

A4. The UK planning system: Putting principles of sustainable development into practice

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The United Kingdom's Government uses sustainable development as the apparent bedrock of the planning system. In *Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development* the government repeats its four aims of sustainable development established in 1999:

- *social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;*
- *effective protection of the environment;*
- *the prudent use of natural resources; and,*
- *the maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.*

Department of Communities and Local Government (2005)

The planning system is charged with putting these principles into practice. Undergraduates need to begin to understand how the planning system has enormous potential as a mechanism for protecting natural resources both locally and globally, and for mitigating climate change and its effects. As they do this, they begin to examine the effectiveness of the system for achieving sustainable development.

Aims

The aim of the module *Town and Country Planning* is to give Level 1 students an appreciation of how they, in their current or future professional roles, might work with the planning system to achieve sustainable forms of development. These students are not normally practicing planners but some will work (or are already working) in heritage, environmental, landscape and community management arenas, while others are geographers for whom this practical understanding of how places are managed will be revealing and thought provoking.

The aim of this activity is to discover how decisions on planning applications take sustainable development (as defined by the Government) into account. In order to achieve this, students examine, analyse and evaluate a real planning application. They put together a group portfolio for assessment (paper or online) demonstrating their findings and reflections on the process of discovery. The activity offers choice and therefore flexibility for students who may be on campus or at a distance, part-time or full-time, inexperienced or relatively experienced in the planning system.

Rationale

The planning system is vitally important as the Government's central mechanism for putting its principles of sustainable development into practice. But it is extremely complex and for students with no previous knowledge the subject proves so daunting that many students have difficulty maintaining sufficient motivation to remain involved. The activity described here gives students an opportunity to engage actively with the real system in a straightforward way. At the same time it gives students more control over their experience of learning in order to sustain their motivation throughout a difficult topic.

Implementation

The activity forms part of a module that is delivered through eight two-hour classes plus the equivalent of an additional eight hours of contact time either face-to-face or online as required by the students. For this specific assessed activity, students work in a small group (typically three or four) to identify a genuine planning application worthy of closer study. Most planning authorities now keep a freely available online archive of planning applications, providing a rich resource for the study of how the Government's Principles of Sustainable Development are being put into practice through the planning system. They may choose studies locally, or in a home area of one or more of the group.

The group works together (either face-to-face or through online discussion in WebCT – or both, blended) to understand the planning application and the process by which the application was decided. They then research the national and local policies and perspectives that would influence the outcome of the application, including policies for sustainability. As part of their reflection on the application, they assess the extent to which the principles of sustainable development are put into practice. Students can

choose how to present a record of their deliberations; for example, they might produce a portfolio (either in print or online), write a report or make an oral presentation. The activity is designed to take approximately twelve weeks with a break for Easter.

The tutor prepares for the project by writing a clear and detailed brief for the assessed activity. The brief provides learning outcomes and related assessment criteria and a step-by-step explanation of the process by which the students carry out their tasks. Each stage of the process is explicitly justified to the students by the tutor in writing, as well as in class. Students are given choices to make (for example, who to work with in a co-operative group, which planning application to study, how to conduct their discussions). Choice can be difficult for some students so the tutor helps the students and explains, for example, how taking responsibility for choice can develop students' personal confidence and influence their experience of learning. The tutor's role is facilitative, within a clear structure of expectations about outcomes.

The range of activities for the module is designed to keep students focused. Lectures are kept short (15 to 20 minutes) except when an external speaker is invited to address the group. A former student, now working as a planning officer, explained in class what happens when a planning application is received. This presentation is recorded digitally and placed into the module's virtual learning environment for the benefit of students not present; WebCT is the medium used at the University. Students then conduct an activity in groups, for example, planning the allocation of industry, housing and leisure facilities across a district or examining the plans for a small development as a first step in working out what location maps, site plans and elevations actually mean.

The tutor provides resources to make sure that students are well informed about the processes by which decisions are made and the policies that influence those decisions. Resources are written into a comprehensive module guide (for the flexible use of campus-based and distance learning students) while additional resources are provided on WebCT. For example, a practice planning application is posted on to WebCT and students are asked to recognise relevant issues including the sustainability of the local economy and its community, traffic and transport issues, the use of sustainable building materials, potential water supply and flooding challenges.

The building of a bank of learning resources involves investment in preparatory time when activities are being developed but creates a valuable repository that is re-usable in following years. Annual revision is required to keep up-to-date with new legislation and Government guidance, and in response to feedback from students.

The provision of written and web-based resources allows the remaining class time to concentrate on interactive discussion and on support for individuals and groups. Class-based activity includes group activities, the search for appropriate planning applications online and the strengthening of skills for online discussion. The aim is to make sure that each student remains actively engaged; the tutor therefore takes care to work specifically with students who appear to be holding back. The activity can work on different levels offering opportunities for success to all students, while stretching the most perceptive, able, or committed.

Sustainability focus

Through this activity students should be able to demonstrate their understanding of the social, economic and environmental purposes of the planning system. They observe how a planning application (for, say, an industrial complex or housing development) responds to social, environmental and economic imperatives, including issues of social justice. It provides an opportunity for debate about the tensions involved in seeking to balance these three demands, and the tradeoffs which may have to be made to allow practical solutions to emerge. It also allows students to monitor whether planning authorities are addressing acute, widespread and challenging issues such as climate change through the planning system, or whether rhetoric is more significant than action in these cases. In particular, it encourages a critical assessment of government policy on sustainable development, and its implementation.

Active learning

The activity engages the student in making active choices, in studying real world events and in reflecting on what they learn from this process. The activity offers students the choice of face-to-face or online discussion (or both) and encourages them to benefit from co-operative effort. The portfolio that they compile for assessment requires students to keep a record of their reflections throughout the process. A sustainable learning community is generated, where students start to behave in a mutually

supportive way which stands them in good stead in later parts of their programme.

Students are necessarily encouraged to consider their own development in terms of personal confidence. This is especially important where, being near the start of their degree programme, they know so little about a complex system. The activity enables the students to generate understandings about the theories behind sustainable development in a new situation (it was introduced during an earlier module the previous semester) and to reflect further on its value as it operates in the real planning system.

Feedback

This is an activity that has evolved through the last few years, in response to feedback and to national imperatives. The students' response to this version of the activity will be carefully monitored. The new design builds on feedback indicating that students who appear disengaged can be drawn into the activity with the offer of choice, and through the application of a little personal attention that responds to individual needs.

Strengths and weaknesses

The students are attracted by the opportunity to engage with the real system, although some are not comfortable with online working and would prefer to see applications in paper format rather than electronically. Students also welcome the opportunity to make decisions for themselves; they like being given choices, particularly in terms of the planning application for study and the outputs to be assessed. From the tutor's perspective, preparation and delivery can be time-consuming in the first instance. This is also a very challenging module for many students who begin it knowing almost nothing about the planning system. The activities help students to be more closely engaged in the subject but it often takes longer than planned to make sure that students understand the concepts relevant to each activity.

Programmes

The module title is *Town and Country Planning* and it is 12 CATS points at Level 1. It is an optional module for Geography, Human Geography, Community Development, Landscape Management and Heritage Management. It is compulsory for Local Policy students.

Although a group of mature, part-time distance learners take this module and engage in this activity, it was designed particularly with the younger, inexperienced (full-time, campus-based) students in mind to help them engage more effectively in a topic which has daunted them in the past.

Key words:

Planning system; reflective learning; group work; online discussion; active learning

References

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