
Students as Agents for Change in Learning and Teaching

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Project blog: <https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/studentprojects>

Project website: <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/change>

Case study 2 – The University of Exeter Business School: Sustainability

Introduction

This project focused on students engaging with staff to encourage sustainable practice within the Business School. It was in part run by Harriet Whewell, who was the graduate co-ordinator organising the University-wide Change agents initiative. However, it was linked in to the Business School technology projects because the students decided to use the audience response voting system to collect their data. This was made easy because the majority of students had just been allocated their clickers for use in lectures.

A group of students, who had previously come into contact with another *Students as Change Agents*/JISC Integrative Technologies project (video in tutorials), proposed a wide range of initial project ideas. Those proposals ranged from the installation of wind turbines to decrease reliance on finite energy resources; through to operational matters such as increased use of double-sided printing within the school and reduction of paper handouts in lectures. In focusing the scope of this project, students agreed that project outcomes needed to be achievable within the short timescale of this project, and with this, students decided to focus on encouraging student awareness of sustainability and participation in sustainable practice whilst at the university. Concerning other operational ideas, the *Students as Change Agents* initiative was able to facilitate connections with other initiatives such as the Green Impact programme which the students also took part in.

In terms of the students' project theme, initial ideas addressed an 'Exeter Green Challenge' award structure, perhaps similar to the Exeter Award, or even better integration into existing award structures. From an employability angle, the latter option could also tap into perceived student desires for increased information on careers in environmentally/socially responsible organisations. The students wanted to investigate student attitudes to sustainability, and the feasibility both these possibilities whilst working with staff for implementation of either option.

Methods of data collection

With the support of Business School staff, a set of student-designed questions were investigated within three module cohorts of first and third year undergraduates in the School. A variety of questions were explored to determine if a) if students considered themselves interested in sustainability, and b) if they would like to see student participation in such activities recognised, and through what methods they might support. Further, student interest in environmentally and socially responsible careers was investigated. Responses were sought using the Turning Point audience response clickers, with around 150 fully completed question sets.

Analysis of data

With varying definitions concerning the concept of sustainability, it was first necessary to concentrate respondents minds on the widely accepted definition put forward by Brundtland (1987) that sustainability referred to "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". With this in mind, the survey found broad interest, with almost 80% of respondents confirming that they were interested in sustainability. However, only a third of students surveyed felt that they themselves led a sustainable life. Picking up on a specific issue raised by the student group, around 84% of students felt they were strongly or somewhat encouraged to recycle in their place of residence whilst at university, although 16% said they were not encouraged at all. A further 73% said having multiple bins in their rooms would encourage them to recycle more.

Just over 50% felt that student participation in sustainability related activities should be recognised by the university on an individual level. This suggested support for students' initial ideas, although there was a mix of opinion about how this could be achieved, as shown in table 1.

'How could student participation in sustainability be recognised?'

	Responses (percent)
Integration into the Exeter Award	29.19%
A new & separate 'green' award structure, similar to the Exeter Award	24.89%
Integration into PDP module (BSD1000)	7.70%
Some sort of generic optional credit-rated module	13.07%
Something else?	9.85%
I voted no!	15.31%
Totals	100%

Table 1: Recognising student activity in sustainability

Turning attention to employability-related issues, students were asked if they were interested in careers with environmentally and socially responsible organisations. Whilst it seemed that only a minority of first year students had considered career options after graduation, over half of third-year students questioned indicated they were interested in such organisations. In looking at this, there also appeared to be motives for better integrating sustainability into existing employability-related incentives such as the Exeter Award.

Implementation:

After determining broad student support for their ideas through empirical means, the student group first looked at the varying possibilities of implementing systems designed to recognise student involvement in sustainable issues. Having previously considered a separate 'green' award structure, students found that substantial resources were involved in setting-up and administering such a scheme, even before marketing such projects to fellow students.

