



Go Green

From travel, to energy to, yes, even seafood and icemakers, sustainability is a word that is rarely off everyone's lips these days, but what part do universities have to play in this ever-growing concern? Luke Dormehl investigates this complex issue...

It will come as little surprise to read that, as a part of a global phenomenon, the UK climate is changing drastically. Summer months tend to be hotter (apparently), with more days requiring active cooling of buildings.

Peak rainfall, meanwhile, has become more intensive, leading to short-term flooding and disruption to business activities. Currently the UK's consumption of natural resources and generating of carbon dioxide is such that, if everyone in the world was

to behave as we do, we would need three planets to support us. "How we move to One

Planet Living is a key government concern," was the governmental message at a recent climate change conference. All of these factors are what has sparked the current focus on sustainability – and universities and other HE institutions are taking it as seriously as anyone, constantly striving to go greener and to improve their (already impressive, in many cases) green credentials.

As if to put an exclamation mark on the point, just before this edition of *University Business* went to press, word arrived that a £1bn development for Cambridge University has been approved; calling for the building of 1,500 saleable homes for staff, accommodation for 2,000 students, and 100,000 sqm of research facilities – all built to the highest levels of sustainability,

equivalent to zero carbon.

But despite the focus on this topic, there are still some fundamental misconceptions about the subject of sustainability, which is a massive issue not just in terms of its planet-saving importance, but also in the scope of what it encompasses. "Every day we realise that the field of sustainability is wider and more complex than we previously thought," says Iain Patton, CEO of the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC). "We've all come to realise that you cannot solve issues such as resource exploitation, purely from the environmental perspective; you've also got to look at the bigger picture and recognise how the likes of economic and social factors are



Iain Patton



inextricably linked with environmental issues. Social responsibility, environmental responsibility and economic responsibility all overlap, along with topics like health issues, access issues, social injustice issues. It's a complicated, challenging agenda. But within universities and colleges there is a unique opportunity to use our world-leading research to find new ways to deal with these problems, as well as influencing students at a very critical stage in their development to change their behaviour and understanding with regards to these issues."

With more than 15 years dealing with sustainability, and a membership of more than 300 universities and colleges – around 40 per cent of the total number – the EAUC is the main environmental and sustainability champion within both further and higher education in the UK. It is also the group behind the Green Gown Awards: the most prestigious form of recognition for best sustainability practice in the sector, now in its eighth year.

GREEN IS GOOD

Sustainability is not a new issue, of course. As far back as the early 1990s selected committees have been tasked with the role of examining environmental issues as they relate to universities. Students have always been a forward-looking group when it comes to embracing ethical, social and economic issues, and climate change and environmental sustainability is no different.

But now students are engaging with the issue with seemingly new gusto. The rapidly growing student-led campaigning organisation People & Planet ('Student action on world poverty and the environment') has shown its support for the university green mission in a big way; offering everything from sustainable skillset training for volunteers, to the creation of its Green League – described in literature as the only comprehen-

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sive and truly independent league table of UK universities available, ranked in order of their environmental and ethical performance. This year the league was topped by the University of Greenwich, whose Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Neil Garrod, was keen to stress how it was an effort on both the part of faculty members and students that so much progress has been made: “We could never have come so far so quickly without the involvement and commitment of the whole university community.”

Meanwhile, overall results showed that sector-wide carbon emissions were down four per cent on last year, double the number of universities are integrating sustainability across their curricula, 86 per cent rise in universities employing at least one sustainability staff member, and that on average universities are sourcing 72 per cent of their electricity from renewable sources compared to just 63 per cent last year. Of course, there is still a way

to go – and many believe that progress needs to be accelerated. The new Green Education Declaration is an effort to secure firm commitments to a greener higher education sector. Thus far, seven university Vice-Chancellors and one students' union have signed up. Visit <http://peopleandplanet.org/green-education-declaration> for more details...

