

# **Specialist Review and Evaluation of the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS) Programme**

**Final report to the UK higher education funding bodies (HEFCE, SFC, HEFCW and DEL) from SQW Ltd**

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# Executive summary

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## Introduction

1. We (SQW) were commissioned by all of the UK higher education funding councils to carry out an independent specialist review and evaluation of the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS) Programme. Within the brief we identified three key questions for the research:
  - what factors help or hinder the promotion of the sustainable development agenda?
  - how effective was HEPS in stimulating enhanced activity and change in HEPS partner institutions?
  - how far has HEPS achieved change within the wider higher education (HE) sector?
2. Our report draws on an extensive evidence base including HEPS programme management documentation, relevant policy and research reports, and 116 consultations including sustainable development practitioners and leading representative bodies inside and outside the HE sector.

## Policy context

3. The policy context has changed over the period of the HEPS Programme. When HEPS was initiated, sustainable development issues were not acknowledged as government priorities in either the Department for Education and Skills or funding council strategies. Now, there are government policies for sustainable development at all levels, which has implications for HE. All of the higher education funding councils are now engaged in developing strategies for supporting the higher education sector to embed sustainable development. HEPS has played a part in changing this context.

## Key issues

4. The concept of sustainable development is subject to critical evaluation within the higher education environment and a lack of shared understanding and terminology can be a hindrance in implementing initiatives such as HEPS.
5. There are two dimensions to sustainable development in higher education: corporate and academic. These are distinctive in terms of their issues, drivers and constraints. Corporate operational functions are driven by regulation and cost considerations

within many higher education institutions (HEIs). It is broadly accepted that a university site should be managed according to sustainable principles. Curriculum development is more complex as autonomous universities employ professionals who are influenced by their academic disciplines, professional institutions and wider changes in society. The institutions involved in HEPS began from different starting points, and made progress in furthering the agenda, on both sides. Overall, the adoption of sustainable development in HEI policy should be acknowledged as a cultural and change management issue.

6. There are also a number of drivers and barriers to implementing sustainable development in an HE context. Common barriers include:
  - HEI autonomy
  - lack of knowledge or enthusiasm from HEI leadership
  - time and/or financial constraints
  - restrictive structures.

Common drivers include:

- rewards and incentives
- internal champions and strategic leadership
- support from government policy and the funding councils
- legislation (for some operational areas) and professional accrediting bodies (for some curriculum areas).

These affect individual HEIs in different ways. In this report, we have distinguished between those which are internal and external to HEIs and suggest that the short- to medium-term focus for the funding councils should be on those factors which are considered external to HEIs.

7. The issues are not new but HEPS has raised their profile. There are also networks and organisations operating within and alongside the sector which are actively trying to promote the sustainable development agenda. There is no single focal point with an overview of what is happening and where it is taking place.

### **Impact of HEPS**

8. When HEPS was set up, the majority of the 18 HEPS partner institutions were in the early stages of promoting the sustainable development agenda within their HEIs and had the prior commitment of a few individuals to sustainability initiatives. Two-thirds of the institutions allocated internal management responsibility for HEPS to a senior-level steering group, and some of these groups have remained in place.
9. Most HEIs chose to concentrate their efforts on activities concerning their roles as businesses and focused on their impact on the environment. These activities were

predominately led by estates departments. Some changed teaching programmes and developed specific modules and courses with encouragement from HEPS, but little was undertaken in the area of research. HEIs that developed projects around their role in the community, tended to be those who were already doing liaison work in this area.

10. Overall, HEPS was rated as having had a moderate and positive impact, given the scale and timing of the programme. It helped to move the sustainable development agenda forward in many HEPS HEIs. HEPS acted as a catalyst and encouraged a continuation of ideas and projects that HEPS HEIs had started before HEPS. In almost all cases, HEPS helped to focus and co-ordinate the thinking and priorities of senior managers on sustainability principles and shifted attitudes to sustainable development in most of the HEPS partner HEIs. However, it was one of several factors, rather than the main driver, which helped to initiate changes at the time. It did not always produce significant change of itself.
11. Most consultees complimented 'Forum for the Future' for the way that it managed the Programme. Although there were mixed opinions about the frequency and effectiveness of communications managed by Forum, it was generally considered to have added value by bringing knowledge of sustainable development and experience within the HE sector.
12. There were a number of ways that Forum tried to communicate information on behalf of HEPS including tools, events and a website. In some ways these mechanisms helped to create a sense of community between partners, but they were generally seen as additional, rather than central, to the HEPS initiative. Different tools were useful in different circumstances and adapted in each individual case. Most of the HEIs downloaded at least one of the HEPS tools developed by Forum from the HEPS website. Among HEPS HEI staff, we found that there is less demand for the tools in late 2005, compared with early 2004, but these individuals were not the only target group for the tools. Forum reports that the use of tools has been much wider and suspects that the downloading of HEPS tools from its site, which remains high in 2006, includes students as well as international readers.
13. HEPS HEIs were conservative in their estimations of HE sector-wide impact. HEPS did not have a strong impact in non-participating HEIs. HEPS was perceived by non-HEPS HEIs as having been strongest at developing and sharing methods of good practice and at driving forward the sustainability agenda during its lifespan. External work to influence the HEI stakeholder community (research councils, student organisations and public sector bodies) was largely initiated and carried out by Forum staff, through their wider links and new opportunities arising from the Programme.

## Conclusion

14. The Partnership was aspirational and aimed high in its mission and objectives. HEPS was experimental in nature, useful and well-timed. The aims were challenging and HEPS achieved some impact within HEPS HEIs, but did not deliver all the hoped for internal promotion of sustainable development, synergy between partners or achieve sector-wide change through the transfer of tools, guidance and inspiration. The achievement of bringing 18 institutions together and working closely with their vice-chancellors and senior teams should not be underestimated. Vice-chancellors did not play a major role in the management of the programme but their participation was a significant factor in raising the profile of sustainable development.
15. HEPS achieved changes in the thinking and priorities of senior managers, and some new practices. The programme was most useful where it created or revised strategy and policy. Where strategy was already in place, HEPS helped to put it in perspective. Most policy changes remained embedded, but the structures were embedded to a lesser extent. However, our assessment is that the sector is well-disposed towards structural change to accommodate better sustainability practices and HEPS has been an influence in achieving this.
16. Critical success factors were seen by the HEPS partners as:
  - ‘top-down’ leadership supported at operational level by persuasive and well-regarded champions
  - dedicated resources (both time and money)
  - policies and structures in place.
17. HEPS was a top-down initiative. This was accepted by most consultees as a necessary approach for this type of project but some suggested that it would have been better to have worked from the ‘bottom-up’ as well, in order to change attitudes at the operational level and put policies into practice. Several HEPS consultees explicitly said that having [both] champions and the commitment of senior management is vital.
18. Autonomy and academic freedom have implications for curriculum change. At an institutional level this was also linked to the burden of accountability. On the one hand institutions looked to the funding councils for a lead, on the other hand argued for autonomy and freedom from interference. Responsibility lies in different places for different features of sustainable development. The funding councils were perceived to have a low profile during HEPS, but they did commission HEPS at a time when there were no specific higher education policy drivers for sustainable development.

19. There was very little sense of collectivity between the very different HEIs which were brought together for the purpose of HEPS.
20. Forum's definition of sustainable development was too broad for some respondents. It became easy to label anything as a sustainability issue. HEPS institutions often found it difficult to handle the economic, social and environmental elements together.
21. HEPS did not sufficiently address the importance of teaching in the context of research and scholarship. Neglecting this meant that HEIs implemented environmental policies that would be expected of any large organisation but that did not fully engage with their core work. However, to influence research would require an approach which acknowledged the national and international context rather than the institutional focus of the project. For a project of this kind it is unrealistic to expect a substantial involvement in research.
22. Overall, the debate prompted by HEPS was seen as valuable. A broad summary view is that HEPS was a relatively small project that had some success, was not without criticism, and had a reasonable impact, given its size and timing, in helping to move the sustainable development agenda forward in many HEPS HEIs.



# 1 Introduction

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1.1 SQW was commissioned by the UK higher education funding councils to carry out an independent specialist review and evaluation of the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (HEPS) Programme, which ran between 2000 and 2004.

## The HEPS Programme

1.2 The aim of the HEPS programme was to ‘establish a pioneering partnership of higher education institutions seen to be achieving their strategic objectives through positive engagement with the sustainable development agenda and to generate transferable tools, guidance and inspiration to encourage the rest of the sector to do likewise’<sup>1</sup>. Eighteen higher education institutions took part in the HEPS programme across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The total investment in the Programme by UK funding councils, the Department of Transport and a further small contribution was £813,221. The programme was managed and developed by Forum for the Future. There were three threads of activity within the Programme:

- **individual work programmes:** supporting higher education institutions (HEIs) in designing individual projects specific to each universities needs
- **partnership-wide initiatives:** using this experience to disseminate guidance documents and practical tools
- **influencing strategy:** building the capacity of organisations that make up the higher education (HE) world.

1.3 The 18 HE partners who took part in HEPS were:

|                            |                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ▪ University of Aberdeen   | ▪ Middlesex University        |
| ▪ University of Birmingham | ▪ University of Newcastle     |
| ▪ University of Brighton   | ▪ Queen’s University Belfast  |
| ▪ University of Cambridge  | ▪ University of Salford       |
| ▪ Cardiff University       | ▪ Sheffield Hallam University |
| ▪ City University          | ▪ University of St Andrews    |
| ▪ Heriot-Watt University   | ▪ University of Stirling      |

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<sup>1</sup> Ref – Forum for the Future documentation

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Liverpool John Moores University</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ College of St Mark and St John</li> </ul>                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Loughborough University</li> </ul>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Surrey Institute of Art and Design University College</li> </ul> |

1.4 Further information about the Programme can be found in Annex A.

### **The context**

1.5 Sustainable development is becoming an increasingly important part of public sector and higher education strategy. This review was primarily initiated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) because HEFCE's strategic statement and action plan (HEFCE 2005/28<sup>2</sup>) includes a commitment to carry out research and evaluation exploring the barriers to sustainable development in higher education and how these might be overcome.

1.6 The funding councils all committed to support this research and consider relevant recommendations. In 2006, there will be a broader strategic review of sustainable development activity within the HE sector in England. This study was commissioned, in part, to help to inform the scope of the forthcoming strategic review. Chapter 2 considers the strategic and policy context for this work. This is presented in terms of the key issues which determined the impact of the HEPS Programme.

1.7 The funding councils who have commissioned this research are: HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Department of Education and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). (At the time of HEPS, the Scottish Funding Council was the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council [SHEFC]. On the 3 October 2005 SHEFC merged with its sister organisation the Scottish Further Education Funding Council [SFEFC] to become the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, which is referred to as the Scottish Funding Council [SFC]).

### **Methodology**

1.8 The terms of reference for this research specified:

"The Council wishes to place a contract for this evaluation of the HEPS scheme with particular reference to an appraisal of how effective it has been in **promoting the sustainable development agenda** in the higher education sector and its success in **stimulating enhanced activity and change at all**

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05\\_28/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_28/)

**levels in HE institutions.** The evaluation should measure the relative strengths and weaknesses of the HEPS programme to achieve **change for sustainable development within the HE sector.**”

- 1.9 Within this brief we identified three key questions for the research:
- what factors help or hinder the promotion of the sustainable development agenda?
  - how effective was HEPS in stimulating enhanced activity and change in HEPS partner institutions?
  - how far has HEPS achieved change within the wider HE sector?
- 1.10 The programme of research was designed in three phases to investigate each of these three questions and iteratively test the issues and findings at key stages of the work programme: each stage increasing in scope and building on the previous stage in developing a fuller understanding of the key issues for measuring impact. The research was also intended to be action-orientated to provide recommendations for future strategy.

