

COLLABORATING ACROSS DISCIPLINES FOR CLIMATE CHANGE EDUCATION

Academics with a shared purpose for climate change education have come together from across the University of Bedfordshire to create a bottom-up Sustainability Forum, where each member defines their own contribution and purpose. This collaboration facilitates mass 'learn-in' events on climate change and social justice themes, where students cross disciplinary boundaries and engage with external stakeholders as professionals.

At University of Bedfordshire, staff interested in climate change and sustainability are scattered across academic departments on three campuses. They came together to create the Sustainability Forum – which enabled them to design and deliver collaborative mass learning events for their students.

The Sustainability Forum is open to all and has no place within any formal university structure: everyone defines the degree of their involvement, and no academic discipline or career stage holds a privileged position. Members of the Sustainability Forum quickly realised the glue to hold them together would not be their shared interest in climate change and the environment, but their desire to provide educational opportunities for students.

The Forum established a key aim to share and develop teaching and learning practices that delivered not just education about climate change and sustainability, but education for sustainability and climate action, and which would engage students in learning about the changes occurring in the world and developing their agency to identify solutions and effect change.

This was achieved by collaborative organisation of annual mass 'learn-in' events, where staff, students and invited guests from community organisations, NGOs and businesses came together for day-long conferences on a particular theme. These events, each with approximately 200 participants, have been organised since 2016 on climate change, sustainability, and social justice-related themes.

All delegates are treated equally; students are expected to participate as professionals, engaging in their workshops and networking with external guests. Key challenges included a lack of institutional buy-in initially; the energy and drive of the members was key to overcoming the inertia associated with creating more authentic learning opportunities.

Sustainability Forum members have now delivered such collaborative teaching to hundreds of students. Partnerships between members has led to, for example, academics co-teaching their Biology and Sociology students about the consequences of climate change for migration (both human and non-human), in a room exhibiting work by Art and Design students,

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bottom-up, cross-disciplinary collaborations** can emerge where staff working in different academic departments in 'teams of one' come together because of their shared concerns about environmental change and climate education.
- **Collaborations can result in innovative education for climate change**, through mass 'learn-in' events which bring together students, staff and external stakeholders.
- **Such events may be simultaneously** curricular, co-curricular or extra-curricular for different participants and are enriched when co-created with students.

while Journalism students interview the invited guest speakers from businesses and NGOs, and Media Production students film and broadcast the day.



“The intervention used an event-based approach to teach about climate change, where students from different disciplines were brought together with staff and external guests, creating a rich learning social-learning environment.”

Author: Dr Diana J Pritchard, University of Bedfordshire and Dr Nicholas Worsfold, Brunel University London.

For Sustainability Forum members, collaboration enables innovation: first through the efficiencies of co-organisation and effort-sharing and second through the greatly lowered consequences of ‘failure’ for

any one individual whose session does not go as planned or whose students do not engage with the learning opportunity presented. Annual changes to the focus and design of the event allows different

students to participate in curricular or extra-curricular activities and eases time commitments of Forum members.

KEY FACTS ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

Institution name	University of Bedfordshire
Location	Bedfordshire, UK
Number of students (total for institution)	20,000
Number of staff (total for institution)	Ca. 1000
Campus type	Split location with five campuses

KEY FACTS ABOUT THE CASE STUDY

University or department led:	The intervention was led by individual academic staff joining together from across disciplinary boundaries to create a Sustainability Forum where each member defined their own contribution and benefits of membership.
Number of staff engaged:	There were seven core staff almost always involved, but a staff survey in 2021 resulted in 32 members of staff reporting their students had benefited from the events.
Number of students engaged:	Several hundred since 2016.
Credit-bearing:	The events created by the Sustainability Forum were curricular for some students and co-curricular or extra-curricular for others. Some students knew that questions for credit-bearing assessments would emerge from the workshops they attended throughout the day while others engaged voluntarily.
Mandatory or optional:	It was mandatory for some students and optional for others, depending on the intended outcomes identified by the academic member of staff and the proximity of the event’s theme to the core curriculum of different students.
External partners:	No, but many external stakeholders invited as guests and participants.
Engagement approach used:	The intervention used an event-based approach to teach about climate change, where students from different disciplines were brought together with staff and external guests, creating a rich learning social-learning environment.

Project team: Dr Diana Pritchard, Dr Nicholas Worsfold, Dr Helen Connolly, Dr Paul Rowinski, Amanda Egbe, Dr Mohamed Saeudy, Dr James Bishop, Dr Tamara Ashley.

More info: <https://www.beds.ac.uk/sustainability/sustainability-forum/>

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