communicating for sustainability: guidance for higher education institutions
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Ever faced the challenge of having to talk about sustainable development? Maybe you’ve had to persuade people to change their behaviour? Or is it your job to convince people that your university or college is ‘good at’ sustainable development?

For people with responsibility for delivering sustainable development, this guide is designed to show you how to tell people about sustainable development, and why communication is the ultimate tool to deliver it.

For communicators in universities and colleges, it will give you a clear idea of what sustainable development means for an institution and ideas on how to think about such a big communications challenge.

Much of the content of this guide comes from the work that Forum for the Future has done with 18 universities and colleges from all over the UK who formed the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS). These institutions have been exploring how sustainable development can help them deliver their strategies. HEPS has so far produced tools and guidance to help universities use their courses, purchasing patterns and travel plans to contribute to sustainable development. This guide is a reminder that good communication is essential for putting all of these strategies and ideas into practice.

The guide begins with a quick introduction to why communication is important for sustainable development and then tries to provide an answer to that difficult question, “what is good communication for sustainable development?”. After looking at other sectors’ strategies and thinking about which of these could be useful for higher education, the guide finishes with an accessible explanation of how to write a communications strategy.

So, whether you’re responsible for implementing sustainability policies in your institution, or involved in student recruitment, external relations, or are a leading manager in your institution, this guide will have something for you to bring your strategy alive.
1 Why communication is important to sustainable development
At the world summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg in 2002, the United Nations said that eradicating poverty, changing consumption and production patterns and protecting and managing our material resource base were essential requirements for sustainable development, i.e., meeting our economic, social and environmental objectives at the same time. We all need to become more aware of how all of our actions affect the people we interact with, our local and global environment and the legacy we leave for future generations after we are gone.

Few people would argue that we need to drastically improve on our track record and reach a better state of affairs. This state is called ‘sustainability’, and essentially means having prosperous, safe, supportive and just communities, in an environment that can support everyone’s needs, now and in the future.

Getting to sustainability means achieving these economic, social and environmental goals at the same time. The conflict between environmental, economic and social goals has come about because they are pursued separately.

In the last few years, most of the arguments about the evidence of drastic global change have died down and been replaced by a convergence of opinion between governments, individuals, education centres, NGOs and even the business community, on a broad process to overcome the challenges we face and to find a path to a better way of life.
Over 170 states have adopted sustainable development as a policy objective. The UK Government’s sustainable development strategy is known as the ‘Better Quality of Life Strategy’ and it commits them to meeting the following four objectives at the same time in the UK and the world as a whole:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone
- prudent use of natural resources
- effective protection of the environment
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment

Businesses are seizing the competitive advantage that comes with engaging with sustainable development. The benefits range from reducing operating costs (because of ecologically driven efficiency), engaging positively with employees and enhancing intellectual capital and creating new business, plus helping to enhance reputation and brand value with all their stakeholders.

So, despite the size of the challenge, there is now discernible progress towards turning the concept of sustainable development into an actual plan for action. A central player in this progression is education, which has the potential to help people learn the consequences of their actions and develop with the capacity to make a difference to the future.

The recent DfES sustainable development action plan for education and skills has recognised the challenge and set out four objectives:

1. Education for sustainable development, including noting in Hefce’s grant letter that they “signal to the university sector that education for sustainable development requires development”.
2. The environmental impact of educational bodies
3. The environmental impact of the education estate
4. Local and global partnership delivery.
Forum for the Future has focused primarily on higher education, in order to revitalise knowledge and understanding within the people who are set to go out into positions of influence in the world. And it’s not just the curriculum which needs to embed sustainability, the physical environment of a university and the way it runs itself as a business and treats its staff and local community are all valuable learning tools. The HEPS has worked with universities and colleges for three years since 2000, and has encouraged a holistic vision of the institution as:

- a place of learning and research: which teaches and influences the leaders and decision-makers of the future
- a major business: where efficient management of all resources has a positive effect on employees, service uses and could also save money
- a key community players: as employer, purchaser and amenity provider with a major impact on exchanging knowledge and knowhow with local residents and the wider world.

This helps universities and colleges identify how their actions can be more joined up, and avoid trading off economic, social and environmental decisions.