#### **Phase 1: Scoping the sustainable development agenda**

- 1.11 Phase 1 helped to set the context and define the current sustainable development agenda. This included the identification of the current priorities within the sustainable development agenda through a desk-based review of key strategies and reports. This was supplemented by consultations with a selected number of ‘experts’ in the field who were approached for their views and understanding of HE engagement in the sustainable development agenda. These organisations included: Forum for the Future, HEFCE, Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals, Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC), Higher Education Environmental Performance Improvement (HEEPI), Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), Higher Education Academy, Academy for Sustainable Communities, Royal Town Planning Institute and the editor of the ‘International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education’.
- 1.12 Concepts and ideas derived from these consultations were used throughout the research to test the extent to which the HEPS Programme has influenced the sector to move towards a sustainable way of working. A copy of the research tool used can be found in Annex B.

## **Phase 2: Consultations with the 18 HEPS partner institutions**

- 1.13 The second stage involved a review the effectiveness of HEPS within HEPS partner institutions. This focused largely on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the HEPS Programme to achieve change for sustainable development.
- 1.14 All 18 partners were consulted about their involvement in HEPS and to ascertain what change has occurred at different levels within and between the HEPS HE institutions. Nine of the partners were visited for face-to-face meetings with a range of different stakeholders (including senior staff, academic staff, non-academic managers and students). The main senior manager for HEPS was interviewed by telephone in the remaining nine HEPS partner institutions. We used a focused aide-memoire in all consultations and in practice covered different aspects of it with different people depending on their level of involvement and understanding of HEPS. A copy of the research tool used can be found in Annex B.

## **Phase 3: Electronic survey of the wider sector**

- 1.15 Both of the early stages provided a strong platform for the final stage which comprised a sector-wide, web-based survey targeted at all UK HE institutions. The survey was constructed to assess the impact the programme has had beyond HEPS partner institutions in the wider HE sector. These results were supported by in-depth discussions with five HEIs who were active in implementing the sustainable development agenda, to provide some comparison against the achievements of HEPS over the same period. The full set of survey questions can be found in Annex B.
- 1.16 Email invitations were sent via two networks within the sector – the EAUC and AHUA. These networks were seen as appropriate mechanisms for dissemination. EAUC is the main network for environmental and sustainability officers in HEIs and AHUA members are senior university administrators with responsibility for an overview of management and governance issues within HEIs. The invitation included an electronic link to a web questionnaire. This survey achieved 34 responses. Of these, 28 were from non-HEPS HEIs, which is around a 20% response rate in terms of representation from all UK HEIs who were not part of HEPS.

## **Evidence base**

- 1.17 This report draws on an extensive evidence base including HEPS Programme management documentation, relevant policy and research reports, and 116

consultations including sustainable development practitioners and leading representative bodies from inside and outside the HE sector.

1.18 In terms of sector-wide representation, the consultations taken together represent staff working within approximately 50 HEIs – around a third of HE institutions in the UK – providing significant representation from HE institutions.

1.19 The research was designed to include individuals working and studying at a range of different levels with higher education institutions: vice-chancellor, pro vice-chancellor, senior manager, operational manager, academic, and student. Consultations included:

- face-to-face visits comprising 48 interviews with a range of individuals (and in some cases telephone follow up and contact with external partners) at 9 of the 18 HEPS partner HEIs
- telephone consultations with senior managers at the remaining 9 HEPS HEIs (10 people in total)
- 34 responses to a sector-wide web-based survey<sup>3</sup>
- five in-depth consultations with sustainability and environmental managers at non-HEPS HEIs<sup>4</sup>
- ten interviews with stakeholders in external networks and organisations.

1.20 A full list of all of the organisations consulted as part of this research can be found in Annex D. Individuals and their responses are anonymised throughout the report.

### **Report structure**

1.21 The remainder of this report summarises the policy context in Chapter 2, the key issues in Chapter 3, the impact of HEPS in Chapter 4 and the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the research in Chapter 5.

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<sup>3</sup> There were 34 responses to the web survey but five of these came from individuals within HEPS partner institutions. Therefore for the purpose of providing an assessment of the impact at non-HEPS institutions, these five responses were excluded from the survey analysis. These five were analysed separately and used to supplement the HEPS partner interview findings. The web survey analysis included 28 HEIs and one FE college.

<sup>4</sup> One responded to the web survey as well.

## 2 Policy context

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- 2.1 When HEPS was established in 2000 the policy context for higher education was different from the current position. Sustainable development issues were not acknowledged as government priorities in either Department for Education and Skills (DfES) or funding councils' strategies. HEPS took a pioneering role as it was one of the first programmes to engage with the issues. Although the environment for such a programme was not hostile, it was indifferent. Now it has become more supportive. The HE funding councils showed some foresight and influenced the policy context by establishing HEPS. HEPS partners made a joint representation to DfES on the Higher Education Bill, which became the Higher Education Act 2004, and is reported to have influenced the current DfES Sustainable Development Action Plan. The current policy context for the HE sector is explained in this chapter and is important in relation to the outcomes of this report.
- 2.2 At the **international level**, several international charters have been instrumental in shaping European, national and local policies. They include the **Talloires, Kyoto and Copernicus declarations**. These agreements form part of the framework for UK government policy on sustainable development. UNESCO has also committed to making 2005-2014 a **Decade of Education for Sustainable Development**.
- 2.3 The UK government published its strategy for sustainable development 'Securing the Future' in conjunction with the publication of a UK and devolved administrations' **shared strategic framework: 'One future - different paths' in March 2005**. This framework sets out common challenges and goals for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Within the UK strategic framework, separate strategies are being produced for the UK government, the Welsh assembly, the Scottish executive and Northern Ireland. The UK government's strategy 'Securing the Future' is for England and all non-devolved issues, it includes international affairs. The shared UK framework and strategies for the UK government and devolved administrations share the same guiding principles (see Box 3.1) and priorities. The four priorities for UK action, shared across the UK, are:
- sustainable consumption and production
  - climate change; changing the way that energy is produced and used

- natural resource protection and environmental enhancement
- sustainable communities.

### **The English context**

- 2.4 The **government's current strategy 'Securing the Future - delivering UK sustainability strategy'** (March 2005) outlines plans to implement long-term sustainability across all government departments and abroad.
- 2.5 The strategy states that the set of services that a sustainable community possesses includes well-performing local schools, further and higher education institutions and other lifelong learning opportunities. The strategy gives details of the Community Action 2020 programme launched in 2005. A number of the aims of the project will involve the education sector:
- increasing learning opportunities and training on sustainable development
  - forging links between school citizenship and sustainable development syllabuses
  - improving the promotion of volunteering opportunities
  - making community development practitioners and mentors better-equipped by improving access to information, advice, community packs, web portals and training
  - the promotion of good sustainability development practices, with education institutions of all types leading the way.
- 2.6 'Securing the future' explains that the DfES will aim to ensure that sustainable development is embedded in the core education agenda. This includes working with universities to raise the profile of 'sustainability literacy' in all curricula to make it a core competency for graduates. The strategy highlights the indicators currently used by the government to measure sustainable development progress. Of note is the continuing work by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the DfES to develop an indicator to show the impact of formal learning on knowledge and awareness of sustainable development.
- 2.7 The strategy also announces the investment of £192 million over three years into the Carbon Trust in order to develop more efficient carbon management technologies. The strategy emphasises the need for the education sector to develop more efficient methods, as it is currently responsible for 10% of all

carbon emissions from commercial and public buildings. The proportion of emissions for which the HE sector is responsible is not stated in the strategy.

2.8 The **DfES**’ **‘Sustainable Development Action Plan for Education and Skills’** is currently being re-written. The 2006 action plan is due to be published in Spring 2006. The last policy document published in 2003 has four key objectives which cover: education for sustainable development; the environmental impact of the department and its partner bodies; the environmental impact of the educational estate; and local and global partnership activity. The main objective of relevance to HE is on the impact of the educational estate. The plan encourages and supports all publicly funded educational institutions to operate to the highest environmental standards; this includes the co-ordination of activities by local education authorities, schools and non-government organisations. The strategy references the Department’s intention to ask HEFCE to develop a strategy for supporting the higher education sector to embed sustainable development.

2.9 In July 2005 **HEFCE** published a sustainable development support strategy called **‘Sustainable Development in Higher Education’** (HEFCE 2005/28). The document sets out HEFCE’s approach to promoting sustainable development following a public consultation including organisations and individuals in the higher education sector. The report aimed to demonstrate what has already been accomplished, build capacity and develop good practice to enable the HE sector to become a major contributor to sustainability within the next 10 years. HEFCE’s consultation process highlighted a consensus that an agenda on sustainability was important but also concerns over how it is promoted. There were mixed views on HEFCE’s role in promoting sustainable development and a lack of clarity concerning what it means to engage with a sustainable development agenda.

2.10 The report states HEFCE’s main aims and objectives to:

- seek 'win-win' opportunities for the sector to engage in this agenda by helping to identify sector-wide business cases as well as benefits for individual institutions
- promote the value of engaging with the sustainable development agenda by integrating it in HEFCE’s policy-making processes and being open about the often hard choices made
- demonstrate to stakeholders that HEFCE and HEIs are making genuine efforts to promote sustainable development and to develop good practice and tools



- support sector-led capacity building to pursue this agenda, based on existing frameworks and activity
- stimulate national debate among stakeholders on those structural features of the English HE system that currently underpin its financial viability but which do not promote sustainable development, and to identify possible policy responses.

2.11 The key priorities and plans for action can be summarised as follows:

- engaging with stakeholders (employers, professional bodies and students) to bring about policy synergies on sustainable development
- increasing the capacity of people to manage sustainable development
- sharing good practice, or supporting the development of good practice where none exists
- rewarding more sustainable behaviour.

2.12 The report also discusses the need for a flexible and understandable definition and policy for sustainable development. It highlights the HEPS programme finding that institutions must own their own sustainable development agenda.

### **The Scottish context**

2.13 The Scottish executive published a strategic framework for sustainable development in December 2005 entitled '**Choosing Our Future: Scotland's Sustainable Development Strategy**<sup>5</sup>'. The document sets out actions for Scotland as its contribution to the UK shared framework for sustainable development. The Scottish strategy provides a high level strategic framework for the executive's strategies on climate change, transport, renewable energy, energy efficiency, 'green' jobs and biodiversity.

2.14 One of the key strands of the executive's strategy is 'Learning to make Scotland sustainable' (Chapter 13). Within this strand, the key outcomes are for "...a Scotland where:

- learning for sustainable development is a core function of the formal education system
- there are lifelong opportunities to learn

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/12/1493902/39032>

- the sustainable development message is clear and easily understood.”
- 2.15 The executive plans to publish a strategy in 2006 on the wider contribution to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which will cover education in its broadest sense. It plans to monitor the strategy in line with the arrangements for its high level strategy.
- 2.16 The executive’s strategy states, in paragraph 13.8, that: “Scotland’s universities and colleges have a vital contribution to make to the UN Decade. In their estate developments they can act as exemplars to others. The funding council will provide best practice advice and assist - where possible through funding mechanisms - the development of an estate which is based on sound principles of resource procurement, energy efficiency, and waste management.”
- 2.17 In paragraph 13.9, the executive’s strategy goes on to state: “Universities and colleges also have a role to play in spreading knowledge to their students and the wider community, supporting research that leads to more sustainable technologies and introduce education for sustainable development into their curricula wherever relevant, particularly for qualifications relating to the use of natural resources. The executive will work with the funding council to develop guidance and examples of best practice in all these areas.”
- 2.18 The Scottish Funding Council is in the process of publishing sustainable development guidance and is working on the development of key performance indicators in relation to sustainable development for the sector.

### **The Welsh context**

- 2.19 In 1998, under the Government of Wales Act, the National Assembly for Wales assumed a responsibility for sustainable development in Wales as one of the assembly government’s cross-cutting themes. The document **‘Education for Sustainable Development – a Strategy for Wales’** was issued by the assembly for consultation between September and December 2005. The strategy that will emerge as a result of this process will identify specific actions for the assembly government and its partner organisations.
- 2.20 HEFCW has undertaken to deliver its own strategic aims in clear and positive support of the national assembly’s approach to sustainability. It will do this in particular, through teaching and research, but also through the operational and corporate practices of HEIs (e.g. in respect of environmentally sensitive energy and estate policies).

