Higher education partnerships
Creating new value in the environment sector

Nicholas J. Barnes
Research Fellow, Centre for Complexity and Change, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, and
Paul S. Phillips
Reader in Environmental Science, School of Environmental Science, University College Northampton, Northampton, UK

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Abstract Outlines some of the benefits that can arise through partnership working between higher education institutions and other local organisations in the environment sector. Aims to contribute to the debate on sustainability by highlighting the capacity for partnerships to “unlock” value retained within single organisations. Argues for the need for more creativity in the ways in which HEIs interact with other organisations in the environment sector, in order to harness mutually-advantageous opportunities. The situation in Northamptonshire (central England) is described and case studies are included to demonstrate some local successful partnership-based projects and to highlight the wider approach. Suggests this approach can offer considerable scope for the personal development of academics and to benefit HEIs, the local communities they serve and the economies they operate within. States, in addition, that partnership working can significantly contribute to the process of sustainable management within HEIs and external organisations by promoting the effective use of human resources, information and finance for environmentally beneficial activity.

Introduction
During recent years, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK have operated in a climate of increasing student numbers, resulting in heavy pressure on the financial resources of these organisations. A shift from the provision of purely academic courses has necessarily accompanied the need to recruit more students and serve a wider community of users (Hawley, 1999). HEIs are now increasingly encouraged to develop working links with external organisations of all types (Bagwell, 1998). Simultaneously, the regime for providing financial support to students has been changed dramatically, forcing most students to critically assess the potential value and relevance of courses and training. In addition, HEIs now need to be ever more responsive in terms of accommodating the needs of part-time students and those unable or unwilling to utilise “traditional” methods of attendance (The National Skills Task Force, 1999). This need has been amply highlighted by the significant increase in open-learning opportunities in recent years.

Many part-time students are now following work-related courses, gaining time off work or using spare time to follow courses perceived as benefitting their future careers and the work of their employers. These students are effectively representatives of organisations of all types, partners in the process of
developing the human resource for personal and economic objectives. Their knowledge and enthusiasm as local practitioners can significantly add to the value and relevance of many courses. Furthermore, many HEIs offer recognition of current and previous work-based activity when assessing eligibility for entry onto courses. Accreditation of such experience is now also frequently possible.

These factors and others have influenced the creation of a rapidly changing framework for HEIs in the UK with consequences for the educational and community functions they now perform. These trends highlight the widening role of HEIs in local communities and the increasingly flexible approaches to learning which are needed. In addition, Government policy to promote Lifelong Learning is now crystallising into practical initiatives (NAGCELL, 1999) with further implications for HEIs. As the culture of Lifelong Learning begins to emerge, HEIs must rise to the challenge of providing relevant education to many new “customers” who are seeking new skills and knowledge throughout their working lives, and beyond.

Increasing student numbers during the 1990s and public sector funding pressures have inevitably posed problems for HEI management and this has resulted in very real pressures on many academic staff. Increasing workloads comprising both teaching and administration, together with budgetary constraints have combined to create heavy demands on staff time. This has meant that trying to allocate time for professional development, research and other scholarly activity, or to establish and foster links with outside organisations has become seemingly very difficult. Yet it is precisely this type of activity that may offer the opportunity to accommodate varying organisational demands and offer opportunities for personal development.

We argue that there is considerable scope for increasing the quantity and quality of co-operative working relationships between HEIs and local organisations of all types in the environment sector. Although some academic departments have traditionally always fostered active working relationships with external organisations (for example in business and management) many departments are relatively “isolated” in this respect (Hawley, 1999). Bringing together academics and practitioners offers numerous advantages. Complimentary knowledge and skills, can feed into teaching, research and professional practice, making courses more relevant to employment whilst simultaneously giving practitioners a better intellectual foundation for decision making.

Competition for traditional sources of research funding (i.e. Research Councils, the European Union and some larger charities) is acute, particularly in light of the demands of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This has created a feeling of despondency in many academic departments, particularly in the “new” universities and there is a sense that funding allocations are partly informed by a “pecking order” amongst university academic researchers. In contrast, partnership working offers the opportunity for all academics to access new sources of support both financial, and in-kind. This can support project work, personal development, research and other scholarly activity. Crucially,
partnerships also offer opportunities to contribute to the wider local community with mutual benefits for external organisations, which are not usually available via “traditionally funded” research projects.

