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Programme quality documentation and Education for Sustainable Development: an overview across MMU.

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Introduction

At Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), there is an institutional culture of environmental sustainability. The institution's Environment Team promotes policies and activities that contribute to this through student and staff engagement and other developments. One result of this is that MMU won the title of greenest university in the UK (People & Planet Green League) in 2013. In parallel, MMU undertook a Higher Education Academy-funded project entitled Global Citizens, Global Futures. This involved a research phase surveying students and staff and the second phase (ongoing) which includes a global citizenship Award offered through the "MMU Futures" extracurricular framework. In addition, the Sustainability Literacy survey at MMU (Mork, 2014) suggested that students think that their courses do not address sustainability literacy as much as they might expect.

A number of MMU strategies include elements of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2006) including the Strategy for Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CELT, 2014), and the Internationalisation Strategy (MMU, 2014). The publication in 2014 of the Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy's guidance on ESD (QAA, 2014) also served to advance the Education for Sustainable Development and global citizenship (GC) agendas.

In terms of academic activity, two cross-institutional groups of staff, namely, the MMU Sustainability Research Network and the Sustainable and Ethical Enterprise Group (SEEG) have relevant

expertise and work on issues related to sustainability. SEEG has a particular interest in curriculum development.

With all these developments, ESD in the curriculum in MMU needed further exploration to see whether the programme quality documentation accurately reflected the elements of ESD within curricula. Although substantial work has been done by academics within each faculty, department or school, a study of curricula across the whole institution with respect to ESD has not been done before. The author, (ESD Co-ordinator at MMU currently co-funded by the Faculty of Science and Engineering and The Environment Team), has been leading a whole institution approach to embed sustainability into the curriculum through different initiatives. The document survey presented in this paper and the follow up activity are part of this endeavour.

ESD has the potential of leading to useful and practical developments. For instance, initiatives that explore and use transdisciplinarity in order to “react and contribute to social development”(UE4SD, 2014:52) approaches Some subjects may seem unrelated to ESD, however, due to its nature, thinking about it can be a really powerful way to find directions of travel towards a value- based transformational change. This is needed due to the following main reasons: humans are facing social, environmental and economic challenges globally (UNESCO, 2016), recent European funded mapping exercise suggests that university educators across the continent need ESD competences (UE4SD, 2014) and that several groups and individuals are demanding holistic approaches that engage more actively with social and environmental issues.

It is important to mention that this work is the starting point of an exploration of the potential link between curricula and the other activities in MMU related to ESD. In addition, it will be used in the National Union of Students (NUS) Responsible Futures accreditation pilot, in which MMU is participating alongside fifteen other FE and HE institutions in England and Scotland. The aim of the NUS Responsible Futures project is to develop a desirable, externally assessed accreditation mark for environmental sustainability and social responsibility, spanning the formal and informal curriculum, applicable to both further and higher education (NUS, 2014). In partnership with the students' Union, MMU is working in this project

to shape criteria provided by the NUS, test the approach and feedback to the NUS. The defined mandatory and optional criteria provides a framework from which we can pick and mix commitments, actions and interventions that suit us. Each criterion will be scored and we will need to attain or exceed a threshold score to receive the accreditation mark. MMU and the Student's Union will be audited in May and June 2015. The pilot is running from September 2014 to July 2015 and the author¹ is the key contact for the project for MMU.

Methodology

After considering structured approaches in the sector such as STAUNCH® (Lozano & Peattie, 2011) and E4SD Audit (Desha & Hargroves, 2007), which assess systemically to what extent and how curricula addresses ESD through collecting and grading data against set criteria, it was decided that a survey of programme specifications for their ESD content should be carried out. This was in order to have baseline information to start conversations with academic staff and move forward in the ESD agenda in MMU.

In order to explore the ESD content of programme specifications, the entire population of 477 MMU UG and PG programme specifications was accessed and searched. This represents 100% of the latest version of programme documentation publicly available for all faculties in the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement's (CASQE) website. The keywords used in the search were: Global*, Global Citi*, Sustain* Environment* and Green*.