2.21 HEFCW's Corporate Plan already commits the Council to engage with the sustainable development agenda in its commitment that:

- by 2010 HEFCW "will have enabled the sector to embed sustainability in its overall strategic planning to ensure that in all aspects of their activities HEIs deliver sustainable impacts, as measured by evidence provided in the various plans requested from HEIs by the Council".

2.22 Over coming months, HEFCW plans to define its engagement, and the engagement of the Welsh HE sector, in sustainable development more precisely and more prominently through support for the Welsh Assembly Government's overarching Sustainable Development Action Plan 2004-2007. Specifically, this will be through support for a strategy for action that will set out a clear future for education for sustainable development and global citizenship within the school, youth, further education/work-based learning, higher education and adult/continuing education sectors.

#### **The Northern Irish context**

2.23 In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Environment is leading the development of an inter-departmental strategy for sustainability. As part of its contribution to this, the Department for Employment and Learning has agreed that HEFCE's support strategy '**Sustainable Development in Higher Education**' (July 2005) should be issued to Northern Ireland's HE institutions.

#### **The Egan Review**

2.24 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned a report, **Skills for Sustainable Communities (2004): The Egan Review**<sup>6</sup> which recommended that creating sustainable communities requires not only upgrading the skills of built environment professionals, but also the active engagement of a wide range of occupations with a broad range of generic skills, behaviour and knowledge, e.g. from government to retailers, police officers and educators. Around 100 different core occupations are identified, divided into:

- 'core' occupations – directly planning, delivering and maintaining sustainable communities (e.g. planners, government staff, voluntary groups)
- 'associated' occupations – contribution is extremely important, but not involved full-time (e.g. police officers, health service, educators)

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1127965>

- ‘legitimate interest’ – but not necessarily employed in the sector (e.g. wider public, media, students, school children).

2.25 It is explicit that this will require new skills and new ways of working, and implicit throughout the document that the HE sector can provide a strong start for professionals across the board, both in terms of directly relevant skills, and ‘softer’ skills developing understanding/knowledge of the broader subject across the disciplines. The report states:

“We believe that it is the generic skills, behaviour and knowledge that will make the difference between successful delivery and failure. Skills such as the ability to create a vision, leadership to achieve buy-in to the vision, communication, team working, project management, process re-engineering, understanding sustainable development, effective financial management, understanding the economics of development and the processes of local democracy...” (page 10)

2.26 It is against this background that the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) was proposed and developed. There is a re-emphasis on planning (for sustainable communities) on mixed-use, multi-purpose developments, in order to deliver safe and attractive places. This is accompanied by the need for strong leadership at local level to drive a vision forward in conjunction with all key partners, and “above all skilled committed individuals working together to make people’s priorities a reality” (page 4). For the ‘core’ occupations, it is recognised that “the breadth of these occupations and their different training and accreditation processes make it difficult for existing providers and institutions to deliver the requisite skills to everyone involved” (page 11). A new mechanism is proposed “to develop world class skill sets”, this is now the ASC.

2.27 The report recommends that the government works with professional institutions, local authorities, education institutions, sector skills councils, and regional centres of excellence:

- to raise the profile of ‘core’ occupations and understanding of their role, and to encourage entrants to these professions (paragraph 4.13)
- to ensure that an introduction to the generic skills forms part of existing formal training courses for built environment professions (and a requirement for accreditation), and that cross-sector working is introduced at an early stage (paragraph 4.18)
- employers in core occupations should deliver continual training opportunities; and make continuing professional development training

in generic skills compulsory and able to be accredited (paragraph 4.24)

- organisations with responsibilities for training those who work in 'associated' occupations should review training programmes to ensure they include both generic skills and an appreciation of sustainable communities. Joint project working with others from core and associated groups will increase cross-occupational understanding and sharing of good practice. Ideally regional centres of excellence should have a role in brokering such projects (paragraph 4.33).

### **Summary**

2.28 The policy context has changed over the life of the HEPS Programme. When HEPS was initiated, sustainable development issues were not acknowledged as government priorities in either DfES or funding council strategies. As the sustainable development agenda has progressed over the past five years, the policy context has changed. Now there are government policies for sustainable development at all levels, which has implications for HE. All of the higher education funding councils are now engaged in developing strategies for supporting the higher education sector to embed sustainable development. HEPS has played a part in changing this context, in a formal sense, for example, when HEPS HEI partners made a joint representation to the DfES on the Higher Education Bill to influence the 2003 DfES Sustainable Development Action Plan.

### 3 Key issues

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3.1 It would be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the HEPS Programme without considering ‘sustainable development’ as a concept, since it is the key ‘agenda’ that HEPS was set up to promote. This section focuses on a discussion of our findings on the current sustainable development agenda and the way in which it is interpreted and perceived in a higher education context.

#### **The definition of sustainable development**

3.2 Consultations with HEPS and non-HEPS institutions confirmed our initial impressions that, within the sector as a whole, sustainable development is considered to be an important objective but is difficult to promote across all parts of HE. This is largely for two reasons:

- the concept is broad and easily misunderstood. It is used in different ways and can sometimes be a ‘catch-all’ for all policies which support environmental or social objectives
- the essence of academic activity is scepticism and critical evaluation. Concepts are therefore subjected to heavy critique and continually re-evaluated. Change to the curriculum, or academic discourse more generally, arises from debates within academic peer groups and cannot be easily imposed from outside.

3.3 It is 25 years since the World Conservation Strategy<sup>7</sup> began to advance the theme of sustainable development and almost 20 years since the first internationally recognised definition of sustainable development was put forward in ‘Our Common Future’ (also known as the Brundtland Report)<sup>8</sup>, but there is still no common shared understanding as to what sustainable development means. Lack of consensus about the agenda adds complexity and can create misunderstanding about motives. For example, HEFCE used the internationally recognised Brundtland Report (1987) definition until recently although it received some criticism in its recent consultation that this was not sufficiently wide nor in line with the current (2005) UK government

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. International Union for Conservation of Nature, United Nations Environment Programme and World Wildlife Fund (1980): ‘World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development’, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Gland.

<sup>8</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) ‘Our Common Future’, Oxford University Press

definition. The HEFCE consultation document preceded the new UK strategy and HEFCE has since included the new definition in its final strategy. At the time of HEPS, Forum for the Future used the then current 1999 UK government definition (all three definitions are given in Box 3.1 below).

### **Box 3.1: Definitions of sustainable development**

#### **Brundtland Report (1987) definition:**

“Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

#### **UK government strategy (1999) ‘aims’<sup>9</sup> at the time of HEPS:**

“...meeting four objectives at the same time, in the UK and world as a whole:

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

#### **Current UK government strategy’s ‘guiding principles’ (2005):**

- living within environmental limits
- ensuring a strong, healthy and just society
- achieving a sustainable economy
- promoting good governance
- using sound science responsibly.

The strategy goes on to state: “These principles will form the basis for policy in the UK. For a policy to be sustainable, it must respect all five of these principles, though we recognise that some policies, while underpinned by all five, will place more emphasis on certain principles than others. Any trade-offs should be made in an explicit and transparent way.”

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<sup>9</sup> The 1999 strategy used the Brundtland Report definition and set out that sustainable development means “a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come”. The strategy also had 10 guiding principles, but the aims were used to capture the simple priority areas at the heart of sustainable development.

- 3.4 HEPS consultees confirmed that the language used can be a hindrance. The terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ have become fashionable and are sometimes used indiscriminately with only limited connection to definitions such as those set out in Box 3.1. As a result, they could be used to justify anything, some argued, and need to be broken down to practical activities.
- 3.5 Some HEPS consultees were struggling to understand where and how they fitted in to the global-local spectrum and commented that the difficulty of the concept often leads to partial implementation, frequently concentrated on the environmental side. For many the agenda is still seen as primarily environmental and there was less recognition of social or other aspects.
- 3.6 Forum argued that, in the context of the definitions in Box 3.1, the three components of sustainable development (see Annex A, Appendix 4), environmental, social and economic are not necessarily in competition in any significant way and that it is possible to move forward on all three fronts together. Some HEPS consultees found this approach difficult. A pragmatic focus on improvement and getting on with things was widely endorsed, particularly by those involved in managing or administering the corporate activity of universities but they recognised that moving forward on one front might have undesirable consequences in other areas. For academic staff it was important to address the trade-offs that exist between the component parts of sustainable development. Many sympathised with the argument that doing something was better than nothing but universities are required to address trade-offs intrinsic to the debate. A detailed critique of the concepts and models employed, such as the ‘triple bottom line’ and ‘five capitals model’, is part of the core work of universities. It is important to engage in critical debate in a higher education environment.
- 3.7 Partly as a result of these definitional issues and partly because of the ways in which activities have been dealt with traditionally in universities, a number of relevant areas of work were not always labelled as part of sustainable development. For example, many human resource strategies and problems can be interpreted as part of sustainable development but this interpretation is rarely taken. In the curriculum, critical skills development is frequently taken for granted and not separately labelled, but it is essential to becoming a sustainability literate person.
- 3.8 In many universities the core concept of sustainable development is well-understood. Some of that understanding has arisen because of the higher profile HEPS gave. Even so the term sustainable development is used less



widely. 'Environment' is sometimes used as a substitute even though there is recognition that sustainable development is a wider issue. Frequently the concept is broken down into its component parts. A number of universities are using the notion of **corporate social responsibility**, or sometimes corporate social and environmental responsibility, as a synonym for sustainable development in relation to their corporate activities, as against academic activities. This emphasis includes the relationship of the university with its wider community and is not restricted to issues such as waste and the environment.

- 3.9 Some HEPS consultees pointed out that the debate had moved on from definitions of sustainability. These commentators argued that in HE most people support the principles, and the focus has shifted towards delivery. We suspect this change has largely occurred among those who are already knowledgeable about sustainability. It is clear in many institutions that understanding is patchy and has not been fully incorporated – it is not taken for granted.

#### **Two dimensions of sustainable development in HE – corporate and academic**

- 3.10 Many consultees from a range of institutions and organisations distinguished between two aspects of current strategy; first, the broad management and operation of the sector; and second, the development of the curriculum. Each is different with different issues, drivers and constraints. Drivers, such as specific regulations, tend to be in place for many operational functions within HEIs, but the development of an appropriate curriculum is much more complex.
- 3.11 Discussion around the curriculum has to recognise that it is a primary component of one of the key outputs of higher education. Formal learning in HEIs is based on theories and evidence founded in the canons of the academic disciplines. Vocational courses are not exempt from this. They are rooted in academic disciplines and attempt to teach students skills of critical awareness and professional judgement. The government's 2005 sustainable development strategy highlights the need for 'sustainability literacy' as a core competency for graduates but it is not straightforward to embed this into the curriculum of autonomous universities employing professionals whose reference groups are their academic disciplines or professional institutions.
- 3.12 It is unrealistic therefore to expect academic disciplines which operate across, and independent of particular HEIs, to respond in their curriculum development to exhortations from vice-chancellors or senior managers in, for

example, the funding councils. Changes to the curriculum are influenced by other drivers.

