

Spontaneity and strategy: co-designing a process for sustainability action at the University of St Andrews

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Transition: University of St Andrews



Who are we?

- Transition University of St Andrews (TUSA) is part of the worldwide Transition movement.
- It was launched in 2009 by a group of students and staff and has since gained momentum¹
- We have raised Climate Challenge Funding, and a University grant to employ seven staff (some part time) to run three years of action together with the wider town community.
- Our work builds on enthusiasm and opportunism, but is guided by a Steering Group and is also linked to formal University structures.
- Unusually for a grassroots movement, we have good links with research and learning activities.

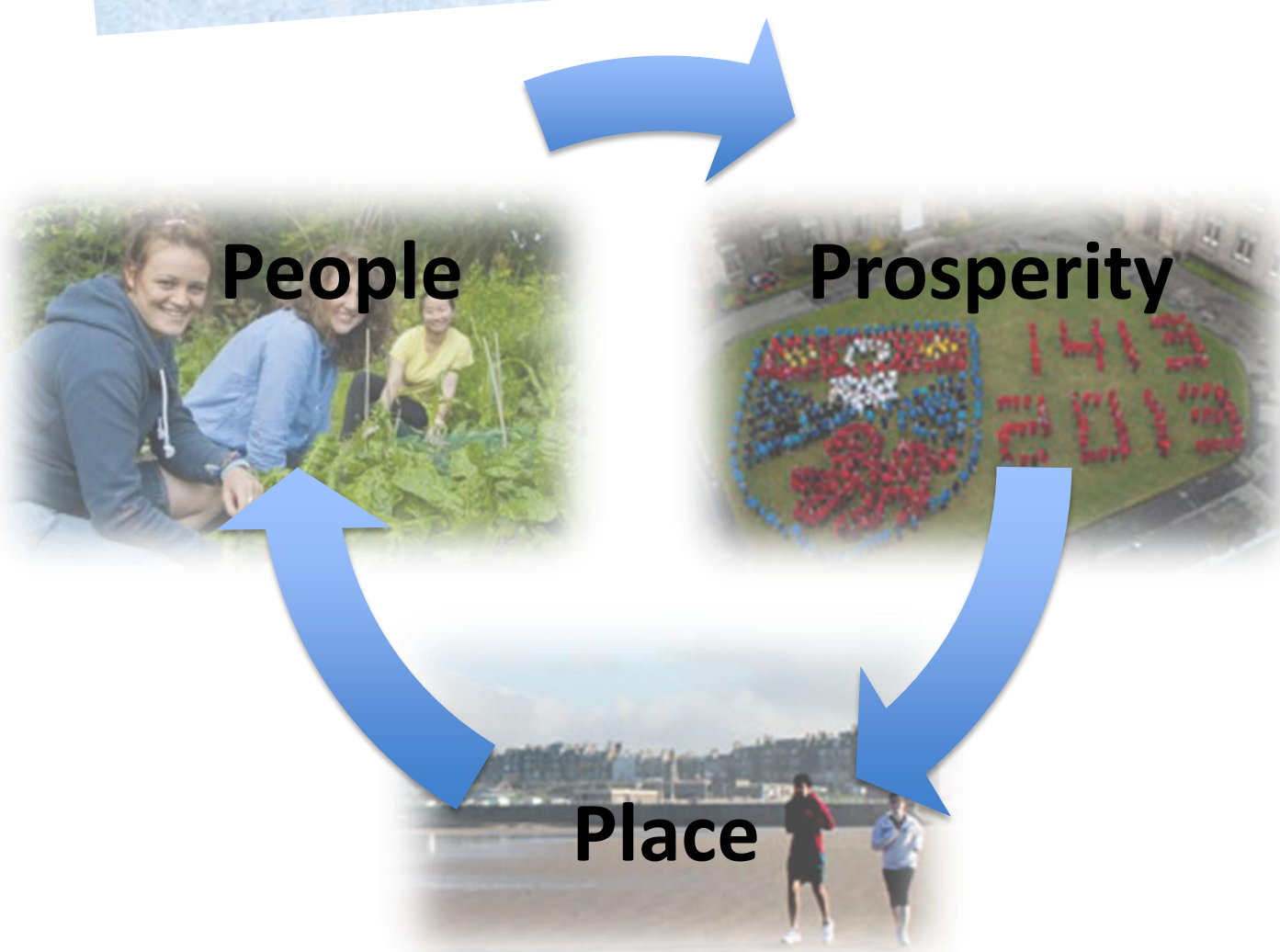
Why did we develop a strategy?

