

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

Introduction

Box 8.1: Chapter purposes

- To review the evidence gathered in the light of the original research questions
- To review the degree to which extra-curricular interventions fulfil the potential benefits associated with them.
- To reflect upon the implications of the research for knowledge, policy and practice.
- To consider the limitations of the research and suggest future avenues of enquiry

Prior to the research presented in this thesis, little was known about the extent and nature of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions in UK HE, nor indeed elsewhere. Little was documented about how such interventions were perceived within the HE community, nor what influence they were having as part of ESD work. Extra-curricular interventions were evidently a part of campus life, but rarely mentioned in the literature and seldom the primary focus in published investigations. Unsurprisingly, given a lack of visibility in the literature, the role of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions had not been theorised, nor did it feature greatly as a part of policy driven efforts to further ESD practice in UK HE.

This thesis (and associated papers produced from it: Lipscombe, 2008a, 2008b; Lipscombe et al., 2008) has scrutinised extra-curricular ESD-related practice in UK HE. In doing so, it has begun to fill the knowledge gap identified and to open the field for further investigation. This chapter aims to draw together the main findings and emergent themes from the research in order to consider their value and implications. To meet its purposes (see Box 8.1) the chapter is split into three parts. The first revisits the research questions to draw conclusions about the extent, character and impact of extra-curricular interventions. The second considers the implications of these findings for knowledge, policy and practice, and the third considers the research process and its limitations before suggesting further avenues for enquiry.

The research questions revisited

Two guiding questions have driven the investigation. The first concerned *the extent to which extra-curricular interventions are characteristic of the ESD response in UK HE*. This question was investigated using a postal questionnaire sent to all UK HEIs in 2006. Importantly, the survey confirms extra-curricular interventions to be commonplace and a prominent feature of ESD practice. It shows:

- Nearly all universities use them and that extra-curricular interventions are perceived to be developed in similar measure to curricular work; ESD overall is typically thought to be at a relatively early stage of development.
- A range of different intervention types are widely used, with awareness campaigns and on-campus events most commonly employed.
- There is a widespread belief that extra-curricular ESD-related interventions are useful. They are thought to be strong for raising awareness, for reaching wider audiences and for promoting wider perspectives.
- By contrast, the main identified weaknesses are a limited take up, few resources to support them, and few links with institutional and curriculum planning.

With extra-curricular interventions being a clear part of the HESD landscape, it follows that they ought to be recognised as such and understood better.

Here the case study serves to highlight that:

- Some extra-curricular ESD-related interventions will be pre-planned to deliberately encourage curriculum change, help improve a university's operational environmental efficiency, and to raise awareness of, and encourage, pro-sustainability behaviours within and beyond the campus.

- Others will occur where sustainability issues are prominent in wider society and are captured through existing extra-curricular event programmes, e.g. annual science and literature festivals.
- Extra-curricular interventions may be led by either academics or support staff.

The second question driving the research focused on *the potential for extra-curricular interventions to provide learning experiences that contribute to both personal and institutional change*. Here a combination of the literature review, postal survey and case study helped to explore and test this potential.

With respect to personal change, conceptions of education and theories of learning from the literature highlight the potential value of extra-curricular interventions as one of multiple prompts for learning. Here they can be viewed as:

- A *non-formal* mode of education used alongside and interacting with *formal* and *informal* modes (La Belle, 1982);
- Part of the wider educational *infrastructure* that can satisfy free-choice learning impulses (Falk & Dierking, 2002); and
- Features of the external learning landscape that learners can interact with (Illeris, 2002) so providing prompts for conscious and sometimes unconscious or *tacit* learning (after Polanyi, 1967).

Responses from the postal survey of UK HEIs indicated a widespread belief that extra-curricular interventions can raise awareness and promote wider perspectives amongst learners. Evidence from the Bright College case *confirms* that multiple influences are involved in shaping the thoughts, feelings and actions of learners – both staff and students - and, *importantly*, that extra-curricular interventions were prompts for changes in people's learning more often than not. Indeed, extra-curricular interventions may provide the sole university driven ESD-related stimulus for:

- Support staff;

- Students whose formal studies do not yet feature sustainable development; and
- Academic staff whose disciplinary interests are yet to focus on it.

