

Student sustainability activism: Linking the formal and informal curriculum

Dr Zoe Robinson

*Director of Education for Sustainability
Senior Lecturer in Environmental Science
Keele University*

Key themes

1. Linking student activism, sustainability and the campus as a 'living lab'
2. Linking the formal and informal curriculum
3. Student-staff partnerships and supporting students within the informal curriculum



The role of student activism for sustainability

How do we as educators enable students to gain the kinds of skills needed to bring about transformative social change towards sustainability in their own universities and wider communities?

- Educational approach which advocates *action* for sustainability linking courses and action
- Students use their academic learning to inform action in the world with the aim of bringing about positive social, political and cultural change

How has this come about at Keele University?

Initial inspiration: BSc Environment & Sustainability

- Brings together committed and like-minded students

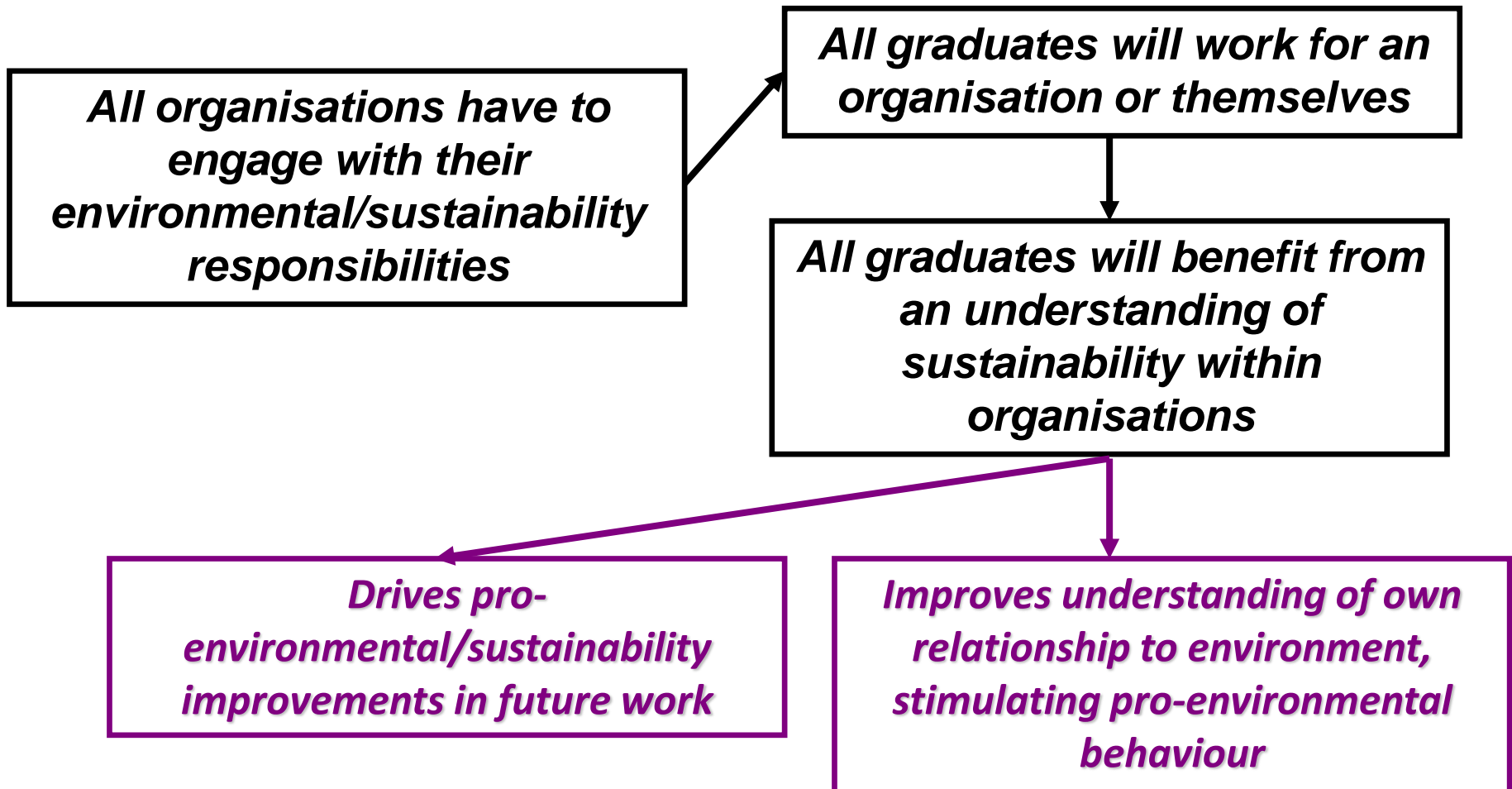


Secondary inspiration: 1st year module on 'Greening Business'

Aim: To help students gain the knowledge, understanding and practical skills to help drive environmental and sustainability improvements in their future (or current) workplace

***Group projects driving sustainability
improvements at University***

Appropriate for learners from all discipline backgrounds....



The details

- The module:

UIG

cohort

– Gro

How?

