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THE ROLE OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND IN SUPPORTING ACTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT
Many universities have signed international and national declarations that have publicly committed them to embed sustainability within education, research, outreach and management operations. To date, research has focused on examples of good practice and case studies. Little research exists that has looked at the change process itself. This chapter is based on a doctoral study conducted at the University of Southampton in which a doctoral student was engaged as a critical friend for a period of more than one and a half years working with a group of staff and students trying to implement a programme to embed sustainability within the institution. In this paper evidence is provided on the impact and contributions made by the critical friend, and reflections presented on the challenges and opportunities the critical friend encountered during the research.

KEYWORDS
action research, critical friends, higher education, institutional change, sustainability

INTRODUCTION
Many universities have signed international and national declarations and have publicly committed themselves to work towards achieving sustainability in their education, research, outreach and management operations (Wright, 2004; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010). However sustainability in Higher Education (HE) is a rather recent and emerging research area (Wright 2010). Most of the research in the field has focused on: environmental management and greening of university estates and operations; descriptive case studies and examples of good practice; embedding sustainability in specific courses such as environmental sciences, business and engineering; theoretical developments in teaching and learning approaches towards sustainability; university and policy analysis (Cotton et al., 2009; Barth and Rieckmann, 2013). The lack of a theoretical basis for research conducted in the field has been criticised for leading to descriptive and non-theoretical accounts
(Fien, 2002; Corcoran et al., 2004). It could be argued that the focus of research to date has been on explaining part of the transformation stories, as papers have concentrated on the achievements and positive experiences without paying sufficient attention to the barriers to progress and the process of change per se (Velazquez et al., 2005). The environmental management and greening of campus operations and estates has seen much more progress than curriculum development (Jones et al., 2010). Despite the emerging literature, the signing of international declarations and the creation and development of university strategies and policies, little implementation and holistic transformation has been achieved in the curriculum arena so far (Thomas, 2004; Cebrián, 2014). Curriculum, pedagogy, structure, organisation and ethos are the shaping dimensions of education, therefore embedding sustainability implies a cultural change rather than an add-on to existing curricula and structures (Sterling, 2004).

The existing body of literature reports on different university experiences in implementing sustainability, but HE institutions have so far failed to bring about the necessary structural changes required for the paradigm shift and transformation advocated by Education for Sustainability (EfS) experts (Sterling, 2004; Tilbury, 2012). Most of the research has focused on small-scale projects and examples of good practice that show the potential for creating organisational learning and in HE becoming a leader and innovator to advance sustainability (Albrecht et al., 2007; Beringer and Adomßent, 2008). These projects have generally proved successful but they are sometimes fragmented and often happen on the margins of the institution (Sharp, 2002).

Institutional commitment, allocation of resources for innovative projects, leadership and the professional development of staff, amongst other factors, are needed for holistic curriculum change towards embedding sustainability (Ryan, 2011). Emergent areas of research on sustainability in HE, which so far have been overlooked include the professional development of staff, organisational learning and change processes and leadership (Thomas, 2004; Tilbury, 2012; Cebrián et al., 2013). Few contributions in the literature report on lessons learned derived from successful organisational change projects and the wider application of these in HE (Velazquez et al., 2005; Verhulst and Lambrechts, 2015, in press). Universities face two major challenges in becoming learning organisations towards sustainability: the fact that sustainability is an evolving and moving target and the need to “become skilful at the process of change itself” (Sharp, 2002, p. 129). Further research is needed to understand the processes of organisational change and learning towards embedding sustainability.
in HE curriculum (Cebrián et al., 2013). Little empirical research on EFS has documented the key issues, processes and learning generated through organisational change processes (Velazquez et al., 2005; Verhulst and Lambrechts, 2015, in press). There is a need to promote research on curriculum and staff development within an institutional environment to truly aim for the implementation of the principles of EFS within university curriculum and for the generation of holistic organisational change (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Barth and Rieckmann, 2012). Within a university, success in embedding sustainability depends on learning at an individual and institutional level. This involves the empowerment of members of the organisation and the creation of spaces for collective and interdisciplinary reflection and collaboration, that encourage learning, critical reflection on existing practices and worldviews, and creative and innovative action (Sterling, 2004).

