

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CURRICULUM – A PROGRESS REPORT

Progress made in relation to curriculum delivery

As well as considering the sustainability *content* of the curriculum [see below], the Sustainable Education Working Group has also highlighted the need to monitor the environmental *impact* associated with the mode of delivery of academic programmes.

- The Working Group has devised a Sustainability Checklist [revised in June 2009]. This identifies sustainability issues which academic programmes are invited to consider.
- Section 4.3.4 of the revised Quality Manual (see below) makes specific reference to the environmental impact of academic programmes, and also refers to the Checklist.

The University has a commitment to the development of programmes that support a sustainable environment whenever possible. Programme Teams should consider this when designing programmes, and should ensure that a rationale is made for the inclusion of any activities that run counter to this commitment. In addition, Programme Teams are expected to consider proposals for programmes against the University's Sustainability Checklist and other guidelines that the University may from time to time develop. Details of the University's approach to sustainability are included in the documentation, Standard Items for Validation.

- In relation to the location of validated programmes within the campus network, the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) has agreed that a question should be added to the Planning Form asking how 'environmental sustainability issues (e.g. travel impact etc.) have been taken into account with regard to the proposed location for the programme'.
- The 'Greening Student Teacher Transport to Schools' initiative (which was adopted by the Education Faculty in 2006) is a good illustration of the concrete steps taken by one programme to reduce its own environmental impact. [NB. This initiative emerged independently of the deliberations by the Sustainable Education Working group.]

Significant progress made in relation to curriculum content

The module 'Learning in the global context' is now compulsory for all Level 3 students on the BA (Ed.) degree.

- The module has a strong focus on global sustainability and includes consideration of scientific and ethical issues, as well as the implications for prospective teachers.

The module focuses on specific environmental issues such as global warming and climate change and is underpinned by an environmental ethic throughout. Prospective teachers are introduced to a variety of ways of presenting these complex issues to children in a spirit of hope and optimism. CCCU is taking a lead in this aspect of initial teacher education and has identified the importance of devising successful teaching strategies in an area of the curriculum which is liable to become increasingly important in the years to come.

- This module probably represents the University's most significant achievement so far in bringing the relevant issues to the attention of a large group of students.

Areas where more limited progress has been made in relation to curriculum content

- The 'starred' module 'Environment and Society: sustainable futures' was validated within the General Modular Scheme. But, although the module was offered to Level 1 students in September 2008, there was insufficient interest for the module to run and was not offered in 2009 due to problems related to the starred module selection process.
- The Sustainability Checklist invites academic programmes to consider "the possible inclusion of material on environmental sustainability as an element within the academic programme." However, this is merely a recommendation, for consideration only "in those cases where the subject matter of the discipline lends itself to this."
- The potential for the inter-professional modules in the Faculty of Health and Social Care to focus strongly on the sustainability aspects of professional practice has been discussed and given some consideration, as part of the programme review process. This is ongoing.
- A limited discussion of sustainability is now part of the PGCELT (HE) programme. This has value for the new academic staff attending, but needs to be complemented with wider engagement through Staff Development for established teaching staff.

Factors which have restricted progress in relation to curriculum content

- The lack of student engagement with sustainability issues and the relatively minor role of 'starred' modules in the General Modular Scheme. (It has become clear that the starred module format was not an appropriate vehicle through which to promote greater environmental awareness more widely among the student body.)
- The strongly-felt view of some academic staff that it is inappropriate to require all academic programmes to include content relating to environmental sustainability. For some colleagues, such a requirement would run counter to the principle of academic freedom. Moreover, while sustainability might sit naturally within the curricula of subjects such as health, education, geography or bioscience, there are concerns that for other subjects the inclusion of such material would perhaps be rather contrived.

Partly for these reasons, the Sustainability Checklist merely suggests that academic programmes should consider the possible inclusion of material on environmental sustainability "in those cases where the subject matter of the discipline lends itself to this" (for example, in geography or biosciences) rather than in *all* subject disciplines.

- It is acknowledged that an *expectation* that sustainability should be included in all curricula would require the intervention at Senior Management Team level. It is also acknowledged that that other areas such as equality and diversity or entrepreneurship might be seen to have an equal claim for mandatory inclusion in the curriculum.

Although Section 4.3.4 of the Quality Manual refers to the environmental *impact* of academic programmes, the following sentence (initially proposed by the Working Group) was not included as this refers to academic *content*:-

Consideration should also be given to ways in which academic programmes might include appropriate content relating to environmental sustainability.

- The need to work with and engage the Staff Development office in future developments is acknowledged.

Possible next steps in order to move the curriculum agenda forward

- There is a need to undertake a systematic audit of the sustainability content of all academic programmes. We simply do not know what is actually being done in particular modules, or what plans programme teams may have to extend this. For example: do applied and vocational programmes consider environmental ethics?

As survey designed to collect the necessary data – though Senior Management would need to endorse this and make clear to programme leaders that a response was required.

- It is suggested that a future Staff Conference with a sustainability focus would need a significant external keynote speaker to engage staff in sustainability and indicate its importance beyond the institution. This would demonstrate to colleagues that the University is taking the curriculum issues seriously. The inclusion of a sustainability topic in the annual public lecture series would also help to raise the profile of these issues. The use of the public lecture series in this way would also be consistent with the 'extra-curricular' approach that has been advocated by the Working Group as an incremental strategy.
- Careful consideration could be given to the adoption of a new structure at Level 1 in the General Modular Scheme. Although this would not work in the case of Combined Honours students, for Single Honours students (often the majority) a model based on five 20-credit modules plus two 10-credit modules would be feasible. The five 20-credit modules would be based in the student's chosen academic subject, while the 10-credit modules would cover a wide range of options, one of which could be sustainability. As students would be *required* to take two 10-credit modules, the likely take-up would be much higher than with the ill-fated Environment and Society 'starred' module.

A similar model is used in some other universities and it may also offer other benefits. For example, one of the 10-credit modules could be used to launch PDP or study skills.

- The scope of the department and programme review process should be extended to include a proper assessment of the extent to which sustainability issues have been considered at department or programme level, either in relation to modes of curriculum delivery, or in relation to academic curriculum content.

- Consideration might also be given to the development of a new undergraduate degree in sustainability: The University of Keele's 'Environment and Sustainability' degree is a possible model.

Management and leadership as the key to progress

- Several of the above suggestions have already been discussed by the Sustainable Education Working Group. The Working Group has made some limited progress; and the key issues have been identified – but, if significant change is to be achieved and priorities are to change, this will require clear direction at SMT level.
- One of the aims set out in the University's *Strategic Plan 2006-2010* (Supporting Document, Section 22) is to: "Embed sustainable development within teaching and learning approaches, and where appropriate in curriculum development." The University's Sustainability Policy also states that the University will:
 3. Through curriculum development, research and training engage students and staff in the critical debate on environmental issues.
 4. Incorporate best environmental practice in curriculum design as a key aspect of programme development, based on clear guidelines and inclusion in programme validation processes.
- The challenge is to make a link between general policy statements such as these and tangible actions at grass roots level.

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Sustainable Education Working
Group, 24 October 2009

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