- 3.13 Different curriculum areas engaged in HEPS differentially. It is clear, however, that there exists considerable grassroots enthusiasm among some academics. A number of examples can be found of an increased emphasis on sustainable development and, in some cases, the re-badging of courses to emphasise their sustainable development content. In some universities HEPS brought existing curriculum elements into the limelight and stimulated some academic areas to emphasise the sustainable development elements of their curriculum in ways that had not happened before. Some academic consultees spoke positively of the way in which HEPS acted as a catalyst for shifting the emphasis in the curriculum.
- 3.14 There were also academic consultees who were not persuaded of the merit in changing the curriculum. This did not usually imply a negative view of policies to improve sustainability. Consultees agreed that, for example, the university's site should be managed according to sustainability principles but argued that it did not follow that sustainability should be privileged in some way in the curriculum.
- 3.15 The outputs of university teaching already include the development of skills of criticism and scepticism in graduates. Evaluative skills and the importance of judgement based on evidence are also important graduate attributes. In those respects sustainability literacy is already taken into account in the HE curriculum. What is lacking, in some cases, is the connection between graduate skills and sustainable development. Through HEPS, Forum was concerned to develop a process which academic staff could use to think through these connections. Forum found it hard to engage staff in discussion about the curriculum and, for example, chose to test the HEPS curriculum tool with a university partner outside the UK.

***Relevant approaches at different levels within HEIs***

- 3.16 HEPS HEIs approached sustainable development from different starting points. Some had been doing a good deal on the academic side, others on the operational side. Some already had structures and mechanisms in place to govern and manage change.
- 3.17 A number of operational managers in HEPS HEIs commented that their colleagues are not interested in sustainable development, perhaps because they do not yet understand it. The universal approach to combine the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development,

which was promoted by Forum during HEPS, is perhaps most appropriate at vice-chancellor level, but had limited influence at the operational level. There was some suggestion that the concept could be more easily understood at the practical level if broken down into component parts, e.g. environmental practice, social policy/local community, economic regeneration. The difficulty with this approach is that the components are interrelated and there is a danger that important linkages may not be made if components are tackled separately. However, there is a view that there are some 'quick gains' to be made on the environmental side.

- 3.18 In some HEPS institutions, corporate and operational views differed within the university though they were usually broadly supportive of taking the agenda seriously. For example, the senior management team in one university argued that the university could not afford to carry out aspects of sustainable development. There, the estates department operated pragmatically. In others, whilst not necessarily included in a mission statement, sustainable development had caught the attention of senior management and had become embedded in policy. In those cases, enthusiasts in, for example, estates departments did not have to push hard to ensure sustainable development principles were taken seriously. At the other end of the spectrum, there are HEPS HEIs where sustainability has become a focus of attention and is readily incorporated into all the corporate and operational work of the institutions.
- 3.19 There appears to be enthusiasm for embracing sustainable development in operational areas, such as estates and procurement. Senior management teams have a range of responses. In HEPS institutions it can be described at worst as benevolently neutral, frequently hard-nosed in resource allocation and sometimes genuinely supportive, occasionally with enthusiasm.
- 3.20 In general there was less awareness of social and community issues. HEPS and non-HEPS HEIs argued that further guidance would be beneficial and that more emphasis could be given by the funding councils about what appropriate policies should be. In terms of broader university responsibilities, including academic areas, there is recognition that adopting sustainable development as a key component of HEI policy is a cultural and change management issue and would benefit from an approach which acknowledged that. This includes reference to addressing controversial areas such as academic freedom and acknowledgment of the wider drivers for disciplinary change.

- 3.21 An increasingly important factor for many universities, which is independent of HEPS, is the increasing awareness of sustainable development by many professional institutions and employers. This includes government organisations and non-government organisations. One university expressed the point starkly: teaching sustainable development is about future-proofing career opportunities. Changes in professional institutions are also likely to influence academic areas since they are reference groups which are seen as more relevant to course development.

### **Distinguishing between internal and external drivers and barriers**

- 3.22 Drivers and barriers affect different HEIs in different ways. This assertion is supported by the variety of different factors mentioned by consultees during the research.

#### ***Barriers***

- 3.23 Factors that hinder the progress of the sustainable development agenda in HE were said to be:

- HEI autonomy
- lack of knowledge or enthusiasm from HEI leadership
- financial priorities
- lack of suitable discretionary funding
- lack of interest
- difficulty of implementation.

Students can be major drivers of sustainable development but by their nature they move on and so it is difficult to maintain a consistent student voice easily. The Research Assessment Exercise was perceived by some to be a hindrance because it drives a particular research focus and, it is claimed, limits the ability to be creative or take risks. In addition, the vision for sustainability needs to be constantly refreshed, particularly as the membership of universities' senior teams changes.

- 3.24 The devolved structure of budgets was cited regularly as a limiting factor and there were frequent references to lack of resources more generally. Funding in HE more generally is becoming more short-term. This is not necessarily accepted by the funding councils who emphasise the stability of the funding regime and its 'block grant' structure. Many HEIs make substantial long-term

investments. Nevertheless short-termism features in HE and can make it difficult to take seriously long-term objectives such as sustainable development. Part of this is explained by some consultees in relation to the increasingly uncertain environment in which HEIs operate.

- 3.25 The HEPS report 'On Course for Sustainability' (Forum for the Future, 2004) also supports a number of the findings above, stating that: "Academics keen to integrate sustainability into their courses can be thwarted by less enthusiastic colleagues. Time pressures, cultural barriers to cross-departmental collaboration and multi-disciplinary course validation or research project design all proved difficult areas in which Forum for the Future could not easily intervene." (Section 2.3.2, p.32).
- 3.26 Currently, there are few cross-departmental initiatives within HEIs addressing sustainable development in higher education. The discipline structure of HE, particularly in England, makes it difficult in some cases to address these kinds of approaches. There are pockets of good practice and the recent reviews carried out by the Higher Education Academy have revealed considerable enthusiasm and innovation in many disciplines. Many modules incorporate sustainability issues but are not explicitly labelled. In that respect the sustainable development agenda is becoming part of the mainstream.
- 3.27 There are concerns, to which we have already alluded, about the appropriate approach to curriculum change. Professional and academic peer groups are key to this issue. In practice, interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary programmes find it easier to incorporate sustainable development. The strong disciplinary focus in many English universities works against this kind of change. The Scottish tradition is different and generally is more encouraging for interdisciplinary work. Our research threw up examples of interesting curriculum developments in Scotland which may, in part, derive from these traditions. Demand for, and supply of, cross-occupational and interdisciplinary HE courses could potentially be created by wider government policy led by agencies such as the Academy for Sustainable Communities. As we have noted, comments suggested that it would be difficult to encourage curriculum change top-down and that it would be most effectively driven from within discipline areas and professional groups.

#### ***Positive drivers***

- 3.28 On the assisting side, key drivers to implementation were reported to be:
- legislation (for operational change)

- government policy
- funding council support
- professional accrediting bodies (for curriculum change)
- champions
- the community engagement role of HEIs
- reputation.

Sustainable development has been used for influencing student demand in a number of universities.

- 3.29 Legislation relating to buildings and, for example, new EU directives, from 2006, for procurement are seen as significant drivers. No institution is able to avoid these imperatives.
- 3.30 Some of the positive drivers are internal and difficult to affect because they are heavily influenced by individuals, cultures and structures within HEIs and largely out of the control of the funding councils. However, a number are amenable to funding council influences, for example, financial incentives, legislation, and positive reputation.
- 3.31 There are currently no strong external pressures on the sector to engage with sustainable development other than some encouragement in the areas of sustainable construction and transport. On the contrary, financial issues remain an overriding priority, as well as the Research Assessment Exercise, for many universities and, for some, student recruitment.
- 3.32 Through the process of consultation on HEFCE's strategy and action plan, a number of wider key drivers and barriers for change were identified. These were tested through this research.

**Box 3.2: Factors noted in HEFCE's consultation** (issues which might be considered to be factors external to HEIs are highlighted in bold text)

**Drivers:** students as key drivers for change; individuals as champions for sustainable development (although this in itself may not be sustainable); **leading by example – through culture/values; the role of HEFCE in: use of metrics and monitoring; dissemination of good practice; rewards and incentives; strategic leadership;** seeking a more outward look for institutions, including getting communities involved; viewing sustainability and sustainable development as a core business activity.

**Barriers:** **lack of clarity over definition of sustainable development;** breadth and complexity of sustainability issues (and subsequent inertia); institution size (harder in smaller institutions) and lack of time (even in the larger institutions); **introduction of a market and competition for students;** uneven starting points between HEIs, and different economic and geographic constraints of the local context (requiring different approaches, methods and outcomes); **short planning time-frames, related to increasing pressures to secure relatively short-term funding and achieving value for money as a priority; divergent views about metrics and monitoring;** restrictive structures, **poor co-ordination** and cultural gaps within institutions; an already-overcrowded curriculum.

3.33 The factors in Box 3.2 are broadly consistent with the factors that were cited as drivers and barriers by HEPS HEIs, non-HEPS HEIs and other consultees during this study. Of the list of factors in Box 3.2, we suggest that the short- to medium-term focus for the funding councils should be on those factors which are considered external to HEIs (shown in bold), namely:

- leading by example, through culture/values
- the role of the funding councils in the use of metrics and monitoring
- dissemination of good practice
- rewards and incentives
- strategic leadership.

The funding councils also have a role to play in helping HEIs to overcome barriers of:

- lack of clarity over definition of sustainable development
- introduction of a market and competition for students
- short planning time-frames, related to increasing pressures to secure relatively short-term funding and achieving value for money as a priority
- divergent views about metrics and monitoring
- poor co-ordination.

***Influence of past experience and previous activities***

3.34 It is important to note that the ideas raised by HEPS were not new. Many of these issues had been experienced by HEIs prior to HEPS. HEPS raised the profile in a number of respects which we go on to consider in the next chapter.

3.35 Universities which were part of HEPS built on their previous experience and structures, rather than starting from scratch and many non-HEPS institutions had structures and processes in place which attempted to engage with sustainable development. Some of these were sophisticated and well-advanced. Non-HEPS institutions appear to have engaged with the sustainable development agenda, and like the HEPS institutions, with varying degrees of sophistication. A number have used HEPS tools and have found them valuable. Box 3.3 highlights a precursor to HEPS, HE-21, which was influential in the way HEPS was structured.

**Box 3.3 HE-21**

Twenty-five universities in the UK were involved in the 'Higher Education 21' (HE-21) project (1997-99). A precondition of partnership was a senior level commitment to making demonstrable progress within the lifetime of the project. The project developed a set of headline sustainability indicators. A consultation exercise revealed a strong consensus for a number of process indicators associated with the establishment of an environmental management system. Operational staff were identified as an important target audience for sustainability indicators.

3.36 Peer influence is important. There is a small number of networks which are leading in promoting different aspects of the agenda within the HE sector. Despite variations in where sustainable development responsibility sits within HEIs, there are a number of good exemplars of activity in UK HEIs and there is broad support for sustainable development among the members of



specialist networks and organisations. Forum worked with a number of networks and agencies during the HEPS programme and these are noted in Annex E. In addition, a number of other agencies and networks that were mentioned by consultees include: SIGnet (a network of bodies that fund, plan and regulate the post-school sector), Proc-HE (the body responsible for developing and implementing UK HE procurement strategy), Carbon Trust (set up by the government to tackle private and public sector carbon emissions), the Community Carbon Reduction Programme (CRed), and the Design Council's new think tank 'Red'. A number of professional associations have introduced sustainable development requirements into their membership criteria.

- 3.37 A number of local level initiatives have been or are being set up. Two of the HEPS universities, Newcastle and Aberdeen, have both recently established centres focusing on environmental sustainable development and three of the recently established Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) have a sustainable development focus, two at Plymouth and one at Kingston.
- 3.38 Although there are key actors and champions within the HE sector, there is no single focal point with an overview of what is happening and where it is taking place. Hotspots of sustainable development activity run by those who champion the agenda are in the minority. There remains a lack of integration between them and less ownership (and understanding) of the agenda within the broader sector.

