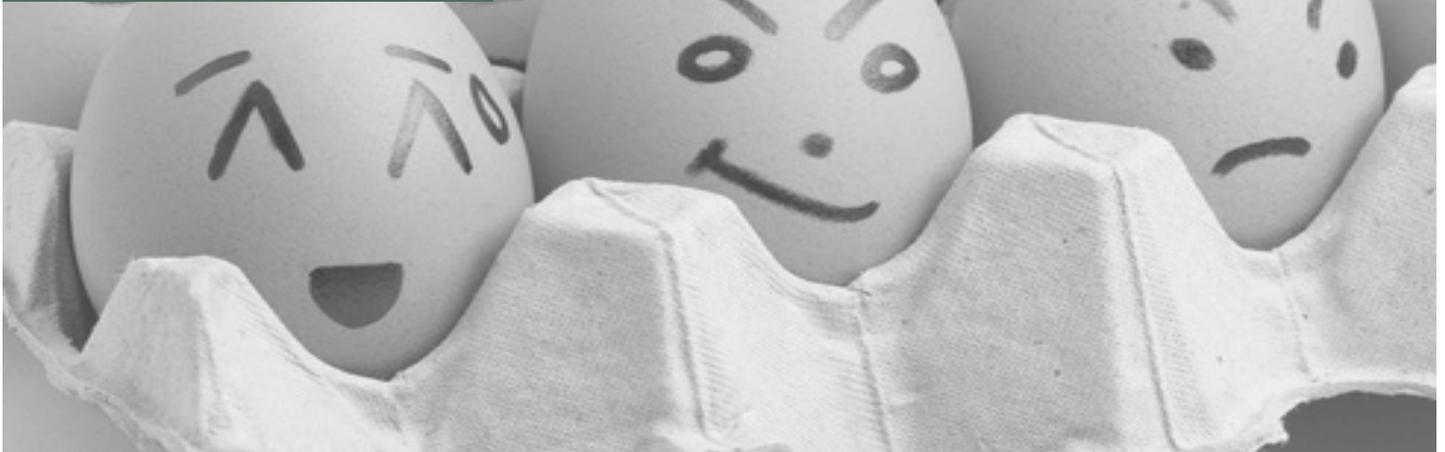


16<sup>th</sup> International  
ACTS Conference

University of the Sunshine Coast  
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## Professional Development Workshop Outcomes Summary

### *Increasing capacity beyond institutional limits: Sharing advocacy and stakeholder engagement lessons and strategies*

*by Anna Lyth, RED Sustainability Consultants*

The 16<sup>th</sup> Australian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS) Conference 2016 offered a professional development (PD) workshop titled *Increasing capacity beyond institutional limits: Sharing advocacy and stakeholder engagement lessons and strategies*. Designed and facilitated by Anna Lyth approximately 20 ACTS conference attendees participated in the workshop. Participants were mostly sustainability or facility managers/officers, although a few were academic participants.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Identify and share how Higher Education institutions can:
  - a. constructively engage with external stakeholders to deliver improved sustainability outcomes for their campuses and communities; and
  - b. deliver effective and pragmatic advocacy to advance sustainability.
2. Identify recommendations to assist ACTS

members to deliver better practice, overcome barriers, and make the most of opportunities for effective advocacy and external stakeholder engagement.

Following a presentation on the imperatives of external stakeholder engagement and basics around how to effectively engage with external stakeholders (see Attachment A), participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and issues in this area through a panel discussion and group work. The role of advocacy in advancing sustainability in higher education organisations was also discussed. Groups worked to identify:

- reasons for (or examples of) higher education sustainability units (offices) undertaking advocacy and external engagement activities;
- opportunities for engaging in constructive and pragmatic advocacy;
- barriers or limitations to delivering advocacy activities to advance sustainability for their institution; and
- recommendations to reduce or remove the barriers/limitations.



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A summary of the workshop group discussion outcomes and recommendations are provided as follows.

### **Reasons for higher education sustainability units to undertake external stakeholder engagement and advocacy activities**

There was acknowledgement of the importance of both external stakeholder engagement and prudent advocacy activities for those working to deliver sustainability agendas within universities. Reasons included:

1. The building of understanding and capacity by all stakeholders involved in delivering or influencing sustainable outcomes (internal and external to the university) through:
  - the sharing of information and resources;
  - awareness raising and the development of mutual understanding; and
  - the development of trust in stakeholder relationships (an important ingredient for developing collaborative partnerships).
2. The important role of collaboration and boundary work in building sustainable societal norms, legitimacy for sustainability initiatives, and social responsibility across the systems in which universities operate within.
3. The need for the university institution to be able to influence wider policies or planning processes (local projects through to international agreements) as opportunities arise and to engage (participate) in these.
4. The need to engage with external stakeholders to advocate university sustainability values and objectives to deliver on strategic commitments (such as carbon neutrality goals and divestment).

### **Opportunistic ways to engage in constructive advocacy**

The following were identified as being constructive and pragmatic approaches to advocacy.

1. *Community Forums*  
Participate in or facilitate community forums to share information and/or solicit feedback.
2. *Advisory Panels*  
Establish advisory panels to solicit independent expertise/advice and leverage credible

recommendations and esteem to advance an issue, initiative, or strategy.

