Final CALT report on 2013-2014 University Teaching Development Grant (Grant in aid) (Part 1 Web-based report)

Developing a student-led community-engaged course on sustainability

Original applicants

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Overview

The University of Uppsala, Sweden (one of Otago's Matariki partners) maintains a student-led learning and teaching programme on sustainability (CEMUS). Undergraduate and postgraduate students develop, coordinate and teach credit-bearing papers that most students in the university are able to take as part of their degrees. The papers are all multidisciplinary in content and ethos. The students are supported in their work by an academic board. The CEMUS model of 'empowering students for sustainability' has been and is being influential around the world as higher education institutions grapple with understanding their role in society and their relationship with their students. Professor Kerry Shephard (HEDC) visited Uppsala and CEMUS in June 2013 and discussed the possibility of exploring the development of something analogous at the University of Otago. Colleagues in Uppsala were delighted to support this exploration. This short report describes our exploration and summarises our findings.

Introduction

The application was developed by members of Otago's Special interest group in community-engaged learning and teaching (CELT) and Otago's Education for Sustainability Research Group and was closely associated with Otago's Summer School and Continuing Education Office. Our project aimed to explore the opportunities, advantages and barriers to establishing a student-led sustainability programme at the University of Otago. CALT requested that the grant-in-aid provided was to address this exploration, rather than the creation and operation of a 'course'. The research team met early in 2014 and decided to undertake this exploration and to enable the students to lead on some 'events'; something short of a 'course' but sufficient to address and research some of the project's substantive aims. The project was operated in a fully inclusive manner and invited all university staff and students to join in the exploration.

Methods

An ethics approval was prepared and accepted, a research assistant appointed and the project started in early 2014. Two undergraduate students initially stepped forward to work with two

senior university colleagues and the project's research assistant as a project team (reporting at intervals to all who had expressed an interest in the project). The major activity for this project team was to plan for and oversee two promotional events held in March and April 2014 intended to recruit participating students and to inspire university teachers to find ways to encourage their students to engage in the project. The project team initially oversaw project research, but this role was later passed on to a dedicated research group involving academic staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students. A student led-group came together to plan three discussion events with minimal input from the project team, whose role became that of providing logistical/material support where possible. Following the final student-led discussion in August, one academic member of the research team met with students who had experienced various levels of involvement in the project to mediate a group reflection.

This project was researched using the approach of action research (accepting that data gathered within the project would influence the project's direction and management). Research data gathered throughout the duration of this project included meeting and interview notes, research reports, email conversations, Facebook postings, Skype calls and more general observations or personal reflections. The research assistant met with or interviewed participants as they joined and left the project using a series of semi-structured individual or group interviews. The data was primarily analysed by two researchers (emphasising research-participant anonymity in the process) using inductive analysis, acknowledging multiple stakeholders and their different experiences and perceptions of how the project progressed.

Results

Students organised and led three discussions on University premises that were open to all. Attendance at the discussions was modest, ranging from 45 participants at the first event, 14 at the second and 23 at the third. Participants were mostly students but some staff and some members of the wider community attended all discussions. Thematic analysis identified four substantial themes that reoccurred within the research data and one overarching conclusion from the project.

1. At an early stage a developing dichotomy of opinion arose relating to the extent to which university staff or 'empowered students' were driving the project. While the project was inspired by the ideal of a 'partnership of equals', and with a view to developing a student-led outcome, participants in the project have indicated a range of experiences traversing this staff/student dichotomy.
2. Closely associated with this theme was that of the nature of leadership in the student group, and how the concept of student leaders resonated with that of student empowerment in the project. The project identified varied perceptions of leadership and of empowerment.
3. A third theme of student engagement emerged at an early stage and persisted within the project, interacting with the two themes above. Student engagement within this project was intense for the relatively few students involved. Limited involvement appears to be associated with the popularity of sustainability in student-led discourse and barriers encountered by students managing multiple demands on their time.

4. Project continuity beyond the constraints offered by a funded research project emerged from the results and in project-discourse at later stages. The matter was anticipated, although not adequately addressed in project planning.

Although these themes suggest that the overall results of the project might not have met the aspirations of the project originators, an overall conclusion from the research and the collective experience of the participants emphasises learning. It is clear that the staff involved learned substantially about the aspirations of some students for more autonomy within their learning and likely advantages in facilitating this. Likewise, student discourse emphasises the advantages of what they see as democratic decision-making and open ended discussion within their learning programs.

Outputs so far

Members of the research group have contributed one short research paper to a conference based in the Department of media, film and communication (University of Otago) and an online paper is being developed. In addition, another research paper will be presented in December 2014 at the Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference. One research article is being developed for a peer-reviewed academic journal. Other research outputs are likely.

> Brown, K. (2014). More than ecodemia: Re-imaging a pedagogical space for learning about sustainability in Higher Education. In Department of Media, Film and Communication (Ed.), *Proceedings of Environment, Spaces and Transformations: Inaugural MFCO Early Career-Graduate Conference* (p. 12). Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago
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> Shephard K, Webster E, Brown K, Payne-Harker H and Payne-Harker N (2014) Exploring student empowerment for community-engaged sustainability education (accepted for presentation at the 2014 *Society for Research in Higher Education Conference*, Newport, Wales, 10-12 December).

Implications

This project may have long-term implications. It appears that many staff and students involved in the project had been affected by it. Students in particular appear determined to seek new opportunities to contribute to the learning and teaching of their peers in a student-led way. Some are considering contributing to the public debate on ‘education for sustainability’ by writing their own research paper. Several staff involved in the project have identified not only changed perceptions in the relationship between them and their students but also a commitment to using the infrastructure of the University to empower students to take more control over their own learning.