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# Finalist's case study

## Plymouth University Sustainability Report Sustainability Report 2016

### About the project

#### Summary

We report biennially on sustainability producing a full, in-depth sustainability report across all of our activities. Historically this report has been based on our own internal framework. However, in 2016 we adopted the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework for our sustainability reporting and disclosure.

#### Project partners

This was a purely internal project, bringing together teams in Estates and Facilities, Finance, Human Resources, Procurement, Office of the Vice Chancellor, External Relations as well as research and curriculum staff. We adopted the GRI framework for sustainability reporting, involving implementing the GRI set framework and submitting the report to GRI for approval.

### The results

#### The problem

We have produced three sustainability reports previously which were well received, but were produced based on our own internal sustainability framework and focused on reporting performance against our targets. For our new report we wanted to increase the challenge to report on a much wider scope of organisational sustainability. We wanted to produce a more robust report that was generated according to a recognised standard in order to achieve best practice when reporting on sustainability, using a framework that is recognised globally and replicable across organisations, a reporting standard that our readers would recognise alongside wider industry reporting.

#### The approach

While our previous reports have been well received, we wanted to adopt an international framework for this going forward, producing a report that our readers and audience would have confidence in, and one that covers all aspects of organisational sustainability. Adopting the GRI framework provided us with a rigorous approach to reporting that involved data capture and disclosure for over 140 aspects. We had to translate this guidance into an internal framework that could be applied to University operations and refresh our materiality assessment to understand which of the aspects applied to our operations. It involved working closely with departments across the University to understand the framework, and how we could apply it to collect new data that might not have been reported on before. A large amount of the data we had not publicly reported on before and were not actively monitoring, however, much of the data was being collected within departmental systems. This also required University sign off to approve reporting across a much wider scope of sustainability, which involves

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#### Profile

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reporting on areas that we are doing well in as well as areas we might have scope for improvement to produce an accurate picture of our performance.

## Our goals

While the University has been praised for its commitment to communicating its sustainability journey – especially to students and external stakeholders – the goal was to move that forward and ensure that the report was more robust, and based upon an internationally respected guidance framework for sustainability. At the same time, we could not lose sight of our goal that the report should be accessible to a wide range of audiences, and the GRI framework enables a recognisable report format that is familiar across all GRI reports from all organisations. Our students would be able to download our report from the GRI website and be able to read our report alongside reports from other organisations and make comparisons along the way.

## Obstacles and solutions

Increased volume of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The GRI framework has a broad scope and demands a great deal of time-consuming data gathering, and greater input into meeting its accepted format. This clearly placed a great deal of extra strain on the small team that was tasked with completing it.</li> <li>• We overcame this by working to a clear project plan and liaising with all departments across the University.</li> <li>• We gained approval from a senior stakeholder, the Executive Dean with responsibility for Sustainability at the University Executive Group to ensure support for reporting against new parameters.</li> <li>• The Sustainability Manager engaged with the different departments, translating the framework into a simple excel workbook where data could be entered easily and the new data points could be easily understood.</li> </ul>
Collecting new data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We already monitor a large number of the data points that are included within the GRI framework, however the process did involve understanding new areas, and reporting existing data under new parameters – such as employee turnover rates or unit of measurement for energy and carbon reporting.</li> <li>• This involved refreshing our materiality assessment, to understand the issues that matter to us and are relevant to our operations and report against that. Not all of the GRI data points are relevant to our operations and it is important to understand which are material and which are not.</li> </ul>

## Performance and results

We produced our fourth sustainability report, and first report according to the GRI G4 Comprehensive option in 2016. The result of this was an 82 page comprehensive report disclosing on our performance against the sustainability issues that are material to us. It provides an excellent learning resource for students: providing one point of reference for all sustainability information that they might require for coursework; and providing a report produced to an internationally recognized framework that they might be required to work with in their future careers. The report was produced as an electronic document and is



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hosted on our Sustainability webpages. The report has been really well received by our staff and students as an accessible document and one that has also promoted question and debate.

## The future

### Lessons learned

We are working on producing an executive summary version to entice readers who are new to the topic to understand our goals and performance and to get more involved with sustainability. This will be up to 10 pages, providing a summary of the main areas of performance and our goals for sustainability.

### Sharing your project

We have shared the report widely around our stakeholders. The report is hosted on our main sustainability pages, and also in the database of sustainability reports on the GRI website. We have promoted this also via social media and through our internal portal announcement system and communication emails.

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

It is fantastic to be a Green Gown Award finalist. It's a great reward that our hard work is recognised within the sector.

### Further information

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