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Finalist's case study

University of Chester Research and Development: Student Alex Lerczak Catalysing Curriculum Change

About the project

Summary

Alex Lerczak achieved a Distinction for his MSc Sustainability Project: *Staff and Student Perceptions of Sustainability and its integration into University Curricula*. Presenting his findings to the University's Curriculum Innovation Lab was the springboard for the group to undertake a wider review of sustainability in the University's curriculum, culminating in a flurry of activity across the institution; 700 students surveyed about their attitudes towards sustainability, 23 student projects and the establishment of a teaching & research sustainability focused network. This takes significant steps towards creating an environment in which sustainability is truly embedded within the curriculum.

The results

The problem

The curriculum is one of the core areas within the University of Chester's Sustainability Strategy. A great deal of responsibility is placed on universities in order to achieve a sustainable future through the direct influence they can have on the development of students' skills and attitudes. As we embarked on a journey of integrating sustainability within the curriculum, we needed an understanding of the current provision and inclusion of sustainability related themes within the curriculum. Alex's skills and experience from his Masters research were central to developing the methodology and approach to conduct a wider review of the University's curriculum.

The approach

Alex presented the findings of his MSc research to the Curriculum Innovation Lab, which was established to drive forward the NUS Responsible Future's project. The results of his MSc research were fundamental to securing support of senior staff to progress the more challenging area of integrating sustainability within the curriculum. Alex developed the methodology, secured ethical approval and conducted a review of the curriculum. There were two phases to the review; the documented review, of module and programme specifications, followed by the second phase of interviews. The results of the documented review were presented to module and programme leaders during the interview. The interview provided the opportunity to discuss the documented and enacted curriculum with staff and explored the challenges and opportunities that lie in embedding sustainability related content within the formal curriculum.

- A review of 2 Programmes within each of the Faculties – total of 16 Programmes (plus the second year Work Based Learning module) and 87 module descriptors.



Profile

- Higher Education
- 20,000 (including students at partner institutions.)
- 2090 staff
- Semi-rural

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- Presented results to relevant Programme and Module Leaders during the interview phase to explore if and how the documented curriculum compared to the enacted curriculum – were staff including examples, case studies, projects relating to Sustainability.
- Presented a poster at the Staff Conference (2015) (won best poster in conference)
- Compiled final report for dissemination.

Our goals

Our aim was to determine the extent to which sustainability-related content and themes currently featured within the formal curriculum. We also wanted to explore staff perception and understandings of, and attitudes towards, sustainability and its integration into university curricula, and more specifically, the programmes and modules that they lead.

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacles	Solutions
Extensive range of modules to review	Focus on the experience for the majority of students, e.g. core first year modules
Themes and content considered to be related to sustainability.	Build on existing methodologies, log related themes within categories
Dissemination of results	Cross-institutional representation on the curriculum lab, that feed into the appropriate committees and networks.

Performance and results

16 undergraduate single honours programme specifications and 87 module descriptors were reviewed as part of the research. 62% of module descriptors contained seven or more themes relating to sustainability. While explicit statements referring to sustainability or sustainable development were identified in the aims and objectives of 25% of the 16 Programme Specifications.

The majority of themes identified were considered to be related to the social dimension of sustainability, and included themes such as health and wellbeing, human development, culture and ethics. However, when asked what sustainability meant to them, staff often identified only environmental themes. Despite these positive findings and the identification of potential content areas where sustainability can be integrated more explicitly within the curriculum, there is often a dissonance between disciplines in terms of staff perceptions towards the importance and relevance of sustainability within their subject areas. Staff were surprised to see all of the potential links, and acknowledged that they're not as explicit as they could be. The majority of staff felt that we should integrate sustainability within the University of Chester's formal curriculum, but we should not adopt a bolt-on approach. They recognised that staff need to confidently understand the concept, so they can apply it to their subject.

As a result of the research, the Sustainability Unit has developed links with staff in departments that had not previously engaged with sustainability. One example is a 5 week work placement for second year students from across a variety of Faculties who worked to develop resources, including a recycling app for use during induction. A Climate Change Special Interest Group has been set up with over 30 staff members signed up from across Faculties, to collaborate on research and teaching initiatives.



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Student led research projects have investigated the attitudes and expectations of students towards sustainability in the curriculum. Over 700 students were surveyed, 87% agreed or strongly agreed that universities should engage with and promote sustainability, yet only 36% felt it was currently incorporated within the curriculum.

The future

Lessons learned

The research has provided an insight in the importance and relevance of sustainability within various Faculties and the recommendations from the Curriculum Review will be taken forward to discussions regarding a review of the University's curriculum.

The Curriculum Innovation Lab is working with the Students' Union to see how the sustainability can be built into end of module/programme evaluations as well as the formal validation and revalidation processes.

We're working to collate examples of current practice from across the University and set up a resource bank, as well as continuing to support staff development contributing to the PgCert Teaching and Learning.

We are a small team, covering all areas of sustainability, therefore we seek opportunities to enthuse and engage students in carrying out research or projects where they have an interest in sustainability. We firmly believe that this is the best way for students to develop the skills that they will need to face the challenges of the future, upon graduation. Alex's research is an excellent example of embedding sustainability in the curriculum and demonstrates how students can instigate meaningful change within their own institution. We plan to build on this foundation to replicate similar projects in other departments.

Sharing your project

Reports and summaries have been disseminated internally with interested staff and Alex presented the results at the University's Staff Conference. We've also had interest from other universities and have shared the report and methodology. As well as advised on what worked well, and potential pitfalls in carrying out the survey. A journal article has been submitted to Journal of Environmental Education Research, which includes the Staff Conference poster.

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

We have worked hard at the University of Chester to embed sustainability in all aspects of the University's activities, with the curriculum being one of the more challenging areas. To be a Green Gown Award finalist in the Research & Development Student category is a huge honour and recognises the hard work and dedication of our students and demonstrates the impact they can have on the University.

Further information

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