When Forum for the Future started working with university staff, students and their stakeholders, the first step was to find an effective way of communicating what sustainable development means and how it might be applied to them, whatever their role might be. The ‘triple bottom line’ explanation shows the three things you need to think about to make sustainable development work; the economy, society and the environment. The Venn diagram on the right shows how all three ‘lines’ or concepts overlap, making sustainable development the bit in the middle.
The triple bottom line model is a good conceptual starting point for explaining what sustainable development is and can be expanded to check how a university is doing across different dimensions, as in the grid below:

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<th>Sustainability Appraisal Grid showing what a university might currently be contributing to sustainable development. New activity could be identified where there are gaps.</th>
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<td>PROVIDE GOOD STUDENT EXPERIENCE</td>
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<td>→ enhance employability of graduates</td>
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<td>→ ensure sustainability literacy for all</td>
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The simplicity of the triple bottom line model and this grid does not really allow the indepth strategic analysis which some audiences require, for this explanations such as the ‘Five capitals model’ and the ‘12 Features of a sustainable society’ are more useful.

Managing what you do and showing your progress to the outside world is also critical in building confidence and attracting interest in your university. The HEPS sustainability reporting tool (HEPS RT) developed a way to do this, which used another model of sustainability, the 12 Features of a sustainable society as its starting point. This model offers a vision of what a sustainable society would look like.

A series of workshops using the 12 Features lead us to a set of indicators which give a comprehensive ‘sustainability profile’ for an institution. The methodology is explained fully in the HEPS publication ‘Reporting for Sustainability: guidance for higher education institutions’. The result is a simple visual tool which shows a universities progress (dark blue) against its own sustainability targets (light blue).

The HEPS RT can be viewed at www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/heps for your password email hepsrt@forumforthefuture.org.uk

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**12 Features of a sustainable society**

GAS USE: Gas therms per sq m per hour
STAFF LEARNING: number of staff training days per year per member of staff
STUDENT RETENTION: % of students continuing in higher education after their first year
DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPATION: % of students from under-represented groups
TRAVEL PLANNING
ACCOMMODATION
BIODIVERSITY
INVESTORS IN PEOPLE: % of staff covered by IIP
WATER USE: cubic metres per sq m per hour

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1 For more information on the Five capitals model see Forum for the Future, *Changing Business*, 2002
Finding the right way to tell someone about sustainable development, and relating it to their experience has been crucial in engaging universities and colleges with the sustainable development agenda. Good communication can influence people’s behaviour, create dialogue, foster understanding and open up dialogue between groups. Without listening and responding to those around you, it is difficult to provide useful educational services or encourage different behaviour.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS are seen as a strategic resource within organisations, and is a good umbrella term for any of the following:

→ public affairs  → corporate communications
→ media relations  → issues management
→ community affairs  → product publicity
→ crisis management  → financial communications
→ events  → lobbying
→ sponsorship  → recruitment
→ all the services which feed into these

Its goal is to influence the behaviour of groups of people who can affect, or are affected by their organisation (who we call stakeholders) through dialogue with all of the different audiences.
Although INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS are sometimes dealt with separately, the internal and external side of communications are inextricably intertwined and it is confusing to detach them, after all you shouldn’t separate what you tell your staff from what you tell the public.

Linking communication to sustainable development strategies means that your university or college has a much stronger brand identity to stand on, which in an increasingly competitive market place can add value to your institution.

Let’s look in detail now at what communications can do for you, as someone who delivers sustainable development, and how communications professionals can benefit from adding sustainable development to their communications activity.

### How communication can help sustainable development

- acts as resource to implement strategy
- creates lasting change through education and understanding
- encourages take-up of practice
- enhances relationships with staff, through dual dialogue
- creates understanding of the meaning behind policy

### How sustainable development can help communication

- increases market take up of product or services
- nurtures relationships with stakeholders
- long standing reputation
- influential voice
- listens to public
- inspirational leader
**Unpacking good communication**

We’ve had a glimpse of what communication can do, if used properly. Here we will start to think about what it’s made up of and what makes it successful.

**Aim: what you are trying to do**

Good communication needs to start with a purpose, which in the best possible case, will be firmly linked to the organisation’s strategic plan. This is to avoid it being concerned only with processes which already exist (such as a weekly bulletin) and instead, be clearly working towards a fixed end point along with the whole organisation. It needs to be managed strategically and be properly resourced.

Incorporating sustainability: an organisation with a strategic plan that contributes to sustainable development (using frameworks that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions) should be supported by communication whose purpose is to bring about some kind of lasting, transformative change.