#### **International benchmarking of sustainability practice**

- 3.39 In our consultation with a leading journal in this field (the International Journal for Sustainability in Higher Education) UK higher education was declared to be the leading sector in Europe after Sweden. This is based on perception, rather than hard evidence.
- 3.40 Using a different measure for national performance more generally, the world leaders in sustainability are the Nordic countries, which consistently top international sustainability rankings such as the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI)<sup>10</sup>. In 2004 a survey conducted by Swiss bank Zürcher

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<sup>10</sup> '2005 Environmental Sustainability Index; Benchmarking National Environmental Stewardship' (2005) Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, Yale University, and the Centre for International Earth Science Information Network, Columbia University. In the 2005 ESI Finland was ranked first, Norway was second and Sweden fourth. In 2002, Sweden was third and Finland and Norway were first and second respectively. [www.yale.edu/esi/](http://www.yale.edu/esi/)

Kantonalbank<sup>11</sup> found Sweden to be the world leader in social and environmental sustainability, scoring an overall sustainability rating of 9.5 out of 10.

- 3.41 In Sweden both national and local governments have made commitments to sustainable development backed with funding. Within this context, Sweden's HE sector has the opportunity to drive the nation's sustainability policy; the Centre for the Environment and Sustainability was set up in 2001 through a partnership between the universities of Goteborg and Chalmers. The centre involves all departments at both universities and its research network is the largest gathering of environmental scientists in Sweden, comprising 390 scientists from all faculties at both institutions and 300 representatives from industry, local authorities and other environmental organisations.
- 3.42 Both Goteborg and Chalmers have embraced a series of sustainable development policies. They have a strong sustainable development context to their teaching and offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate sustainability programmes. Goteborg University is undertaking a policy of making every one of its departments ISO 14001 and EMAS certified. In addition, both universities are on the European Panel of Sustainable Development, which is an independent academic body providing critical reviews of EU policy.
- 3.43 Both the US and the United Kingdom performed poorly in the 2005 ESI. The UK was ranked 65<sup>th</sup> and the US 45<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries. The ESI ranks environmental stewardship by integrating 76 datasets into 21 indicators of environmental sustainability. However, the Pilot 2006 Environmental Performance Index (EPI)<sup>12</sup> uses a different measure of gauging countries against a set of 16 policy targets. The UK is rated fifth in the Pilot 2006 EPI. New Zealand came first followed by Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, and the UK respectively.
- 3.44 The United States was ranked 28<sup>h</sup> out of 133 in the Pilot 2006 EPI. In addition, the US was ranked last in the Zurcher Kantonalbank survey of OECD members. However, despite the overall poor performance of the US, there has been significant action from American HEIs in pushing the sustainable development agenda.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Sustainability Rating for Countries; comparison of the 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries' Zurcher Kantonalbank, November 2004.

<sup>12</sup> 'Pilot 2006 Environmental Performance Index' (2006). Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy (YCELP) and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN) of Columbia University, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. [www.yale.edu/epi/](http://www.yale.edu/epi/)

- 3.45 Tufts University, Massachusetts has been very influential in moving the agenda forward; members of the institution instigated the Talloires Declaration in 1992 and set up University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), which aims to make sustainability a major focus of teaching, research and operations for higher education institutions around the world. The Talloires Declaration is an official commitment, made by university administrators, to environmental sustainability in higher education. The ULSF has helped to get 105 American universities and colleges signed up to Talloires, meaning that American institutions form a large proportion of the 325 signatories. Only nine UK institutions are currently signed up the declaration.
- 3.46 The Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) aims to promote full implementation of the Talloires, Kyoto and Copernicus declarations. The main partners for the GHESP include the ULSF, which aims to make sustainability a major focus of teaching, research, operations and outreach at its member universities. The ULSF also serves as the secretariat of signatures for the Talloires Declaration. The organisation is international, but is mostly concerned with promoting sustainable development in American higher education institutions.

### **Summary**

- 3.47 This chapter has looked at the key issues around the concept and implementation of sustainable development and the way in which it is interpreted and perceived in a higher education context. The concept of sustainable development is subject to critical evaluation within the higher education environment and a lack of shared understanding and terminology can be a hindrance in implementing initiatives such as HEPS.
- 3.48 There are two dimensions to sustainable development in higher education: corporate and academic. These are distinctive in terms of their issues, drivers and constraints. Corporate operational functions are driven by regulation and cost considerations within many HEIs. It is broadly accepted that a university site should be managed according to sustainable principles. Curriculum development is more complex as autonomous universities employ professionals who are influenced by their academic disciplines, professional institutions and wider changes in society. HEPS institutions began from different starting points, and made progress in furthering the agenda, on both sides. Overall, the adoption of sustainable development in HEI policy should be acknowledged as a cultural and change management issue.

- 3.49 There are also a number of drivers and barriers to implementing sustainable development in an HE context. Common barriers include: HEI autonomy, lack of knowledge or enthusiasm from HEI leadership, time and/or financial constraints and restrictive structures. Common drivers include: rewards and incentives, internal champions and strategic leadership, support from government policy and the funding councils, legislation (for some operational areas) and professional accrediting bodies (for some curriculum areas). These affect individual HEIs in different ways. In this chapter, we have attempted to distinguish between those which are internal and external to HEIs and suggest that the short- to medium-term focus for the funding councils should be on those factors which are considered external to HEIs.
- 3.50 These issues are not new but HEPS has raised their profile. There are also networks and organisations operating within and alongside the sector which are actively trying to promote the sustainable development agenda. There is no single focal point with an overview of what is happening and where it is taking place.
- 3.51 The chapter concludes with a summary of international benchmarking work.

## 4 Impact of HEPS

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4.1 This chapter focuses on the impact and additionality of the HEPS Programme.

### **Evaluation findings of the HEPS end of programme report**

4.2 This study was designed to complement, rather than duplicate, the end of programme report, 'On Course for Sustainability: Report of the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability 2000-2003', published by Forum for the Future in April 2004<sup>13</sup>. This report is a useful guide to the approach that was taken by Forum and the 18 HEPS partners in developing HEPS and reporting on the achievements of HEPS at the time. The report, and the reports of the Opening Sustainability Reviews (OSR), was used to steer the methodology of this research.

4.3 At the beginning, middle and end of the programme, institutions completed a transformation index to assess their progress against the programme's seven objectives. At the end of the programme institutions regarded HEPS to be most successful in terms of:

- sustainability reporting
- equipping senior management with knowledge, motivation and skills to make changes to their planning processes
- completing a number of innovative partner-designed initiatives
- developing materials and good practice (i.e. HEPS tools).

HEPS scored less well for:

- creating a sense of common purpose and leadership
- building capacity in the stakeholder community (i.e. research councils, student organisations and local and regional authorities).

4.4 In 2004, Forum reported that early feedback indicated a high level of satisfaction with HEPS and that it was widely felt that there should be some continuation of HEPS. The range and number of initiatives was said to be impressive and over 10,000 guidance documents had been downloaded.

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/publications/HEPSfinalreport\\_page1828.aspx](http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/publications/HEPSfinalreport_page1828.aspx)

Most progress had been made in natural capital, and less in human and social capital (using graduates and generating new ideas). Almost all of the HEPS HEIs had a sustainability policy, had included sustainable development in strategic planning or established a cross-university strategy group. Forum felt that staff should be well-placed to continue the work of HEPS.

- 4.5 However, there remained a tension between what might be right for a university as an autonomously governed body and an integrated approach for the whole HE sector in preparing for the future. Most of the HEPS partner HEIs reported, at the end of the programme, that they would welcome pressure and support from organisations that frame HE. They identified a need for intervention to make it “cheaper and easier to be environmentally, economically and socially sustainable” (Section 3.2, p.51). Suggestions were made that money and time would be the most helpful contributions to help embed sustainable development in higher education.
- 4.6 Further detailed reflections and lessons for the future were documented in the end of programme ‘On Course for Sustainability’ (2004) report.

### **Setting up HEPS**

- 4.7 The majority of the 18 HEPS partner institutions became involved in HEPS because they had some previous experience of internal and collaborative projects relating to environmental or sustainable development, had an environmental policy, and some considered themselves to be leaders in the field. Most of the HEPS partner HEIs were in the early stages of trying to promote the agenda within their HEIs and had the prior commitment of a few individuals to sustainability initiatives. In several cases they became involved due to vice-chancellor interest and enthusiasm for sustainable development. Institutions which were ‘starting out’ saw HEPS as providing a mechanism and opportunities to develop initiatives and raise the profile of the sustainable development agenda. Experienced HEPS partners saw the HEPS Programme as an opportunity to consolidate existing activities and increase the profile of the agenda within their institutions.
- 4.8 A framework was used for the selection of HEPS HEIs and this was structured by location (including consideration of urban/rural), size, tradition and age of institution. HEPS HE institutions were approached and recruited onto the HEPS Programme by Forum, or initially alerted to it by the funding councils. Most of the HEPS HEIs had some prior involvement with Forum. This was typically either through their involvement in HE-21 or because senior Forum staff knew or had access to the institution’s vice-chancellor or college

principal and were able personally to invite them to take part. From the very start, Forum secured awareness and commitment to the initiative 'from the top'. This was seen to be a positive thing by those working in senior and management roles because it gave authority and credence to take forward ideas previously perceived to be voluntary areas of core university business.

- 4.9 Despite the original aim of HEPS to 'establish a pioneering partnership of higher education institutions seen to be achieving their strategic objectives through positive engagement with the sustainable development agenda and to generate transferable tools, guidance and inspiration to encourage the rest of the sector to do likewise', most HEPS HEIs admitted that they were more internally focused from the start. They were most interested in achieving positive engagement within their own institutions, and did not see it as their responsibility to influence the wider sector; this was seen by most as a potential indirect influence of the programme.
- 4.10 Two-thirds of the 18 institutions allocated internal management responsibility to a senior-level steering group. The other HEPS HEIs worked on the basis of allocating a senior manager as lead contact with ground support from departmental teams. In many cases the steering committees comprised both academic and non-academic representatives with management responsibilities in their respective areas. For some, it was their first opportunity to bring together both the academic and estates side on sustainability issues. Many of these groups were either newly created or environmental committees which became sustainable development committees. The activities of HEPS were reported through these formal structures. In some cases a co-ordinator was recruited to work internally to get people involved.
- 4.11 None of the HEPS HEIs reported any significant difficulties engaging groups within their institution, although a few commented on the difficulties posed by student turnover; the buy-in of student officers was spasmodic, structured by the annual cycle of elections to sabbatical posts. Several HEPS HEIs reported difficulties making any progress in the area of curriculum development and engaging academics at the start. They cited: academic freedom and autonomy, lack of interest, and time as key barriers to achieving academic buy-in.
- 4.12 As a whole, institutions were generally positive about Forum's opening review workshop, although some academics found it patronising and this discouraged their involvement later on. The OSR visits were well-attended by HE staff, as evidenced by the attendance lists in the OSR reports. However,

for many staff, this initial involvement was not followed through. The visit resulted in a plan (Opening Sustainability Review) which included a tailored programme of activities unique to each HEI.

- 4.13 Forum's strategy to build capacity did not target external partners in the local community and consequently there was little activity to report in terms of partnership working and influence in local communities. Equally there was no independent demand from externals to be involved in HEPS, which distinguished HEPS from previous Local Agenda21 type activity. HEPS was more about encouraging HEIs to integrate what they were doing internally within their own university.

### **Impact of HEPS**

- 4.14 In reporting on the impact of HEPS two years after the programme finished it is important to acknowledge that opinions about effectiveness may have changed over time and other factors may have had an effect on the legacy. In particular, some key staff have moved on, working groups have been disbanded or individuals' roles and responsibilities have changed. A few institutions have been reorganised and will need to decide how to incorporate the lessons they have learned into new structures. For example, Surrey Institute of Art and Design has since merged with Kent Institute of Art and Design to become University College for the Creative Arts at Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester.
- 4.15 It is also important to recognise that many of the institutions were already committed to sustainability prior to the HEPS Programme or working with other agencies that encourage a sustainable development perspective (e.g. local authorities). HEPS was one of several factors, rather than the main driver, which helped to initiate changes at the time. The fact that the initiative was run within institutions by people who already supported the agenda was critical to HEPS success. HEPS was initiated at the right time to act as a catalyst and add momentum to join up disparate initiatives. As a result, attitudes to sustainable development have shifted. It is now talked about differently, and in some cases with more urgency, from how it was approached before HEPS. As one senior manager recounted: "HEPS has started the sustainability process and stimulated the discussion – in this sense it has done its job."

