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# From Harvard to Bradford - experiences of running a peer education for sustainable development project

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## Introduction

There has been a significant growth of interest and recognition in finding ways to bring sustainable development into the formal curriculum of UK students (Hopkinson *et al.*, 2008, Sterling and Scott 2007, Roberts and Roberts 2007, Blewitt and Cullingford 2004). However, student learning can take place in many different settings and the 'student experience' comprises many diverse influences (refs). In this paper we provide a case study of an informal curriculum project – the Ecoversity ambassadors - funded as part of a Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre small grant in 2006/7 and subsequently funded as one element of a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded programme known as Ecoversity StuDent (2007-2010). The paper describes the origins of the StuDent ambassador scheme, its management, emergent data related to the impact on students and the ways in which the project evolved with time.

## Origins of the ambassador project

The idea of the ambassador project was developed as a consequence of a visit in 2005 to the Harvard Green Campus Initiative, which has run a successful student focussed environmental project for a number of years. The focus of the project is 'resource efficiency' and is described by Harvard Green Campus as:

*'A unique peer environmental education program, the Resource Efficiency Program (REP) relies on paid student representatives who share information with their dorms about sustainability, comfort, health, and efficiency issues. The Reps also provide suggestions to Harvard administrators about infrastructure and policy improvements that will remove barriers to student conservation. And, we have a lot of fun!'*

The design and goals of the Harvard scheme is described thus:

*'Seventeen student representatives, at least*

*one per upper class dorm and three in the Freshman Yard, are employed to work four hours per week on a range of dorm-based ecological education programs and energy-efficiency measures.'*

The goals of REP are:

- Reduce wasteful consumption of resources on campus;
- Decrease refuse generated by increasing the proportion of waste that is reused and/or recycled, rather than trashed;
- Develop active student environmental leaders who strategically coordinate with operations staff to achieve environmental impact reduction on campus;
- Create a norm of environmentally-aware behavior among Harvard College students, both on campus and in their future roles as community leaders.

Source: <http://www.greencampus.harvard.edu/rep/about.php>

It should be noted that there are many other examples, with similar characteristics, of US and Canadian projects which seek to engage students around sustainable development through similar 'dorm' (student hall of residence) based and campus-wide activities. Our contact with Harvard however inspired us to bid to the GEES SC to run a pilot scheme at University of Bradford (UoB) over the academic year 2006/7.

## Management and activity of the UoB GEES project (2006/7)

In the absence of any previous project on a UK campus, the GEES SC funded project was designed as a pilot student peer education project called 'Ecoversity ambassadors', with the following objectives:

1. To employ 10 student ambassadors to raise awareness and promote behaviour change with respect to environmental and social issues among UoB students;

2. To contribute to the reduction of the environmental footprint of the University of Bradford:
3. To evaluate the impact of using the student ambassador model in a UK middle size University like Bradford, as well as the lessons that can be learnt.

The management of the project was undertaken by established academic staff, with some additional help from a volunteering co-ordinator.

The ambassador positions were advertised electronically via the student union job shop, offering an hourly rate of £7.50. Students were asked to provide a CV and a short statement explaining why they were interested in becoming an ambassador. A total of 40 students applied for the posts from which 20 were shortlisted and 10 recruited.

A 3 hour induction meeting introduced the student ambassadors to each other. The scope of activities was outlined and the scene set for subsequent fortnightly meetings (which in themselves would last approximately 2 hours). The payment system via time sheets was explained, as were the rough number of paid hours expected from each student over the lifetime of the project. Finally, the first task for each student ambassador was introduced. Students were asked to determine their own individual or group project objectives. The second meeting generated a number of 'projects' summarised in Table 1.

By the time the students had developed their ideas, the end of the first semester was approaching, at which point student engagement began to fall away as coursework priorities took over. In semester 2 the student ambassadors got into 2s or 3s to develop these projects. During this activity stage, each student group discussed their progress with the project leaders (Hopkinson and Sharp) to work out the next steps to progress their project as far as they could before the examination period in April/May took over. Many of the students left the University in May.

## Achievements

Table 1 identifies project achievements from the pilot project and the impact/influence it had on the subsequent University of Bradford Ecoversity student ambassador project. As this table demonstrates, the key substantive contribution of most projects was to lay the foundations of, and inform, subsequent programming and scope of future ambassador activity. The main exception

to this was the survey of student accommodation needs whereby a report was delivered which impacted on the design of new student accommodation.

