

SUSTAINABILITY INTERNSHIPS: A PATH TO BECOMING AGENTS OF CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus (OPAIC) offers student internships through its Green Office Toitū programme, with the aim of developing sustainability awareness and skills in a non-simulated, experiential context. In order to investigate the impact of sustainability internships, the Employability and the Learning & Teaching teams at OPAIC have been conducting a long term research project on the perceptions, learning progress, skill acquisition and career paths of the student and alumni participants. This article is a case study (based on written qualitative data obtained through the wider research project) designed to focus on two Green Office Toitū participants in greater depth than would be afforded by a more comprehensive survey. By comparing and contrasting their experiences of acting on sustainability, first as Green Office interns, and later as alumni working for different employers in Auckland, this study provides a detailed picture of the way that sustainability internships can affect the attitudes and behaviour of those involved. Their personal reports describe their learning in sustainability and the challenges they were able to meet in order to disseminate information, make suggestions, put forward proposals and introduce measures designed to improve the organisational culture, policies and processes at their place of work. The narrative that emerges from these accounts gives us an insight into the cognitive and affective development which enabled Green Office Toitū interns to bridge the “commitment gap” and become agents of change as alumni.

Keywords: sustainability internships, Green Office movement, work-integrated learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the perspective of work-integrated learning, whatever enables students to change and therefore to learn from their work experience forms a central question in the literature on internships (for example: Ivkovic & McRae, 2021; Shephard et al., 2015; Sulkowski et al., 2020; Zsóka et al., 2013). It is understood in the context of this literature that whilst acquiring knowledge is a necessary part of the process, it is not enough for such a change to occur. Students may gain awareness and even develop relevant expertise without feeling motivated to behave in accordance with the knowledge they have acquired. Their understanding of global issues needs to be affective and not simply cognitive in order for it to become conducive to sustainable action (Hicks, 2002). In other words, students must be emotionally engaged with their learning, both in terms of its content and its processes, if it is to result in behavioural change.

Nor should this change be perceived as being exclusively personal. Lozano (2008) analyses the complexities of promoting sustainability in the world of work at the level of groups and the organisation as a whole (as well as individuals). He identifies three types of attitudes which are manifested in each of these levels: 1) informational, 2) emotional, and 3) behavioural. Informational attitudes are what is known and believed about the topic (i.e. sustainability), emotional attitudes are how people feel about it, and behavioural attitudes are what they are prepared to do (Loranzo, 2008). Sammalisto et al. (2016) summarise the experience of

change as “a congruence between the informational, emotional and behavioral attitudes so that what is learned, what is thought and what is done agree” (p. 3). This complexity has implications in its turn for the way OPAIC view and evaluate learner progress in work-related learning. How individuals act in sustainability has to be seen in the context of existing attitudes within their team and their organisation, not simply in terms of how their actions are connected to their own attitudes.

Furthermore, our ability to understand students’ learning will depend on our having evidence that is sufficiently wide-ranging and multi-layered to convey the complexities involved. At the individual level, we would need some kind of data or documentation that reveals the nature and extent of changes that have taken place at the informational, emotional, and behavioural levels. The bulk of this material is likely to be the student’s self-perception, in the form of learning journals, written or spoken feedback from students, internship reports, etc. In making use of this material, the key question would then be: “How do the students’ self-perceived sustainability knowledge, awareness and actions in the beginning and at the end of their studies differ?” (Sammalisto et al., 2016, p. 4). Here the timeframe could either be narrowed down to before and after their student internship, or extended to include a period of employment after graduation.

Sammalisto et al. (2016) admit there are a number of limitations to their study, including the fact that it may be impossible to tell how much of the changes in students’ attitudes are caused by their studies (or work-integrated learning) and how much by other sources of knowledge or development. Students could be influenced by media stories for example, or by friends and activities outside of their education. A further limitation of this particular study is that the results do not show how students would behave in real-life situations. To gauge a student’s self-perceived knowledge, awareness and actions once they are in employment requires data that extends beyond the timeframe of their studies (Gaebel et al., 2012).

Such a study of former students’ actions as employees would need to do more than simply determine whether “their self-confidence regarding sustainability knowledge has increased” (Sammalisto et al., 2016, p. 13). While data on affective as well as informational development is undoubtedly of value in the context of student learning on sustainability, knowing how these students act later on in their jobs remains essential. How dynamic and proactive were they as independent agents, team players, and members of their organisation? Only their track record in the workplace, first as student interns and then as new recruits, will provide a reliable indication of their progress.