### ***Measurable changes from HEPS***

- 4.16 Different activities were reviewed in some detail at each of the HEPS HEIs selected for face-to-face visits. This was done to ensure coverage of all of the



areas of HEPS activity. In terms of direct achievements, HEPS helped to introduce some new areas of work at most of the HEPS HE institutions, some of which have remained embedded.

- 4.17 Forum observed three roles of an HEI: as a business, as a leader in teaching and research and as a significant member of the community. The level to which activities can be attributed to HEPS is discussed under each of these headings in relation to specific activities explored during this evaluation.

#### As a business

- 4.18 This was the main area where most HEIs chose to concentrate their efforts at the OSR stage. For example, as a direct result, a new management structure with a high-level steering group and sub-groups was created in one HEI. Since HEPS, it has increased its responsibilities and influence with the university and now has a budget and will soon be chaired by a pro vice-chancellor. For resource efficiency and environmental strategy, some HEPS HEIs developed environmental management systems, internal audits and annual reporting influenced by the models provided by the HEPS reporting tool. Through HEPS benchmarking, comparisons with other HEIs gave the champions leverage to lobby for resource use changes. Consideration was given to sustainable construction in buildings planning, development of transport plans or refining purchasing policies.
- 4.19 At all levels and areas of HEI work, HEPS was reported as having had most impact and focus on the environment, which was predominately led by estates departments. Even where HEIs were ahead on teaching sustainable development in the curriculum, they chose to use HEPS to audit and target performance within their estates department. This is possibly partly because they wanted to create some early quick wins and this was the area of least resistance, but mainly because there were clear financial benefits.

#### As a leader in teaching and research

- 4.20 In terms of student involvement, staff development and curriculum development activities, HEIs either considered themselves to be ahead of the game or facing significant barriers (due to issues around staff autonomy, time and interest). Some made changes in teaching programmes and developed specific modules and courses with encouragement from HEPS. A small number of senior managers said they would have liked more advice on embedding sustainability into the curriculum.

- 4.21 HEPS had only a very limited impact in the area of research. A number of HEIs pointed out that they were already doing a great deal in this area. Forum was able to find few opportunities to engage with HE research activities. To influence research in any substantial way would require an approach which acknowledged the national and international context and which looked at the academic world collectively, rather than in terms of the individual institutional location of academic researchers. The HEPS Programme was not well placed to work with the sector at this level.

As a significant member of the community

- 4.22 This area was also underdeveloped and difficult to measure because the HEIs who were most interested were already doing liaison work and therefore there was limited potential for the HEPS Programme to make substantial changes.
- 4.23 Table 4.1 gives examples of activities that were specifically mentioned by the 18 HEPS HEIs as activities which can be directly or indirectly attributed to the HEPS Programme in response to the question: "What were your key areas of activity?" Not all of the activities were embedded during or since the programme. A comprehensive list of all activities undertaken during HEPS at each institution can be found in the 'On Course for Sustainability' report (Forum for the Future, 2004).

**Table 4.1: Key areas of activity specifically mentioned as *directly influenced and attributable* by HEPS (Number in brackets indicates number out of 18 HEPS institutions that mentioned each type of activity)**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>As a business</b></p>              | <p><b>Strategic changes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strategy group set up/reformed (12)</li> <li>● Sustainable development/environmental policy documents or inclusion in strategic plan (7)</li> <li>● Appointed someone for sustainable development (4)</li> <li>● Pro vice-chancellor with responsibility for sustainable development (1)</li> </ul> <p><b>Reporting:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Internal audit/use of reporting tool (7)</li> </ul> <p><b>Resource management:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Environmental management system (2)</li> <li>● Energy reduction schemes (3)</li> <li>● Waste management activities (3)</li> </ul> <p><b>Travel:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Planning (e.g. fuels, staff schemes, car park charging, bus service) (8)</li> </ul> <p><b>Procurement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Changed procurement practices (5)</li> <li>● Capital programmes – sustainable construction (3)</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>As an educator</b></p>             | <p><b>Curriculum changes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developed/redesigned sustainable development module (6)</li> <li>● Developed sustainable development degree (3)</li> <li>● Investigated Master's course (1)</li> <li>● Badged sustainable development courses in prospectus (1)</li> <li>● Curriculum review (1)</li> <li>● Incorporated interdisciplinary elements into curriculum (2)</li> </ul> <p><b>Involving students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students presented at a HEPS seminar (1)</li> <li>● Students placement at Forum for the Future (1)</li> <li>● Students also organized and led a cross-university event (1)</li> </ul> <p><b>Staff development:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Incorporated into part of staff development programme (2)</li> </ul> <p><b>Research:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Established pan-university research school (1)</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>As a member of a community</b></p> | <p><b>Community liaison:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strengthened/some expanded existing community activities (initiatives included: green transport, nature trails around site, programmes with schools, community courses, activities holidays, campus bio-diversity leaflet, working with private landlords of student accommodation) (5)</li> </ul> <p><b>Strategic alliances:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Collaborations with external industry partners (3)</li> </ul>   |

### ***Overall influence of HEPS***

- 4.24 Overall, HEPS was rated as having had a moderate impact. Institutions used a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is no impact and 5 is very influential. Eleven HEPS HE institutions provided a response to this question. The mean score was 3 for the impact of HEPS within HEPS HEIs and 2.5 for the impact of HEPS in the wider sector. Only five institutions responded to the latter as most said they did not know or thought it had not made much difference in the wider sector.
- 4.25 The majority of commentators were very positive about the impact. One of the key strengths of the Programme was its top-down approach and the way that it brought sustainable development to the attention of governors, vice-chancellors, pro vice-chancellors and senior managers on the academic and non-academic side. In almost all cases, HEPS helped to focus and co-ordinate the thinking and priorities of senior managers and keep sustainability principles at the forefront of thinking. It also played a role in increasing information about sustainable development at this level. It helped to pull together different activities under the umbrella of sustainable development. From the perspective of estates staff, HEPS worked well at reaching a high level in universities, which they recognized as being the level at which it was targeted, and provided reassurance that sustainable development was a priority beyond their own HEI.
- 4.26 A weakness was the predominant focus on generalised information and explanation to senior managers. There was not much direction at a practical level and specifically it did not advise on how to implement sustainable development or set targets. Some middle managers thought it had missed a trick and could have developed some benchmark standards, which HEIs would then be encouraged to compete to meet. It was difficult to disseminate the agenda. It took effort to make a small difference. Findings from 'On Course for Sustainability' (Forum for the Future, 2004) on the main limitations were also restated: lack of time due to the short-term nature of the initiative and additional money to drive change. Some said it would have been easier if they had had dedicated staff for sustainable development.

### ***Additionality***

- 4.27 In terms of additionality, most senior managers admitted that the changes which occurred would probably have occurred anyway, although perhaps less well without the influence and focus provided by HEPS. In many cases, HEPS was a continuation of ideas and projects that they had started before

HEPS which were then brought into the limelight and benefited through the programme, rather than started by it and solely attributable. The term 'encouraged' was used by several people to describe the influence of HEPS. Some institutions said that they would not have got to where they are as quickly without the programme. The programme had a catalytic effect in some cases. Whilst it did not always produce significant change of itself, the programme's existence gave other related activities more opportunity to grow.

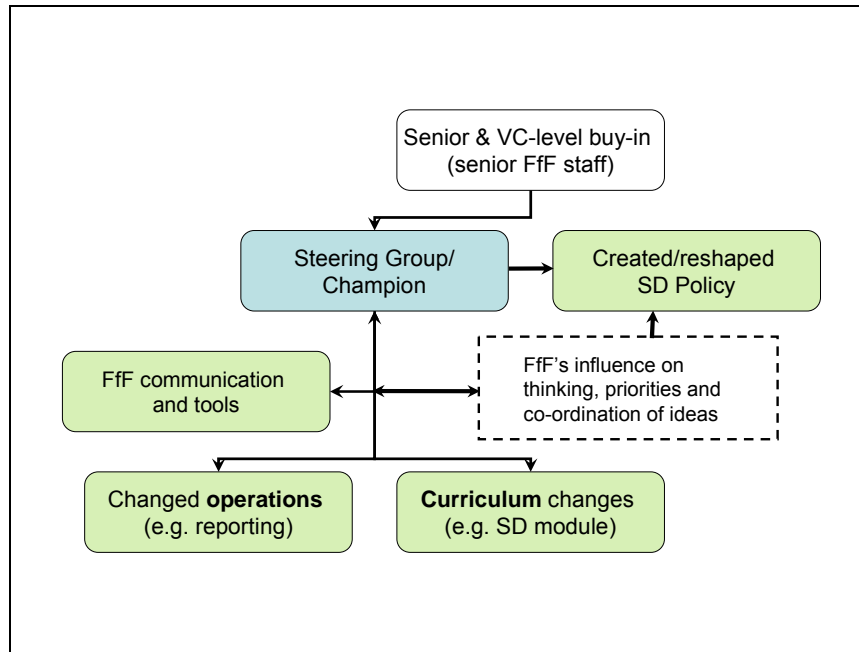
- 4.28 The changes it achieved were important and have made partners better and more focused since HEPS, but they were not significant changes in themselves. Some people reported a sense of losing momentum towards the end of the programme and others said the complete opposite, suggesting different levels of expectation for what HEPS would achieve.
- 4.29 Some significant contracts have been secured since HEPS, influenced in part by the initiative. For example, Aberdeen University's Centre for Environmental Sustainability with three local partners, and Newcastle's partnership with HSBC and the University of East Anglia on the 'HSBC Partnership in Environmental Innovation'.

#### **Management of HEPS by Forum for the Future**

- 4.30 On the whole, consultees said that they thought that Forum managed the HEPS Programme effectively. Several commented specifically on their team who were viewed very positively and described as "very professional", "good quality", "constructive", "active" and "talented people", who "knew what they were talking about" and were "nice people to deal with". Senior Forum staff were also described as "high energy", "invigorating", and recognised for being more widely influential. They were also considered to have both knowledge of sustainable development and experience within the HE sector and were complimented for seeing the bigger picture.
- 4.31 There were mixed opinions about the frequency and effectiveness of communications managed by Forum. They did not appear to appreciate the difficulties and pressures of staff that could not make themselves available at short notice. This was mentioned independently by several institutions. Some felt they were good in their advice and co-ordination role. Others specifically said that they did not think Forum added much value or that its advice was too generic and inflexible.
- 4.32 A small number of individuals complained about delays in the initial set-up process and said that Forum could have been more disciplined to get its OSR visit in place more quickly (one reportedly took place 18 months into the

programme). Some consultees were disappointed that Forum did not follow up with individual staff that attended the OSR and said that its resources appeared to be limited. Instead Forum channelled its contact through a limited number of top-level people.

- 4.33 HEPS was said to have increased the rate of change within some HEIs, partly because Forum maintained regular contact and asked probing questions. Forum staff attended meetings at some institutions. However, several said that the support offered by Forum was too distant and therefore less helpful than it could have been. Many would have preferred face-to-face help and support, but acknowledged that resources were limited. Forum was remembered for asking lots of questions by some of the partners. There were a few who suspected that Forum had used the HEIs to develop their own products (tools) through the consultative process, rather than offering useful support to HEIs. The terms “self-serving” and “fact-finding” were used both positively and negatively.
- 4.34 Senior managers acknowledged that the programme was a difficult one to manage in terms of finding an appropriate definition and methodology for sustainable development. Some consultees said that they thought the potential conflicts between the components of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental) had been underplayed by Forum during HEPS. Some comments from all levels considered that they pushed the notion of no trade-offs too far, which lost some credibility in a university context which, by its nature, is sceptical and critical. Views varied on the five capitals model and its relation to the real world.
- 4.35 The following diagram aims to conceptualise the typical management structure used to implement HEPS within each of the HEPS HEIs:



### Information exchange

- 4.36 There were a number of ways that Forum tried to communicate information on behalf of HEPS including tools, events and the website, which mainly contains the tools and guidance documents. In some ways these mechanisms helped to create a sense of community between partners, but they were generally seen as additional, rather than central, to the HEPS initiative. Most did not consider many transferable skills or ideas to have emerged from these means.
- 4.37 Some partners in the devolved administrations felt peripheral to the programme, but this was not always negative. This galvanised the Scottish institutions into forming their own partnership and working closely together (i.e. the Scottish University Network for Sustainability or SUNS). One HEPS HEI based outside England said it was useful to be part of what it termed as “a larger change in thought” across the UK through its involvement in HEPS. It felt that this had been an opportunity to work with the wider UK HE sector, rather than being left out by virtue of being non-English.