For those who are already engaged with sustainable development through their courses or disciplinary interests, extra-curricular interventions provide complementary learning stimuli that can enrich prior or parallel learning.

With respect to institutional change, Sterling's notion of *sustainable education* (2001; 2003) highlights that educational institutions must learn themselves in order to change, not just modify teaching content for their students. His systems-based view also makes clear that it is difficult to effect change in isolation and from within the education system. This is because the wider, presently unsustainable, socio-economic system tends to shape the education system more so than the other way around. Accordingly, the emphasis should be on trying to build virtuous, mutually reaffirming change processes with others beyond the education system. There is much critique of HE's existing response to sustainable development (see Bawden, 2004; Calder & Clugston, 2004; Camino et al., 2005; Clugston & Calder, 1999; Cullingford, 2004; Haigh, 2005; HEFCE, 2005; Higgitt et al., 2005; Huckle, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Sterling, 2001; Sterling & Scott, 2007; Thomas, 2004). Several of the positive qualities attributed to extra-curricular interventions as a counterpoint to this critique were evidenced through the case study:

- Extra-curricular interventions do engage *both staff and students*, and help both groups to learn.
- Extra-curricular interventions do attract people from a range of disciplinary interests, thereby affording the potential for learning between disciplines. In the case study, they attracted many with an existing disciplinary interest in sustainability, but also attracted those where a disciplinary interest was not evident.
- Extra-curricular interventions can create links between campus and wider communities. In the case study, people from the wider community were attracted to on-campus events, and members of the

campus community were involved as volunteers in various activities beyond the campus, e.g. planting trees, promoting local recycling services and assisting the launch of a local carbon reduction campaign.

- The extra-curricular sphere is permeable to external influence *without these influences being perceived as a threat to academic freedom*, e.g. Bright College became a Fairtrade University during the study year responding to an external challenge to stock and promote goods carrying the Fairtrade ethical label.
- Extra-curricular interventions can rapidly mirror sustainability concerns in wider society, e.g. many of the on-campus events featured climate change which was a high profile issue during the study year.

In the light of the evidence, it can be concluded that extra-curricular interventions do play useful learning-related functions that assist institutional change. That said, considering the difficulty in effecting institutional change from a systems perspective, extra-curricular interventions will not bring about such change entirely by themselves. They are more likely to help when integrated with wider attempts to effect change. Indeed, reports from institutions that are benefiting from external funding to transform themselves into exemplars of sustainability (Blake et al., 2007; Gray-Donald & Selby, 2006; Hopkinson et al., 2008) allude to efforts directed beyond the curriculum alongside curriculum focused work.

A key area where extra-curricular ESD-related interventions can contribute to institutional change is in helping build a community of interest to engender a pro-sustainability culture. Identifying and communicating with people who have an existing interest in environmental and development issues would seem to be an obvious part in building a supportive community in which ESD and actions supportive of sustainable development can flourish. That does not mean that such people are already 'converted' to think the same things and act in particular ways, but their interest may make them more open to the idea that there is some need to change from the status quo. In the Bright College case, the extra-curricular programme was successful in creating an

impression that more was happening at the institution amongst study participants. However, a potential weakness with extra-curricular interventions, identified through the postal survey, is the danger of superficiality, i.e. creating the impression of action in place of real substantive change. For those UK HEIs still at an earlier stage of development, including Bright College, extra-curricular interventions can certainly help to raise awareness, engage people with sustainable development and motivate them to act. This developmental role can be conceptualised as part of the process of forming or extending a *bridgehead* from which to advance ESD work. This is important, *but it is not in itself enough*. The benefits in creating a community of interest may be short lived, if changes in policies, practices and curriculum do not follow. A 'bottom up' movement for change still needs to win commitment from the top to consolidate and drive forward institutional change. In the Bright College case, with the exception of the university's work on Fairtrade, there was little evidence to suggest that such commitment had been secured.