One of the aims of the doctoral research described in this chapter was to explore the organisational learning processes linked to curriculum development in the area of sustainability in HE, taking the University of Southampton as the focus (Cebrián, 2014). The overall aim of the research was to inform future developments and actions of the University in terms of curriculum development and organisational learning towards sustainability. This chapter is based on part of the work emerging from the doctoral studies. In this work a doctoral student was engaged as a critical friend for a period of more than one and a half years with a group of staff and students at the University seeking to implement a programme to embed sustainability within the organisation. In this chapter the methodological contribution of this work is presented. Evidence is provided on the impact and contributions made by the critical friend and reflections presented on the challenges and opportunities encountered during the research.

**ACTION RESEARCH**

**Framing the different dimensions of action research**

Participatory and action-orientated approaches have been said to be critical in fostering organisational learning and change towards sustainability in both private and public organisations (Doppelt, 2010). Action research methodology is in line with EFS processes such as learning-by-doing, empowerment, dialogue and collaboration, innovation, and active and participatory learning (Tilbury et al., 2004). In this study, action research allowed the critical friend to adopt an active role as a researcher to examine a real change programme towards sustainability at the University and permitted her to work with practitioners in order to reflect and promote changes
in the curriculum and institution. The methodological principles of action research are: the integration of research and action; it is conducted through collaborative partnerships; there is a high level of reflection; it stimulates transformative learning amongst participants; it embraces broader political and historical contexts and it starts from aspiration and a vision of social transformation and social justice (Somekh, 2006).

For Noffke (2009), there are three dimensions of an action research approach: the personal, the professional and the political. These dimensions can be differentiated according to the purpose of the action research work in educational settings, where different assumptions and practices can be recognised. The personal dimension makes reference to the practitioner as researcher and the processes of self-reflection, planning and introducing changes to improve self-practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). The professional dimension corresponds to professional development goals which usually in education have the aim of enhancing the skills of the teaching profession (Noffke, 2009). The political dimension is usually embedded in the other two dimensions, but the purpose is mainly to generate democratic processes to empower those groups that are often without a voice, such as lower socio-economic groups and underprivileged communities (Carr and Kemmis, 2009). It is linked to power and political issues, structures, participation and the decision-making process within a community, and ideally leads to educational and social change (Kemmis, 2010). For Noffke (2009) these three dimensions are interconnected, however researchers tend to focus on a single aspect.

The integration of these dimensions is what makes action research particularly relevant and transformational in the exploration of sustainability because of the different interpretations and complexity of the term (Marshall et al., 2011). The emancipatory or critical approach consciously explores the relationship between these three dimensions (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Acquiring a dialogue and a self-critical position in relation to real problems of practice can lead to new insights and ways of embedding sustainability holistically in the curriculum. It can also potentially lead to educational and social change. For this reason, Emancipatory Action Research (EAR), placed in the critical paradigm, brings about personal, professional and organisational learning towards curriculum development in EfS (Cebrián et al., 2012; Cebrián et al., 2015).

Moreover, a useful differentiation is made between first, second and third person (or order) action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Marshall et al., 2011). Action
research projects that engage all three modes of practice, such as this one, are more compelling and sustainable in the long-term. This study contemplated the influence and impact of the critical friend role, the assumptions, motivations and values and the learning gained through the research process at a personal and professional level (first person action research). According to Reason and Bradbury (2008, p. 6), “second person inquiry starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry and learning organizations”. This study was carried out with an existing community of practice. The researcher engaged them in collaborative, supportive and reflective discussions that aimed to develop new understandings and practice in EFS, fostering organisational learning towards sustainability (second person action research). The third-person action research makes reference to extending the project to the wider community consequently having a wider impact that can contribute to wider human and social development. This is the contribution made through the development of an evidence-based model on how to embed EFS within the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Southampton (Cebrián, 2014). In this chapter the focus is on the processes and outcomes from the critical friend role.