Given these factors, project students decided to liaise with those from Exeter Award with the aim of creating more sessions with a sustainability theme that could count towards the award, as well as promoting exiting sessions to students. In particular students felt existing provision in the second-stage Exeter Leaders Award offered a starting point from great inclusion at the more widely available first level. As seen above, this decision was supported empirically, with the Exeter Award the most preferred method of recognition amongst students. Additionally, 40% of survey respondents stated they were registered onto the award, and almost 5,000 students signed-up across the institution.

Students as Change Agents staff were then able to engage students in discussions with relevant staff members. Most notably, discussions began with Harriet Sjerps-Jones (Sustainability in the

Curriculum Coordinator), where common ground was quickly found in better integrating sustainability into curricular and extra-curricular activities, most notably in designing a specific and new session for the Exeter Award. A three-way working group was quickly established to move these ideas forward. Dawn Lees (Employability & Exeter Award Coordinator) also responded positively to both aspects of a) introducing additional skills-based sustainability sessions into the award and b) aiding in making contact with suitable and 'best practice' employers who would be interested in informing students about their actions as organisations. The latter proposal was, of course, a more traditional aspect of the Exeter Award, yet students identified the opportunity for increased synergy with current student trends in relation to 'ethical' careers.

With these successes, students began working with Harriet Sjerps-Jones on a pilot session that it was hoped would build on the success of presentations by the university's sustainability office on operational practice within the institution. The proposed workshop would focus on everyday objects and investigate the economic, social and environmental influences and outcomes whilst also linking these issues to the different academic disciplines of participants. This 'systems thinking' theme was also designed to enhance attendees' skills, being adaptable to many other disciplines and issues.

At this point, students were vital in adding a new perspective to session design and marketing. For example, it was felt that care should be taken with session titles, as this first impression can hold a big influence on possible student attendance. In this case, and after pre-pilot feedback from their peers, students suggested re-branding sustainability in terms such as, for example, 'skills for the future' and 'skills for the green economy'. Staff and students were able to work together to recruit participants.

Around 15 participants attended the 'Systems thinking: future proof your graduate career' workshop, with valuable feedback obtained as a basis for evaluation of the session. Over xx% of workshop attendees found the session useful, with formal inclusion as an Exeter Award activity expected before the 2010-11 academic year. An ongoing challenge remains around the scalability of such workshops once formally recognised, given staff pressures. This is an issue that will be evaluated from next year.

On the second strand, students have themselves made contact with a variety of organisations with a view to give specific presentations on the innovative practices unique to their organisations on campus. They include: Allianz (the impact of global warming on the insurance industry); KPMG (Global Sustainability Services); Deloitte (IT Department Sustainability Scorecard); and Thomson Reuters (offering speakers from their 'Green Team'). There is enthusiasm for such events to form part of the University's Widen Your Options week.

New ideas: Looking to the Future

Building on the good foundations developed in this project, the creativity and drive of the students involved has led to many additional medium-term possibilities. New and innovative ideas have been suggested, such as:

- Challenges and competitions - for example, an inter-mural recycling challenge between halls of residence.
- Access to opportunities for developing green business projects building on entrepreneurship skills and explicitly linked to Business School disciplines.
- Greening the University design games.

With this formal element of the *Students as Change Agents* project coming to a close, the student group will continue to investigate these additional possibilities. The contacts gained from undertaking this project will no doubt be important in pursuing these additional projects.

Recommendations/Solutions

The vision and creativity shown by students on this project has already led to successful outcome in drawing together relevant parties and building consensus amongst university staff. Tangible and embedded outcomes are expected to come to fruition in the 2010-11 academic year in the form of new, sustainability-related sessions for the Exeter Award. Arising from this, it is recommended that work continue with Harriet Sjerps-Jones and Dawn Lees amongst many others, to build on the solid and positive foundations created by this project so far. In particular, continued evaluation of Exeter Award related activities in the coming academic year will be essential to their longer-term success.

In addition, it should be noted that the use of audience response clickers proved to be an exceptionally efficient means of collecting and analysing data from students. The sustainability group students were able to design questions that gained the kinds of response they required, and they had absolutely no problems in gaining feedback from their peers in lecture theatres. This is certainly a technology that will be used by students again.

*Dale Potter
With support from Harriet Whewell
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