Since its inception, TUSA has felt the tension between spontaneity and strategy; change and continuity. As membership, funding and circumstances evolve, the group (re)defines itself. Periods of expansion fueled by fresh motivation are followed by moments of retreat and consolidation as time and energy become scarce. We thus developed a strategy to give direction to the bursts of enthusiasm and to prioritise projects in times of retrenchment. This would also provide a degree of coherence between generations of four-year undergraduate students.

How did we develop our strategy?

We used two approaches – **Visioning and Strategy** to enable a coherent action plan to be developed using theoretical understandings of sustainable development and **asset mapping** to enable us to benefit from local opportunities.

- 1) A task group comprising 6 members of the steering group (3 undergraduate students, 2 academic staff and 1 estates staff) was mandated with developing theory informed vision, mission and strategic objectives under which existing and future projects could align.
- 2) A facilitated focus group (2 undergraduate students, 2 transition staff members, 1 academic staff and 1 estates staff) attempted to map out assets and constraints deriving from our unique context and locality.
- 3) Presentation of findings to wider steering group for feedback; modification and integration.



Mission & Vision:

Transition University of St Andrews is a diverse network of people motivated by a common concern for the sustainability of St Andrews and the wider world. Through partnership and collaboration we aim to foster a flourishing community that lives responsibly on the land.

We have a vision of a university that exemplifies the values and practices of sustainability through excellence in scholarship, operations and community action.