The diversity of organisations in the environmental sector provides numerous opportunities for academics to get involved with the wider community. In Northamptonshire, these range from small voluntary community groups such as Pocket Park groups through to county offices of larger conservation organisations such as The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers or the Wildlife Trust (Northamptonshire County Council, 1996). In addition there are, of course, a number of Government agencies and local authority departments responsible for the whole spectrum of statutory environmental work. Further opportunity for collaboration is available through the private sector where development of intellectual capital is an increasingly important business process (Ulrich, 1999).

**Partnerships**

Most public sector organisations, including HEIs, now operate within a framework reliant on partnership working for the successful delivery of services and projects. In recent years there has been considerable play made of the benefits of using partnerships with greater reliance on the voluntary sector (Hurd *et al.*, 1998). In a complex and diverse world, in which power is diffused, it has been argued that effective governance may only be achieved by building on formal inter-sectoral partnerships (Miller, 1999). More specifically, in relation to education and learning it has also been recognised that effective partnership working will be crucial to the success of the Government’s Lifelong Learning strategic initiative:

> Many bodies which could make a marked difference to lifelong learning, by acting in concert, have spent the recent past developing their own individual strategies, often in response to an explicit policy drive of mutual competition and institutional single-mindedness. For them, learning the habits and good practices of collaboration will be part of the cultural changes we are advocating… (NAGCELL, 1999).

The report also recognises the valuable role of voluntary activity in this country and the importance of collaboration between the voluntary sector and responsive educational organisations. It stresses that learning from such alliances need not necessarily result in recognisable academic awards.

What should partnership working mean for HEIs in practical terms? At its heart must be synergy and complimentarity, harnessing individual academic interests and engaging these in grounded projects of real value to the wider community. In specific terms, partnerships can enable a whole variety of practical outcomes, by-passing the sterility of many traditional approaches to academic work. For example, joint funding-bids may allow access to new support opportunities, previously not available to HEIs. Contributions from academics and practitioners towards the preparation of joint bids can help to ensure they combine academic rigour with grounded applied objectives. Co-operative working with community groups can utilise voluntary input to research projects enabling access to local expertise and information. Many statutory,
community and voluntary organisations hold information and data, which are generally unavailable to the wider public. In many cases there can be mutual advantage to publish such information and promote the objectives and work of the organisations involved. An example is a research project which utilised data from Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) which probably represents the equivalent of more than £100,000 worth or research work (Denman and Phillips, 1998). The project benefited NCC by evaluating the cost-effectiveness of environmental remediation work, whilst the academic partners gained access to a valuable data-set. In this sense, “untapped” information and expertise of all sorts is abundant but can easily be overlooked by academics. By combining skills and resources it is possible to by-pass the need to secure research (or other) funding, utilising instead in-kind support to achieve desired outcomes.

The next section seeks to further demonstrate some of the benefits available through partnership working by describing some examples of projects recently co-ordinated by the School of Environmental Science at University College Northampton (UCN).

Case studies in Northamptonshire

The Northampton Science Initiative

The Northampton Science Initiative (“NORSCI”) began in 1995 and operated until 1999. Initially funded through central Government Continuing Vocational Education (CVE) development funding, it aimed to enhance the future employment prospects of participants (Brennan, 1998). It operated by offering practical support to individuals who were identified as “under-employed”, the aim being to foster personal development in a “tailor-made” way appropriate to each individual. For example, seminars and workshops were held on how to get work published, how to raise funds for environmental projects and the options available for further training. Modest grants were also available to support participants with specific needs or ideas (e.g. to support travel costs for project fieldwork, or for attendance at conferences).