-Problem-based learning

- Different pbl briefs around improving University's sustainability performance

- Students research

- Relevant sustainability issues
- Best practice
- Current institutional practice
- Justified recommendations

University campus as practice ground and case study

summ
recomm

-Presented in

University managers

-Individual reflective diary

The benefits....



Employability and professionalism

- **Active learning and problem solving**
- **Team working**
- **Project management**
- **Leadership**
- **Developing a logical and analytical approach to unfamiliar situations**
- **Critical reasoning and reflection**
- **Negotiating and persuading skills**
- **Audience focussed**
- **Approaching professionals**
- **Learning HOW to learn**

“When we met [the energy manager] about the energy issues it was a really professional meeting and the topics we discussed were nicely in depth, really technical. In some modules it’s still like school. It’s nice to be in a work-based environment”

Interdisciplinarity

- Work with students from different programmes
- Sustainability inherently interdisciplinary
- Peer-learning

“People on different courses all had different views on the issues, for example I took a more science-based approach to the answers, whereas people on the Environment and Sustainability course took a more legal and legislation approach. So [as] a whole my breadth of knowledge was greatly expanded”

Transformative education

ESD – **65%** of students said their attitude towards sustainability issues had changed ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’

70% said their sustainability understanding and knowledge had increased ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’

“One of my biggest fears is that you go through the education system and you learn information but you never put it into the context of business. I wasn’t interested in sustainability at all before starting and suddenly, now I love it. It’s a case of I can see myself doing sustainability within a job and see myself going into a company and suddenly being able to put all my skills into practice and then implementing sustainability within that business”

“I didn’t believe as an individual I could make a difference but now I know that I can”

Subsequent action: Sustainable student house

- 4 students from the BSc Environment and Sustainability programme
- Inspired to act by the 'Greening Business' module
- Lobbied to turn a University student house into an 'exemplar of sustainable student living'
- Desire to:
 - 'live what they are learning'
 - Inspire other students



The curriculum is important in bringing together like-minded students to catalyse change, and providing route of staff support.

The project

- Standard 1960s bungalow
- 'Sustainability' measures and behaviour
 - Vegetable garden
 - Energy saving appliances etc
 - Communal (vegan) eating
 - Sharing of ideas
- Making house a 'learning tool' and focus of student sustainability



Significant staff involvement supporting project set-up.



Some of the challenges

- Student enthusiasm > practical knowhow
- Multiple demands on student time
- The public vs private – students' lives not just a university project. Balancing staff-student relationships
- Managing relationships with Estates and Accommodation

What we've learnt....

- Have realistic expectations
- Be sensitive to their lives as students
- The need to support them to become 'change agents' and manage expectations

What they've learnt...

- Enacting change is not as simple as the design; it happens
- The range of different stakeholders involved in any change process and the range of perspectives
- The need to negotiate with different stakeholders
- The amount of resources and decision making to underpin activities
- Awareness of barriers to implementing change, and how to overcome them
- Skills in negotiation, persuasion, working with others constructively, public speaking, grant writing and funding

More skills than could even be achieved through core academic activities

For example...

A simple job?....

- Growing your own vegetables might seem a simple enough task...
 - Factors controlling design of vegetable garden
 - Design of raised beds
 - Sourcing of materials
 - Transport of materials
 - Storage of tools
 - Planting times....



Longer-term impact?

- Still working on establishing wider impacts but...
 - become a hub for like-minded students with the potential to catalyse larger-scale future change
 - catalysed genuine student-led engagement with the sustainability agenda
 - Estates and accommodation working together with staff and students – in place for further future holistic, integrated sustainability changes

The future – new students (and from different degree programmes) and possibly new properties

‘Activist learning’ is student-led, but requires substantial academic support and steering.

So.....

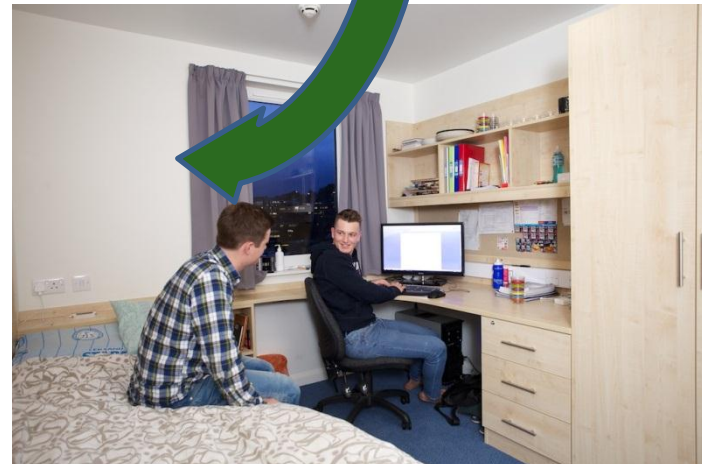
The formal curriculum



Students ↔ Staff

The informal curriculum

The 'subliminal/hidden' curriculum



Summary

- Importance of the curriculum to inspire students, bringing like-minded students together, catalysing change
- Role of staff-student partnerships – inspiration, mentoring, support....
- Synergies with other agendas – ie Graduate Attributes, employability...
- What are ‘Sustainability skills’? People skills, research skills, values, drive, sustainability ‘knowledge’

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