## Outcomes and challenges

A focus group was held with some of the ambassadors at the end of the project. In addition, other students remained in touch after the project ended in July. Three of the students stayed on to become ambassadors in the 2nd year of the project. All the students had enjoyed and valued the experience of being an ambassador. Some found the process of planning and developing their projects too slow and 'just wanted to get on with it'. Some found the University very unresponsive and most felt some sense of disappointment that they hadn't been able to make as much progress as they had intended. All the students enjoyed and valued the student village survey and found this the single most satisfying activity during the course of the project.

Our first challenge was that few of the students recruited to the project actually lived in University - owned or University-managed Halls of Residence. One of the characteristics of the Harvard and similar US schemes was that they were focused around students living in dorms. In the Harvard example the student reps are pre-existing elected or nominated eco-champions. The combination of factors found in the US examples made it much easier to co-ordinate and manage a group of students: they were in a fixed place with a ready-made community of peers and had a bounded focus for their activities (i.e. the dorms). The Bradford students mainly lived off campus (a good number of them at home) and most of them were relatively new to the idea of eco-championing. In addition, several Bradford student ambassadors were first years – many of whom were highly enthusiastic about the ambassador project but who nonetheless were struggling with the transition into Higher Education, notably workloads and time management.

Due to the wide geographic spread of where the students lived and their various responsibilities, it proved difficult to find a convenient time for all students to meet weekly. In the end, a late afternoon session was most workable; daytime and evening sessions were more problematic. Further differences between the student groups may result from the fact that the Harvard students are consistently academic high flyers, and from middle class backgrounds; whereas the Bradford students' have more variable levels of academic achievement with 70% come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This means that many students have either had to

**Table 1:** Summary of Project achievements

Project: Progress achieved 06-07	Follow on action 07-09.
<p><b>Amphitheatre clean-up:</b> Setting the foundation for a follow-on Amphitheatre project in year 2 by highlighting the issues and opening up debates with key staff and the Student Union.</p>	<p>In June 2008 the student ambassadors led a clean up at the end of year student party on the Amp and for the first time the campus was cleansed by students. The story featured in the Summer edition of the Ecoversity newspaper (The SEED). In October 2008, recycling facilities were finally installed in the Amphitheatre.</p>
<p><b>Reducing catering waste:</b> Ambassadors identified a problem (catering waste) and an opportunity to cut down on the number of disposable cups and lids being used in the catering outlets. Actual reduction of catering waste was compromised by the fact that catering was outsourced.</p>	<p>In 2008, once the ambassador project had gone into its 2<sup>nd</sup> year, the students designed a lug-a-mug scheme – essentially a re-useable thermally insulated mug. The student engagement co-ordinator and ambassadors designed and sourced the lug-a mugs which are now on sale at all the catering outlets and to date over a 1000 have been sold.</p>
<p><b>Paper reduction:</b> The paper reduction project focused on trying to reduce the amount of paper waste created in the library. This group found it difficult to make progress as it wasn't clear who was responsible for the various systems that appeared to generate unnecessary paper use. The project group became understandably frustrated.</p>	<p>A positive impact of activity 06-07 was that this project laid the seeds for subsequent activity by student ambassadors and the wider Ecoversity. In December 2008 the University Ecoversity project has launched a 10% paper reduction project for the entire University.</p>
<p><b>Second hand store:</b> A group attempted to find new, larger premises but again were challenged by the complexities of working with the wider University. Their plans at the time also included increasing the opening hours and making sure that student volunteers were around at those times to support the store. This group also suggested and laid the plans for a green move out from Halls of Residences.</p>	<p>As with the other projects, the students' plans were ambitious and they were unable to get to the implementation stage within the time-limits of the project. But again, as with other projects, these first attempts laid important groundwork for the second year of the ambassador project which has seen the second hand store expand, increase the amount of goods being offered and become a much better known facility amongst students.</p>
<p><b>Student accommodation needs survey:</b> Peer-to-peer research was undertaken, with approximately 120 students interviewed over a week period in different locations. A report of the study and key conclusions was presented to the Estates Director and Sustainable Student Village Board.</p>	<p>This project has had the most substantial long term impact. The findings have had direct impact on the thinking and some of the decisions influencing the student village design, which is due to start work in 2009.</p>

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secure paid work or are looking around for work and thus have reduced disposable free time. While the programme was intended to address the latter issue through paying the students for their time, in practice the timing of the programme, and some doubts about how many hours could be 'promised' to each student, meant that many did the work for Ecoversity in addition to other jobs.