Implications

For knowledge

The research has demonstrated:

- The use of extra-curricular interventions is common amongst UK HEIs; and,
- Extra-curricular interventions can provide learning experiences that promote both individual and institutional change.

In the process of answering the main research questions, there are several further contributions to knowledge:

- *Qualities of the extra-curricular sphere*. A review of the published critique of the HE response to ESD highlighted a series of positive qualities possessed by the extra-curricular sphere in contrast to the curriculum, notably: *subject neutrality, interface, permeability* and *fluidity*. The subsequent empirical investigation provided evidence to reinforce this. However, it also found that although the extra-curricular

sphere can be viewed as subject neutral, extra-curricular ESD-related *interventions* may still be perceived as belonging to particular disciplines by students following subjects not traditionally associated with sustainable development.

- *Functions of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions.* Several functions in support of ESD were anticipated from extra-curricular interventions. The evidence collected supported their roles as a *disciplinary bridge, community bridge, social learning arena, and socialisation scaffold*. However, in the Bright college case, the opportunity for social learning appears to have been limited because there were few opportunities for interaction between participants through the extra-curricular programme.
- *Conceptions of sustainable development in HE.* The *Layers and Strands model* (Figure 6.11) developed to represent and map participant understandings of sustainable development in the case study, adds to the embryonic literature concerning staff and student understandings of sustainable development in universities. It echoes the environmental emphasis from earlier studies. However, it offers the idea that this can be viewed as a core understanding to which further layers can be added as people learn more, and so build up more sophisticated views.

For policy and practice

In the light of this investigation, those with an interest in promoting ESD in the HE sector ought to consider both the curricular *and* extra-curricular response. International policy recognises the value of formal and non-formal education for ESD, yet thus far UK HE policy has tended to focus on the former in isolation². With extra-curricular interventions being common across HEIs, it is important that such work is both recognised and integrated into thinking

² Interestingly the Higher Education Funding Council For England's strategic review (Policy Studies Institute et al., 2008) did not report on extra-curricular ESD activities, but focussed on research, estates management and trying to establish a base-line of courses offering sustainable development related content. However, the recent Higher Education Academy report looking specifically at ESD in Scotland (Ryan, 2009) does report on informal learning practices as a recognised part of ESD, albeit with a student focus.

about the future development of ESD. Here the research conducted highlights that extra-curricular interventions are:

- Useful to mobilise and motivate sections of the campus community to support ESD and take actions helpful to sustainable development. They can thus serve an important developmental role for ESD.
- Peripheral activities that may be prone to erratic implementation. They are by definition 'extra' to a university's core business - the delivery of particular curricula – and thus may suffer from a lack of ownership and inadequate resourcing. It seems important to recognise the potential benefits of extra-curricular interventions and to resource them accordingly.
- Led by support staff not just academics. Efforts to support ESD should recognise the role and pedagogic approaches of support staff, not concentrate solely on support for academic teachers.
- Focussed on staff as well as students. Importantly, extra-curricular interventions provide an opportunity for all staff to learn.
- Used for different purposes, including: encouraging behaviour change in support of environmental management objectives, cultivating wider perspectives of sustainable development, and encouraging curriculum change.
- Useful to provide a bridge between campus and the wider community.

Those with an interest in promoting ESD in the HE sector, but who are external to HEIs, should recognise that the extra-curricular sphere is likely to be more permeable to external influence than the curriculum. It is thus a potentially fruitful place to introduce sustainability issues within university communities without encroaching on 'academic freedom'. External resources to develop ESD-related interventions in this sphere are likely to be welcomed as there may be few resources available to develop them within HEIs. Such support may have an important indirect impact on the curriculum by helping to encourage inter-disciplinary exchange and by promoting staff learning.

The success or otherwise of extra-curricular interventions is unlikely to be judged solely on the basis of the numbers directly involved and any immediate feedback participants may provide - although clearly such data will help. Some individual events can have a powerful impact by themselves, as with George Monbiot's presentation about climate change at Bright College. Other interventions, though apparently having little impact at the time, may still have an influence some time later when combined with subsequent influences. In line with constructivist learning theories (Illeris, 2002) the impact of different stimuli will depend on each learner's position – their emotional state and prior learning. Accordingly, to appreciate the impact of interventions it seems important to question participants not only at the time of the intervention, but some time after. Here, the Layers and Strands model developed (Figure 6.11) provides one way to track changes in people's conception of sustainable development over time.