The NORSCI initiative generated numerous positive outcomes for the individual participants both in terms of personal development and enhanced career prospects. For example, support was given to one of the authors to complete and write up an ecological research project (Barnes and Halliday, 1998). The completion of this work directly contributed to later success in securing a research post. In another case, one participant networked extensively with local partners to develop collaborative research. This resulted in the publication of a paper in a journal with a good RAE rating (Marley et al., 1998), the work being undertaken at a fraction of the cost that it would have required if funded internally. The NORSCI scheme also provided benefits to UCN in terms of (for example) raising the profile of some of its academic activity, helping to generate research income and encouraging many participants to publish a variety of work. An evaluation of the national CVE programme (HEFCE, 1998) highlighted the value of strengthening links between HEIs and the wider economy in the process of wealth creation both locally, and regionally.
The Northamptonshire Resource Efficiency Project
The primary aim of the Northamptonshire Resource Efficiency Project (NREP) was to establish a waste minimisation programme in Northamptonshire, in order to assist local companies to reduce costs, improve competitiveness and enhance environmental performance (Phillips and Pike, 1998). The main project partners were UCN, Business Link, March Consulting and Northamptonshire County Council. The project has now assisted more than 30 companies and in excess of £1,300,000 worth of savings per annum was achieved during the period 1997 to 1999. Examples include a Northampton company which is now saving some £2,000 per year simply through re-using cardboard boxes rather than disposing of them. Another company is saving around £10,000 per annum by washing and re-using parts that were previously thrown away after being accidentally dropped. Other companies are making more significant savings through the implementation of more efficient energy management techniques.

In addition to the savings already achieved, a further £2.5 million pounds worth of potential savings have also been identified. All this has been achieved through an initial “investment” of only £140,000 through the Local Governments Capital Challenge scheme, together with a modest fee from each participating company. The economic benefits to Northamptonshire’s local economy and the improved environmental performance of the companies concerned have been highly significant (Phillips et al., 1999). These benefits have come about through the establishment of genuine partnerships, where expertise has been applied following consultation. The Government has recently called on the public, private and voluntary sectors to share best practice in sustainable waste management (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999) and to work together to implement waste minimisation and other initiatives. In this respect, NREP has made a timely contribution to the development of sustainable waste management in Northamptonshire.

The potential benefits of the NREP are not confined to the gains solely made through the life of the project. For example, there is likely to be a “ripple effect” as other companies witness the potential benefits of waste minimisation and begin to consider and employ their own measures. In addition, NREP has already spawned a number of daughter projects and generated other related work (Table I) with positive environmental and economic gains which will extend far beyond the life-span of the original project. For UCN, the benefits of an enhanced reputation, the professional development of staff involved and the potential scope for the production of publishable material and other teaching resources are clear.

The Northampton Pond Project
This is a small-scale wildlife conservation and education project seeking to identify, evaluate and, where appropriate assist with the management of ponds and wetlands across Northampton, for the mutual benefit of wildlife and local people. Initially, UCN assisted the project with identification of suitable funding sources and the preparation of funding bids. The project went on to
Project

1. Practical projects
Waste exchange at Corby
Corby “waste not” project

2. Research projects
Survey of best practice in the Anglian Region with Environment Agency
Best value research project for local authorities

3. Possible “daughter” waste minimisation projects
Bedfordshire and Derbyshire waste minimisation projects
Northampton Borough Council waste minimisation project for MSW
Construction waste minimisation project
Moulton Park project

4. Dissemination activities, publications, etc.
Waste minimisation discipline network
Northampton Environmental forum
A total of 24 papers in national and international journals
Training for waste minimisation with Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce
Waste minimisation textbook (ISBN 1 902375 19 X)
Forum for waste disposal and collection authorities
Internet site for schools and colleges

5. Awards, etc.
Roy J. Weston Award for contributions to world waste minimisation issues

secure in excess of £10,000 worth of financial and in-kind support for research and other project costs. It is unlikely that the project would have achieved this without the support and backing of a large HEI. Similarly, UCN has gained from the partnership, benefiting from research undertaken by volunteers, which would probably not have been achieved otherwise. The project has also helped to further raise UCN’s profile in the wildlife conservation sphere.

Agenda 21 in Northamptonshire
The Environmental Forum is an important part of Northamptonshire’s Agenda 21 process, where local authorities work in partnership with a variety of other organisations to shape and implement the process of sustainable development at the local level. The Forum provides an opportunity for a wide variety of Northamptonshire’s environmental stakeholders to share ideas and experience, and to consider how best to move towards the goal of sustainable development in the county. Widening the participation in the determination of Local Agenda 21 policies is seen as critical to its success (Burgess et al., 1998), and UCN now hosts the Forum following the withdrawal of support from the County Council. A number of working groups have been established to address specific areas (e.g. transport, economy, countryside etc.) with a variety of participants. In addition to the development of strategic documents a number of more grounded initiatives have been agreed. For example, a green business award
has been established to encourage more companies to consider the environmental impacts of their activities and to implement more sustainable business practices.