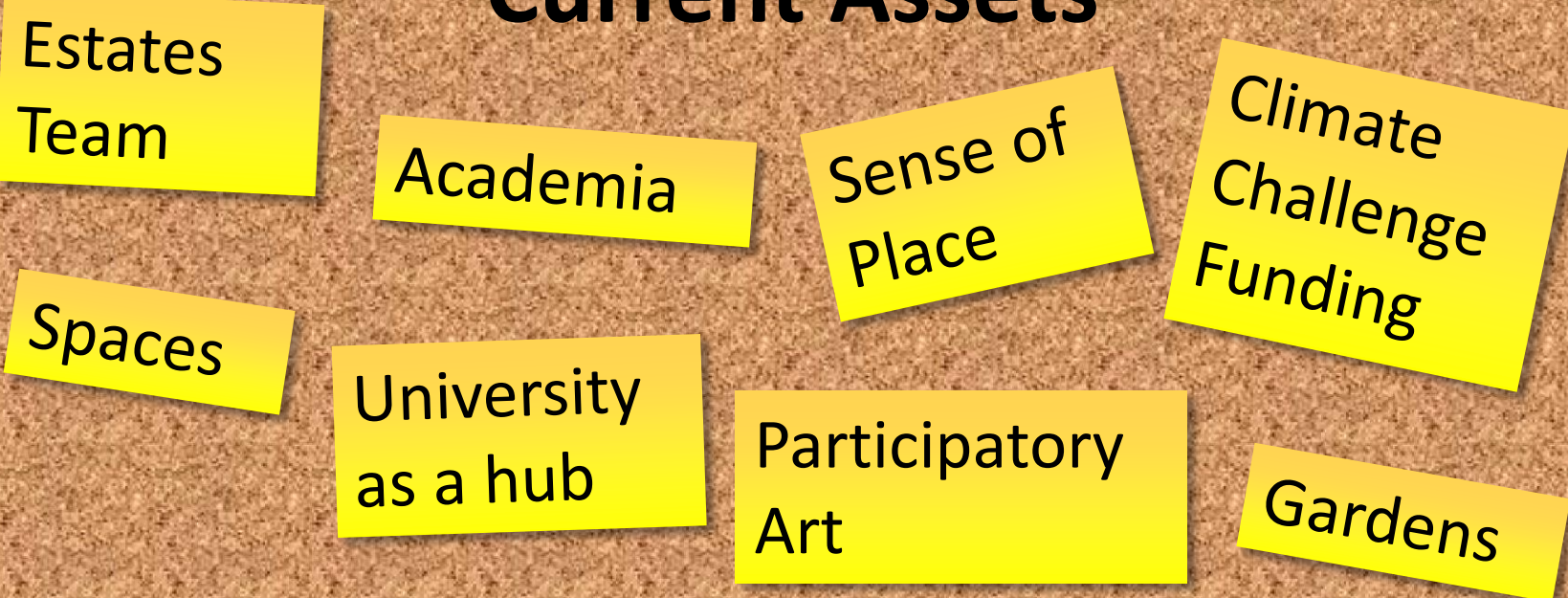


Strategic Framework

Strategic goals	People: We want to empower people to fulfil their potential in local action and as global citizens	Prosperity: We want to foster the bodily, intellectual and spiritual well-being of all	Place: We want to support and be supported by the biological and cultural diversity of this place
Themes for action	Knowledge: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generating, mobilising & implementing knowledge for sustainability• Skills exchange, research/learning	Circulation: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less input-output• More circular flows of materials and money	Energy: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Energy Island• Local generation• Reduce energy consumption Food: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Edible town- and landscapes• Food culture
Projects	Dissertations & staff research projects. Skillshare. Transition Reading. CarbonConversations	LETScheme. St AndRe-Use. Car-sharing.	Inter-Hall Energy Competition. CookSmarter. Carbon Conversations.



Current Assets



Potential Opportunities



Reflections on outcomes

- We were surprised by how well our strategic goals ultimately aligned with the three pillars of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental²
- But - we recognised that these goals have to inter-relate according to strong as opposed to weak sustainability³
- Our action themes are similar to the main Transition foci of food, energy, transport and waste³
- The emphasis on knowledge derived from our University context allowed us to consider how to both be theoretically informed and practically relevant; non-university groups could also benefit from greater knowledge focus
- Strategic goals gave a strong framework to our action plan, but the asset mapping enabled us to build practically on existing strengths and opportunities

Reflections on process

- We recognise that the process was as important as the outcome in enabling reflection and social learning and building relationships
- Self-facilitation in the strategy approach was as effective as facilitation in the assets approach
- Our focus on the small groups meant we had to work hard with the rest of the steering group and Transition staff to bring them on board; wider engagement beforehand would have enabled better buy in
- The process took relatively little time and was time well invested for the long term benefit of the initiative

Conclusions

The use of both a visioning and strategic approach and identification of assets and opportunities allowed us to grow our project and people and enhance both theory and practice

Recommendations for other groups

- ✓ Rather than adopting an existing strategy, try to develop your own contextually relevant one
- ✓ See it as a process rather than trying to get the perfect answer in one go
- ✓ Start with a wide debate then ask a small task group to take it forward and produce a draft
- ✓ Don't feel you have to get a formal facilitator; you know your own project best
- ✓ Keep good minutes of the discussions!
- ✓ Develop and use your own vocabulary.
- ✓ Use the resources below to help you plan and run your process ^{4,5,6}

Acknowledgements

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Further Reading

1.White & Harder (2013) Chapter in *The Sustainable University* Ed. Sterling et al. Abingdon: Routledge. 2. Blewitt (2008). *Understanding sustainable development*, London, Earthscan. 3. Dietz & Neumayer. (2007) *Ecological Economics*, 61, 617-626. 4. Transition Network <http://www.transitionnetwork.org> 5. Sarkissian et al. (2009) *Kitchen table sustainability* London, Earthscan. 6. Chambers (2002) *Participatory workshops*. London, Earthscan.