What research on this timescale would provide is some insight into the extent of the commitment to promoting sustainability. In their study on students’ perceptions, Emanuel and Adams (2011) found there was a “commitment gap” when it came to recycling. While the vast majority of student participants understood the waste management system put in place on their campus, there was a discrepancy between what they knew they should do and what many of them were actually doing (Emanuel & Adams, 2011). Informational knowledge does not automatically lead to appropriate behaviour. The same applies to student internship programmes as it does to campus recycling schemes. The behavioural attitudes of students in their individual journeys before and after graduation can be set against the sustainability aims of OPAIC courses. According to Zsóka et al. (2013), the impact of environmental education is correlated to the intensity of its programmes of study. On that basis, the more students are involved in sustainability in their internships, the greater will be their commitment to raising awareness and introducing green practices.

BACKGROUND

OPAIC has a vision of developing New Zealand’s most employable graduates, and the internship programme plays an invaluable role in helping students to transition into the workforce. The Covid lockdown and work restrictions in Auckland in 2021 meant that many host organisations began to operate remotely and the OPAIC internship programme needed to be agile in order to deal with the challenges that this situation presented.

OPAIC consulted the intern students, some of whom expressed a desire to have an authentic and formal engagement in sustainability initiatives and contribute to building sustainable local communities as international students. OPAIC then adapted the Green Office model to its campus (Green Office Movement, 2021) and worked with a number of students to join the global movement. Green Office Toitū was set up as the OPAIC campus-wide sustainability hub, offering meaningful professional development learning to intern students in exchange for their work to progress OPAIC's sustainability strategy (Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus News, 2021).

Green Office Toitū offers interns the opportunity to operationalise sustainability by organising events, promoting climate action initiatives, sharing carbon footprint tools, and conducting relevant research projects. Meanwhile, students enhance their employability skills, particularly innovation and leadership soft skills (Balducci & Mao, 2022).

Green Office Toitū has four priority Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contributing project targets:

1. Good health and well-being

- campus recreation and wellness
- prevent substance abuse
- access to sexual and reproductive care
- urban forest and park initiative working group
- student mental health focus.

2. Responsible consumption and production

- food and dining sustainability initiatives
- reduce waste generation on campus and at home
- FutureFit competition (to promote sustainable lifestyle)
- Again Again campaign (on reusable packaging)
- advocate for brands committed to sustainable practice.

3. Climate action

- native tree reforestation project
- energy choices: efficiency, renewables, and conservation
- Auckland conservation volunteering
- Carbon Footprint Calculator
- Individual carbon neutrality.

4. Partnerships for these goals with:

- government agencies
- communities
- SMEs
- researchers
- other sustainability-passionate organisations.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research was how OPAIC's Green Office Toitū internships affect students' attitudes and behaviour after graduation. More specifically, we wanted to know to what extent the particular type of internship these students undertook resulted in a deeper understanding of sustainability and a stronger personal commitment to promoting more sustainable practices in their subsequent employment. It is important for OPAIC that the internship programme not only helps to build greater knowledge of sustainability in students and alumni, but also fosters their ability to act and influence others in the world of work. In other words, there is a role for higher education providers to play as agents of change (Doring 2022), and students in their turn can adopt such a role when they become alumni in employment.

The questions we sought to address in this article were: How did some of our Green Office students perceive their own knowledge of sustainability before and after their internship? How did they behave in their employment during the first year after graduating from OPAIC and what does this tell us about their learning? For them to be able to act effectively in promoting environmental awareness and sustainable practices in their new jobs, they would need

- i) a clear understanding of their present context,
- ii) a firm grasp of what can be done in practical terms, and
- iii) the motivation and capacity to act accordingly within their roles and responsibilities

Acting for better sustainability as an agent of change involves taking initiative in order to disseminate information, make suggestions, put forward proposals, or introduce measures designed to improve organisational culture, policies and processes. To gain insight into what is learned through a sustainability internship that will equip OPAIC alumni with the confidence and skills to exhibit such patterns of behaviour at work, it was decided to look at data covering the whole time span from their student internship to their present occupation (up to one year after graduation). We set out to investigate their attitude to sustainability immediately before they became student interns, how they perceived what they achieved during their student internship and their perspective on what they are doing now for the environment in relation to their work as alumni.

