

The Purpose of Further and Higher Education in a Climate and Ecological Emergency: Sustainability



**Jamie Pearson, Environmental Sustainability Manager,
Edinburgh Napier University**

- I was at a party recently.
- I was asked the inevitable question ‘so what do you do’?
- I’m sure we’ve all been there. I’ve certainly faced this question before.
- It was a Friday night. My brain was full from a week of everything. So I considered my options.
- Should I keep it simple and stick to bins and lightbulbs? A quick fix. But significant risk of belittling my experience and skills. But, more importantly, even higher risk of the person then spiralling into a rant about their Council waste collections.
- Should I keep it topical and speak about single use cups? Also a quick fix. But again significant risk of further fuelling the misconception that the only thing we need to do to solve the climate and ecological emergency is to stop using single use cups.
- Should I really go for it? Basically go into absolutely every detail of what I do from legislative requirements, financial management, data management, audit, carbon reporting, the woes of trying to source accurate transport data, an in-depth overview what a carbon conversion factor actually is, bins, lightbulbs and cups. But again, it was a Friday night and even I didn’t want to listen to that.

- I decided to experiment with a new response. I proclaimed with gin fuelled glee that I am basically a human sized bumblebee. In one brief statement I became the person at the party to best avoid.
- I often question what I have achieved, what I actually do and the impact I can positively support.
- What I keep coming back to in terms of purpose is this analogy of being a pollinator.

- The topic is ‘the purpose of further and higher education in a climate and ecological emergency’.
- The emergency has existed for a number of years.
- We’ve had purpose for a number of years.
- We have an amazing array of knowledge, skills and experience in this room and beyond already.

- It’s up to all of you here to consider purpose but for me the purpose we have is:
 - To audit, report and share knowledge, experience and best practice that already exists professionally, academically and through research.
 - To work collaboratively, connect people, enable holistic collaboration and join the dots.
 - To be known as trusted sources of information for all, not just our direct sector and communities.
 - To be a contact and conduit to glean and share innovation and new opportunities.
 - To build and sustain confidence.
 - To ensure respect of symbiotic processes that instigate and lead to change.
 - To have patience but ability to prioritise.
 - To have oversight to spot opportunity but also risk.

- To be visible but also a core cog working behind the scenes.
 - To support those with funding to meet their objectives. And spend their budget.
 - To test academic best practice in reality, further developing the concept of a living lab.
 - To recognise our purpose as an educational institutions, a charities, public bodies, a businesses.
 - To be the change required.
 - To basically be aware of the elephants in the room. To have the skill and drive to study them piece by piece, give them meaning, priority and focus instead of ignoring them.
 - To introduce the elephants in the room to colleagues and partners that have the skillsets to actually make a difference.
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- Within further and higher education, we have the advantage of a broad overview.
 - Within my own role I've personally kept going because of the support we all provide each other.
 - There have been points over the past eleven years that if it wasn't for the broad overview and support of everyone connected to the EAUC, the SSN and other networks I would have stopped.
 - We shouldn't forget the purpose that we as practitioners enable and what the EAUC network provides.
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- We have to shout about our purpose even more. To end with my daft analogy. As per the bumblebee, even though we have purpose we can't assume everyone knows or appreciates our purpose. The climate and ecological crisis doesn't guarantee people care about our purpose. We can't be in a position where our purpose is only realised when we're gone.

EAUC Scotland Conference: The Elephants in the Room
Tuesday 26th November 2019