



Engaging higher education institutions in the challenge of sustainability: sustainable transport as a catalyst for action



Linda Hancock^{a,*}, Sonia Nuttman^b

^a Public Policy at Deakin University, Australia

^b School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 May 2012

Received in revised form

15 July 2013

Accepted 16 July 2013

Available online 2 September 2013

Keywords:

Sustainable transport

Case study

Higher education

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, higher educational institutions (HEIs) have become more conscious of their performance on sustainability. For many, this has not been an easy transition. This article focuses on a case study of an Australian university program aimed at leveraging staff/student behavioural change and wider institutional change by starting with sustainable transport (ST) in a context where the case study university was coming from a low base on sustainability outside teaching activities. The case study research program aimed to (1) engage with internal and external stakeholders identified with barriers and facilitators to ST, (2) encourage more ST behaviours via explicit Travel Plan strategies and (3) utilize the project to embed ST policy and programs institutionally and act as a catalyst for more extensive and integrated sustainability performance across a multi-camps university. In terms of strategic choice of the case study, this project was the first under the State Government (of Victoria, Australia) HEI TravelSmart program to embrace both staff and students in a 'whole of campus-community approach' to sustainable transport. The methods adopted – using behaviour change activities, travel plan, staff/student surveys and approaches identified with the TravelSmart brand – were not restricted to a social marketing interventions model, but took on an advocacy/feedback approach informed by stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984, 2009) and a stakeholder policy advocacy strategy using a mixed method ecological social marketing model (Halpern et al., 2004). Over a period of four years the funded research facilitated a complex action-oriented case study that achieved some progress towards improved sustainability in travel behaviour and university policies, programs and capital works to address barriers. The participatory design fostered formal and informal networks that developed organizationally to foster environmental politics and develop a form of institutional ecological citizenship (Dobson, 2003) within the steering committee, and in terms of external advocacy. Matched university and government sourced research funding that financed a behaviour change and stakeholder engagement strategy and buy-in from key internal stakeholders, were key facilitators of organizational changes in policy, resourcing and organizational commitment to sustainability.

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1. Introduction¹

Over the last decade, higher educational institutions (HEIs) have become more conscious of their performance on sustainability, and transport and mobility are recently emerging fields of action. Engaging reflexively with their own performance is challenging to entrenched interests and practices in HEIs, and there is merit in exploring how change can be leveraged. This article focuses on a

case study of an Australian university program aimed at leveraging staff/student behavioural change and wider institutional change by starting with sustainable transport (ST).

Section 2 discusses the policy context and related literature on operational and broader higher education (HE) sector sustainability and the challenges of encouraging more ST-related behaviours. Section 3 focuses on theoretical and procedural methods used in the research. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984, 2009) and an ecological model based on layered social marketing behaviour change theory (Halpern et al., 2004) underpin the stakeholder engagement strategy. Section 4 presents the main findings, Section 5 discusses the findings in the context of the theories used in the research and Sections 6 discusses the main conclusions and reflects on how a government-university co-funded program to enhance

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: linda.hancock@deakin.edu.au (L. Hancock).

¹ The authors acknowledge advice on earlier drafts of this paper from Paula Tovey, Manager and Amanda Neilson, Sustainability Officer, Office for Sustainability, Deakin University.

policy and practice on ST, catalysed change and how the participatory network formed by the project is illustrative of Dobson (2003).

2. The policy context and related literature

Much of the focus on environmental sustainability has been driven internationally, over a relatively short period from the 1980s and 1990s (Brundtland, 1987; United Nations (UN), 1992); although there was little regarding the specific role of higher education in the original UN 1992 Rio conference Agenda 21. Since these early days, regular summits and conferences related to sustainable development include Rio +5 Summit in 1997 (UN, 1997), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the ensuing Kyoto protocol in 1997, the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg, the Copenhagen Climate Conference in 2009 and the Mexico Climate conference in 2010; and the Rio+20 conference in 2012. There has been increasing recognition in various iterations of the UN Convention on Climate Change (2012), that rich or developed countries should lead the way in reducing their emissions; which because of their relative affluence are amongst the highest globally.