The keywords used in the current study were selected from a list produced by Dr. Konstantinos Tzoulas and Dr. Rachel Dunk (Geography & Environmental Management, MMU) through an unpublished review of policy documents and published audit tools. These relate to embedding sustainable development in Higher Education curricula. ²

The keywords for the current study were selected from Dunk and Tzoulas's list following two criteria. The words that are higher in the hierarchy and that relate to the ESD mainly addressed in MMU to

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² Publications reviewed include: Sterling, 2012; Dawe et al., 2005; Cade, 2008; Drayson et al., 2013; HEFCE, 2009; QAA, 2012; UNESCO, 2010; Lozano, 2010.

date, namely, environmental sustainability and global citizenship. The first set environment*, sustain* and green* represent the former and global citizen* and global* represent the latter. Other terms that could be searched in future and more rigorous studies would include equity, equality, impact, resources, health amongst others.

Because of the theory underpinning ESD and its systemic scope it is crucial to acknowledge that other themes including social justice, ethics and wellbeing outlined in the QAA Guidance (QAA, 2014) are as important as the themes mostly developed in MMU and this study aims to support further development of all the areas outlined by the guidance.

The context in which the keywords were found was checked and occurrences unrelated to actual ESD activity were not counted, for instance: “sustained research” or “learning environment”. The programme specifications in MMU include a section titled “*Employability and Sustainability Outcomes*” which makes reference to a choice of learning outcomes provided centrally to all faculties. The occurrence of the term sustainability was not counted for the title(s) of this section. Even if all the *Employability and Sustainability Outcomes* (CASQE, 2012) in MMU refer to employability some do not relate to sustainability necessarily, so the heading might appear in a context unrelated to sustainability specifically. For example, in reference to an outcome such as “Communicate effectively using a range of media”. For the same reason the word ‘sustainability’ when it refers back to tables that map against *Employability and Sustainability Outcomes* was not counted. When a term could be potentially used in the context of ESD such as in the “patient’s environment” (Health, Psychology and Social Care) and “sustainable development” (Education) the term was counted. The word search was undertaken in all the sections of the programme specifications.

Some programmes from each faculty were selected on the basis of highest numbers of occurrences of one or more words depending on the average numbers in that faculty. This will be the starting point of a further study were some case studies will be discussed in detail.

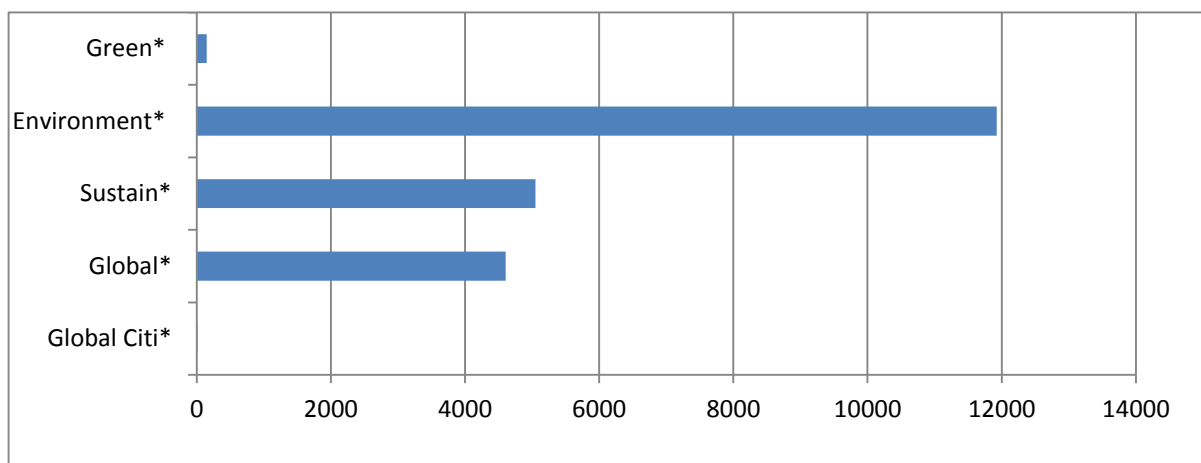


Figure 1. Average of occurrence of key ESD/GC words in Programme specifications by Faculty – Summer 2014

Results

In this section the data on occurrences of ESD keywords in programme documentation across MMU is summarised and presented in forms of total numbers of each keyword across MMU (Table 1), times in average a keyword appears per programme specification (Figure 1), and a list of programmes with high frequencies of keywords in relation to Faculty averages (Table 2).

By far the commonest term related to ESD is 'environment', with 'sustain' and 'global' occurring about half as frequently (Table 1). Global Citizens, or Global Citizenship as a term is very unusual, but this is perhaps not surprising as this manifests in many different ways, and the term 'global' may encompass many of these manifestations. Similarly, 'green' is a term that is only relatively rarely found in MMU programmes. Arguably, this may not be a very academic word. Derivatives of the term 'Sustain' such as sustainable and sustainability are also seen in many of the programme specifications.

Table 1. Occurrence of key ESD/GC words in Programme specifications across MMU – Summer 2014

| Faculty | Global Citi* | Global* | Sustain* | Environment* | Green* |
|---|--------------|---------|----------|--------------|--------|
| Education | 0.08 | 3.53 | 0.71 | 3.08 | 0.00 |
| Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences | 0.00 | 9.72 | 0.31 | 4.44 | 1.11 |
| Science and Engineering | 0.00 | 5.95 | 34.77 | 106.87 | 0.85 |
| Cheshire Campus | 0.00 | 9.08 | 2.04 | 5.31 | 0.06 |
| Health, Psychology and Social Care | 0.02 | 3.48 | 0.24 | 6.16 | 0.00 |
| Business and Law | 0.02 | 27.27 | 16.92 | 9.36 | 0.00 |
| Hollings | 0.06 | 12.77 | 9.00 | 7.63 | 0.40 |
| Manchester School of Art | 0.00 | 1.33 | 1.87 | 1.59 | 0.04 |

The Faculty of Business and Law has the highest average per programme specification in MMU of occurrences of 'global' and its derivatives (Figure 1). Bearing in mind that several occurrences of 'Environment' appear referring to a course such as 'environmental sciences' or the 'School of Science and the Environment' instead of actual content of the course/programme, the Faculty of Sciences and Engineering has both the highest number of 'sustain' and 'environment' on average per programme specification.

Although the results (Figure 1, Table1) presented above give an overview of ESD content in the programme quality documentation, they do not give in depth information about how programmes address ESD. In order to explore this, the next phase of this work will

Table 2. Programmes with high frequencies of key ESD/GC by Programme – Summer 2014 (see Table 1 for Faculty colour coding)

| Programme | Global Citi* | Global* | Sustain* | Environment* | Green* |
|---|--------------|---------|----------|--------------|--------|
| BA (Hons) History | 0 | 2 | 0 | 17 | 0 |
| BA (Hons) Social Work | 0 | 21 | 0 | 38 | 0 |
| BA (Hons) Film and Media Studies | 0 | 7 | 0 | 11 | 0 |
| BA (Hons) Landscape Architecture | 0 | 1 | 44 | 10 | 0 |
| MA / MSc Product Design | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| BA (Hons) Arts and Humanities Education | 1 | 24 | 0 | 31 | 0 |
| MA Education Studies | 1 | 24 | 0 | 31 | 0 |
| BA (Hons) Business Management (Network) | 0 | 44 | 8 | 8 | 0 |

look in more depth at curricula in terms of the faculty overall activity through a case study approach of some of the programme specifications (Table 2).

The programmes chosen for this future study have higher keyword frequencies than the other programmes in their faculties. For instance, the 17 occurrences of 'environment' and its derivatives in the BA History is higher than most, if not all of the other programmes in the Faculty of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences and considerably higher than the average (4.44) for these terms in the Faculty (Figure 1). Similarly, the BA Landscape Architecture has 44 occurrences of 'sustain' and its derivatives compared with 1.87 on average per programme specification for the whole Art School. Another interesting group of case studies might be: the BA Social Work (Health, Psychology and Social Care); the BA Film and Media Studies, the MA / MSc Product Design (Art School); the BA Arts and Humanities Education and the MA Education Studies (Education); and the BA Business Management Network (Cheshire Campus). In most cases, these programmes have high frequencies of both environment* and global* in relation to the most of the other programmes in their faculties. Overall, the programmes chosen for the case studies have higher than faculty average occurrences of at least two of the key words searched for this review generally 'global' and 'environment'.

Limitations

The programme specifications represent a superficial indication of curricula and cannot capture the whole student experience or areas of interest of academics that may shape or influence their teaching practice. For instance, academics with expertise or interest in ecology may use examples from this topic to illustrate issues in any area. This is not necessarily reflected in the written documentation but is as important for the curriculum as any other part of it.

It should be noted that, although the documents were analysed on the basis of frequency of occurrence of specific key words, on occasions the analysis required subjective judgments to be made as to the intended application of the word in a particular context.

The team is aware of the many limitations of doing a word search for content in written documents. (Leech et al., 2001). One of the most relevant limitations in this search is the fact that ESD content is very diverse and in order to map all areas of it in programme specifications, a long list of terms would need to be searched. The Art School (Shuttlewood & Vargas, 2014), the Management Department (Walley, 2013) and the School of Science and the Environment have undertaken thorough curriculum reviews that are more appropriate in showing the broad spectrum of ESD activity. The only review of all faculty curricula in MMU has been done in the Art School. Their Unit Specification search confirms the apparent trends in this study. Most programmes in the Art School could take advantage of ESD theory to enrich their programmes mainly in terms of social responsibility and environmental sustainability. In addition, both studies suggest that the programmes with highest content of ESD are Architecture and Landscape Architecture degrees (Shuttlewood & Vargas, 2014 : 6). The review of curricula in the Management Department also shows similarities to the results in the current study.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to prompt conversations around ESD content in MMU's curricula. For that reason, this paper does not present explicit recommendations. Readers who are interested in discussing the results or help shaping future conclusions, are invited to get in touch with the author. More specific conclusions will be presented in a following paper from the case studies suggested in Table 2. Also, it is important to emphasize that programme specifications are only outline documents and they do not represent all the aspects of a course or network of courses. As stated before, the words may or may not portray the programme team's intentions in relationship to ESD. In the future, these conclusions would be formed by the analysis of the case studies (Table 2).

Overall, there is some very valuable work going on in Manchester Metropolitan University in relationship to ESD but there is a lot of room for improvement as well. The extent to which ESD is present in programmes, courses or units is covered more appropriately by local reviews such as The Art School (Shuttlewood & Vargas, 2014), the Management Department (Walley, 2013) and the School of Science

and the Environment. However, low frequencies may suggest that ESD content is addressed in the programme but might not be explicit in the documentation. In addition, further discussions with academic staff have already shown that ESD content is present in their teaching but sometimes not acknowledged as such or not explicit in Unit Specifications, Programme Specifications or in the classroom with students. These two issues may suggest that there is a case for a review of programme specification templates in order to address ESD more explicitly.

As discussed previously, the words chosen for this search are very limited in terms of the scope they cover and other words might be more appropriate for different subject areas. For instance, although green may not seem a very academic word, it is frequently used in the MA English Studies specifications (12) and in the BA Sports Management (“green business”).

This preliminary analysis has already shown that there are some interesting pointers for further activity. For instance, beyond the raw data in Figure 1, the exploration of the sense and context of words in the programme specifications from the Faculty of Health Psychology and Social Care has shown that ‘environment’ is often used to delineate the environment of the health practitioner and their patients, that does not extend beyond a certain point. This could be further investigated with programmes in the faculty and through the case studies. Perhaps the focus of programmes is such that wider environmental concerns are not always seen in relation to specific professional training, or that the curriculum would need to challenge professional body requirements in order to take a broader view. Another example is the fact that the Faculty of Education uses the term ‘environmental sustainability’ and ‘Sustainable Development’ consistently across their postgraduate documentation. It would be interesting to know the details about how they interpret and apply these terms as this may be an example of good practice to share with other faculties.

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