

Finalist's case study

University of Worcester Courses and Learning

Tree huggers, liars and economic collapse?

The challenge of sustainability

Section 1 About the project

Summary

Providing University of Worcester students with an exciting opportunity to participate in a unique 'elective' (module) exploring the principles and practices of sustainability. Integrating students across institutes and pushing beyond disciplinary frontiers it nurtures critical thinking, global citizenship and employability skills. It's an innovative project that makes a tangible difference!

Project partners

The local community, including city and county council, 3rd sector organisations, businesses, and Transition movement have all contributed their time free of charge to talk to the students.

Section 2 The results

The problem

The need to question, to challenge and to think beyond a discipline is an essential part of EfS (Sterling, 2011). The elective offers an enriching and potentially transformative academic experience for students that will open up many pathways and opportunities in the future.

The approach

The initiative offers students the opportunity to explore the themes of sustainability alongside peers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. It's a 30 credit module that has moved beyond traditional lecture/seminar models to adopt an 'enquiry-based learning' approach to sustainability embracing student led co-creation. Experiential and group work exploring perceptions, reflections and personal views are incorporated alongside some of the underlying theory and conceptual ideas. The elective seeks to promote wider community engagement, the role of external contributors is core to this, with a broad array of 'expert witnesses' regularly invited who contribute their interpretation and understanding of sustainability in their job or research. Furthermore, a large part of assessment involves teams of students project managing the University's Go Green Week which has multiple community activities.



Profile

- A Higher Education Institution
- 10,000 students
- 1,000 staff
- Urban campus

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Our goals

Pedagogically the emphasis of the elective is to provide students with key sustainability skills such as critical thinking, deep learning and citizenship in addition to knowledge building and practical skills. Topics are used as the basis for taking students on a personal sustainability journey and they complete a portfolio illuminating their reflections and transformative moments.

"The elective has changed my view on an individual's contribution to sustainability, showing that a change no matter how small can make a difference especially if the effort is a collective one. This message was something we aimed to advocate during Go Green Week to both the university and wider community." (Extract from student journal.)

Obstacles and solutions

Engaging more students	The Worcester model does have a wider impact, especially innovative in its use of an online digital publishing strategy, which combines a private and public site encouraging cross communication across curriculum, campus and community. The eagerness of businesses and international academics to want to collaborate in this project indicates its potential impact and reach.
Internal processes	The 'home' for the elective sits within one Institute. It does take effort and energy to ensure internal colleagues from across the Institution can all participate in the delivery.

Performance and results

Evaluation of the 2013/14 sessions:

- 100% of students found the expert witness sessions helpful.
- 90% of students responded positively to their role in Go Green Week with many recognising personal development benefits alongside inherent employability skills for CVs and job applications.
- Assessments indicated that at least 75% had fully engaged with the materials and reflected personally and deeply on the practices and principles of sustainability covered during the year (grade B- and higher).

The elective demonstrates the University's commitment to its core values of sustainability and employability and senior management recognition of the intrinsic value of transdisciplinary electives and commitment to their success.

Level four has now been running for two years and level five, a work based placement, is being piloted in 2014/15. The administrative home for the elective is in the Institute for Science and Environment but in practice it is fully supported by all six institutes and staff throughout the University. All Institutes have contributed to its development through provision of expert witness sessions or other teaching materials. Running alongside efforts have also been made to integrate sustainability into the broader curriculum and it is now integrated into 34% of all modules, up from 23% in 2010.

Section 3 The future

Lessons learned

The elective project provides multiple social and environmental benefits to students, staff, campus life and the broader community. These include:

- Raises awareness of the delicate interaction between social, environmental and economic sustainability and engages students in some of the key debates.
- Provides students with practical skills for leading a more sustainable lifestyle.
- Facilitates students learning to interact and communicate with students from disparate academic backgrounds – “Me and my peers were all studying different subjects. This definitely stimulated discussions and different considerations, which all helped to build up and enhance my point of view”.
- Has helped forge a strong sustainability network across institutes.
- Has helped generate broader awareness of the University’s sustainability profile and achievements.
- Encouraged broader student awareness and engagement in Go Green Week and other sustainability related activities on site.

Sharing our project

The progress and issues faced/learning are actively shared with other institutions via the HEA (seminar held in May 2014) and other networks (WSSDU conference Manchester September 2014). Ultimately, the model is transferrable across institutions who wish to pursue a similar approach. We are extremely enthusiastic about spreading the model we’ve created and have showcased it and are following up several international collaborations.

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

This award provides independent recognition of our collaborative approach bringing together staff, students and members of the community. It has provided external recognition of ESD activity at the University of Worcester creating the opportunity to share the Worcester model. It has also increased awareness of work internally, spurring those academics who are engaged to deepen their involvement and feel part of a team that is rewarded.

Further information

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