The critical friend role
A critical friend, as the name indicates, is a person who assists reflective processes in a supportive and helpful way. Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) define a critical friend as:

“A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context or the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working towards”.

Critical friends are facilitators of learning. They are able to listen, step back from the process, and assist through providing another perspective (Kember et al., 1997). Critical friends allow for time to reflect on processes and actions. Action research is about the process of learning in both the insider-teacher and the outsider-supportive role. The critical friend is an outsider-supportive role and can adopt different approaches, being more proactive or passive, depending on the project and the needs of the group (Kember et al., 1997). Critical friends have been widely used in a school context to promote individual and professional learning and reflection on practice (Bambino, 2002; Butler et al., 2011). They can be outsiders to the organisation such as HE academics or external advisers acting as educational experts (Nind, 2003), or they can be peers from the same organisation or peers from other schools.
(Bambino, 2002). Critical friends, being external advisers (Kember et al., 1997) or peers (Fulcher and Paull, 2010), have been used in HE to facilitate action research projects to improve professional practice of academic staff members. Critical friends are key agents for organisations that see themselves as learning organisations (Senge, 2006) because of their ability to foster reflection and improvement.

Critical friends face a number of challenges including effective communication, ownership of the project, power relations; time constraints; type of support required and interpersonal relationships (Pettigrew, 2003; Tilbury et al., 2004). Becoming a political entrepreneur (Buchanan and Badham, 2008) is important and involves adopting different strategies and diplomacies to work with participants and to acquiring a critical reflective position in relation to the position of different people. Buchanan and Badham (2008) suggest that managing this political role involves performing and back staging. Performing and pursuing the change process and agenda involves being pro-active and facilitating participation for change, whereas back staging requires skills that enable negotiation, justification and influence to mediate and interact within the existing culture and politics of the organisation.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The University of Southampton is located in the South East region of the United Kingdom (UK). It is one of the top-research universities in the UK and is a member of the Russell Group. It has over 22,000 students and around 5,000 staff members. The profile of sustainability at the University of Southampton has increased over recent years. Some indications of this are the creation of a university sponsored PhD focusing on EfS, whilst the institution also supports a group of practitioners engaged in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Green Academy programme ‘Curricula for Tomorrow’. The HEA Green Academy programme is an innovative initiative launched by the HEA Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Project, in association with the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) and the National Union of Students (NUS). The main aim of this programme is to help institutions achieve sustainability in their curriculum goals (Kemp et al., 2012; McCoshan and Martin, 2012).

The HEA Green Academy institutional change programme has provided evidence of significant institutional change across the HEIs that participated in its 2011 programme (McCoshan and Martin, 2012). These institutions were: Canterbury Christ Church University, Keele University, the University of Nottingham, Swansea University, the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, the University of Worcester,
University of Bristol and the University of Southampton. The programme adopted a bottom-up approach by engaging university groups of senior managers, academic staff and student representatives in training activities to support their action and to foster change agents towards sustainability in their institutions (McCoshan and Martin, 2012). The main aim of the programme was to embed sustainability within the student experience. The Green Academy acted as a catalyst for achieving institutional change, developing strategic vision, institutional developments, senior management commitment and raising the sustainability profile and practice of the participating HE institutions (Kemp et al., 2012). At the University of Southampton, institutional developments and a strategic vision to become a global leader in sustainability were developed, along with embedding sustainability in the CORE (curriculum, operations, research and experience). This goal is reflected in the university strapline ‘The University of Southampton: A Globally Responsible University’. These institutions identified the role of critical friends, senior management commitment and engagement, the fostering of partnerships and a focus on opportunities rather than on barriers, as critical to progressing the implementation of the programme in the university (Kemp et al., 2012).

The HEA Green Academy Programme at the University of Southampton provided a suitable context in which to conduct an action research project. A doctoral student was allowed to engage as a critical friend with the Green Academy group and research, with others the processes and outcomes in learning from their experiences of implementing a change programme. The Green Academy Programme represented an opportunity to learn from an innovative curriculum change programme during, and as part of, the research process.

**THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

The aims of a critical friend were: to contribute to the self-reflection and collective reflection of the group; promote a critical group reflection that could facilitate the acquisition of new perspectives and discourses; and explore the impact of the role of critical friend and the method used in generating new action and practices. An outsider role was adopted, stepping back and listening. The aim was to understand the group dynamics and action, through engaging as an observer in the group meetings, and by conducting three individual interviews and two reflective sessions. These activities took place over a period of a year and a half, from January 2012 to May 2013.

The sampling was purposive. The participants were selected because of their involvement in, and membership of, the Green Academy Programme. The main
features and conditions of the critical friend role and the process of engagement were agreed with the Programme leader during informal interactions and meetings before the start of the research. These were then shared with the group in order to gain informed consent from the different members willing to participate. The group was made up of six people representing different areas of University operation and with different responsibilities. The majority shared an environment-related background, coming from environmental sciences, geography or biology. Participants’ roles within the university included a staff member, lecturer, teaching fellow, undergraduate student and senior manager. Participants held specific roles and responsibilities within the group such as programme assistant, programme leader, environmental manager and student representative. This group was particularly valuable to the research because of the involvement of academics, students, a senior manager and the environmental manager of the University on a real time change programme.

A total of three one-hour individual interviews and two two-hour reflective sessions were conducted, and observations that could inform reflective sessions conduced with the group. Table 1 maps the focus of each individual interview conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Gain a deep understanding of the context and conditions under which the Green Academy Programme was operating. Find out initial successes, challenges and opportunities faced, and the desired outcomes, aims, and expectations.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>The members of the Green Academy Programme had the opportunity to reflect upon the process so far. What has happened since the last meeting and what are the current challenges, successes and opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>Focused on the process and evaluation of the programme so far, the key achievements and remaining challenges, and the identification of opportunities and future insights.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. The focus of individual interviews*

The two reflective sessions conducted focused on sharing the insights of the critical friend and giving feedback, mirroring data and helping the group reflect and discuss on issues related to EfS, the curriculum and organisational development. Feedback documents were shared with the group during the research process. These were brief summary documents on emerging themes and key findings from previous interviews and from the research, research papers and other relevant documentation related to EfS and organisational change. So for example, three days before
Interviews 2 and 3 a working document on the key themes that emerged in previous interviews was shared with participants. At the beginning of these individual interactions, participants were asked for their views and feedback on key themes. This allowed time to reflect on the progress made, the remaining challenges and emerging opportunities.

OUTCOMES OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND ROLE

Some of the outcomes that emerged from the reflective sessions and interactions with the critical friend included: the organisation of an away-day devoted to reflection and strategic thinking; the streamlining of meetings; and the establishment of more formal roles and responsibilities for members. The feedback documents, individual interviews and reflective sessions became useful tools for fostering critical reflection and helping the group find focus. One of the participants considered the process of individual interviews as a valuable way to enable them to reflect on the programme.

“This is extremely useful for us and helps us to think a bit more strategically both about our individual roles and the role of the Green Academy Programme within the university” (Andrew – Interview 1)

The members saw the value of the critical friend in terms of mirroring the existence of a shared vision amongst the group and contributing to reflection. The actions of the critical friend were seen as useful to help the members reflect on the programme development. As one participant emphasised, these sessions contributed to team learning and the creation of communicative action.