**Market: who you are saying it to**

Good communication is directed at nurturing relationships with key stakeholders, both internally and externally. It should be driven by constant evaluation of who is important to the organisation and its strategic aims, not just by an evolution of what has been done in the past.

Incorporating sustainability: establish stakeholders across the board, looking at environmental, social and economic relationships. Maximise the relationships between all of these groups, and think not just about links with people but the relationships they have with the environment, for example, a view from a window or on the way to work.

**Messages: what you are saying**

Research into stakeholders’ interests and views is required in order to deliver appropriate messages and crucially, messages which will make a difference to behaviour or understanding. What you say should create an open, two-way dialogue. Formal and informal research can be used to understand the audience, and to monitor effectiveness.

Incorporating sustainability: the message should include and join up environmental, social and economic messages, or be directly related
to a strategy which includes these three dimensions. It’s also important to tailor messages to particular audiences, and not to assume that because sustainability is integrated and holistic, the messages will necessarily be the same.

**Methods: how you are saying it**

There are a multitude of ways that stakeholders receive messages; presentations, events, newspapers, websites, prospectuses, policies and activities, annual reports, brands, buildings and advertising.

Incorporating sustainability: the techniques used should take account of economic, social and environmental costs and benefits, like benefits to the local economy, cultural sensitivities and accessibility. For lots of examples of reducing the negative social and environmental impacts of products and services, see HEPS publication, ‘Purchasing for Sustainability: guidance for higher education institutions’.

**Measurement: did you achieve the aim?**

Finally, in order to assess its contribution to the aim, communications must be able to stand up to measurement. This can be objective; measuring buying or voting behaviour, or distribution levels, or subjective; assessing client satisfaction using judgement or intuition.

Incorporating sustainability: as the aim of communication for sustainability will be contributing to some kind of lasting transformation, this should be the criteria by which success is measured. There should also be continual learning from the experience which can be shared with others in order to accelerate change.

**What is good communication for sustainable development?**

All the methods, markets and messages of communication follow best practice and integrate the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability, or they support a strategy that does.

In the next section we will apply this definition to examples of communication for sustainable development.
2 How are the others doing?
Concern about the environmental and social impacts of business has ebbed and flowed over the last 30 years. As we start the 21st century, these concerns have grown measurably into what can be translated as greater stakeholder interest and a demand for ‘greener’ products. Add to this the increase in social and environmental regulatory demands on companies and you have a business sector taking the business case for sustainable development more and more seriously.

Other Forum publications have dealt thoroughly with the impact of sustainable development on businesses.

This section looks at the effect of business’ commitment and action on sustainable development on their ‘marketing mix’, which includes their corporate communications, brand and public relations. What lessons can be drawn from that for communications in general?

BRANDS ARE MORE THAN WHAT YOU SEE IN ADVERTISING

In their early years, the Body Shop, a key green brand, spent virtually nothing on advertising, compared to their main competitor Boots, which spends millions annually. Yet 38% of people surveyed felt Body Shop had more distinctive voice or brand than Boots, and 24% believed they had heard of the Body Shop through advertising.³

³ White, J and Mazur, L, Strategic Communications Management: Making Public Relations Work, Economist Intelligence Unit, Addison-Wesley, 1994
The corporate sector has for longer than other sectors, recognised the importance of public relations and the marketing of products, to the extent that now, marketing could be described as the framework in which businesses exist. Marketing is the business as seen from the end point, ie the picture companies want the public to see. Companies spend a lot of time and money communicating their products through brands. They have a long standing, sensitive and intuitive understanding of brands and the complexity of consumers’ relationship to them, a complexity which is growing in an increasingly globalised world, offering a multitude of choices and information. They recognise that people buy brands and not commodities. Building a brand that shows commitment to sustainable development must be preceded by the adoption of appropriate core values and strategy.

Wendy Gordon has pinpointed the many factors that contribute to a brand’s success;

Successful brands have a world-view about the way people connect with them, they understand:

- what matters to people in their lives
- how and in what direction culture is changing
- how to lead rather than follow
- how to ‘walk the talk’ of brand integrity

What’s more, brands communicate in code, in addition to the surface message (what they say) is the altogether more subtle hidden message (how they say it) which uses sensory and emotional cues like colours, symbols, shapes, textures, images rather than purely rational ones. These hidden messages play a very important role in how people make decisions.

Wendy Gordon, Brand green: mainstream or forever niche?, Green Alliance, 2002
They’ve got the budgets and the know-how, but just how good are these businesses at communicating for sustainable development?

