understand how students experience the campus as a site for learning about sustainability in order that we can enhance their experience and move towards a genuinely transformative education in sustainability.

Methods used:

The project used an ethnographic approach to gather student perspectives on sustainability at the university (specifically with respect to the campus environment). The primary data collection method was student video diaries. Students were quickly able to adapt to the medium of video, and it was possible to collect some very rich data, largely untainted by the investigator's perspective. The video diaries were supplemented by interviews, using a form of 'stimulated recall' (where short clips from the video were replayed during the interview) to encourage students to think more deeply about the impact of various aspects of the university environment on their understandings of sustainability. The data were analysed using an interpretive approach which aimed to understand students' individual perspectives, but also to identify cross-cutting themes.

Results:

Students' video diaries observed examples of sustainable and unsustainable practice around the university. Visible signs of sustainability included recycling bins, energy efficient lighting, provision of bike racks, automated taps, fair trade procurement in cafes and the shop, use of electric vehicles by estates, and sustainability features of the Roland Levinsky building design¹. Examples of unsustainable practices included littering, misuse of recycling bins, energy inefficiency through excessive lighting, heating and powering computers (and the role of building design in compounding these), water inefficiency through non-automated taps and old toilet cisterns, hand-dryers and the volume of paper waste. Participants were unanimous in how they summarised these experiences: that the University is doing a lot to progress sustainability on the campus but that, at present, the campus sends mixed messages in terms of sustainability practice which are further compounded by a lack of information about the university's achievements to date, as well as present and future plans to pursue sustainability.

Other key findings were that participants' perceptions of sustainability were focused on the environmental dimension and that most struggled to identify examples of economic and social sustainability on campus. It also became evident that despite all participants suggesting ways in which the university could progress the sustainability agenda (embedding ESD in the formal curriculum, increasing use of renewable energy, sustainability focused campaigns, energy and water conservation, information provision, promotion of pro-environmental behaviour, maintenance of older buildings and design of the new built environment), they unanimously reported that at present, students felt somewhat excluded from contributing to a dialogue about sustainability at Plymouth.

Outcomes.

The outcomes of the project so far are listed below. A further student campaign around sustainability is planned for later this year:

- Two conference papers have been presented on the research findings so far;
- A research paper is currently in preparation, which will be submitted for journal publication later this year;
- Guidance for staff has been developed and is published through Educational Development. The guidance provides an introduction to campus based learning opportunities and provides an overview of key principles; making students aware of sustainability issues the university is addressing, adopting appropriate pedagogic approaches, utilising the campus and campus operations in teaching and learning for sustainability, raising awareness of environmental, social and economic

¹ The Roland Levinsky Building was awarded first place in the Abercrombie Design Awards for 2007.

- dimensions of campus sustainability, challenging students to consider their own values and behaviour, inviting students to contribute ideas for improving sustainability on the Plymouth campus and measuring sustainability;
- The findings will also feed into the development of a new Negotiated Study Module on ESD which will be delivered as part of the PGCAP later this year.

Associated publications:

Winter, J. and Cotton, D. (2010) A sustainable campus: student perspectives of campus based sustainability in a UK case study. *International Conference on Teaching and Learning*. Temasek Polytechnic. Singapore. 9-11 June 2010.

Winter, J. and Cotton, D. (2010) Sustainability and informal learning in a UK university. *The Annual conference for the American Association of Sustainability in Higher Education*. Denver, Colorado, USA. 10-13 October 2010.

Keywords: sustainability, campus learning, informal learning.

References:

Jackson, P, W. (1968). Life in Classrooms. Chicago Teaching College Press

University of Plymouth. (2006) Sustainability Policy Summary. Retrieved on 13/9/2006 from <http://csf.plymouth.ac.uk/files/UPSUSTPOLICY12.pdf>