

INTERVIEW

A new way of **LiFE** is helping guide universities and colleges to a green economy

Iain Patton is the Chief Executive of the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC). He recently sat down to discuss the launch of their new LiFE programme and how the EAUC is using it to help universities and colleges through the current period of transition.

→ **Let's start simple. What is LiFE?** That's probably a good start. LiFE stands for Learning in Future Environments. It's a brand new system that launches on 1 November 2011. We're incredibly excited about it. Basically LiFE is being developed to help universities and colleges manage, measure, improve and promote their social responsibility and sustainability performance. We're delighted to be working closely with our funding partners HEFCE, HEFCW, the SFC and DELNI on this initiative.

In a broader sense, however, LiFE is really about helping institutions cope with this period of tumultuous transition that's happening now, and has been developed with direct input from across the sector.

So it's actually a system institutions can use? Yes, it's actually a system they can use! As you may know, we started the process of designing a social responsibility system with *Universities that Count* several years ago. That was our first attempt and while it did many good things, in some areas it fell short of what we needed it to be. We used that as an excellent opportunity to learn what really matters to universities and colleges and we've been applying that learning to the development of LiFE.

So LiFE is a system that has been



Iain Patton

Iain Patton with Dame Ellen MacArthur: Communicating the sustainability message is 'knot' always plain sailing



developed through sector engagement and has been designed to be time-efficient, relevant and effective for all types of institutions.

Why create LiFE? First of all, in August this year the government set out its stall in terms of its vision for enabling the transition to a green economy. This is hugely significant because it will be the UK's further and higher education sectors that lead that transition to a green economy through skills training, research and student development. Colleges and universities need to prepare themselves for this role, and LiFE will help them imbibe social responsibility and sustainability throughout their institutions. The green economy is the future for the sector and LiFE will help them realise that future.

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help institutions realise the financial savings they so critically need to make as we move through these uncertain times.

Secondly, it's never been so important for universities and colleges to be able to actively manage and improve their sustainable development. Doing so will lead to more efficient institutions

across the board and help institutions realise the financial savings they so critically need to make as we move through these uncertain times.

Thirdly, at their very core, universities and colleges exist for wider societal benefit and their social responsibility is to demonstrate to their students, staff and their wider communities the meaning and value of social responsibility and sustainability. And finally, with the current financial crisis hitting our sectors, LiFE will help participating institutions to position themselves for the future. It's not a doom and gloom matter – it's a positive step they can take to help secure their futures.

So this will bring real benefit to institutions? It isn't just a time-consuming reporting tool? Far from it! We have spent a lot of time talking to the sector and it's obvious that they don't need another reporting tool or name-and-shame league table. They want a system that will help them directly improve and promote their activities. One of the key criteria we had was to make sure this system is useful to institutions: that it brings direct benefit to institutions and isn't simply going to waste



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their time collating data for data's sake. It is a real improvement and benchmarking system.

You mentioned league tables, and I know you are having accreditation as part of the system. How is this different from any other league table?

LiFE accreditation will be confirmed through independent verification. That's an important part of the value that the LiFE accreditation brings – independent verification. In addition, we'll have a process that allows for peer review of performance. It's important that universities and colleges are allowed to learn from, and share with, one another.

LiFE is not about random naming-and-shaming. Instead, LiFE institutions can use their accreditation to publicly promote their achievements and benchmark their success against the sector, both nationally and internationally. They will also be able to use LiFE to directly drive improvement within their institutions. That makes LiFE a much more positive and effective experience for institutions than a traditional league table.

Any final thoughts? We know the various challenges the sectors currently face are varied and difficult, but we also know that universities and colleges cannot afford to avoid the sustainability challenge. To that end, through direct sector engagement, we have created LiFE to help and support institutions through this period of transition, and I encourage all institutions to get involved. They can find out more at

www.thelifeindex.org.uk
www.eauc.org.uk



The EAUC's new benchmarking system will impact on all aspects of LiFE on campus