Given the relatively small number (so far) of OPAIC graduates whose internship was directed at sustainability, the pool of potential participants for our study was limited. In these circumstances, such a constraint was also an advantage in that it enabled us to delve more deeply into the specifics of their internship experience and their performance in their current occupation. We could map out the details of a few of our students' journeys, identify key points and issues, and possibly take actions on our Green Office internship programme.

By the same token, we would be preparing the ground for the development of a data-gathering system on internship students and alumni. As pointed out in a TRACKIT report for the European University Association (Gaebel et al., 2012), it is essential to collect data on all aspects of academic programmes: "Regardless of how tracking is approached, institutions need to establish explicit feedback loops, which would ensure systematic use of the results of tracking and their contextualisation" (p. 54). The intention here is to upgrade the current OPAIC system in order to be able to track the professional development of both students and alumni in sustainability skills (as well as their career progression). In addition to providing some hard data, such a system would be able to capture individual voices and provide a rich source of information for further research and associated purposes in employability.

Hence we chose to follow a case study approach, which is recommended for research into work-integrated learning (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). According to Lucas et al. (2018 p. 217), "case study as a methodology provides researchers with the ability for a flexible, in-depth and multi-perspective research approach". Yin (2013) defines a descriptive case study as one where the phenomenon being examined is viewed within its context. Experiential learning on sustainability practices in business was the phenomenon to be studied in the context of Green Office Toitū internships, where students are exposed to a higher intensity of environmental education. All the data to emerge from this research was qualitative and perfectly suited for constructing

narratives based on our findings, a form of representation that brings the students' and alumni's voices to the fore and allows their stories to be told (Lucas et al., 2018). It follows that the theoretical foundation for this type of research is broadly constructivist in that knowledge is co-created and personal experience can be conveyed in its subjectivity.

We had three data collection methods at our disposal for this project: student focus groups, coursework samples and post-graduation reports. Applied Management students were invited, soon after completing their internships, to participate in group discussions. These online meetings were recorded, and the transcripts carefully studied for thematic content, following procedures approved by the OPAIC Research and Ethics Committee (Balducci & Mao, 2022). Then six months after their graduation, alumni who had completed a Green Office Toitū internship were contacted and their consent for using their coursework (i.e. their industry projects and post-internship reflections) was obtained in writing, together with a written description of their work experience and progress after graduating, in whatever format they preferred. In the end, we found that two of the participants in our research provided parallel stories whose common ground as well as particulars were the most illuminating. They were also happy to be identified and acknowledged for their achievements.

FINDINGS

Maimiti works for an IT distributor dealing in Information and Communications Technology hardware, software, Cloud, and Internet of Things (IoT) solutions. Shehan, meanwhile, is employed by a retail business selling luxury designer rugs, cushions, furniture, and other interior accessories. Whereas both of them left OPAIC as highly motivated graduates with a good track record in developing more environment-friendly approaches to business management, neither of their employers was particularly focused on sustainability. But in each case, the story of how these former students took up the challenge of raising awareness and implementing change begins with their personal views and beliefs prior to their internship.

Maimiti started her industry project with a very positive attitude to ecological alternatives, or as she put it, "sustainability has always been important to me". As for Shehan, his perspective was more complicated. He explained that he used to be happy "talking about the subject", but was never "actually concerned about being sustainable and taking initiatives". However, they are equally prepared to acknowledge in their own terms the part that their studies played in enhancing their motivation:

...studying at OPAIC raised my interest in sustainability to another level. (Maimiti)

My internship with the Green Office Toitū (...) has helped me to understand the true meaning of sustainability. (Shehan)

Shehan has repeatedly stressed in his focus group, his coursework assignments and his post-graduation report that the internship boosted his confidence and drove the taking on responsibilities aimed at making his workplace more ecologically sustainable. His initial lack of confidence felt like a significant obstacle for him to overcome. Shehan was involved in presenting Green Office Toitū to the Executive Leadership Team as a potential project for OPAIC, which not surprisingly appeared rather daunting at first. He has described how much he learned from all the work he did on presentations throughout his internship, and its usefulness in his present context where he has proposed sustainability initiatives to his team.