The following recommendations are offered to those involved in the planning and delivery of a programme of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions at a university:

- *Present a diverse programme of events and activities.* In order to attract a broad audience it is important to provide a variety of entry points to the topic, rooted in different disciplinary areas.
- *Encourage academic and support staff from all departments to contribute events and activities to extra-curricular programmes.* Asking staff to contribute a session or activity relating to sustainable development may enhance diversity in an extra-curricular programme; it can also encourage their engagement with and ownership of the topic. For academics, it can help take a general personal interest and refocus it into a disciplinary one.
- *If setting up an electronic network/ mailing list, keep asking people to join at every opportunity.* Some people will join because of an existing interest or to show solidarity to a perceived cause. Some people will join out of curiosity. Some will join simply because they are asked to. It is thus important to keep asking.

- *Link events and activities to contemporary high-profile sustainability issues to amplify impact.*
- *Link events and activities to external campaigns and initiatives to amplify impact and lever in external resources.*
- *Consider opportunities to link with curricular work in order to magnify impact and lever resources for extra-curricular interventions.* Making such links can increase the appeal of extra-curricular interventions to some students. It can also enrich curricular work.
- *Encourage academic staff to help promote participation amongst students.* Some students, especially those following subjects not traditionally associated with sustainable development, may avoid taking part in extra-curricular ESD-related events unless the relevance is made clear to them. The recommendation of tutors could thus encourage more widespread participation.
- *Create space for interaction between participants, both face-to-face and on-line and encourage this interaction.*
- *Promote open events – inviting those from the wider community to attend.* Events open to a wide audience may attract more people. A large audience may have an energising effect helping to illustrate that people are not alone. Conversely a limited turn out at events can demoralise both presenters and audience.
- *Include clearly noticeable interventions in busy, open-spaces, not just those taking place indoors and behind doors.* Whilst not everyone will engage in events and activities, when there is visible evidence that such events and activities are taking place (including promotional materials such as posters) even those not taking part may still be influenced by merely knowing about them.
- *Recognise the value of participation in research related to understandings of sustainability.* Asking research participants to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and actions relating to sustainable development can have a powerful learning impact.

The research process

The research upon which this thesis is based was not without limitation. As an exploratory investigation into a under researched area it also raises questions beyond those it set out to answer and as a result of the findings uncovered.

My own reflections on the research process are presented in Box 8.2. In summary, the main elements of the research - the postal survey and detailed case study - were implemented largely as originally planned, although with the benefit of hindsight it may have been possible to implement them in a more efficient manner most especially by focusing on the most pertinent data at the outset.

Box 8.2: The researcher's reflections on the research process

My path through this investigation has been long and at times hard. Looking back, I am relatively pleased that the main elements of the original research plan were followed and that the research instruments performed well. Some adjustment in the original timetable was necessary, but both the survey and case study approach were eventually completed largely as intended.

The postal questionnaire did not seem to cause respondents a great deal of difficulty to complete. The majority of questionnaires appeared to have been completed by one person, although occasionally there was evidence that they were circulated to more than one member of staff. I was particularly pleased that the return from the postal survey topped 50% of potential responses. At the outset, I had hoped it would reach at least 40%. Looking back at my research notes I am reminded that to get this return was something of a 'grind'. I doubt it would have been so high - and would probably have been well below 40% - without me following a pre-planned and active routine for post-distribution reminders. I also feel that the initial effort to get the survey packages individually addressed and to look and feel credible paid dividends. I remember feeling envious of those conducting surveys for respected external agencies such as HE funding councils where some prior credibility or leverage exists. Of course, despite getting a creditable return for this type of survey, just under half of UK HEIs still did not respond. It is of course conceivable that the non respondent group may include more institutions with limited ESD activity. That said, amongst non respondents were some institutions who had reported much ESD activity in the literature.

