

TITLE:

Engaging the community reaps rewards at Bedford

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SUMMARY

Through active engagement in lots of community sustainability initiatives, Bedford College has created new opportunities to enhance learner experience, making learning relevant to local needs while maximising benefits to the community.

Partnerships with industry, community and public sector organisations have led to a number of cutting-edge projects that are helping stimulate low carbon economic developments locally and regionally.

ORGANISATION PROFILE

Large further education college
700 employees
Charity
Eight sites
Urban and rural

EAUC COMMENT

Bedford College's commitment to embedding sustainability throughout its structures and curriculum is evident. But what must be recognised and applauded is its new ventures to work with local communities, partners and industry, weaving itself into a wider network to ensure the College's sustainable future.

THE PROBLEM

Bedford College has ambitions to be truly sustainable. It has made good progress and wanted to take the next step by involving its local community in college activities. The challenge was how to integrate the college's sustainability ambitions with the needs of local people and industry.

The college wanted to ensure that sustainability is embedded in all aspects and in particular into all of the courses it delivers.

Bedford College's commitment to sustainability was cemented by the creation of the post of Director of Sustainability in August 2008. This created both the resource and the expertise to take sustainability to the next level.



THE APPROACH

In order to engage the whole college in sustainability initiatives, the Bedford College Sustainability Group (BCSG) was established with representatives from all departments, as well as students.

The Director of Sustainability, one of eight college directors reporting to the Deputy Principal, meets with each BCSG member to identify their priorities and liaises with their line manager to incorporate these into their annual objectives. Progress is reviewed at termly BCSG meetings and meetings with each individual. An annual Sustainability Day provides the opportunity to showcase students' work, including examples of community engagement, and to share good practice across the college.

To complement this group the college also established the Education and Community Sustainability Group which is made up of volunteers from the college and its external partners. This group helps to generate ideas for integrating the needs of the community and industry within the college's curriculum. This process works both ways - partners come to the group with ideas and the college also presents ideas to its partners.

Bedford College plays a highly proactive role in many local initiatives. The plans for an Education and Community Sustainability Group were shared with organisations within a wide range of existing networks and they were invited to a meeting to determine how best to establish, and proceed with, a local plan. Attendees at the inaugural meeting of ECSG included college representatives, representatives from local councils, schools, transition town group, Wildlife Trust, BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) and Bedfordshire Climate Change Forum. New members have since joined the group.

This initial meeting provided a much clearer overview of existing sustainability initiatives and how best they could be pooled to maximise benefits to local communities. It soon became clear that there was a great deal of existing activity that the group could build on. There was huge potential for engaging learners in numerous projects as well as involving many organisations and networks in college activities. It was agreed to showcase local good practice during Bedford College's Sustainability Day on 22nd March 2010. The day included:

- Information on work currently in progress at Shuttleworth College, Bedford College's land-based centre, including:
 - Hinchinbrook Country Park- tree work and weekend demonstration.
 - Tempsford church- tree work
 - Edward Peake middle school, Biggleswade - designing and building children's garden
 - Peter Pan Children's Centre, Bedford- designing and building a play area/sensory garden
- 'The Green Box' competition entries from St Andrews school - an art and design schools competition organised by Bedford College's Centre for the Arts. The winners were given prizes during Sustainability Day by the Mayor of Bedford.
- Work done by Foundation Degree in Construction and Building Services students to support the design and development of the Riseley Eco House
- A 'Make Bedford Green' poster competition sponsored by local company Willmott Dixon

Other examples of sustainability projects with external partners include:

- Retro-fit for the Future, a project developed by Foundation Degree students working with a local building company to fit carbon-saving equipment and products to social housing stock in order to meet the national carbon reduction targets
- The Pathfinder Innovation Centres for Sustainability project. An initiative in collaboration with colleges, industry organisations and other key stakeholders to support low carbon business developments and showcase low carbon retro-fit and new-build technologies. Students work on a number of aspects of the project both developing technology and documenting the project
- Media students producing a documentary about the Transition Bedford initiative
- Later this year (2010) a mixed group of level 2 and 3, full and part time Horticulture students are spending a week in France beginning the restoration of a 17th Century chateaux garden. The college hopes this project will be on-going in future years