Shehan has also explained that he was "not afraid to take on the responsibility of managing the website and social media" for his current employer. In his internship focus group, he described in some detail how he had managed Instagram, Facebook and Twitter pages, posting different content such as photos, videos and newspaper articles, and also using Canva to create posters and information sheets. In his own words, "there are so many ways in which we can promote our content".

The skills and strategies he learned through his Green Office internship could now be put to good use for marketing purposes:

Initially, I proposed that my employer focus more on sustainability while promoting the products. All of the hand-knotted rugs that the company sells are 100% natural and don't affect the environment badly. Moreover, some of the collections were imported from Belgium and they were produced using 100% renewable energy according to the government policies in Belgium. As soon as the company focused more on advertising the sustainable aspects of products, it helped us to address customers who had not been identified before. Also, I have requested blogs on the website about how these rugs were made using renewable energy and also how eco-friendly all of our items are.

Shehan reported that he put in place these and other practices which could be introduced without any monetary expenditure and would bring financial as well as marketing benefits to the company.

Maimiti's initial actions on sustainability were also closely modelled on her Green Office experience. Since her internship project was about improving the recycling capacity of an organisation, her first initiative was to re-enable the collection of recyclable items at her employer's new office. She found all the planning for this to be relatively easy after the work she had done during her student internship. The knowledge she had gained was likewise instrumental in encouraging new sustainability practices at work as well as in the private sphere:

I emailed instructions to all our workforce with some links for those willing to learn more about reducing waste at home. Informal discussions with my co-workers allowed me to share my passion for sustainability and raise awareness on that topic. I was able to attract the interest of some of them and share tips and habits to adopt in order to reduce waste in general.

It is interesting that the reflective internship report she submitted during her studies provides evidence of her learning from published literature on this type of activity:

In fact, a study conducted in 2019 shows that sharing knowledge within organisations enhances the motivation of teams to assimilate and use this knowledge and, ultimately, improves the creativity of the team (Men et al., 2019).

Her passion and commitment did not go unnoticed by her employer. Asked about her career goals at an interview for promotion to a new role within the company, she talked about her ambition to work towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. "Sustainability Champion" was then added to her job description.

Shehan's role in his organisation has also evolved rapidly as a result of his proactive attitude and his capabilities. He notes that his initiatives have given him a certain authority in the workplace. This has emboldened him to "suggest changes to the store layout and to processes for improving sustainability. The store used to have plastic containers to display some of the stock which was not that good for the environment. I've managed to replace them with jute boxes which are more attractive and eco-friendly". He also turned his attention to receipts and invoices: "The store used to print hard copies of receipts for customers with all the purchases. I've proposed to email the receipts to customers and only print receipts

if customers request them. I've also proposed using a barcode reader for the delivery orders so that we do not need to print invoices for all the parcels." Maimiti has made similar moves to reduce paper consumption in her place of work: "I provide support when possible to allow staff members to work 100% paperless".

What does the future hold for them? They've certainly made substantial progress since their graduation by channelling the drive and knowledge they were able to develop through their internship experience:

Luckily, most of the skills that I obtained through the internship I've managed to apply at my workplace. (Shehan)

Sustainability is more than ever a significant part of my career and my daily tasks. (Maimiti)

And they do have plans for continuing their efforts to make the world of work a better place:

In the future, I would like to implement multiple sustainable initiatives. (Maimiti)

I'm working on promoting more sustainable initiatives within the business which, hopefully, I can take to the next level. (Shehan)

CONCLUSION

The detailed feedback we have obtained from our former Green Office students and alumni provides a wealth of information on the progress they have made and the actions they have taken in their jobs after graduating. Through their stories, we have gained an overview of their learning in sustainability, as well as an appreciation of how they were able to meet new challenges with confidence and creativity. Judging by the reports of the two alumni quoted in this article, we can see how the intensity and focus of a sustainability internship may contribute to bridging the "commitment gap" in our future graduates. Looking forward, we now have a model of the qualitative data that could be harvested by staying in close contact with our former students. This form of tracking could be applied more widely as Green Office Toitū continues to grow and our findings are used for a variety of purposes ranging from programme evaluation, to academic research and marketing. What is more, it could pave the way for OPAIC to take a leading role in developing experiential education and work-related learning in sustainability for international students in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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