

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A model for curriculum renewal

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# INTRODUCTION

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Beyond any doubt, there is an unprecedented challenge facing educators today in delivering responsible education for a sustainable tomorrow. I have travelled widely over the last decade in particular, meeting with higher education colleagues internationally to discuss the extent and nature of this challenge, and the need to orient education accordingly.

Over some years I have often commented on the tendency for significant challenges (such as education for sustainability) to be understood and accommodated within the norms of the existing system, rather than changing the system to be congruent with the challenge. It is still the exception rather than the norm for institutions to rethink radically how they will equip graduates with knowledge and skills necessary for life in this century. Perhaps the challenge is just too large: can the higher education sector reinvent its role in society in time?

As my colleague Arjen Wals reflects, 'at present most of our universities are still leading the way in advancing the kind of thinking, teaching and research that . . . accelerates un-sustainability'.<sup>1</sup>

At Plymouth University, an urban university very close to the city centre, we have completed a major initiative through the HEFCE-funded Centre for Sustainable Futures (CSF), which sought to embed sustainability as a key institutional principle (see page 171). In 2005, with a staff of nine, we had the ambitious aim of reaching 3,000 academic staff and 30,000 students in 5 years. We were very fortunate to have a significant budget, with which we provided buyout to 48 staff, and we also created an interdisciplinary network. There have been successes: in 2011 Plymouth won the 'Whole Institutional Change' category in the Green Gown Awards, and it has averaged out as the top green university in the UK since the People and Planet 'Green League' table began in 2007. However, two internal curriculum surveys have indicated that although there is support amongst senior staff virtually across the board, there is still a way to go to ensure all our students are receiving some sustainability education. A number of lessons that we learned are reflected in *Sustainability Education*<sup>2</sup> and *The Future Fit Framework – an introductory guide to teaching and learning for sustainability in HE*,<sup>3</sup> which bring together some of our experiences and those of the Higher Education Academy's work in this area.

I am very pleased to see that this publication builds on experiences from Plymouth University, in addition to a host of other institutions, to develop a grounded, practical and rigorous model for rapid curriculum renewal that does not rely on a super-budget or the energy of one or two champions. Here we have a timely set of tools to imagine and implement stretch goals that can result in transformational

change in our institutions, now. Moreover, the inclusive, whole of university approach presented here sets a rapid curriculum renewal agenda for sustainability education with clear responsibilities and tasks for staff throughout the campus. In doing so, the methods shown create a possibility for real creativity and innovation within each institution that takes the model on board. I look forward to tracking the experiences of those who do.

## Notes

- 1 Wals, A. (ed.) (2008) *From Cosmetic Reform to Meaningful Integration: Implementing education for sustainable development in higher education institutes – the state of affairs in six European countries*, DHO, Amsterdam.
- 2 Jones, P., Selby, D. and Sterling, S. (2010) *Sustainability Education: Perspectives and practice across higher education*, Earthscan, London.
- 3 Sterling, S. (2012) *The Future Fit Framework – An introductory guide to teaching and learning for sustainability in HE*, Higher Education Academy, York.