

Finalist's case study

The University of Nottingham Courses and Learning Driving for Change with an Open Online Course: Sustainability, Society and You

Section 1 About the project

Summary

The world of MOOCs allows universities to drive forward the sustainability agenda via engagement with global communities of learners. With our course 'Sustainability, Society and You', we have supported nearly 9,000 people to learn about, for and through sustainability in an interactive mix of practical activities and challenging debate.

Project partners

The University of Nottingham and FutureLearn

Section 2 The results

The problem

Since 2011, a strategic push to move the University's sustainability agenda beyond the domain of our estates and operations and into our teaching and learning, has resulted in the development of 'E-learning for sustainability' as a driver for change.

The approach

We have used 'disruptive' Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) pedagogy to create an interdisciplinary online course, 'Sustainability, Society and You', within which learners support each other in learning *about, for, and through* sustainability. The different perspectives that our stakeholders (both learners and the course team) bring from their professional, educational and home contexts is a major strength. Across 10 weeks we have inputs from academics and postgraduate researchers (drawn from the Sustainability Research Network – subject of a separate submission to these Awards) in geography, engineering, philosophy, archaeology, sociology, nursing, mental health, politics, chemistry, education, modern languages and economics. The course is creative commons licensed - available for all registered learners to reuse and repurpose.

Our goals

Achieving sustainability is a key objective of our University Plan. Sustainability is integral to our internationalisation and employability agendas as we prepare students for lifelong and wide learning. It is an



The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

Profile

- HE
- 43,765 full and part time students
- 9000 staff
- Urban/rural

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agenda supported by our University Executive Board, the members of which are personally committed to both individual and corporate sustainability.

Obstacles and solutions

Challenge of interdisciplinarity	Finding academic champions in a range of schools
Getting internal senior level support	Showing the benefits to the institution
Making sure the project was sustainable in its design	Thinking through the sustainability credentials of every aspect – production values, teaching model, content creation

Performance and results

This course was about 'Sustainability, Society and **You**'. The evidence of its impact lies in the stories of individual tutors and learners. While thousands enrolled, the active participants were in their hundreds. But all retain access to the course materials indefinitely (there are still learners working their way through the course in late August although it officially finished in March), illustrating the potential of the course's format to make a sustainable contribution to learning for sustainability.

The biggest impact for tutors came from working with an interdisciplinary team in an intercultural setting:

Interdisciplinarity enriched the course. It was very interesting to hear how staff and students from outside of engineering defined sustainability, which led to some debate when putting the course together.

Having voices from different cultures and nationalities challenged some of the assumptions that were made; it was all too easy to assume that everyone would be familiar with using the kitchen appliances that were being discussed.

Participants from poorer countries seem to demonstrate more resilience to lack of electricity, clean water and so on – the things we tend to take for granted. I think there's also a lot more creativity and "survival instinct" demonstrated in coming up with simple but effective solutions, such as using plastic bottles for skylights and so on.

Learners took the '**You**' element to heart, telling us their hopes for their future behaviours:

I know there are many ways I can improve my sustainability and want to explore these as much as I can and 'walk the talk' so others might choose to follow rather than tell them what they should be doing.

I look forward to continuing my studies in this area, and "fighting the good fight" for sustainability! I would like to find better ways of applying sustainable practice in the world of nursing!

Taking this course I could gain wider view of environment sustainability. I was encouraged to take a positive action keeping the earth to be ever sustainable.

This has been an inspirational course and I intend to switch to Good Energy as soon as I move into my own home in a couple of months.

While the longer-term impact of the course upon learners is difficult to gauge, the impact upon Nottingham is already significant. We have analysed data to explore effective pedagogies for developing sustainability literacy. We have seen how students with simplistic understanding can be tutored towards informed conceptualisations that encompass all three pillars of sustainability (economic, social and environmental). We have put sustainability at the heart of teaching enhancement and innovation. Significantly, from Autumn 2014

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the course will be available for academic credit for undergraduate students as well as being available to all staff and students across our UK, China and Malaysia campuses for their continuing professional and personal development.

Section 3 The future

Lessons learned

Beginning as a 'skunkworks' initiative (trailing innovation in a low-risk environment), our project has resulted in an online learning strategy being written for University Executive Board. This includes an essential requirement that "Content created as part of a MOOC (or NOOC – a 'Nottingham Open Online Course') must be made available for use in other teaching and learning, or research, contexts, or as open educational resources". Sustainability is thereby enshrined in the strategy, ensuring maximum benefit to the maximum number of learners. The key lesson has been learning that the initiative needs to be translated into a strategy for longer-term benefit.

Sharing our project

The project has been disseminated widely. We ran an HEA-funded seminar, 'Online and open: modelling sustainability and 'greening the academy' through e-learning' (March 2014) and presented at conferences for the Quality Assurance Agency, the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, the Lifewide Education Network, EduLearn14 and the FutureLearn Partnership. Internally, project design and evaluation has been shared with the Senior Manager's Workshop, Students in Conversation Conference and Learning Sciences Research Institute.

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

The global imperative to reduce carbon emissions and to improve the sustainability of our activities is compelling. Developing sustainability literacy in individuals and communities is key. In recognising the value of online learning for sustainability, the Green Gown Awards is sending a powerful signal to higher education and to our institution.

Further information

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<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studywithus/online/mooc.aspx>

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/teaching/teaching/moocnooc/index.aspx>