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# **Taking the lead: creating an undergraduate environmental science programme to meet the benchmarks and expectations.**

## **Bethan L Wood**

This case study illustrates the benefits of listening to student demand, working with students, employers, and colleagues to become a programme lead. As a programme leader you must work within institutional frameworks to make your case, build alliances, and take colleagues with you.

My strategic proposal for the 4-year BSc Environmental Science and Sustainability programme was not a sudden idea. Over the course of my teaching at the University of Glasgow, latterly as environmental lead, I had periodically met with students on the MA Liberal Arts (Environmental Studies) and asked for feedback on their programme experience. This, together with information from the student evaluations, feedback, and graduate destination data, sent the clear message that the MA programme was not what they wanted. The students wanted the degree to be a BSc and not a MA, with more core environmental-based courses offered, and an environmental-centred honours project.

Thus armed, I compiled a list of the students' requirements and approached the following for feedback:

- my MSc Carbon Management students,
- my environmental academic colleague - who was already on board with the overall proposal for a BSc since they also came from a scientific background and had also recognised the need for more scientific content to meet the QAA benchmark for Environmental Science rather than Environmental Studies, and
- local employers who had previously had students on placement or employed graduates from the MA degree - to continue to foster our links and encourage their continued involvement with a new programme.

Scottish undergraduate degrees are typically four years long with time for a dissertation or placement, and honours project over years three and four. It became clear that the proposal would need to include at the very least: a greater diversity of placement options which were world-wide in

reach, an environmental-based honours project in year 4, and a residential field course to foster group work and a sense of community within the cohort. These all fitted well with the new strategic direction of the School into the environmental sector under a new Head of School.

To gain approval for the new programme we needed the support of the Head of School, as they would be our advocate and, crucially, we would need new members of staff to run the new courses involved; there were only two full-time members of staff available at that time to run the degree programme. A meeting was arranged where I explained the plan and highlighted benefits such as increased student numbers, a feeder into our Postgraduate Taught programmes, and its place in the strategic direction of the School. Support was given. Next, I created the programme plan which contained the list of courses that would contribute to the degree. Environmental-based courses offered by my environmental colleague and I were still running at the campus at the time as they were a key part of the new MA Primary Education with Teaching Qualification. These courses were therefore added to the programme plan. The remaining courses were created by identifying gaps in content that related to the QAA benchmark for Environmental Science programmes and student and employer requests.

The 60-credit placement course, offered in semester 2 of year 3 had run at the campus for many years and was included in the new programme as an alternative to the 60-credit dissertation, albeit the onus was to be put on the student to find their own placement with staff support. Local employers who were consulted about the programme proposal were also keen to commence having students on placement with them again. The final fourth year was completely new, with a 60-credit Environmental Stewardship Project, the residential field course and two new taught courses: Environmental Policy and Management for a new member of staff and Perspectives on the Environment from an environmental humanities colleague who was keen to be involved with the programme. The programme plan was complete.

Next, we sought approval through the normal University Programme Information Process (PIP). The required me to:

- Complete programme specification and programme support documents for submission to the Learning and Teaching Committees (School and College levels),
- Seek marketing information from the University marketing department,
- Provide evidence of consultations with students, employers, and other relevant University-wide staff. These consultations informed course content.

I was fortunate to have had the experience of going through the same process for my MSc Carbon Management programme. Sources of help can be found by viewing exemplars (on the University website), from colleagues who have been through the process, and the Chair and members of the School Learning and Teaching Committee, among others.

Once the programme proposal was approved, I evaluated the content of the new and established courses against the QAA Benchmark Statement for Earth Sciences, Environmental Sciences and Environmental Studies. As the first cohort (2010) progressed through the degree, all courses were continually assessed to ensure that they met the requirements of the benchmark; this is still done today as best practice. The resulting BSc programme specification was very much a student-employer-staff partnership in revising the curriculum to create an environmentally focused programme. It is still used by our Senate Office as an exemplar, more than a decade after the programme commenced!

Ten years on ....

Students are drawn to the opportunities provided by the degree programme, especially the placement option, as illustrated by comments from students on their experience of the degree for our programme webpage:

'I chose to study Environmental Science and Sustainability at the University of Glasgow's Dumfries Campus, because the programme was very attractive - a variety of environmental topics ...'

'The BSc Environmental Science & Sustainability programme can offer every student an individual pathway. The broad and extensive topics in the classes are there to guide you and broaden your horizons. Many of the assignments can be approached with your own individual interest that you can also pursue throughout the entire programme, as well as the placement (here or abroad) or your final dissertation.'

Our students now travel globally (Australia, Greece, Finland, Borneo, Oman, Sri Lanka), as well as nationally and locally, for their placements. The University's graduate attributes are embedded in the students' personal learning goals which they include in their initial report before going out on placement; this enhances their employability by encouraging them to articulate and use these skills on their CV.

My creation of the programme and its leadership have given me personal success: promotion and recognition as a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. I have contributed to the University's Work-Related Learning Policy and presented at conferences on employability with my students and placement colleagues. In 2016 I stepped down, becoming the mentor for my original

environmental colleague who took over. This colleague in turn used their programme leadership to successfully apply for promotion.

Our students leave with graduate attributes which enhance their employability. We know this because of the employment rates of graduates from our programme (our HESA data for 2018 shows 98 % in work or in further education), particularly in environmental consultancy. The impact of the programme and its opportunities on the students manifests itself in their increased confidence as they proceed through the degree. I have witnessed level 1 students who struggled with oral presentations and / or academic writing, blossom into graduates who can critically argue points in environmental debates or research and write A grade final dissertations.