These environmental projects demonstrate some of the many potential advantages of the multi-partner approach and collectively, play an important role in the delivery of UCN’s mission. They also make a significant contribution to the income of the College’s School of Environmental Science (Figure 1). More importantly, they advance the process of defining and implementing sustainable development initiatives in Northamptonshire and beyond.

**Adopting the partnership approach**

What techniques can be adopted to help implement effective partnerships between HEIs and other environmental organisations? First, it is important to identify, and harness existing areas of expertise. Higher Education Institutions are, by definition, centres of expertise and knowledge, which are constantly evolving in light of new developments. This expertise has usually taken the form of academic knowledge, which is used to deliver courses and undertake research but increasingly may also be employed for wider applied use. Second, establishing meaningful relationships or fostering existing alliances requires outreach work, based on a willingness to learn about the aims and activities of local organisations. It is then possible to consider and identify areas of potential mutual interest. Third, partnership working requires applied activity for mutual benefit, a two-way flow resulting in something positive for all concerned, activity with outcomes greater than the sum of the parts. This needs to be based on careful consideration of the needs of the organisations concerned, the problems to be solved, ideas to be explored or synergies to be gained. Consultation is crucial in this process to ensure new projects are genuinely needed and to build trust between organisations. These relationships can then be developed to “build capacity” for future work.

Part of the strength of the partnership approach is that it can be employed in almost any area, making use of, and benefiting the local situation as it is. New funding or strategic initiatives are not necessarily required, more important is the focus on positive outcomes. Organisational co-operation may give rise to unexpected gains or opportunities. In this respect, the concept of emergent

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**Figure 1.**

Relative importance of external research income sources for the School of Environmental Science at University College Northampton (1998-1999)
properties (Capra, 1997) in systems thinking is highly relevant, with new opportunities arising from new organisational structures and relationships. Such opportunities offer exciting chances to “break free” from existing organisational or workload constraints.

**Benefits to local communities and economies**
HEIs play a significant role in the process of national economic growth and are being encouraged to play an ever greater part in the knowledge driven economy (Times Higher Education Supplement, 1999). HEIs are also important players in local and regional economies and it is difficult to overstate the importance, existing and potential, of universities as a source of local economic regeneration (Khan et al., 1998). For example, in Northamptonshire, UCN has recently undergone a multi-million pound capital development programme, employs over 500 staff and provides courses and training to more than 10,000 students. But this, of course, is only part of the picture. By bringing new funds into the local economy and improving the efficiency of existing resource flows, HEIs can become even more powerful drivers of the local economy. Partnership projects can play a key role within this economic activity, both in terms of helping to access external funds and, perhaps more importantly, by working together to ensure more efficient use of existing resources in other partner organisations (East Midlands Development Agency, 1999). In this respect, the approach can also make a real contribution to the process of implementing sustainable development and, where necessary, aiding economic regeneration (Murphy and Bendell, 1997). For communities, enhanced skills and knowledge amongst students, environmental volunteers and staff, offer numerous personal benefits to the participants of partnership projects and the wider local economy.

**Conclusion**
Partnership working between HEIs and other organisations offers significant opportunities for “adding value” in the environment sector and for promoting sustainability. A range of projects and partnerships from small-scale (mainly) local, to regionally important economic initiatives, are within the grasp of all HEIs. Examples of partnership working in Northamptonshire demonstrate the type of benefits that can be gained. For example, we estimate this approach has already secured in excess of half a million pounds worth of environment-enhancing activity. This level of project resourcing is simply not available to most organisations through normal funding routes. Moreover, funding raised for partnership projects can produce excellent “value for money” because the level of activity and practical outcomes achieved can far exceed those which might ordinarily result from projects delivered by single organisations. In this way, modest financial investment can produce valuable environmental and economic returns, demonstrating the need for further investment in partnership projects. Partnerships are not only about securing resources though, if anything, they are about establishing, developing and celebrating meaningful and mutually rewarding relationships. These partnerships should, by definition, benefit all parties concerned and the wider community served by HEIs.
References


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