Of course, it doesn't have to be left up to these national (or even international) bodies to get the ball rolling on making universities sustainably aware; many HE institutions have already implemented their own self-contained schemes to raise awareness about the subject. One such institution is Manchester University, which has created its own environmental sustainability mini site (www.sustainability.manchester.ac.uk/) for just such a purpose. The page, which is kept up to date with the latest topical news, features full details of the Carbon Credit Scheme to which the University subscribes (with an aim of “[developing] a model for the devolvement of responsibility for energy consumption to schools/directorates through a system of annual target setting for carbon emissions from energy consumption”) as well as monthly prompts about more specific targeted events happening at the University. These range from details of regular volunteer-organised cycle rides – designed to help guide both new and experienced cyclists along safe routes to the University environs – to a news roundup of the recent Green Impact Awards, where Manchester was singled out for honouring – to an item about the innovative Furniture4reuse concept; designed to help both students and staff get rid of any “unwanted, although perfectly serviceable items of furniture in a cost-effective sustainable manner”. By embracing online platforms, Manchester University ensures that sustainability gets the publicity that it so deservedly warrants. There's even the opportunity for those that want to get further involved to nominate themselves as Sustainability Enthusiasts: figurehead reps with the role of

PEOPLE & PLANET

People & Planet is certainly garnering attention with its groundbreaking work to promote sustainability. Below are some comments from those that have come into contact with it:

NAOMI KLEIN, JOURNALIST AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *NO LOGO*:

“People & Planet campaigns forced some of the most powerful corporations in the world to take notice. With the student population changing every year,

People & Planet also provides much needed continuity and stability for progressive voices on university campuses, and links students to broader, cross-generational movements for social and economic justice.”

JOANNA RUSSELL, STUDENT AT ABERDEEN:

“Since joining the committee I have grown as a person and developed ideas and beliefs that I never knew I felt so strongly about. I have become very active on



both alerting and advising the University on sustainability issues, as they pertain to education and research.

SUSTAINABLE WAVEMAKERS

But how does the increased emphasis on sustainability marry up with the other big topic of conversation regarding universities over the past several years: namely HE institutions' transition to businesslike market economy, with a focus on consumer (student satisfaction) in order to justify the increased fees. Fortunately, according to Iain Patton, students have always taken a progressive interest in areas such as environmental sustainability, and the increased role of students in determin-

and around campus ... I believe that every student should do something they feel strongly and passionately about, making university the best years of our lives."

DAVID BABBS, DIRECTOR OF 38 DEGREES:

“ People & Planet was where I learnt how to campaign. I'm still using skills and insights I got whilst I was in P&P every day. I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I hadn't got involved with People & Planet.”

ing how the HE experience is run may well be the best thing to happen to the sustainability movement in a long time. “I think it's really going to be interesting hearing the student voice increase in volume as a more market-type economy develops, and students begin to increase their expectations for what they get for their money,” Patton says.

The idea that universities are increasingly becoming big business might alarm education purists (or those who believe that HE should be entirely governmentally-funded), but one of the undoubted positives of the new regime is the way that universities' forward-looking approach to sustainability may be rubbing off on the corporate world. Cambridge University hosts the Sustainability Leadership in the Built Environment Programme, which is run by its dedicated University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership (CPSL) in association with the UK Green Building Council (UK GBC) – with the aim of bringing together senior leaders across a range of sectors including architects, investors, designers, builders, product manufacturers and occupiers. “Our business platforms set the standard for progressive business commentary and action on sustainability,” CPSL claims. “We identify change that needs to occur within a given system (corporate or policy) and then work in sectoral or cross-sector groups to take practical action towards achieving this change.” The conflation of university

wavemakers with representatives from a range of backgrounds has resulted in some well-received discussions regarding the connection between sustainability and business success. “The outstanding achievement of the Cambridge Programme has been to consistently see sustainability through the lens of responsible business, and as a result it is able to build on the personal experiences and testimonies of people who have pioneered the integration of the principles of all round sustainability into their plans and operations: salutary and challenging and also inspiring,” said Sunand Prasad, a Senior Partner in Penoyre & Prasad LLP.

Perhaps the most surprising news about the sustainability drive is that, while it might seem like short-term sacrifice for the long-term good, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, it may come as a shock that ensuring that doing your bit for sustainability might also save money: a valuable selling point at a time when budgets are tighter than ever. “Understanding that carbon management plans will save universities money in the long term should help push the green agenda even when times are tough,” John Bailey, sustainability projects officer at University of Greenwich told *The Guardian* newspaper. “This comes from saving carbon, reducing energy and electricity usage and reducing the use of resources but to make the point people must be willing to listen and look at the arguments in a sensible manner.” ●