Unilever, Bird’s Eye Peas

If you look closely at a packet of Bird’s Eye Frozen Peas, those of you with good eyesight might spot the following small statement:

THE PEAS IN THIS PACKET HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED AS PART OF A PARTNERSHIP WITH FARMERS TO PROTECT THE LONG TERM HEALTH OF THE LAND

This is the only overt link that Unilever have made to their relatively large scale ‘partnership for sustainability’, a project with farmers, academics and NGOs. The farmers in the partnership have agreed to work together to promote a definition of sustainable agriculture which has been drawn up between Unilever and other environmental groups.

The communication of this initiative to consumers has been low key, as business director Chris Pomfret explains,

“sustainability is all about the long term security of our supply chain, so the only way for a business to thrive in the long term is to sell the concept of sustainability to consumers……But, a significant emotional bridge between people’s concerns over sustainability and their buying habits has yet to be built”

SO WHY THE RETICENCE ABOUT SELLING THE BRAND OF THE SUSTAINABLE PEA?

“in our view, the time to cross this bridge is not yet right… and so blowing our trumpet at this stage would risk undermining the credibility of the whole project, by convincing an already sceptical public that this is just another marketing angle from a multinational looking to sell its brands”

HOW WILL YOU COMMUNICATE AND WHEN WILL THE TIME BE RIGHT?

“the emotional link between people’s concerns over the environment and our sustainably-sourced brands in the freezer cabinet must have
THE VERDICT’S IN…. UNILEVER
Very good communication for sustainable development

WHY?

→ Although the communication at this stage was low key, it had an explicit link to a wider corporate strategy of recognising the necessity of long term planning for sustainable agriculture. This strategy, a collaborative effort by many stakeholders had a clear end point: sustainable agriculture that is productive, competitive and efficient while at the same time protecting and improving the natural environment and conditions of the local communities. The strategy will measure itself against ten key performance indicators, from soil fertility and health to pest management, water, energy to social and human capital.

→ The communications strategy was linked to a wider plan of talking more and more loudly about the product when the time became right, in this sense the strategy itself was sustainable, built on market research and stakeholder analysis and determined not to let the selling of sustainability fall into the usual traps.

three attributes:

→ powerful and based on scientific fact, such as the link between polyunsaturated fats and a healthy heart
→ it must be water-tight, preventing the growth of cynicism about our true aims
→ it must carry an absolute benefit that customers value.”

www.unilever.com
Jeremy Leggett, CEO of solarcentury, the biggest UK provider of solar energy found that not only did they have to promote solar PV, but actually build a market for it in the UK, as when they started, it did not exist.

**HOW SOLARCENTURY HAVE COMMUNICATED OVER TIME:**

- The people who set up solarcentury had a history of environmental activism and so were concerned with promoting ‘alternative lifestyles’. They were initially involved with sponsoring cycle races, and pushing the green value of solar power.

- During the 2000 petrol strike, they ran a big advert in a broadsheet with the tagline ‘Call that a fuel crisis?’, as an attempt to prompt people to think about the bigger picture of energy and fuel consumption in the UK, and create a desire for a more sustainable type of energy. This was a pertinent point and cleverly made, but was unsuccessful in promoting any response or sales.

- A second advert was run the following year in the broadsheet press, which depicted solar panels in action along with a message about how it worked and save customers money, this advert received over 800 responses.

- solarcentury fitted large Sainsbury’s stores with solar panels and Channel 4’s original Big Brother house in East London was also powered by their solar cells.

www.solarcentury.com
THE VERDICT’S IN…. SOLARCENTURY
Good communication for sustainable development

WHY?

- solarcentury quickly learnt lessons from their first attempts at associating themselves with the ‘alternative agenda’. After analysis, they began to look more carefully at where their potential audience was at and started to put less emphasis on purely environmental messages and more on action and adding value to the customer. The linear approach of persuading people to buy a product because it was ‘the right thing to do’ has been subsumed into their brand identity and mixed with messages about cost benefit.

- They have also tried their hand at letting other people speak for them, through using their product. This was successful with Sainsbury’s who were keen to show off their innovative energy solution to their own stakeholders. Its possible that on reflection, the golden opportunity of panelling the Big Brother house was lost in the furore of other messages coming from the media experience.

Are the UK government doing their bit?

