



University of Edinburgh Highly commended – Continuous improvement – institutional change “Edinburgh’s continuous investment in social responsibility and sustainability measures”

Profile

- University of Edinburgh – founded 1583
- 28,000 students and over 8,000 staff
- 600 UG and 100 PG programmes

Summary

Edinburgh’s 21 year old programme of sustainability initiatives has significant positive impact across the University and contributes to sector-wide improvements in performance.

Since its launch in 1990, by the then Principal Sir David Smith, over £20 million has been invested in environmental initiatives. This has contributed to halving the carbon footprints of students’ since 1990.

The University leads by example through a whole-institution approach to creating a living laboratory and embedding commitments to social responsibility and sustainability in our policies, strategies and procedures.

Governance and Delivery

The Sustainability Office based in Estates and Buildings has achieved sponsorship and support at the highest level of the University, with the Vice Principal - External Engagement chairing the Sustainability and Environmental Advisory Group (SEAG). Her role on the Central Management Group provides the opportunity to raise issues of social responsibility and sustainability.

The University now has a range of supporting Task Groups under SEAG implementing a holistic approach and continues to share its experiences and learns from other institutions in the sector through the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC) Scotland branch. See these at www.seag.estates.ed.ac.uk

The problem

With many decisions nowadays taken with short term interest in mind and everything having its price there is a risk that some of the traditional values of a University can be set aside in the rush to balance the books and recruit the next cohort of students and researchers.

Some consider that higher education establishments should adopt business practices and run with the market; but it may be that there is a continuing role for independent institutions as seats of learning drawing on traditional values of scholarship combined with effective stewardship of resources.

The approach

For a University founded well over 400 years ago Edinburgh has thought how best to ensure that the institution will still be here in 400 years? This long-term perspective, combined with a whole life costing approach leads to sensible decisions to invest in enhancements to resource efficiency.

Our Social Responsibility and Sustainability Strategy 2010-2020 reflects the practical achievements and sets our aspirations, our direction and our steps on the journey forwards over the next decade.

Our approach is to create the conditions where students and staff are inspired and supported to engage with and contribute to social responsibility and sustainability at the University and beyond.

See more at www.ed.ac.uk/sustainability for Strategy and first GRI-compliant Sustainability Report.

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Our goals

- Firmly embed the objectives set out in the social responsibility and sustainability strategy within University plans and processes and increasingly within education for sustainable development.
- Aim to cut 29 per cent from our greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 against a 2007 baseline, i.e. a 3 per cent cut each year with an interim target of 20 per cent savings by 2015.
- Reduce waste to landfill by 3 per cent each year and continually enhance re-use and recycling.
- Develop and implement a business travel plan and reduce the carbon footprint of University vehicle fleet as well as daily commuting impact on the city.
- The sustainable procurement action plan adopts the flexible framework to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in carbon emissions through engaging with our supply chain.

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacle/challenge	Solution
Sustainability can be challenging for institutions to engage with it due to its links with personal values	Increasingly consult / involve University staff and students in the sustainability decision-making process
Policy makers and senior colleagues have different but valid organisational drivers	It is important to balance these drivers and follow a sustainability decision-making process which is inclusive to colleagues
Lack of dialogue between colleagues – arising from the strong disciplinary framework associated with academic endeavour	Establish and support regular meetings with colleagues from across the university, and include both academic and support staff
Administrative loads of staff restrict the amount of time colleagues focus on sustainability	Focus workload on colleagues delegated to lead on the issues and mainstream tasks

Performance and results

- Extensive reduction in the University's greenhouse gas emissions, cutting the University's carbon footprint by over 30 per cent in relative terms since 1990.
- Reduction in campus and city traffic, and related local pollution with over 50 per cent of staff and students travelling to University by foot, 21 per cent by bus and 10 per cent by bicycle.
- Extensive reduction in landfill waste, with a 2010/11 recycling rate of over 67 per cent, up three percent on 2009/10 against a sector average of 45 per cent.
- Expansion of undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses in the areas of social responsibility and sustainability and launch of three Global Academies.

Lessons learned

To achieve coherence in promoting social responsibility and sustainability requires investment in infrastructure and in human resources; from our experience this repays well in reduced costs, reduced impact on the environment but most of all it exemplifies the mission of the University.

Achievements and progress must be highlighted to University staff and the student community, making the issues of social responsibility and sustainability visible influences the level of awareness amongst colleagues and their level of engagement in these issues.

Further information

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