Playing the role of researcher-in-action in order to create the case study was a mixed experience. Looking back over my reflective notes, it is clear that in the thick of the extra-curricular programme I was struggling to balance the time devoted to both research and practice. My practitioner background made it easy for me to devote more time to practice, partly motivated by the need to have something worth researching. I certainly committed more than one day per week (the original stipulation) to the extra-curricular programme at its height. This experience helps to confirm that running a programme of extra-curricular interventions demands staff

resources. It also indicates that being a researcher studying the impacts of one's own work is a great motivator. I do not think this extra effort was aimed at showing my work in a good light. Rather, it was to give me the motivation to expend energy on researching its impact, i.e. if I didn't believe the programme was a reasonable effort, I may have been less inclined to expend the effort to understand it so fully. By devoting some extra time to the event programme, I deferred some of my available research time until after it had finished and therefore the whole research process took longer than I originally hoped.

My initial attempts to recruit study participants for the survey within the case study via Bright College's sustainability related e-bulletin met with limited success. This necessitated some additional email contact, including emails targeted to attract first year students to ensure a range of participants. Once recruited, I was impressed that all participants stayed with the study and agreed to be re-interviewed. At the conclusion, it was quite evident that several people had genuinely enjoyed being part of the research process and felt they had got a lot out of it. A number alluded to having missed receiving regular invitations to reflect after the academic year had finished. This gives an indication of the impact of the research in making sustainable development more 'front-of-mind' for those participants making regular reflections. Participation in the research undoubtedly had a powerful impact on a number of people. I believe this is a powerful impact that is worth trying to harness.

I am amazed how closely I feel I know many of the study participants, despite only interviewing them twice for a few hours, one year apart, and receiving some emails from them between times. The strategy to immerse myself with the data is no doubt the root of this apparent closeness. It has certainly made me feel a burden of responsibility not to misrepresent people. However, I am conscious that the work is still my interpretation of a shared experience.

The enormity of the case study investigation was at times overwhelming. The successful retention of all study participants and my eagerness to work with all the data proved a double-edged sword. In total, I conversed with the participants for around 60 hours; listened to every interview recording several times; transcribed them into scripts totalling over 430,000 words; read and reread these scripts; coded them line-by-line; refined these codes to build themes; and summarised and analysed the patterns relating to my areas of interest. If I repeated this process, I think I would be much more selective in what I transcribed and coded in the first place. A considerable amount of data remains unreported directly. Having been closely immersed in all of it, it has been a difficult task to make sure that the chain of evidence was kept intact in the thesis and that I was not leaving out the material from which I was drawing conclusions because I had become so familiar with it.

Reviewing my experience working for Bright College's Environmental Committee, I am left with the impression that there was little institutional 'drive' behind the committee's work. The committee appeared relatively peripheral and its work seemed to be treated as a low priority. There was perhaps an acceptance that 'something' environmental should be done, but little idea or interest in what that 'something' should be. In this regard, it was similar to some of my previous experiences working in local government when trying to establish a new environmental management programme with little commitment from management to changing from 'business as usual'. I feel that environmental management at Bright College was perhaps some years behind the local government norm. I suspect this may be because central government in the UK has more direct leverage over local government than universities.

Looking back on the extra-curricular programme, I am relatively pleased with the interventions I helped to initiate. I feel it was a credible effort in that it involved interventions one might expect in other HEIs that are working to implement an extra-curricular programme with limited resources. In helping shape the programme, I directly drew on my experience from prior work as Local Agenda 21 Coordinator, particularly when attempting to build a network of interest served with a regular bulletin. In my previous work on Local Agenda 21, however, there was an underlying objective to engage people in shaping and implementing a strategy. At Bright College there was no equivalent focus for engagement. Indeed, beyond the extra-curricular programme, I felt little of note happened on campus to evidence a shift towards more sustainable practices. Amongst study participants, Bright College tended to be strongly criticised for its apparent lack of action and ambition. I do not think many study participants were fooled by the extra-curricular programme into thinking more was going on than there actually was. There is of course a danger that, the institution's management could believe that such work was enough by itself.