The government communicates its work on sustainable development via their website www.sustainable-development.gov.uk and annual reports⁴. The reports take an indicator driven approach, and replace the ‘s’ word with descriptive terms such as ‘quality of life’ or ‘essentials of life’. Defra has lead responsibility for communicating what sustainable development means and encouraging real transformative change in behaviour from the public.

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Are you doing your bit?

This campaign was a joint Defra and DTLR initiative, designed to promote key environmental messages, like using less electricity or water in the home. The campaign encouraged people to consider how their lifestyle impacts on their health and quality of life. The campaign established a strong ‘brand’ for itself which is evident in the use of the phrase by a range of other organisations for their sustainable development campaigns.

THE VERDICT’S IN…. DEFRA
Not so good communication for sustainable development

WHY?

→ The campaign did not allow people to work out how to do things differently and forgot the most important feature of any transformative change programme – that of reinforcing positive behaviour. Anyone who did their bit (like cycling to the supermarket with their own shopping bags) did so with no recognition or reward, and were surrounded by people not doing their bit and finding life a lot easier.

→ It focused on the environment and resource efficiency and did not make bigger connections with society.

→ It was tied to Defra’s and DTLR’s strategy but was seen as a message coming from the government, whose general policy (on say, road expansion and aviation) do not line up with sustainable development, thus the brand and messages lacked legs to stand on.

HOW COULD IT IMPROVE?

→ The success of the campaign was very difficult to measure as it ultimately wanted widespread behavioural change. Future campaigns should have defined outcomes and built in evaluation techniques from the start so that changes in behaviour can be assessed.
What can higher education learn?

BRAND

Communication for businesses is all about linking brands to products and encouraging a continuous desire for those products. Where businesses have to work a bit harder is in getting people to accept that their values and altruistic practices are genuine. This can be achieved by being very clear about their values, and aligning all parts of their practice with them.

Universities are at a considerable advantage, as they can expect to face less cynicism about their values and operations. Public education is perceived to be a good thing and the historical position of universities and colleges as independent and autonomous adds to this. Therefore, any community minded strategies or sustainable development activities will generally be taken at face value.

The use of brands is increasing as universities and colleges move into a more competitive market, and incorporating sustainable development into a brand can be a useful way to set the university apart. Queen’s University, Belfast took the opportunity to incorporate sustainable development into their re-launch. At the time there were political changes in Northern Ireland which meant people were looking for a new set of values and easily connected with the social and environmental messages. Working with HEPS, they discovered there was a lot of work already going on at Queen’s which contributed to sustainable development, such as gender equality and environmental policies, new curricula, and research into green transport. These were not widely publicised, but by pulling them together into the theme of sustainable development, they became stronger and mutually reinforcing.

TALKING QUIETLY

Some businesses, such as Levi-Strauss have recognised the power of getting other people to talk positively about you, which has more of an impact than releasing good news stories about yourself. This brings us back to the point about being clear about your values and linking them to practice, and utilising everyone you meet to be a conduit for your communication.
The reach of universities, as community players, employers, teachers and service providers means there are ample opportunities to employ people as channels. For example, debates on campus on the pros and cons of recycling, crèches on campus, or a new shared public transport routes as a solution to congestion.

**KNOW YOUR MARKET**

Businesses are adept at responding to market demands, and marketing is the key organising principle of many businesses' operations. Now, more than ever, universities are in the position of trying to attract students who will better reflect the make up of society, and alongside this, will bring in money. Higher education could invest more resources in their communications and target stakeholders more effectively. For example, the Body Shop produces annual reports for each of its stakeholder groups.

**BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU’RE NOT SAYING**

First and foremost, the product that you are selling, or idea you are communicating must be right. Good research into the audience will mean that you can sell very sustainable and ethically sound goods without mentioning it explicitly, as the idea is stronger than its association.

Take some recent marketing material from the Transport Planning Skills Initiative, which tried to encourage more people to study travel planning; a complex and exciting area which is essential for progressing towards sustainability. Although environmentally-friendly travel has often been used as a leading symbol of the green movement; this marketing material had no traditional ‘green’ messages or images, instead focusing on career satisfaction, the creativity needed to solve transport problems in the 21st century, as well as an awful lot of attractive people in edgy, urban settings. Not a bicycle or toll road in sight; and yet a strong message conveyed to take part in something which will have a lasting impact on our travel habits and the future of the world.
3 How to design a strategy
More and more universities and colleges are recognising the importance of communications to delivering strategic development. Think about how communications work in your university. Do you have an in-house magazine? Who would a journalist call if they wanted an expert opinion on a news story? Who pays attention to ratings in league tables? Like all organisations, universities and colleges communicate in different ways, through action and policies, through the way they brand themselves, through events, by sending out stories to the media and by being written and talked about.