### *HEPS events*

- 4.38 Meetings were arranged in the format of seminars, events and conferences. These were assessed by most people who attended them to be useful for creating opportunities to network and transfer practice, which would not have happened otherwise. One of the strengths was that they enabled people in HEIs to talk to each other and stop ‘re-inventing the wheel’. This view was

not shared by everyone. Some found the meetings excessively general when specific advice was wanted.

- 4.39 These opportunities seem to have had most impact on those within the partnership. At one level, it encouraged a sense of common experiences, and possibly competition, contributing to the sense of a partnership 'club'. Many commentators thought that events were predominately attended by individuals who were already persuaded of sustainable development and champions in their own departments. These opportunities were not used (perhaps not intended) to promote the agenda to people who are less aware of sustainable development and they did not manage to convey the message that everyone needs to play their part in order to make a difference. Hence, some consultees were unclear about what Forum was trying to achieve from the events.
- 4.40 A small number of HEIs found it difficult to attend partner events. They commented that these were often London-centric, convened by Forum at short notice, and Forum placed demands on high attendance. This focus was also criticised for being unsustainable because more than one representative was asked to attend some events and partners were obliged to use transport in order to take part, where perhaps video conferencing could have been used. Management information indicates that Forum did arrange some events in 'the north' as well as 'the south'. Forum told us that it planned and agreed dates for events annually in advance with the key contacts, but it appears that this information was not disseminated widely.

#### ***HEPS tools and guidance documentation***

- 4.41 In Section 3 of 'On Course for Sustainability' (Forum for the Future, 2004), there is a recommendation that the real appraisal of the effectiveness of HEPS will have to be done after a long period of time and suggests that the uptake of tools is a suitable measure.
- 4.42 We observed that most of the tools were published in the last year of the programme or after it had finished and therefore had little impact at the time, other than through the involvement some institutions had in creating the tools. HEIs who were involved in the development of the tools found the process useful. Even so, awareness of the tools was high. Most of the HEIs downloaded at least one of the HEPS tools developed by Forum from the HEPS website<sup>14</sup>. The most commonly cited tools were:

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<sup>14</sup> [www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/aboutus/HEPS\\_page1509.aspx](http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/aboutus/HEPS_page1509.aspx)



- ‘Reporting for Sustainability’ (2003) (*audit tool*). We found very little evidence of this being used widely. A few universities had used it initially to benchmark their estates information against other HEIs. A few have since developed their own auditing systems or considered incorporating some indicators into a core set of performance indicators. This tool was said to be helpful but used some complicated terminology
- ‘Purchasing for Sustainability’ (2003) (*procurement tool*). This tool was considered to be the most useful, and commentators were generally very complimentary about it. It was generally disseminated to procurement officers and was used to design a purchasing guide at one institution
- ‘Travel Planning for Sustainability’ (2003) was one of the tools mentioned most by partners. It was useful as a reference guide where institutions were applying for new developments or were required by their local authority to submit travel plans, but generally there were other external influences that were more influential e.g. local authority or government guidance
- ‘Sustainable resource and asset management in the higher education sector’ (2002). Some partners found this tool good for learning. One person reported that they found the case studies in this tool “aspirational” and very useful for providing contacts for follow-up.

4.43 The other tools: ‘Accounting for Sustainability’ (2003), ‘Communicating for Sustainability’ (2004) and ‘Learning and Skills for Sustainable Development’ (2004) (*Curriculum tool*) were not referenced by consultees. One institution thought that the curriculum tool was not the right starting point for academics.

4.44 Different tools were useful in different circumstances and adapted in each individual case. A few openly admitted that their HEIs did not use the tools at all. Those who did use the HEPS tools said that they were nicely written, helpful and gave good examples of case studies. The tools provided a reference point in helping to design projects but were quite theoretical and gave a high level overview of existing practice, rather than specific guidance about implementation or new ideas. Some said that they are continuing to use the tools now. Where the tools were not being used, consultees thought that they had been developed in isolation and were too generic.

4.45 Several consultees considered the tools to be interesting to read and good documents, but that they were not necessary. Consequently, there is not much demand from partners for updating the tools. One commentator said

that any framework and guidance needs to be user-friendly, more practical and in an interactive and creative format rather than a journal. This indicates that there is less 'demand' from HEPS HEIs for the tools now compared with early 2004 when HEPS HEIs rated the HEPS tools as one of the strengths of the programme in a transformation index (see paragraph 4.3 of this report).

4.46 These comments need to be seen in the context of the nature of the HEPS HEI group. Many were already very familiar with sustainable development, had experience of implementing initiatives, but these individuals were not the target group for the tools. Forum reported that over 10,000 guidance documents were downloaded by the time of the 'On Course for Sustainability' report (Forum for the Future, 2004). Given that most of the documents were published in 2003 or 2004, this is exceptionally high. The number of downloads remained high in 2005. Forum has not been able to provide any analysis of who is downloading the tools or how many are repeat visitors. It expects some of the tools are downloaded by students undertaking projects on sustainable development and others may be downloaded by individuals outside the UK.

4.47 The sector-wide survey (summarised in the next section) provides further indication of the effectiveness of tools for the HE sector.

#### **Stimulating change across the wider HE sector**

4.48 HEPS HEIs were conservative in their estimations of sector-wide impact. Their views on the wider impact ranged from those who believe the sector is better engaged and exposed to sustainable development because they found the network very useful and remembered seeing people from non-HEPS HEIs at events, to those who thought the lessons from HEPS were not disseminated beyond HEPS HEIs. Very few HEPS institutions developed relationships with each other, other non-HEPS HEIs or externally with other private or public sector organisations for the purpose of HEPS. Many said that they are already liaising with local and regional government, industry and community partners in a number of ways.

4.49 In total, 29 non-HEPS institutions responded to the web survey, which is around a 20% response rate in terms of all UK HEIs. Around two-thirds (19) of the respondents had heard of HEPS prior to the survey. Eighteen institutions had heard of Forum through their wider work on sustainability, but only one had heard of Forum through the HEPS programme.

4.50 As context, five out of the 29 non-HEPS institutions said that sustainable development appeared in their vision statement and 11 said it appeared in

their objectives. A further 11 said that sustainable development did not appear in either their objectives or vision statement. The most common structure for the management of sustainable development was environment policy. The next most popular structures and mechanisms were a senior member of staff with general responsibility for sustainable development and other members of staff with specific responsibility for sustainable development. All of the institutions experienced some difficulties in making progress with the sustainable development agenda within their own institution. The most common difficulties in doing this were insufficient time, the breadth and complexity of sustainability issues, value for money being a priority and the limited number of staff with a remit for sustainability.

- 4.51 Only a small number of non-HEPS institutions had sent representatives to HEPS events. The most used HEPS tool was travel planning, followed by purchasing and reporting (which supports the findings from HEPS partners from Phase 2). Less than half (14) of the respondents had downloaded or received any of the HEPS tools. The majority used the tools for reference, with almost a quarter (7) of the institutions saying that they used the tools in this way. Two HEIs had used the tools to shape processes and procedures and two had not implemented the tools, but had disseminated them among colleagues. The purchasing and reporting tools were cited as offering the most potential to be developed further and they were also two of the most used. There was little demand for further development of the travel planning tool (despite it being the most used).
- 4.52 The influence of the HEPS programme across the HE sector on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 is no impact and 5 is very influential), was given a mean score of 1.9 by non-HEPS institutions (i.e. low to moderate impact). HEPS did not have a strong impact in non-participating HEIs; there was a general disagreement with statements about positive direct change or impact as a result of HEPS. There was, however, more agreement when individuals were asked if HEPS stimulated discussion in their HEI and slightly more positive feedback concerning sustainability thinking in the sector and confirmation that sustainable development is a government HE priority.
- 4.53 Three of the 29 respondents indicated that there were additional changes in their organisation as a result of HEPS. Of these, one institution commented that it was influenced by the HEPS travel planning work that HEPS institutions had done. Another stated that sustainability had entered the vocabulary and thinking within the institution as a result of HEPS. One respondent suspected that EAUC would have published the material if HEPS had not and so it is

hard to tell whether changes were truly additional. In terms of meeting its original objectives, HEPS was perceived by non-HEPS HEIs as having been strongest at developing and sharing methods of good practice and at driving forward the sustainability agenda during its lifespan.

- 4.54 Consultations with non-HEPS HEIs showed examples of good practice and thoughtful engagement with sustainable development. Understanding and activity was mixed and many of the comments raised by HEPS partners were repeated. Some non-HEPS HEIs were committed to improving practice in these areas for some time before HEPS was established. Some, for example, have found their wish to integrate fully with local communities has pushed them towards sustainable development activities. This does not indicate that the sustainable development agenda would have been taken forward without HEPS but it confirms that HEPS was one influence among many.
- 4.55 The full analysis of the web survey can be found in Annex C.

#### **Influence on HEI stakeholder community**

- 4.56 None of the HEPS institutions reported being involved in dissemination activities, beyond some involvement hosting and participating at partnership workshops and events. Some HEPS institutions mentioned various activities that they are currently undertaking to influence policy makers and industry on issues of leadership and sustainable development both at a local and national level. These activities are separate from the HEPS initiative.
- 4.57 Data from the programme's management information indicates that in practice HEPS did not only promote sustainable development within partner institutions. External work was largely initiated and carried out by Forum staff, however, through their wider links and new opportunities arising from the Programme.
- 4.58 Forum hosted meetings, conferences and events which were open to other agencies working within the HE sector, for example, HEPS worked with a number of stakeholder groups and organisations to run workshops or presentations at annual conferences amongst other networking activities. Articles were published in magazines and a joint representation was made to the DfES on the White Paper "The Future of Higher Education". A full list of conference and event appearances by the HEPS team can be found in Annex E which contains a copy of figure 4 from the 'On Course for Sustainability' report (Forum for the Future, 2004). The report also gives examples of the

wider impact of Forum staff presenting to overseas organisations in the US, Chile, Greece, Australia, and Hungary, as well as EU and UN bodies.

### **Summary**

- 4.59 When HEPS was set up, the majority of the 18 HEPS partner institutions were in the early stages of promoting the sustainable development agenda within their HEIs and had the prior commitment of a few individuals to sustainability initiatives. Two-thirds of the institutions allocated internal management responsibility for HEPS to a senior-level steering group, and some of these groups have remained in place beyond the programme.
- 4.60 Most HEIs chose to concentrate their efforts on activities concerning their roles as businesses and focused on their impact on the environment. These activities were predominately led by estates departments. Some made changes in teaching programmes and developed specific modules and courses with encouragement from HEPS, but little was undertaken in the area of research. HEIs that developed projects around their role in the community, tended to be those who were already doing liaison work in this area.
- 4.61 Overall, HEPS was rated as having had a moderate and positive impact, given the scale and timing of the programme. It helped to move the sustainable development agenda forward in many HEPS HEIs. HEPS acted as a catalyst and encouraged a continuation of ideas and projects that HEPS HEIs had started before HEPS. In almost all cases, HEPS helped to focus and co-ordinate the thinking and priorities of senior managers on sustainability principles and shifted attitudes to sustainable development in most of the HEPS partner HEIs. However, it was one of several factors, rather than the main driver, which helped to initiate changes at the time. It did not always produce significant change of itself.
- 4.62 Most consultees complimented Forum for the Future for the way that it managed the Programme. Although there were mixed opinions about the frequency and effectiveness of communications managed by Forum, they were generally considered to have added value by bringing knowledge of sustainable development and experience within the HE sector.
- 4.63 There were a number of ways that Forum tried to communicate information on behalf of HEPS, including tools, events and the website, which mainly contains the tools and guidance documents. In some ways these mechanisms helped to create a sense of community between partners, but they were generally seen as additional, rather than central, to the HEPS initiative. Different tools were useful in different circumstances and adapted in

each individual case. Most of the HEIs downloaded at least one of the HEPS tools developed by Forum from the HEPS website. Among HEPS HEI staff, we found that there is less demand for the tools now compared with early 2004, but these individuals were not the only target group for the tools. Forum reports that the use of the tools has been much wider and suspects that the downloading of HEPS tools from its site, which remains high in 2006, includes students as well as international readers.

