Living Labs Brief

What are they? And why are they crucial for post-16 education?

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Setting the Context

In the academic year 2015/16 there were 201,380 academic staff, 208,750 non-academic staff working, and 2.2m students studying in UK Higher Education (HE). The sector's total income from all the various sources was £34.74bn, while its expenditures amounted to £33bn[i]. The sector has a significant amount of physical presence, financial impact, resource consumption, and human capital. Although, its overall impact on society is much more profound. UK universities undertake a disproportionately large amount of leading global research and education activities. These institutions educate future workers and leaders from across the world, produce research that impacts every sector and all countries, and serve as anchors of the communities surrounding them. The four major stakeholder groups in each institution that collectively add to this impact are:

1. **Students** – being educated
2. **Academics** – teaching and conducting research
3. **Professional staff** – enabling core education and research activities through administration and operational support
4. **External stakeholders** – all the various neighbourhoods, local communities, businesses, NGOs, cities, local and national authorities surrounding the institution

However, despite the diversity of stakeholders involved, and their resourcefulness, universities and colleges are under significant pressures from multiple ends. These are from problems rooted in a combination of socio-economic phenomena (external pressures) and systemic issues (internal pressures). The table below provides a very brief and simplified overview of some of the key pressures perceived by each stakeholder group. It also describes the pressures perceived by senior management concerning each stakeholder group.

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	PRESSURES FOR LEADERS OF FACULTIES AND INSTITUTIONS	PRESSURES PERCEIVED BY TEAMS OR INDIVIDUALS OF THE GROUP
Academics	Improving research ratings to attract greater public funding, other grants and commercial interest, which in turn help improve ratings through attracting researchers	Constant pressure to produce impactful, high-quality and innovative publications in esteemed journals, contributing to personal (and institutional) reputation
Students	Reducing non-continuation rate and increasing the proportion and level of graduations Assuring a high level of student satisfaction, contributing to rankings, providing courses and degrees of interest to students; mostly to attract more students Attaining the highest possible employment rate for graduates; providing the right learning outcomes for students to become employable	Getting good grades to reflect higher academic and intellectual capabilities in upcoming professional life Expectations and hopes for the learning experience to be stimulating, interesting and relevant Expectations and hopes for degree to equip one with employability skills so it is possible to find relevant work upon graduation

i *HESA (n.d.). Data and analysis. HESA [online]. Available: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis*

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	PRESSURES FOR LEADERS OF FACULTIES AND INSTITUTIONS	PRESSURES PERCEIVED BY TEAMS OR INDIVIDUALS OF THE GROUP
Professional staff	Making institutional administration and operation as time, resource and energy efficient as possible, and keeping up with the growth Safeguarding (or improving) institutional reputation in administrative and operational areas	Delivering relevant KPIs, such as cost savings, and enabling the growth of core academic activities through operational and admin support Assuring all regulations (environmental, economic, labour etc.) are complied with, and achieving more outcomes where there is remit and funding
External stakeholders	Answering to pressure for the publicly funded institution to more directly engage with and benefit the public that neighbours it Building business and community partnerships with financial, social and reputational potential	Facing all manner of social, environmental and economic challenges to success and growth Seeking partnership with those who can help or participate in mutually beneficial activities

The great barrier

Each stakeholder group faces significant challenges, which are part of one failing system that is increasingly more unfit for an economically, socially and environmentally evolving world. However, very few staff, students and external stakeholders recognise complex systemic links among problems. Large portions of each stakeholder group are both searching for the solution in isolation and trying to solve parts of the problem that only affect them. This has resulted in a lack of empathy for others' troubles and, as a result, has contributed to polarisation inside and around institutions. Furthermore, this inward-looking perspective has encumbered the long-term perspective as well as collective awareness of the shared challenge. This has been one of the important causes of institutions losing sight of their values, which has in turn been a key contributor to the problems they are facing in the first instance. In other words, the very strategies that institutions have employed to tackle major issues facing them deter them from solving the issues (or even contribute to the issue). Rather than chasing the ends, these strategies have helped shape a system that leaves institutions perpetually chasing the means, which themselves are outdated and flawed.

For example, students fear rich learning experiences and skills that risk impacting their priority to get good grades that lead to a good job. In parallel, the institutional strategies have been to manufacture graduates through processes akin to an assembly line; factors like student satisfaction and rankings are obsessed over through targets. Yet these means divert attention from the goal of a meaningful education that arm students with critical thinking, professional skills and values. A similar scenario is also occurring with academics: the means of attracting as much funding and publishing as much as possible does not always equate with an engaged scholarship. While many academics and institutions are eager to conduct research that directly contributes to society, the means-focussed strategies divert them from fully being able to realise the end-goal. Isolating issues in silos and retaining barriers between different stakeholder groups means that disconnected strategies like these are commonplace. There is a need for a common set of values and collective action that recognises the overall shared challenge.

What are Living Labs, and why are they relevant?

