

# University of Gloucestershire

## Continuous Improvement

### Assuring Quality Futures: Sustainability at the Heart of the Curriculum System

#### Section 1 About the project

##### Summary

Establishing institution-wide commitment to sustainability in the curriculum is one of the **hardest but most important strategic issues** to address - no University has yet fully embedded EfS into their education systems. This is the ambition of UoG - a goal that was set in 2007 when senior management buy-in allowed a strategic shift in policy to promote EfS. **Initial work focused on Quality Enhancement (QE)** – the development of resources / frameworks to support staff teaching practice.

The next, far more challenging, phase is to embed EfS in the 'gatekeeping systems' and educational culture of the University through the **Quality Assurance (QA) system**. Advances were made at UoG when it took the role of lead institution for this project that was funded by the 2010 HEFCE LGM scheme for projects to advance sustainability - **the only large scale project dealing with EfS** - and delivered in partnership with four other Universities, HEFCE and the QAA.

This work has resulted in renewed leadership commitment for EfS at UoG. The University has formalised a commitment that all QA processes must embed EfS; to provide EfS guidance and training for External Examiners and QA Professionals; and to establish responsibilities and assurance safeguards to secure EfS in the curriculum quality system.

##### Project partners

- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Exeter
- Aston University
- University of Brighton
- Oxford Brookes University
- HEFCE
- QAA

#### Section 2 The results

##### The problem

National reviews are pointing to the need for graduates equipped to contribute to new 'green' and low carbon economies, to deal with globalised business and professional scenarios, and to support the



##### Profile

- HEI
- 9,000 students (includes full and part time students)
- 100 staff
- Urban

development of sustainable communities. It is no longer sufficient to tinker at the edges of our education systems with special sustainability courses or leave EfS enthusiasts isolated on the fringes of HE. Establishing institution-wide commitment to sustainability in the curriculum is one of the **hardest but most important strategic issues** to address - no University has yet fully embedded EfS into their education systems.

## The approach

This initiative changed established academic practices - **formal assurance frameworks** and **routine processes for course development, review and validation**. Previous work at the University resulted in guidance for teaching staff and academic managers on EfS, but this initiative had greater ambition to **influence these well established academic practices** through:

- **Gaining executive approval** for the University to continue embedding EfS in both UG and PG courses as part of its approach to assuring curriculum quality.
- **Engaging with the Directors of Quality & Standards and Teaching & Learning** to gain entry to curriculum change agendas for the institution and its formal frameworks and strategies.
- **Amending QA documentation** to reflect the University's commitment to EfS as both an educational and a corporate policy priority.
- **Informing the development of the new Learning & Teaching Strategy** to secure the academic foundations for EfS as an ongoing educational priority in the development of all courses.
- **Enabling senior QA leads to gain clear understanding** of how EfS can be implemented across the University's courses through workshop sessions and targeted guidance for their area.
- **Developing subject guidance** with clear connections to national quality benchmarks, for academic staff to use in responding to EfS as a quality matter for curriculum development.
- **Involving the UK QAA** in University level project work, informing discussions with the executive team and key gatekeepers in relation to the national policy context.
- **Embedding EfS into both QE and now QA** over the five year period of the new University Strategic Plan 2012-17, using the pilot study findings.

## Our goals

To embed Education for Sustainability in the curriculum '**gatekeeping systems**' at the University of Gloucestershire **through the Quality Assurance (QA) system**. This submission profiles our work and achievements in bringing EfS into the heart of the University's educational culture and practice. It shows the advances made when UoG took the role of lead institution for an innovative project on EfS and curriculum quality funded by the unique 2010 HEFCE LGM scheme for institutional development initiatives in sustainability. UoG worked closely with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

## Obstacles and solutions

The main challenges in this project were played out at the institutional level – below are the key issues to overcome.

Finding entry points	Make strategic links with current corporate agendas and education priorities, being sensitive to context and the institutional starting point on EfS
Anticipating the challenges	Anticipating the challenges - be flexible in creating pathways for EfS that connect QA and QE in ways that make sense for the institutional approach to curriculum development
Formalising changes	Work on ways to scale up engagement across the institution and find a shared approach to managing EFS, with an eye on future audit and reporting needs

## Performance and results

This project is unique internationally in promoting EfS as a curriculum quality concern and is significant in progressing EfS as an organisational issue. It has resulted in a range of important benefits, which are **geared to producing more effective courses** and **equipping students with sustainability skills they need** when entering the workplace in their chosen field. Some of the key tangible outcomes from the pilot institutions included:

- new levels of executive commitment to embedding EfS across the curriculum at Aston University and the University of Gloucestershire;
- new approaches and steps to implement existing commitments at Exeter University and the University of Brighton;
- more effective embedding of EfS into existing quality initiatives at Oxford Brookes University.