- 4.64 HEPS HEIs were conservative in their estimations of HE sector-wide impact. HEPS did not have a strong impact in non-participating HEIs. HEPS was perceived by non-HEPS HEIs as having been strongest at developing and sharing methods of good practice and at driving forward the sustainability agenda during its lifespan. External work to influence the HEI stakeholder community (research councils, student organisations and public sector bodies) was largely initiated and carried out by Forum staff, through their wider links and new opportunities arising from the Programme.

## 5 Conclusion

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*“Such experiments should be undertaken even if they fail (which HEPS didn’t) – the sector needs room to experiment and learn.”* (HEPS vice-chancellor)

- 5.1 The HEPS HE institutions, along with Forum for the Future, achieved a number of hard-to-measure but important outputs. The HEPS HEIs took sustainable development seriously and the senior teams at all 18 institutions ensured their universities took positive steps towards greater understanding and involvement with sustainable development issues.
- 5.2 The Partnership was aspirational and aimed high in its mission and objectives for HEPS. HEPS was experimental in nature, useful and well-timed. The aims were challenging given the resources available to Forum, the expectation of in-kind contributions from HEIs, and their different starting points. Consequently, HEPS achieved some impact within HEPS HEIs but did not deliver all the hoped for internal promotion of sustainable development, synergy between partners or achieve sector-wide change through the transfer of tools, guidance and inspiration. The achievement of bringing 18 institutions together and working closely with their vice-chancellors and senior teams should not be underestimated. It is evident that the extent of senior commitment to the programme was high. Vice-chancellors did not play a major role in the management of the Programme in their institutions but their participation was a significant factor in raising the profile of sustainable development.
- 5.3 Even though the definition and concept of sustainable development was difficult, HEPS achieved changes in the thinking and priorities of senior managers, and some new practices. The programme was most useful where it created or revised strategy and policy. Changes at this level were a key objective of the Programme. Where strategy was already in place, HEPS helped to put it in perspective. Most policy changes remained embedded, less so for structures. However, our assessment is that the sector is well-disposed towards structural change to accommodate better sustainability practices and HEPS has been an influence in achieving this.
- 5.4 Overall, the debate prompted by HEPS was seen as valuable. A broad summary view is that HEPS was a relatively small project that had some success, was not without criticism, and had a reasonable impact, given its

size and timing, in helping to move the sustainable development agenda forward in many HEPS HEIs.

### **Lessons**

5.5 A significant number of partners said that they have learned that the critical success factors are:

- top-down leadership supported at operational level by persuasive and well-regarded champions
- dedicated resources (both time and money)
- policies and structures in place.

5.6 HEPS was a top-down initiative. This was accepted by most consultees as a necessary approach for this type of change management process: to produce the strategic statements and legitimise the pursuit of a (sometimes) new agenda. Many saw it as **too top-down** and suggested that it would have been better to have worked from the bottom up as well in order to achieve attitudinal change at the operational level to put policies into practice. Awareness of the programme did not filter through HEIs beyond key people on steering committees. Several HEPS consultees explicitly said that having [both] champions and the commitment of senior management is vital.

5.7 The HEPS partners discovered that a primary challenge is in finding a structure for implementing sustainable development. Some admitted that they had not committed enough **capacity or resources** and in one person's opinion while this gap exists, attitudes will remain the same. The need for **both time and money** was mentioned by most people consulted during this study.

5.8 **Policies and structures** were very important. A sustainable development committee was critical because it legitimised sustainable development projects and brought them into the centre of the university. Promotion was then supported by practice.

### ***Other issues***

5.9 **Autonomy** and academic freedom have implications for curriculum change. At an institutional level this was also linked to the burden of accountability. On the one hand institutions looked to the funding councils for a lead, on the other hand argued autonomy and freedom from interference. Responsibility lies in different places for different features of sustainable development. The



**funding councils** were perceived to have a **low profile** during HEPS, but they did commission HEPS at a time when there were no specific higher education policy drivers for sustainable development.

- 5.10 There was very little sense of collectivity between the very different HEIs which were brought together for the purpose of HEPS. One HEPS HEI said partnerships should not be “imposed” and are most effective where they form naturally. Two commentators observed individually that the group chosen for HEPS was not a trailblazing group capable of leading the sector and thought that perhaps HEPS could have been more successful had this been the case.
- 5.11 Forum’s **definition of sustainable development** was too broad for some respondents. It became easy to label anything as a sustainability issue. HEPS institutions often found it difficult to handle the economic, social and environmental elements together.
- 5.12 Notwithstanding the institutionally focused opening sustainability reviews, some consultees commented that Forum did not sufficiently try to adjust HEPS to their specific needs. For some it was pitched too low, and “preached to experts”. A few HEPS HEIs felt there was too much talking and discussion without action.
- 5.13 In terms of teaching and learning, HEPS did not sufficiently address the importance of teaching in the context of **research and scholarship**. This was regarded as a missed opportunity, because it is an area where HEIs can make a major difference. Neglecting this meant that HEIs implemented environmental policies that would be expected of any large organisation but did not fully engage with their core work. However, to influence research would require an approach which acknowledged the national and international context rather than the institutional focus of the project. For a project of this kind it is unrealistic to expect a substantial involvement in research.

### **What next?**

- 5.14 We found a broad consensus among the HEPS partners at different levels of management that the funding councils should continue to support the sector in developing more sustainable practices. It was suggested that change of this kind in HEIs needs to be driven by the funding councils (with financial incentives) but it is important to retain support from vice-chancellors and the wider sector of academics and their networks.
- 5.15 A small number of partners, mainly those who felt that the partnership had achieved significant changes within their institutions, would like to see HEPS

repeated but as a more specialised programme. Others had decided not to be involved in HEPS 2 on the basis of the proposal that Forum would charge institutions a fee for consultancy. A significant number felt that enough time had been spent on talking around the issues and testing ideas. There is now a need, they said, for more concerted action, to share information about good practice and implementation with incentives and guidance. A repeat of HEPS was regarded as undesirable by this group.

- 5.16 A number of consultees did not think it would be helpful to replicate the HEPS model directly. There was some concern that Forum for the Future and the 18 partner HEIs had a 'privileged position' and a few non-HEPS institutions felt left out. Notwithstanding this, these consultees readily acknowledged that the key strengths of **Forum for the Future brought credibility because Forum is influential and independent**. The HEPS Programme would possibly have had less impact without them.
- 5.17 There is **demand for resources** to co-ordinate the agenda. Several consultees suggested that a **future model could be a joint venture** between groups representing the sector. Although the notion of partnership working is accepted by most, agencies want to retain their distinctive roles. Funding bodies may provide the focus for this. However, any future partnerships would need to be careful not to compromise the independent voice of groups that represent the sector by becoming too dependent on time-limited initiatives and external funding sources. A suggestion was made in Phase 1 that the new SIGnet (DfES/Forum for the Future initiative) may offer potential to be extended as a co-ordinating body, but demands from HEIs are for a body more clearly internal to the sector.

#### **Actions for consideration**

- 5.18 Our findings suggest general support for the sustainable development agenda and recognition of its importance. There is frustration at difficulties of implementation, lack of awareness, prioritising and lack of strategic direction and financial support.
- 5.19 There may be a case for setting up a **co-ordinating group** within the sector to bring together information, advice and guidance on implementing sustainable development practices within a central repository and create opportunities for communication/networking. This would need to distinguish between needs on the operational and research and teaching activities of HEIs.

- 5.20 Institutions **will respond to incentives** and in order to make long-term investments **need confirmation that sustainable development is not just a current short-term priority**. The most effective incentives take the form of funding support (e.g. incentives for energy savings in older buildings) and/or demands that relevant sustainable development activities (e.g. in relation to buildings) are a condition of grant. A sound business case and the potential to acknowledge students' demands are also important incentives.
- 5.21 The **funding councils' sustainable development strategies and action plans could be promoted more widely** to inform the sector of the councils' intentions and priorities for the HE sector.
- 5.22 The HEFCE proposal **for a strategic review** is timely. The review should involve a comprehensive overview of what is happening in sustainable development activity within the HE sector. The review should actively involve the sector. There is a desire to celebrate good work and acknowledge good practice as well as to build on the experience of successful and less successful initiatives within the sector. Some HEIs would value an opportunity to visit other universities to gain direct experience of their practice. There also needs to be some active engagement with **sector-wide bodies** that influence teaching research and operational issues.
- 5.23 Academic areas need to be reached through **professional institutions and discipline groups**. Some professional institutions take sustainable development, as defined here, seriously. Others take up issues in other ways. Academics can best be influenced by engaging with these debates and not through, what is seen as, top-down instructions.
- 5.24 The strategic review will be, to some extent, an audit of activities in the HE sector. It could consider the inclusion of:
- specialist networks (e.g. Proc-HE, EAUC, HE Academy)
  - academic and professional reference groups
  - staff at different levels and different areas within HEIs (e.g. senior and middle management, vice-chancellors, estates directors, and environmental/sustainability professionals on the non-academic side).
- 5.25 This study has highlighted a number of issues which could be usefully explored in the forthcoming strategic review to which HEFCE is committed and which may include the other funding councils. Firstly, there are a number of issues around local understanding and acceptance of the concept of sustainable development and individual institutions' commitment to

sustainable development. The strategic review could question how far sustainable development has been included in HEIs' policies and strategy documents.

- 5.26 Secondly, the review will present an opportunity to undertake in-depth analysis of drivers and barriers to embed sustainable development within HEIs. This could include approaches/drivers for academic and curriculum change, separate from strategies relating to individual HEIs. It could ascertain institutions' openness towards measuring their own progress of sustainable development, including an assessment of what can be measured and how any potential new measures could integrate with existing monitoring mechanisms. The findings of this study (particularly around strategic commitment and barriers to promoting the agenda) provide a basis for this work.
- 5.27 Thirdly, the strategic review could undertake an audit of social and economic, as well as environmental, sustainable development activities along a number of different dimensions. These could include curriculum and operational areas, staff involvement by level of seniority, and allocated responsibilities for specific activities within each HEI. The review could identify local champions and any niche/specialist activities. The influence of specialist knowledge sharing networks and/or methods could also be included.
- 5.28 Fourthly, the review could assess where most value has been gained from sustainable development activities that have been tried and tested. It could present advice on how the funding councils can support institutions in promoting sustainable development in the areas that are difficult to influence. This should include an assessment of how to encourage research into sustainability issues, recognising that this may best be undertaken by other institutions alongside the funding councils and individual HEIs.

## Glossary of terms

| <b>Acronym</b> | <b>Full name</b>                                |
|----------------|---|
| DfES           | Department for Education and Skills             |
| EMAS           | Eco-Management and Audit Scheme                 |
| HE             | Higher education                                |
| HEFCE          | Higher Education Funding Council for England    |
| HEI            | Higher education institution                    |
| HEPS           | Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability |
| OSR            | Opening sustainability review                   |