

‘Sustainability Clinic’

1) Name of Institution

University of York

2) Name of Initiative

The Sustainability Clinic

(<https://www.york.ac.uk/about/sustainability/teaching-learning/sustainability-clinic/>)

3) Initiative Outline

The Sustainability Clinic is an interdisciplinary elective Community Engaged Learning (CEL) module available to all undergraduate and postgraduate taught students at the University of York. It is a collaboration between Environmental Sustainability at York (ESAY), Careers and Placements and the Department of Environment and Geography, with leadership and teaching staff from diverse disciplines including Arts and Creative Technologies, Biology, Education, Law and Politics.

4) Context/History/Need for Initiative

The Sustainability Clinic provides a supported opportunity for students to test ideas, develop thinking, and to be active citizens who are empowered to make a difference. It increases accessibility of work-related learning, ensuring that any student can develop Green Skills in a professional setting.

5) What happens and how it is assessed

Students work in multidisciplinary teams on a 10 week project, co-developed between the CEL Manager and a community partner organisation. Each team tackles a unique real-world sustainability challenge for their partner, culminating in a clearly defined output. Over the course of the module, taught workshops focus on teamwork, project planning and project management as well as exploration of specific sustainability case studies. Teams meet on a weekly basis with support provided by Expert Advisors, Graduate Teaching Assistants, the Module Convenor and CEL Manager. After an initial partner meeting, teams liaise with their partner via email, receive feedback on a mid-project plan and on their project output, which they present to their partner and key stakeholders during their final meeting. Students are assessed on their critical reflection on their work. They explore the impact of the project on themselves, their team, their partner and broader society. They are also encouraged to consider how their project contributed to their partner’s sustainability goals and what it shows about the place of sustainability in that sector.

6) Green Skills developed

Students develop skills to analyse the status quo, research creative responses, and to communicate environmental and sustainability information in a meaningful way. These span technical skills such as research monitoring and project management, transferable skills such as collaboration, problem solving and strategic thinking, and transformative capacities such as working within complexity, collective action and environmental stewardship.

7) Contribution to Leverage Points

Through their projects, students consider aspects of efficiency, justice and social equity (LP1). Specific project types align with LP3 for advocacy projects which could involve literature reviews or qualitative/quantitative research to provide evidence, influence policy and make recommendations for future policy and LP4 for Sustainability Action Plans. CEL Managers build strong relationships with community partners (LP2) founded on trust, mutual understanding of desired outcomes and shared strategic objectives.

8) Impact/Successes/Challenges

Challenges include how to ensure students in all departments can access the module, how to timetable it effectively and how to support students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds who have very different experiences with teamwork and reflection. We have developed marking criteria involving staff from different disciplinary backgrounds, integrated more explicit support with reflection, and worked with the library to ensure asynchronous support for students. A student testimony reflects the module's success and impact:

"I found this module very enjoyable. It gave me experience working with actual sustainability issues, and improved my teamwork and communication with external stakeholders. It was one of the best group work experiences I've ever had, and the workshops held early on helped with that."

(Sustainability Clinic student)

9) Advice for others

As with all CEL modules, careful consistent relationship management is key to success. Community relationships must be reciprocal, ensuring learning experiences designed in collaboration which considers where the opportunity can add value to the community partner and at the same time underpins students' academic and professional learning and their workplace readiness.

