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## Sustainable development education in the UK: the challenge for higher education institutions

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### Abstract

*This brief article outlines some of the UK initiatives towards sustainable development education and the sorts of sustainable development standards that all practitioners and professionals would be expected to accord with if the Government Sustainable Development Education Panel proposed recommendations are adopted.*

### Defining Sustainable Development Education

Sustainable development education enables people to develop the knowledge, values and skills to improve their quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.

### UK Initiatives - The Sustainable Development Education Panel

In 1998 a Government Sustainable Development Education Panel was established to consider issues on education for sustainable development, in its broadest sense, in schools, further and higher education, at work, during recreation and at home; and to make practical recommendations for action in England.

The Panel reports directly to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and is chaired by Sir Geoffrey Holland, the Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University. It is in its fifth year of operation.

### Its Terms of Reference

- to promote a strategic approach to sustainable development education in England;
- to identify gaps and opportunities in the provision of sustainable development education and consider how to improve that provision;
- to promote an approach which will reduce duplication, increase cooperation and develop synergy between all sectors and groups involved;
- to consider whether and what targets should be set for various sectors;
- to highlight best practice and consider the means of disseminating it more widely;

- to make recommendations to key players on priority areas for action;
- to assess the effectiveness of this approach.

The general idea is that sustainable development education should be a seamless process which begins in the nursery and is systematically progressed throughout the formal education process and reinforced in society. The Panel set out its key aims for the further and higher education sectors in its first Annual Report.

It calls all FHE institutions, by the year 2010 to:

- be accredited to an internationally or nationally recognised sustainable development management systems standard;
- have staff fully trained and competent in sustainable development; and be providing all students with relevant sustainability learning opportunities.

Within the same time frame it also calls on the Higher Education Funding Council to:

- have made a defined level of sustainability performance relating to house-keeping, curriculum and community responsibilities, a condition of grants to institutions.

These recommendations embody a view that students learn from their learning programmes and from the learning environment; that institutions should practise what they teach; and that the principles of sustainable development should be consistently reinforced through all learning settings and learning programmes. They also embody a recognition that the FHE sector needs to define acceptable sustainability standards both in terms of its core business (i.e. education and research), its house-keeping practices and its broader community responsibilities.

So far, most progress has been made in relation to house keeping practices. We now have in place a range of cross-sector national policy initiatives to encourage and reward environmental responsibility e.g. waste reduction and energy efficiency. There are also a number of FHE specific initiatives designed to generally encourage the integration of environmental or sustainable development responsibilities into FHE management practices, for example:

- the Forum for the Future's HE 21 Project (1997-99) and its Higher Education Partnerships Scheme (ongoing);
- the Higher Education Funding Council's Environmental Management Guide (1999);
- the Association of Colleges Towards Sustainability Guide (2000).

As regards raising the competence of academic staff and implementing the necessary adjustments to academic programmes and professional standards, progress is slow.

The first challenge has been to identify exactly what sustainability learning is required by different professions. In 1999 the Sustainable Development Education Panel in partnership with the HE 21 Project, developed sustainability learning specifications for four HE sectors: business, design, engineering and teacher education.

In its second year the Panel began to think more specifically about the role of professional bodies and it undertook a review of the responses of twenty key professions to the sustainable development challenge. It came to the conclusion that a new kind of mechanism was needed to ensure that sustainable development standards were integrated into professional practice.

It is not clear yet exactly what this mechanism will be, but there is currently a proposal being considered by ministers for the establishment of a series of sustainable development standards open to all professionals. This proposal has been led by Sustainability First and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment.

## Sustainable Development Standards

Two kinds of standard are proposed.

### (1) The Guardian Standards

These would be relevant to all practitioners and professionals and be knowledge based. Accreditation to the Guardian Standard would confirm a defined level of sustainable development literacy.

The rationale for the establishment Guardian standards is that all professionals and practitioners have sustainable development responsibilities and that they should all embrace their guardian role.