We’re interested in making this communication line up with sustainable development, so let’s return to our working definition of good communication for sustainable development:

All the methods, markets and messages of communication follow best practice and integrate the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability, or they support a strategy that does.

Heriot-Watt University were one of HEPS’ Scottish partners who were driven to align their strategy with sustainable development for a few different reasons:

- profile of SIStech, a leading research institution into sustainable technology in Scotland
- pressure from students
- internal restructuring and the need to save costs.

The Press and Public Relations, working under the instruction of the Cost Savings Working Group and closely with Estates, SIStech and Graphics and Media Services, were asked to create a communications campaign to support the cost saving agenda.
Their “Sustainability Campaign” was devised to encourage university staff and students to contribute to cutting the university’s annual utilities costs, by introducing more efficient ways of working, recommending good practice and promoting sound environmental practices. With no formal budget allocated to the campaign, they made use of the limited resources available, to communicate and illustrate at every level cost savings and good practice to achieve a sustainable university and remind themselves that every little helps!

Aim
The campaign was designed to encourage staff and students to contribute to the University’s target of reducing current annual operating costs by around 8% over the next two years by changing attitudes and behaviour to support a sustainable university.

Market
All the staff and students in the university.

MESSAGE THEMES
- Energy Efficiency
- Resource Cost Savings
- Recycling

Methods
As the campaign was not allocated a specific budget, existing communication tools were used to communicate the various themes of the campaign:

POSTERS
Two poster campaigns were employed to persuade and remind staff and students to do their bit to help reduce waste and save the University money. The themes were – “Guiding Lights” and “Computer Costs”.

STICKERS
A number of stickers were produced to support the sustainability recycling campaign. These mainly took the form of stickers to be placed on recycling bins. Stickers for telephones were also produced to support the phone wise campaign.
Regular articles and features on the campaign with cut-out-and-keep prompts have appeared in all of the university's key publications.

**WEBSITE**

www.hw.ac.uk/sustainability provides detailed information to supplement the various poster campaigns. The site has also been devised to encourage staff and student feedback and sharing of good practice. Once the results of the staff transport survey have been collated, the website will be used to communicate the findings and to establish a car sharing database for staff and students.
EVENTS
Friends of the Earth sponsor an annual initiative called Green Office Week. Two departments took part and were encouraged to recycle stationery. Although the savings achieved were not significant, Heriot-Watt hope to build on the experience and roll out the initiative to more departments next year.

Measurement
Since the start of the campaign and following the appointment of an Energy and Environment officer, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of recycling sites and staff and students participating in recycling activities around the university.

The Cost Savings Working Group evaluated the campaign by carrying out a survey to gauge the effect the sustainability campaign has had on creating awareness and changing attitudes to sustainability amongst staff and students.
Sheffield Hallam University: Sustainability Week April 2003

Heriot-Watt's key markets were the staff and students on the university's campuses. The next campaign under the microscope comes from Sheffield Hallam University, and was designed to create awareness of sustainable development amongst the staff, students, the local community and further afield. Although this case study focuses on one week in Sheffield Hallam's calendar, it forms part of a wider communication strategy which is based in their business development centre.

Aim

The theme of Sustainability Week in 2003 was ‘Think B4U Buy’ and aimed to promote sustainable purchasing to students and staff at the university, small to medium enterprises in Sheffield and the wider community of Sheffield. Picking a specific theme meant that efforts were focused on audiences and activities from the start.

Messages

Think before you buy
Everything has an impact
Businesses and universities can work together

Methods

FARMERS’ MARKET
Sheffield Hallam University organised and promoted the outdoor Farmers’ Market in partnership with Sheffield City Council’s Markets Division. It was the first market of its kind in the city centre. The market was very popular with staff and students from Sheffield Hallam University and the general public. As a result, Sheffield Markets will be organising further farmers markets in the city centre in the autumn of 2003.

SUSTAINABLE SUPPLIERS EXHIBITION
The exhibition aimed to give Sheffield’s small to medium enterprises (SMEs) a chance to appreciate the value of considering sustainability issues when making purchasing decisions. The exhibition was run in partnership with the Sheffield and District Chamber of Trade and Sheffield Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
LECTURE - SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING MAKES BUSINESS SENSE
SMEs were also invited to attend a lecture by purchasing expert Dr Barbara Morton called ‘Sustainable Purchasing Makes Business Sense’ which looked at introducing good practice in purchasing policies.