In the HEI sector, from 1972 a range of international declarations specifically address sustainability and endorse the principle of HEI responsibility in teaching, operations and for sustainability policies and practice. Principle 4 of the Halifax Declaration states that universities must 'enhance the capacity of the university to teach and practice sustainable development principles, to increase environmental literacy, and to enhance the understanding of environmental ethics among faculty, students, and the public at large' (The Halifax Declaration, 1991; np). The CRE-Copernicus Charter states that universities must incorporate an environmental perspective in all their work and set up environmental education programs involving both teachers and researchers as well as students – all of whom should be exposed to the global challenges of environment and development, irrespective of their field of study (CRE-Copernicus, 1994; np). The Talloires Declaration states that universities must 'create programs to develop the capability of university faculty to teach environmental literacy to all undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students' (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 1990; np). Talloires also calls for more sustainable physical operations and for higher education to be an exemplar of environmental responsibility by establishing institutional ecology policies and practices of resource conservation, recycling, waste reduction, and environmentally sound operations (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 1990).

Leading global groups have formed including COPERNICUS-CAMPUS a European network formed in 1999 committed to HEI sustainability in curricula, institutional management and services to the local/regional society and a responsible balance between economic, ecological and socio/cultural aspects.² In 2000, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formed the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP), and shortly after the International Association of Universities (IAU) and University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) were also formed. A major impetus for HEI worldwide was the World Summit on Sustainable Development declaration of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2015. These affiliations and declarations have both inspired and driven HEIs to embrace sustainable development policies and practices.

In a review of declarations, Wright (2002a, 117) alludes to the broad focus of the HEI community beyond student teaching and notes that '(n)umerous declarations and policies expand the scope of ecological literacy beyond students and recognize the need for environmentally literate faculty, staff, as well as an environmentally literate community'. These declarations have been important in terms of the unifying theme of universities' ethical and moral responsibility and their emphasis on the sustainability of their operations; the need to encourage sustainable research, public outreach, inter-university cooperation and partnerships with NGOs, government and industry; and the need to engage with interdisciplinary curriculum and ecological literacy (Wright, 2002a, 117). On the more skeptical side she also observes that 'no declaration offers practical actions to take in order to ensure more sustainable physical operations'; and that there need to be ways of determining whether commitment to such declarations is public relations window-dressing or a sign of real commitment to practice (Wright, 2002b, 12).

There is thus new pressure on HEIs to embrace their environmental sustainability responsibilities (Egan, 2006; Eilperin, 2005; Sammalisto and Lindhqvist, 2008; Shepard, 2010). But sustainability remains a challenge for the HE sector, which has been urged to re-think courses, research programs and operations, not just as learning outcomes but as a catalyst for educational change and institutional innovation (Corcoran and Wals, 2004).

In the Australian context, The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC, now called Universities Australia) issued a policy commitment to sustainable development in 2006, acknowledging the leading role of universities in campus management and administrative practices, alongside promoting sustainability through research and building capacity for change (AVCC, 2006). In 2009, the federal government committed \$650 million up to 2013, for an education investment fund for clean energy initiatives and higher education and research infrastructure relating to climate change and sustainability activities. On sustainability reporting, some universities have self-organized into a collaborative consortium led by ACTS (Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability, 2011),³ although not all HEIs have signed up. ACTS has been active in international policy and presented a position on tertiary education and sustainable development to Rio+20.

Despite these policy proclamations, educational leaders have been relatively slow to focus on sustainable development (Bottery, 2011) and performance by higher education institutions on their own sustainability performance has been patchy. This is to say that aside from attainment of core goals of quality teaching and learning outcomes, *financial sustainability* is at the core of university governance and performance review. *Social sustainability* has focused on domestic and international student welfare, staff/student wellbeing and diversity agendas. In light of these other priorities, *environmental sustainability* has been slower to gain traction – especially in HEI core organisational policy and program commitments, performance measurement, benchmarking and reporting. It is only fairly recently being recognized that universities are large complex organisations with considerable carbon footprints themselves. Many HEIs are only beginning to address sustainability in terms of internal policy, practices and operational 'silos'. Some have been wary of public reporting for fear of being exposed as under-performing compared with competitors.

This research is focused on ST as a newly emerging area for HEIs. A range of common drivers underpin HE communities' moves to engage more meaningfully with their ST obligations. The high level

² The COPERNICUS-CAMPUS University Charter for Sustainable Development is signed by over 305 university heads in 37 countries (COPERNICUS-CAMPUS, 2012).

³ Available at: www.acts.asn.au

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