Turning to the impacts of the research on my own thinking and practice, I feel I now have a greater understanding of how my own informal educational interventions contribute to learning and behaviour change. The research confirms such interventions most certainly can work, but rarely in a simplistic transmissive fashion. I now think of my informal educational efforts as part of a wider web of influences, and am perhaps more optimistic - and patient - as a result. Importantly, I feel I can use this understanding. Having recently started work back in local government as a sustainability officer - tasked with engaging the public in efforts to cut carbon emissions - I am already using insights gained from my research in planning my actions. I am very mindful of the amplificatory impacts possible by linking with other agents for change and the beneficial effects of encouraging a community of interest to sustain new behavioural norms. From an educational perspective, I am certainly more mindful of each person's starting point and their capacity to progress as an independent learner.

Limits

- The postal survey represented a 'snap shot' in time. It captured the position at, and looking back from, 2006. It is possible that the picture will have changed as initiatives to promote the uptake of ESD during the UN Decade have since taken effect.
- The picture captured in the postal survey is a composite one formed from the impressions of individuals within each HEI. It is probable that not everyone answering the questionnaire had a full and accurate overview of ESD work at their institution. The potential for diverse and multiple actors to be involved with ESD makes it difficult for one person to have such an overview. In a few cases the questionnaire had been completed by more than one person, but most appeared to have been answered by only one.

- The questionnaire survey was concerned primarily with detecting the occurrence and types of extra-curricular interventions in use. It did not enquire about the frequency of interventions within each institution, i.e. it is difficult to get a sense of how much extra-curricular work was going on within an institution compared to another.
- Though it had a creditable response, the postal survey still failed to generate returns from nearly half of the institutions sent questionnaires.
- The survey within the case study involved those who were already engaged with extra-curricular interventions, i.e. they were all signed up to receive Bright College's regular sustainable development-related electronic bulletin. Those who were not engaged with extra-curricular interventions at all were not recruited in this part. Their responses to the extra-curricular ESD-related interventions may have been different but have not been recorded in any great detail.

Future lines of enquiry

Having mapped out a broad picture of the extent and character of extra-curricular interventions and demonstrated that they have an influence on learning, several potential future areas for enquiry are suggested:

- *Investigations into ESD-related extra-curricular activity stemming from the student body.* This investigation has focused on interventions developed by university staff. At Bright College this helped stimulate the formation of a student 'People and Planet' group which then developed its own programme of activity. Investigations into the impact of such student peer-to-peer extra-curricular activity seem to merit closer scrutiny. Participants at Bright College who had joined the People & Planet group seemed to have been influenced by their experiences.
- *Further investigations designed to record the extent of extra-curricular practice within different HEIs.* As mentioned, this investigation detected the occurrence of extra-curricular practice in many UK HEIs,

but only provides one case study recording the extent and nature of this practice within an institution. In the case study the extra-curricular programme was itself developed in part so it could be researched. It seems important to develop further case studies of extra-curricular practice in a variety of different HEIs. It would be useful to compare the extra-curricular response at HEIs at different stages in the development of ESD, so that the functions of extra-curricular interventions at different points could be investigated further.

- *Attitudes of different stakeholder groups towards extra-curricular interventions.* A variety of different groups may lead extra-curricular interventions. It would be useful to explore if and how the attitudes of different groups toward them vary.
- *Investigations into the perceptions and experiences of non-participants in extra-curricular events and activities.* This would help explore the reasons for non-participation and so help to identify any barriers to engagement that may exist.

Closing remarks

If sustainable development is one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity in the 21st Century and HE has yet to fulfil its educational contribution towards it, then it seems likely that the remainder of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-15) will see heightened activity focussed on ESD. This thesis makes clear the importance of considering the extra-curricular as well and curricular dimension of ESD practice. Each pursued alone will have an impact, although combined the impact is likely to be greater than the sum of the parts. Influences on learning and action are much bigger than the curriculum. They are much bigger than HE too. Here the extra-curricular sphere can be a useful connective space where movements for change within universities and in wider society can find common ground to amplify each other's impact, thereby helping to progress the transformation towards sustainable development.