The Guardian Standards would provide a stimulus for the provision of relevant continuing professional development programmes and the integration of appropriate SD elements into further and higher education programmes. They would also provide a steer to specialist environment / sustainable development departments in universities to re-shape and re-target some of their specialist programmes. The Guardian Standards would not supersede or negate existing professional standards. They would be complementary and voluntary.

The second set of Sustainable Development Standards proposed, which would also be assessed at practitioner and professional level, may be thought of as:

### (2) Advocacy Standards

These would be relevant to individuals who in one way or another are championing sustainable development e.g. within their organisations, across their professional constituency; across the local community or through work in the voluntary sector.

Whilst there is much talk about sustainable development, the truth is that sustainable development is not yet a mainstream concern for most people. We need advocates to catalyse engagement, innovation and entrepreneurship in the sustainable development process: advocates who exhibit intellectual clarity, far sightedness and personal integrity; who are skilled at resolving conflicts and at bringing people together to find solutions.

Sustainable development advocates are likely to be drawn from a wide range of professional backgrounds. It would therefore be feasible for an architect or an accountant or an engineer with an interest in sustainable development to acquire the knowledge and skills to become a sustainable development leader. And it is clear that sustainable development advocates will be needed to help remove the barriers which are preventing the various professions from fully engaging with the sustainable development challenge.

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## How can Higher Education produce graduates with the capacity to accelerate change towards a more sustainable society?

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### Abstract

*This paper will explore the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS). HEPS is a collaboration of 18 Universities and Colleges contributing towards sustainable development. The purpose of HEPS is to help institutions deliver their own strategic objectives through positive engagement with the sustainable development agenda and to share that experience across the sector. It lays out the key framework of the project and the areas of work within Higher Education Institutions and across the Higher Education sector that have been identified as critical to achieving this aim. It goes on to update the reader on activities since HEPS inception in October 2000.*

### The Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS)

HEPS is a three year initiative established by Forum for the Future in 2000, involving 18 Universities and Colleges from across the UK. The project focuses on the potential contribution that Higher Education can make to sustainable development. Such a contribution can be made in many ways, but by far the most significant will come from the qualities of the graduates and their capacity to accelerate change towards a more sustainable society. There is limited time to get this right as the evidence of unsustainable patterns of growth becomes more compelling by the day. For this reason, a key test of a Higher Education Institution's value should be whether it gives students a total experience that makes them both capable and willing to accelerate change to a sustainable society. This recognises that all of the experiences and influences that students have affect their learning, both formally and informally.

An institution's staff are capable of improving these experiences with a combination of formal teaching and research and informal influences such as campus management and community relations. HEPS is encouraging good practice in these areas, as shown below in Figure 1:

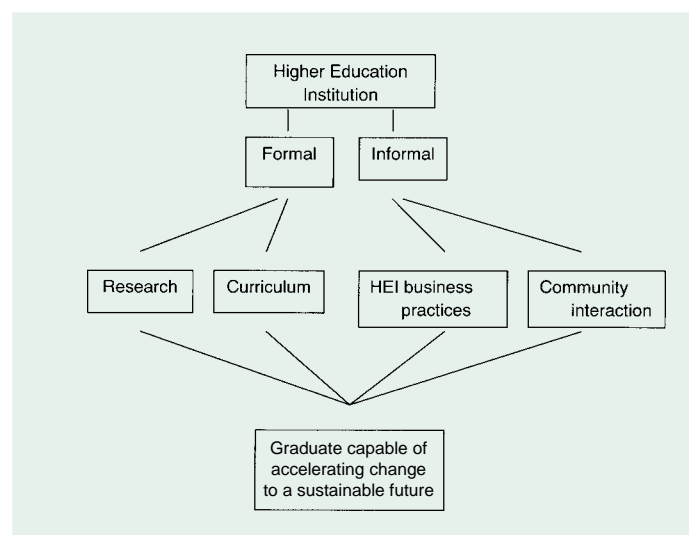


Figure 1 Schematic diagram of the HEPS approach.