

Students Taking the Lead: a student-centred approach to creating participatory learning experiences around sustainable development within the informal curriculum.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to allow the voices of students who have been engaged in constructing their own participatory learning experiences around sustainable development to be heard.

Students actively engaging with Ecoversity have been empowered to shape their own learning experiences within the informal curriculum spaces created for them. Ecoversity is the name given to Bradford's University-wide programme, launched in 2005, which has the aim of promoting learning about sustainable development *for all students*. This paper describes the work of the student engagement strand of Ecoversity, which offers opportunities for students to work as Ambassadors, Interns or Actioneers, each of which work in different ways to initiate and develop participatory experiences in the form of events, actions or activities for their peers in ways meaningful and relevant to them.

The model of engagement with sustainable development that has evolved from this work is one which is student-centric; enabling students to explore issues that emerge from their concerns and passions and affords them the possibility of actioning meaningful change. The students are charged with, and supported in, becoming agents of change within the Institution and beyond and, as such, become role models for citizenship; influencing both people and processes.

Students actively engaging with Ecoversity are also encouraged to participate in the University structures that have been developed across the Institution to implement the ambitions of the Ecoversity programme, with this more formal approach students have direct access and input into the discussions and decision making processes of the University. But what do they have to say about these experiences? Are they positive experiences? How do they compare with the learning in their formal programmes of study? The value of this 'real world' opportunity to both the students and the Institution will be revealed. A significant proportion of those students most actively engaged with this agenda have been from the International cohort. The dialogue that has taken place between students from different countries about their understanding and experiences of sustainable development will be outlined as well as the reasons for their enthusiasm to engage.

A significant part of this supported participation involves encouraging a practice of reflection upon learning and skills development and this paper shares some of the student perspectives emerging from this. A series of 'student voices' or case studies have been developed and are presented as evidence of the value of this type of experiential learning experience to the students involved. Reflecting on their personal development and how they made connections between their formal curriculum and these informal learning experiences, students can be seen making sense of their own skills and capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the World beyond the University; a World they are considered the future leaders of as graduates of the 21st century.