COMPETITIONS AND QUIZZES
The sustainability team encouraged student participation during the week through a web competition on the Sustainability website and impromptu prize quizzes were held in the University’s largest catering space in the heart of its main campus.

PROMOTIONS IN CATERING OUTLETS
Throughout the week Catering Services offered organic and sustainable choices in catering outlets and also had displays of organic products.

How was Sustainability Week 2003 communicated?
The sustainability team organising the week was a mixture of placement students from the university, sustainability managers and communications managers. They used existing communications networks like:

- emails to all staff and students with a link to website
- features on staff and student intranets with a link to website
- information fed through departmental managers
- features in SHU print, a quarterly publication for all university staff and FD news, a quarterly publication for Facilities Directorate staff
- posters on existing notice boards in student and staff areas
- listed in Happening at Hallam, a leaflet which is distributed to households in Sheffield.

Raising the profile of the event to the outside world with a thoughtful mix of local and national specialist media before and after the event:

THE STORY WAS COVERED BY:

- BBC Radio Sheffield
- Sheffield Star (listings and post-event coverage)
- Sheffield Telegraph (pre-event coverage and post-event readers letter of thanks)
→ Bags sponsored by Smith Anderson carrying the University’s Sustainability Week logo
→ Times Higher Educational Supplement feautered the Sustainability Manager’s diary of his unusual week
→ EAUC newsletter for environmental managers
→ Clippings from all the above were sent to relevant University stakeholders after the event.

**Measurement: Overall Success**

→ More local media coverage was expected. Next year advertisements could be scheduled in with local media if funds are available. This would hopefully have the positive effect of getting more editorial coverage in the run up to the event
→ The farmers’ market was seen to be the most successful event of the week as staff, students and the general public were interested and positive feedback was received. Research showed that the farmers’ market would attract more people if it was located near a busy shopping area
→ The prize draw was successful in attracting a number of people
→ Two placement students worked solely on sustainability week and carried out a research and evaluation project as part of their marketing course.

**Measurement: What made a story?**

Overall, the local press are more interested in quirky angles and photo opportunities as opposed to ”key themes” in general.

→ They liked the ostrich burgers which were on sale at the market, as they gave the story an angle
→ It was the ‘first ever’ farmers’ market in Sheffield
→ It was not just a student, but a public event so appealed to all media.

[www.shu.ac.uk](http://www.shu.ac.uk)
Set out an objective to start with, something that can guide all of your activities. Make it measurable so that you can check that it was achieved. Move away from just ‘raising awareness’ to concrete action and behavioural change. Make it align with your University’s strategy on sustainable development and use established communications channels.

Before deciding messages, ask yourselves what audiences you want to reach, for a university, think across the different stakeholder groups; operational staff, academics, the management board, as well as students. Talk to the public relations department, or contact NUS’ campaigns department for advice.

Even if it’s just quick research, make sure you have a good idea of what messages would work for which group, for eg the management board will be interested in cost saving. Diversify your messages, think about what you want people to do, how you want them to feel after receiving the message?
What were their key messages?

The key messages that we tried to get across to the students was to generally think about what their actions are doing to the environment, such as leaving a light on when it is not needed, dropping litter, and why they needed to recycle.

What happened?

Stalls in the atrium gave away free lightbulbs, courtesy of Scottish Power, and leaflets about energy-saving and other ways that people could help the environment.

Several companies and organisations were contacted regarding a visit to Stirling to tell the students about what they are doing for the environment and how students fit in to that. Two organisations replied, both of them attended.

A Green Party MP visited on Tuesday, 14 students and one member of staff attended his talk. Out of this came the idea to set up a permanent student group to lobby the University on the green issues that affect them, such as recycling facilities in halls.

The Energy Efficiency Advice Centre was booked to run two workshops on energy efficiency on the Thursday and Friday. Unfortunately no-one turned up for the Thursday session and only three people attended on the Friday.

Assessing success

It is quite difficult to measure success but since people were voluntarily coming up to the stall to get information and a lightbulb, I feel that students were interested in the topic and would do more to help the environment if they were encouraged to do so by the University.

Activities are strong, with good, successful ideas, like getting sponsorship from corporates, and involvement from external organisations.

