

Session 2-3

Quality Futures – Innovation for Sustainability through Quality Systems

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Abstract

Sustainability continues to rise up global agendas, prompting a rethink of patterns of life and the need for innovation in education systems. This session explores how sustainability connects with tertiary education through its core educational function and as a priority for the future of curriculum quality. It is based on a unique UK national project to embed sustainability education principles into quality assurance and enhancement systems in Higher Education. The project completed in November 2012 and involved collaboration with the UK Quality Assurance Agency and development work in five universities. The session explores findings from this work around academic leadership for sustainability in the context of quality. It considers the issues at organisational and sector levels, with discussion of the implications for quality systems in different countries.

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The sustainability agenda continues to rise up the global agenda, prompting a rethink of our patterns of life and the ways that we can prepare future generations to address complex sustainable development challenges. Its influence is increasingly evident in research themes and university practice worldwide, and the role of tertiary education is critical in this area, but the challenges for mainstream curriculum practice remain substantial.

The need for more effective education and learning to support sustainable development requires a rethink of curriculum priorities at all levels. For tertiary education, this connects with essential ‘quality’ questions around the nature, value and purpose of learning. Real ‘sustainability’ means not just the continuity of existing systems; it requires the kind of learning and innovation processes that will improve quality of life across the globe.

This session explores this challenge of locating sustainability in the evolution of curriculum quality and educational practice. It is based on an ambitious UK project to embed Education for Sustainability (EfS) in Higher Education (HE) quality assurance and enhancement systems. It asks:

Q: How do we ensure that the quality of the curriculum includes principles of sustainability?

Q: What strategic work is needed to connect quality assurance practices with learning processes for sustainability?

Q: How can different countries make sense of sustainability in relation to their quality systems?

Q: What are the academic leadership and change management issues for this kind of innovation in the tertiary sector?

The project was funded from 2010-2012 through a high profile initiative by the HE Funding Council for England to lead innovation for sustainability across the sector. It was the only initiative to tackle EfS as a strategic change priority for the HE curriculum, so that future academic practice is informed by the sustainability imperative. The project was underpinned by research from the UK National Union of Students, Higher Education Academy, and private sector, showing the increasing demand and need for graduate competence in this area among students and employers.

The project was led by the University of Gloucestershire, working closely with the UK Quality Assurance Agency and across a consortium of five HE institutions. It has worked to advance the sector position on EfS in the UK at three levels:

1. *Institutional* – with development projects across a partnership of five different HE institutions with different academic profiles, track records and starting points on EfS.
2. *Sectoral* – in consultation with the key sector agencies responsible for curriculum quality and expert advisers from HE executives, government, community and industry.
3. *Individual* – involving academic leaders, quality professionals and educational developers, through the pilot work, national conference and to produce an online Guide.

The proposed session will share the lessons and issues from this unique project, which has recently completed. It will explore the pathways developed by leading institutions working to bring EfS into their routine work to develop and enhance the curriculum and will look at the steps taken by national agencies to support the sector in this agenda. It will go on to involve the audience in discussion of the prospects for systemic curriculum change in other countries by connecting EfS with quality assurance and enhancement systems.