OUR GOALS

- To develop productive partnerships with the college's wider community
- To build capacity for sustainability in industry through partnership projects
- To give learners the opportunity to work on 'real life' sustainability projects rather than just theoretical ones

OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

Obstacles

- How to embed sustainability across the whole college, having made a good start with the CoVE
- Funding the group
- Recruiting people to sit on the group
- Engaging academic departments
- Maintaining momentum

Solutions

- The Director of Sustainability role was created to lead college-wide developments. This senior level post helped emphasise the importance of sustainability to staff and students while providing the opportunity to support and guide staff in all parts of the college. This full-time role also enabled the post holder to work with external organisations, developing projects, creating new partnership opportunities and attracting substantial grant funding. As a result, Bedford College is now leading a multi-million pound regional project to contribute to low carbon economic developments.
- The Education and Community Sustainability Group was created to ensure that students can work on sustainability projects which match with the priorities of local/regional industry.
- It is important that the ECSG is not seen as an 'add-on' activity. The related projects are an integral part of curriculum delivery and funding is mostly provided by curriculum departments. Bedford College's aim is to plan activities for the next academic year in advance to enable departments to build these into their next year's budgets. It will also seek to attract additional funding for local projects through a range of external funding sources.
- People sitting on the group are mostly volunteers representing member organisations
- Senior support for the sustainability activity sent a clear message that departments must integrate sustainability into their curriculums.
- In the future projects will be identified for the next academic year in advance to make it easier to build these activities into curriculum delivery
- As awareness of the potential benefits of a local collaborative partnership grows, many organisations are keen to discuss how Bedford College can help with their plans and projects. These ideas will be further developed and shared at ECSG meetings and through electronic communication to stimulate further interest.

PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS

- A number of curriculum activities are the direct result of the formation of the ECSG including the Green Box competition, Peter Pan Children's Centre developments, Transition Bedford Documentary production and 'Make Bedford Green' poster competition
- Projects that were already underway are enhanced through the wider community engagement opportunities
- A number of new projects are currently being considered amongst ECSG partners
- Partners are benefiting from the skills and expertise of staff and students, provided free of charge
- Learners are benefiting by getting involved in 'real life' projects with a strong sustainability focus.

LESSONS LEARNT

It was a good idea to build on existing collaborative networks and partnerships. This meant that in most cases the initial communication about the formation of ECSG was sent to the most appropriate person in the organisation, ensuring the most positive response.

Starting a group in the autumn term with plans to develop and implement community projects was highly ambitious for a couple of reasons. Firstly the academic schemes of work were already in place and in some cases it proved difficult to incorporate new projects into already established plans. Secondly this was already a very busy time of the year for all concerned so they could not give this initiative their full attention. It would have been better to start a group towards the end of an academic year, or to only plan to build activity into the following year's curricula.

Identifying projects before the academic year starts means it is easier to incorporate them. Such advance planning will provide much needed support to academic departments and give a clearer indication to partners of how we can help them with their projects.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Bedford College

http://www.bedford.ac.uk/our_courses.aspx

<http://www.greenbedfordcollege.com/>

Information on Centres of Vocation Excellence

<http://cove.lsc.gov.uk/>

Bedford's policy statement

<http://www.greenbedfordcollege.com/docs/Sustainability%20Policy%20Statement-New.doc>

Riseley Eco House

<http://www.riseleyecohouse.com/>

Ms Esin Esat

Director of Sustainability

Bedford College

Cauldwell Street

Bedford

MK42 0BH

Tel: 01234 291 384

E-mail: eesat@bedford.ac.uk



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**www.eauc.org.uk
info@eauc.org.uk**