### 3. *Action research*

Universities provide excellent opportunities to draw on academic research expertise and student learning aspirations. Developing an evidence base to assist with establishing a case or argument for an initiative can be achieved through academic and/or student research programs. Involving stakeholders (internal or external) in research also facilitates social learning. Action research is a process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking action. A primary reason for engaging in action research is to work with the 'actor or actors' to determine or improve actions. The questions posed by an action research project and the findings it reveals are anchored in the operating context of the actors who also become the researchers therefore the research is highly relevant to the participants. Ultimately action research helps guide improvements through the data (evidence base) that is collected and analysed through the process.

### 4. *Involve students*

Support student placements, projects and volunteering to deliver initiatives, deliver experiential education for sustainability, and engage the student body.

### 5. *Engage sustainability champions*

Develop initiatives around existing hubs of sustainability interest, champions, and passion in order to maintain and leverage action. Involving these individuals and groups appeals to their values and will assist in communicating agendas and initiatives in diverse parts of the organisation. Make sure these champions are aware of and have access to any relevant strategic plans that communicate sustainability values, goals and initiatives.

### 6. *Say yes to external committees*

Say yes to sitting on local council or other relevant external committees as a university representative and sustainability professional where the forum has relevance to the delivery of the university's sustainability values and plans, and/or where stakeholder relationships can be further fostered.

### 7. *Participate in consultation processes*

Public or stakeholder consultation processes are an invitation to provide feedback on policies, programs or projects that impact on an institution's sustainability plans and progress. Take advantage of invitations to attend forums and submit feedback via public or stakeholder consultations on matters affecting the system that has relevance to the university's sustainability agenda.

## **Barriers to delivering constructive advocacy activities to advance sustainability within the system**

Workshop participants discussed the limitations of undertaking constructive advocacy to advance sustainability within their university institutions and the systems in which they operated. Limitations were predominantly identified as being internal to the institution, specifically associated with the following.

1. *The organisational structure, culture, and priorities of the institution:*
  - operation of the university institution according to silos with little co-ordination or communication between them;
  - conservative organisational culture adverse to doing things differently or embracing alternative ways of thinking; and
  - risk adverse approaches, especially focused on shorter term risks as opposed to longer term ones.
2. *Challenges determining financial costs, benefits and impacts:*
  - to develop the business case for sustainability initiatives and inform decision makers; and
  - provide a financial evidence base to call out decisions that undermine the institution's sustainability values and bottom line.
3. *Tensions associated with freedoms of academic speech versus restrictions on non-academic sustainability staff to provide public commentary*

There was mention of challenges associated with public commentary or consultation submissions by independent academics on matters that impact on the university's sustainability program. Problems arose when an academic's public commentary was viewed as being on behalf of the

university rather than simply an independent statement. On the contrary it was also recognised that academic commentary can also be useful but that it worked best when University positions and values were well communicated and coordinated.

4. *Invitations to submissions not always being sent to the appropriate person for reply*

Complicated professional networks and organisational structures sometimes meant that invitations to provide consultation submissions did not always reach the appropriate person for reply, meaning that opportunities to engage on an issue might be lost completely or that a reply is sent by another unit or individual who does not have carriage over sustainability considerations.
5. *Time or budget capacity limits affecting the preparation of submissions*

The lack of time or resources to respond effectively to submissions was a regular challenge. It was also pointed out that sometimes position descriptions did not include mention of this task which made it difficult to justify participating in these activities even though highly relevant to the delivery of institutional sustainability objectives.
6. *Mis-communications or non delivery of key sustainability messages (mis-communication to public, staff, students)*

Mis-communications or missed opportunities to communicate university sustainability initiatives or issues was identified as a concern for some participants. They saw an opportunity to work with university communications teams more constructively where they could take advantage of skills and resources not otherwise available.
7. *The risk of public scrutiny or brand damage*

The fear of creating negative public reactions or facing public scrutiny that might impact on the image or brand of the university was identified as a barrier to being able to pursue advocacy activities for some. This was less so where sustainability was viewed as a high priority for the institution, where sustainability was part of the institution's branding, or when sustainability was embedded in the values and strategic aspirations of the institution.

## What is needed to reduce or remove barriers?

Workshop participants identified a range of things that needed to occur or be implemented to reduce or remove the above limitations or barriers. These included things that they as individuals could do, their organisation should do, or external stakeholders or peak bodies (such as ACTS) could do. These are presented in the following figure as nine key action theme recommendations for individual institutions and ACTS.



Nine Recommendations for reducing barriers to delivering effective advocacy for university sustainability

## About RED Sustainability Consultants

The RED team offers comprehensive consultancy services to support the development of sustainable and resilient places and organisations, including universities. We aspire to facilitate innovative and achievable outcomes and transformational journeys for clients. We have a deep understanding of the built environment, urban systems, sustainability and resilience concepts; and extensive experience in stakeholder and community engagement.

- Sustainable building
- Sustainable transport and settlements planning
- University/campus and workplace travel planning
- Energy efficiency
- Behavior change and capacity building
- Housing sustainability
- Climate change adaptation planning and resilience thinking
- Vulnerability assessment

<http://www.red-sustainability.com.au>

tel: 03 6223 7108

email: [admin@red-sustainability.com.au](mailto:admin@red-sustainability.com.au)

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