Additionally, the recruitment process took longer than was expected, and proved hard for the staff to organise when combined with the pressures arising at the start of the academic year. As with any recruitment process there needs to be advertisement, short-listing and interview processes. Interviewing alone (20 students) took around 2 days. As a consequence the project did not start until November.

Once recruited, the students required considerable guidance and hand-holding in making progress with their projects. This was entirely expected, but was made more challenging by the fact that students chose to work with students from different year groups and courses. This made finding mutual free time for meetings or activities very hard. It also removed the control that the organisers had exercised in the past when managing activities that are placed within a module or programme unit. When students missed sessions, significant time gaps between meetings occurred, which caused some projects to slow down: sometimes this created a sense, for both students and project leaders, that the project wasn't happening or progressing. This was particularly difficult for those students who wanted to see quick action and immediate change.

Students had some difficulties in making appointments with key University officers. Again, this difficulty is not unusual in any kind of group project that engages with the wider institution, but in this specific project students had an expectation that the 'University' might be more responsive as they believed they were working on behalf of the Ecoversity. This difficulty also underlines the contrast between Bradford and the Harvard projects when the individual dorms were more closely oriented to student needs and concerns, and provided a wider range of individuals who were able to mediate between the students and the institutions.

A number of the student aims and objectives were unrealistic in scope and ambition. Again this is not unusual when students set out to tackle real-world problems. However, in this instance students believed that change could and should happen – possibly straight away – and the dawning

that slowness of response was 'normal', as was complexity of infrastructure, and that even small changes were hard to realise - led a number of students to become demoralized and to need a lot of support.

The project leaders noted that the level of input that students could or would dedicate to the projects correlated highly with coursework and exam pressures confronting students. By week 10 of semester 1 nearly all the students were pre-occupied with their formal courses and progress on their projects slowed. Participation and progress increased at the start of semester 2 and stayed high for around 5 weeks and then the lead up to the Easter vacation produced a further slow down. At Bradford, the Easter vacation is only two weeks, which places time pressure on our students with submission dates immediately after Easter. We were further surprised at how soon students then left the University after their exams in May to seek full time work or go on holiday/travelling; by the end of May /beginning of June many were gone.

## Conclusions

The ambassador project was designed around the notion of an informal curriculum whereby students would work as a peer group to generate student-led projects completed in their spare time to impact on University environmental performance.

A key lesson was the need for a nominated person, with responsibility and time to co-ordinate and manage a complex student group. Student groups, whilst they can potentially emerge and self-manage, would be unlikely to be able to develop or influence complex institutional patterns without a lead figure. The successful US examples all have an academic/University officer in post to support the student groups. The 'informal curriculum' model is time-consuming administratively and in management terms. In the US examples, an overall project officer might spend around 20 hours a week managing and co-ordinating an ambassador scheme, with lead students themselves spending 10 plus hours each in co-ordinating other students. We were fortunate in 2007 to be able to secure funds to create a full time student engagement post which has enabled the ambassador project to flourish in 2007/8 and 2008/9. Even with such a post established however, the pace of change and ability to progress student led initiatives is complex and demanding.

The students' ability to influence or modify student behaviour was less immediate than expected. The shift of focus from a 'dorm' based approach to an 'institutional project' approach was necessary

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because of the non-dorm living reality of most of our students but made the creation of rapid change or influence on behaviour more difficult. What students in the first phase were able to do, however, was lay some of the groundwork for the second year of the project.

Could the ambassador idea work in UK Universities generally? The answer is clearly 'yes', as several other Universities have embarked on similar projects in the past 2 years, notably Durham, which started as a result of the staff REP officer from Harvard having an academic post there in 2006. The Durham college system and pre-existing eco-champion scheme is more akin to Harvard and the US model would appear to be most readily transferable in Universities with strong 'dorm' or campus based Halls of Residence cultures.

The 'Bradford model' - working with students outside of a Dorm or eco-champion system - can work in any University of college setting, but requires a dedicated staff member to co-ordinate student activities and act as both a facilitator of student activities and a buffer and interface between the students and the University. This role is essential to maintain continuity; supporting students through a highly complex, and at times frustrating Institutional culture, whilst helping them set realistic goals and work out that change is possible if not always rapid.

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