The project also produced a range of developmental outcomes at many levels:

### 'On the ground' – at our University:

- **Securing a legacy and commitment** – to embed EfS in the QA and QE systems from 2012-13 onwards – all courses in future will now have to demonstrate how they address EfS principles.
- **Positioning EfS clearly in QA documentation** – to support the external monitoring of EfS as a corporate issue for UoG, which will be assessed in future audits by the QAA.
- **Providing recommendations for reporting and monitoring** - to establish an assurance and continuing improvement mechanism for EfS developments across all UoG courses.
- **Creating strategic pathways** - to align previous EfS work with the revised corporate focus of the University and its organisational planning trajectory in the Strategic Plan 2012-17.
- **Increasing the educational connectivity** - to situate EfS with the core themes Learning & Teaching Strategy, creating an internal funding scheme for EfS curriculum development projects.
- **Building capacity with senior staff** – to support those responsible for QA and QE and improve understanding of how EfS connects with other priorities and adds value for the institution.
- **Developing CPD provision** – to enable professional staff to bring EfS into all aspects of the student learning experience by understanding its place in education and skills development.
- **Providing targeted guidance and tools** – to help busy teaching teams to plan ways to embed EfS in course design, in line with national policy for professional practice and subject benchmarks.

### Across the sector – for all universities:

- **Creating case studies of success** – all five universities in the consortium have managed to renew and develop their institutional pathways and commitments to EfS across the curriculum.
- **Sharing lessons and guidance** – the project toolkit reports the pathways, challenges and 'top tips' from five very different institutions, offering a wide range of practical insight for the sector.
- **Developing materials and tools** – the five pilot projects created and tested tools and resources that can be taken away and adapted by others seeking to develop EfS practice at their university.
- **Active involvement from sector Learning and Teaching agencies** – the project is the first to successfully engage both QAA and HEA in working on EfS as a cross-cutting education issue.
- **Building bridges for EfS across the HE sector** – all the main HE agency stakeholders (HEFCE, QAA, HEA and LFHE) have engaged with this EfS project in relation to their core services and roles.
- **Underlining the 'business case' for EfS** – the project shows how five universities prioritise EfS despite the difficult sector climate and how sector stakeholders see its place in the future of HE.



## Section 3 The future

### Sharing your project

- **Engaging the expert stakeholders** – using an expert advisory group from within and beyond HE who can increase the impact and translation of findings across sectors, and involving all key UK agencies in the main project conference and in discussion of future developments.
- **Communicating with new audiences** – presentations targeted outside the EfS community, to reach education, leadership and HE research audiences (e.g. SRHE, DPE, LFHE conferences) and the project toolkit is designed to reach HE education professionals as well as EfS specialists.
- **International positioning for the agenda** – the project featured as an example of leading practice in the Global Universities Network for Innovation *Universities and Social Commitment Observatory* and the International Association of Universities Special Issue on *Higher Education's Contribution to Sustainable Development* (reaching institutions in 130 countries).
- **Sharing resources and findings strategically** – the project findings will be articulated with global initiatives such as the *Sustainable Futures Leadership Academy* its toolkit will be available internationally and sector-wide, featured at both the QAA and HEA online resource portals.
- **Finding pathways to transfer the learning** – the UoG team has been invited to inform the next UK *Green Academy* initiative through the HEA and is in discussion with colleagues at the UK sector agencies to explore ways to translate the findings in different UK quality contexts.
- **Developing the scholarly platforms** – the project is showcased in an upcoming UK publication (Sterling et al, *The Sustainable University*, Earthscan) and plans are under way for a special issue to broaden the discussion on EfS across the international education community.

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

This project raises awareness that embedding education for sustainability in QA is one of the most impactful ways of influencing student's learning experience in sustainability. Being a Green Gown Finalist will help raise the project profile, ensuring others learn from the experience. It also provides recognition for the five partner institutions who took the bold step of piloting this work, helping all of them to share practice, develop further partnerships and continue to improve in this field.

### Further information

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