Is a talk the best way to reach an audience? How about a film followed by talk? Maybe a set up ‘interview’ session with the MP and the vice-chancellor? Try to have a set objective for the talk, so that outputs and ideas are well focused.

Could this have been done in conjunction with the Scottish Power give away? Come to the workshop and get freebies?

Have a theme to hang the week on, as opposed to just ‘raising awareness’

Have a clear objective against which you can set targets and measure success.
These examples have looked close to home at their campus and local community and haven’t engaged all of the sector wide bodies which impact on higher education, like regulators, funders and staff associations. Forum for the Future visited the Association of University Administrators’ (AUA) annual conference with the aim of getting the people who run universities to think about how their work and lives relate to sustainable development. The choice was to run a seminar or do something altogether different...

In between seminars, lunches and coach rides at the conference, there was a strange looking hippie handing out LSD tabs to unsuspecting delegates and luring them to come and take part in a fun analysis of their working life.

The conference is attended by over 2,000 university and college administrators, so was a great opportunity to reach as many people as possible. As contact time with delegates was limited, the focal point had to grab people’s attention quickly and get them interested.

The ‘Learning for sustainable development’ (or LSD) Laboratory was set up in the exhibitors suite, and really stood out amongst the stationery displays and leaflets. Once people had noticed the stand, the idea was to get them to think about all the different relationships they have in their jobs and their lives, by filling out an interactive ‘learner profile’. This took them on a deeper journey as to how their lives are affected by the environment, economy and society.
Evaluation of what went well

- It was a strong idea from concept to practice with a recognisable theme of the sixties, LSD and ‘hippies’
- There was just one activity for people to do
- We were not directly preaching to people or explaining the idea in detail, but hinting and giving a taste of what we were about
- It was fun. There was a person dressed up as a focal point in an unexpected place at unexpected time
- We managed to reach a lot of the potentially high audience and used the short amount of time to engage effectively
- It opened up excellent networking opportunities – with delegates, organisers, other exhibitors, as they all remembered us.
Surrey Institute of Art and Design was one of the first HEPS partners to put a sustainability strategy in place and has used the creativity of their students in its delivery. Students on the ‘Product Design: Sustainable Futures’ course took a module in sustainable development, and explored the opportunities for creative use of media through sessions with a communications officer from Forum for the Future. The outputs of their project on communicating sustainable development were used on campus to raise awareness and encourage lasting change.

www.surrart.ac.uk
The way that Aberdeen University organised itself to operationalise sustainable development is reflected in how they communicate what they do. Their sustainability group is made up of students, press officers, academics, marketing managers and a Vice Principal. They are a great example of embedding values within a brand and building on that through their communications. Taking the lead on sustainable development gives them a goldmine of stories to take to the media, potential students and stakeholders. For example, their wildflower meadow:

What could have been a simple, uplifting story about a university growing flowers in an otherwise disused space unfolds into something more: the wildflower meadow project grew out of the university’s biodiversity action plan, which was a result of their strategic commitment to sustainable development. Experts from local conservation groups advised on the type of native plants which would grow in the wild and local schoolchildren include this on a wildlife tour of the campus.

www.abdn.ac.uk
More reading

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About Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future is a sustainable development charity, and our mission is to accelerate the transition to a sustainable way of life. Our mission is one we share with partners drawn from business, local authorities, regional bodies and universities. It is also the organising principle behind our portfolio of leading edge projects. We provide advice on issues as diverse as climate change, procurement strategies, environmental accounting and the digital divide. We communicate what we learn with our partners to a wide network of decision-makers and opinion-formers.

www.forumforthefuture.org.uk

HEPS

The Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS) is a collaborative initiative for 18 UK higher education institutions established with funding from the higher education funding councils of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our partners are:

College of St Mark and St John  University of Aberdeen
City University  University of St Andrews
University of Salford  Heriot-Watt University
Liverpool John Moores University  University of Stirling
Loughborough University  University of Birmingham
Sheffield Hallam University  University of Brighton
The Surrey Institute of Art and Design  Middlesex University
Queen's University, Belfast  University of Newcastle
Cardiff University  University of Cambridge

AIM

The aim of HEPS was to establish a pioneering partnership group of universities and colleges that were seen to be achieving strategic objectives through positive engagement with the sustainable development agenda. The tools, guidance and inspiration have been shared with the rest of the sector to encourage them to make the same enduring change.

www.heps.org.uk
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