In response to the challenges all stakeholder groups and institutional leaders are facing, there are numerous initiatives at local, national and international levels. One of the most important is the ongoing work on implementing the concept of Living Labs in institutions. A university or college Living Lab is where real-world sustainability challenges are formally addressed in stakeholder partnerships. The Living Lab initiative hosts projects where participants from all stakeholder groups collectively address real-life sustainability challenges. The Living Lab facilitates a bridge of collaboration whereby an institution's intellectual potential is used to address practical sustainability challenges faced by external stakeholders or professional staff. Academics participate as part of their research or teaching responsibilities; involving students through curricular activities (courses, dissertations, compulsory volunteering etc.) or formal extracurricular programmes (e.g. internships, summer schools); while professional staff participate through their formal responsibilities; and external stakeholders, where possible, are involved through paid work.

A Living Lab helps form strategies that directly target the end-goal, but at the same time can fit within the constraints of the current system. One of the major reasons for this is that a Living Lab does not demand a significant amount of additional resource; it simply helps identify existing resources and redirects them to the right problems. This is achieved by finding common ground to build partnerships that produce mutually beneficial outcomes and solutions to the common problem. This approach essentially translates to addressing each group's individual problems through a collective approach.

The most important potential of the Living Lab approach is its ability to make the 'common sense' or 'good business' case for holistic institutional changes that normalise education for sustainable development, practice-based sustainability research, sustainable operations and administration integrated into academic activities, and meaningful external engagement. The Living Lab can thereafter play an important part in helping to catalyse these long-term changes by directing projects, drawing investment, providing opportunities, and continuing to demonstrate the sustainability impact of collective partnerships.
A Living Lab catalyses change at two different levels. Firstly, it provides direct and relevant benefits to each stakeholder group through its projects and, secondly, it serves as a governance tool that can assist in the greater systemic transformations. Both these areas are highlighted in the table below:

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	BENEFITS OF A LIVING LAB FOR STAKEHOLDER GROUP	COLLECTIVE BENEFITS TO INSTITUTION AND LEADERSHIP
Academics	Real-world sustainability challenges provide an active test-bed for academics to conduct innovative, impactful and transdisciplinary research that involves direct engagement, experimentation, testing/prototyping, implementation and further study of social, environmental and economic issues	Utilising academic intellectual capacity more actively; development of social, environmental and economic solutions in and around campus; and attracting funding for innovative and cutting-edge research, rather than doing research to attract funding

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	BENEFITS OF A LIVING LAB FOR STAKEHOLDER GROUP	COLLECTIVE BENEFITS TO INSTITUTION AND LEADERSHIP
Students	Practical experience that provides professional skills, personal development, intellectual capacity, critical thinking skills and real-world experience through working on real issues Becoming more prepared as agents of change in personal and professional lives upon graduation, with intention to do social good and an empathetic character	An opportunity to develop new ways of delivering and measuring learning outcomes outside of the traditional assessment methods, and using methods that directly contribute to development of graduates Making students happier, more content with studies, more entrepreneurial, and ready for the working world
Professional staff	Getting direct support and intellectual resources at zero cost to address sustainability challenges; better outcome achievement; integration and contribution to learning and research activities	Utilising institution's academic potential to solve its own sustainability problems; significant cost savings; increased reputation for better sustainability outcomes; linking internal stakeholder groups together
External stakeholders	Partnership and direct collaboration with institution to face sustainability issues, and access to space, resources and support	Opportunity to collectively solve common problems; attracting external stakeholders to work with institution with economic potential; and significant reputational benefits

Living Labs have transformational potential. In recognition of their significant potential to contribute to the post-16 education sector sustainability revolution, the EAUC has invested in in-depth research. The outputs aim to illuminate the benefits of Living Labs, and provides a model that can be used to design, analyse and practically implement initiatives. Further, Living Labs have the potential to form a significant part of the EAUC 2021 strategy to make sustainability "just good business" for universities and colleges. Living Lab initiatives provide the practical means to make sustainability not only 'good business' but the norm. It is hoped that the EAUC's efforts towards promoting Living Labs will be met with shared enthusiasm among academic, operational, administrative, and senior colleagues across institutions.

The research accompanying this brief is in two parts. Part one, "A Revolution for Post-16 Education – Part 1: A Case for the Living Lab", expands on this brief by providing the rationale for Living Labs. This is relevant for readers concerned with the importance and pertinence of the Living Lab in universities and colleges. It also provides ammunition for those who wish to further the Living Lab agenda among the various entities and individuals at their institution. Part two, "A Revolution for Post-16 Education – Part 2: How do Living Labs Work?", explores the machinations of the university or college Living Lab in depth. This practical model is most relevant for academic and professional staff who wish to improve their understanding of the Living Lab in order to implement or improve them at their institutions.

If you want to know more about Living Labs, please read Part 1 of our Research - 'A Case for the Living Lab'

If you want information on developing a Living Lab, please read Part 2 - 'How do Living Labs Work?'

The EAUC hosts a Living Labs Community of Practice, which is open to all staff and students from EAUC member institutions. The community is a platform for exchanging knowledge and ideas about university and college Living Labs. To join the Community of Practice, simply email info@eauc.org.uk with a request to be added to the JiscMail.

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LIVING LABS

Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges