

ENGAGE Winter 2009 : Leading Lines by Sara Parkin

The government's new framework for higher education, 'Higher Ambitions', asks for "intellectual and practical" leadership on sustainability. Now is the time to give it.

Background

In 2008, the UK became the first country to pass targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions into law. Slowly, and rather confusingly, the government is putting into place structures and mechanisms that will provide a rapid and radical track to a low-carbon economy. In practice, that means reducing greenhouse gas emissions from 2007 levels by at least 20 per cent before 2020 and 76 per cent before 2050.

Each government department now has responsibility for a slice of this UK total. In England the Regional Development Agencies have a mandate to deliver sustainable development, despite the inherent contradictions with their other mandate to promote conventional-style economic growth. However, the recession has caused the most significant drop in greenhouse gas emissions since 1981.

Thinking ahead, Scotland has published a pioneering carbon assessment of its draft 2010/11 budget, considering direct, indirect or induced emissions. Under education, for example, an increase in the student body meaning more books, furniture etc would be a **direct** impact, with the emissions of the suppliers being **indirect**. **Induced** emissions come from the increased activity in the rest of the economy – local shops, entertainment, lodgings and so on.

It is not just higher education that is affected; for every portfolio the indirect and induced emissions outstrip the direct ones by a considerable margin. In the UK higher education sector, over half the institutions have carbon management schemes but very few think far beyond the institution's boundaries.

There is little evidence that the leadership of any sector has truly grasped the magnitude of what needs to happen to achieve the UK targets. 2020 is only 10 years away, and for the 2050 targets to be met significant planning and investments will have to be made up front. In his latest report, the chair of the Committee on Climate Change, Adair Turner, minced no words when he rated performance so far as poor, with a step-change essential. As the UK carbon budget setter he will add this year's missed targets to tougher **legally-binding** ones later on.

What does this mean for HEIs?

All of this represents opportunities for the higher education sector, not only to walk its own talk but also to seize the many opportunities for helping others to do likewise. The scale and the speed of change (which may be forced as well as planned) will require a special sort of leadership, both in the sector and from those who graduate from it.

Leadership challenges

The leadership challenges inherent in climate change and unsustainability in general are frequently classified as 'wicked problems'. 'Tame' problems are the solvable ones, which may be complicated but which have precedents and don't involve too much uncertainty. 'Critical' problems are those that are just so serious and urgent that a 'command and adjust' strategy is necessary, overriding normal consultation and sometimes even democracy. 'Wicked' problems are the more intractable ones – they are complex and involve lots of uncertainty, and it is not possible to find clear solutions that don't generate even more problems. There may not even be right or wrong answers - just better or worse alternatives, which need to be worked out through a collaborative process.

As the 21st century progresses, the interlinked ecological, social and economic trends point towards more and more critical problems, with progress slowed or hastened by our ability to solve some of the wicked ones. How many graduates are being equipped to work, live and make choices and decisions in such a complex, rapidly changing and increasingly dangerous world?

Anyone doubting how the world might be 10 or 20 years from now is advised to read the 2008 US National Intelligence Council (NIC) report on global trends to 2025. Incoming US president Barack Obama got the unabridged version of this report, which concludes that the hallmark of tomorrow's world will be scarcity – of land, water, oil, food, and not least 'air-space' for greenhouse gas emissions. It also concludes that individual and collective leadership has been and remains the biggest "game changer" in history, for bad as well as good. "Leadership matters," the report concludes. "No trend is immutable, and...timely and well-informed intervention can decrease the likelihood and severity of negative developments and increase the likelihood of positive ones."

What happens next?

Whatever the flavour of the next UK government, responsibility for meeting the UK greenhouse gas emission targets will go on being tamped down onto sectors and into geographical regions. It is good news, therefore, that the higher education sector is developing a low-carbon strategy.

But this won't be enough. Whatever happens at the climate change talks in Copenhagen this December, it will be the ubiquity of sustainability-literate leadership across all sectors and at all levels that will change the game – for the climate and for the economy.

Sara Parkin is a founder director and trustee of Forum for the Future

References

US National Intelligence Council (2008). *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*.
www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html Accessed 13 November 2009.