“The reflective session was very helpful. I thought it was probably one of the better Green Academy Programme meetings in terms of the group working more as a group, having something to discuss and work around, compared to other meetings we have had” (Richard – Interview 3)

Feedback was provided through sharing theoretical ideas on effective leadership for sustainability, EFS and organisational learning. The concept of an ideal learning organisation (Senge, 2006) was used as a tool for reflection in the first reflective session. Members were asked to consider on how the Green Academy Programme might contribute to making the University become a learning organisation towards sustainability. Achieving a shared vision was seen as difficult and depended on the whole-institution vision and strategy. A perceived lack of power within the institu-
tion was made evident when sharing the learning organisational ideal. Although there were senior staff members in the group, they felt disempowered to make change happen in the organisation. One participant stressed that:

“I think that’s too big for anything that we’re trying to do and anything we could do as a group, I think that’s something which is more systemic across the whole organisation, only then I think it’s possible” (Bob - RS1)

**DISCUSSION: THE MAIN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED**

Reflection is necessary in becoming a reflective practitioner and to enhance the validity and quality of the research (Somekh, 2006). In this study, emancipation was understood as liberating participants from previous knowledge and power issues within the organisation that might constrict EFS practice. Reflective sessions were used as they allowed participants to explore and reframe current assumptions and practices in EFS. However these sessions contributed to critical reflection amongst participants, existing organisational conditions and dynamics could hinder participants’ emancipation or empowerment.

Expectations of the critical friend role differed amongst participants. So for example one participant stated that ’I expected you to be more critical’. However being more critical was difficult as the critical friend felt powerless in the face of the personalities of the academics, their strongly held-views and their expertise and experience in academia. The following research memo shows that a sense of protectiveness was felt which disempowered her from being more critical:

“It’s been very challenging... because there’s a power relationship issue between myself, being a PhD student, and my participants, being professors and experienced in lecturing at universities” [Researcher memo 15-04-2013]

Being a PhD student with less power in the organisation and less academic experience hindered her role as a critical friend. As pointed out by other authors (Pettigrew, 2003; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008), balancing power relationships is a critical skill for action researchers to enable them to create democratic participation. According to other action research facilitators (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Pettigrew, 2003) flexibility and the development of strategies and diplomacies to work with people holding different values and worldviews are needed. Several authors have made reference to the different roles facilitators need to play to fulfil participants’ expectations and achieve the research goals (Kember et al., 1997; Tilbury et al.,
A number of roles were adopted by the researcher including being a mirror, teaching consultant and resource provider as well as being flexible to meet in any environment and situation. This allowed the building of a personal and professional relationship with participants. As the next quote shows, participants also saw the value of the critical friend role in this sense:

“What I’d be very interested to see is when you report back about not only how we all felt, but how you feel. You’re in the privileged position of having taken each of us independently and then you can more flag together in a picture of how you think it’s working or not working” (Andrew – Interview 1)

Moreover, the researcher’s supervisors and two other academics at the University, both experts in action research, acted as critical friends to the researcher during the project, helping to critically reflect on the roles, challenges faced and decisions and actions taken.

Second order action research makes reference to the facilitator and critical friend roles when working with others to facilitate action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Similar to other critical friends or facilitators a number of challenges were faced, such as ensuring effective communication, ownership of the project, organisational politics, power relations, and time constraints (Kember et al., 1997; Pettigrew, 2003; Baskerville and Goldblatt, 2009). Finding effective communication strategies to ensure continued engagement of participants in the action research is critical (Kember and Associates, 2000). However, ensuring on-going communication was particularly challenging when working with academics because of existing workloads and seasonal changes in academic work practices.

Gaining access to research participants is another of the challenges that qualitative and action researchers face (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). It took from February to November 2011 to gain access to the Green Academy Programme Group. This might have been for a number of reasons such as lack of time, lack of interest in, or value placed on the critical friend role, academic culture, and existing politics within the organisation (Pettigrew, 2003). Gaining access is political, and particularly so when doing action research in your own organisation (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Access might be even more of a challenge in academic contexts because of protectiveness, competition, recognition and existence of academic tribes and territories (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Hegarty, 2008). Becoming what Buchanan and Badham (2008) called the ‘political entrepreneur’ is critical when doing action research with
others. Political strategies, performing and back staging, being active, and building collaboration, but also being able to interact with the existing cultural and political system, are critical (Buchanan and Badham, 2008). It is about being politically smart, whilst still ensuring an ethical practice (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Building trust and rapport was key to establishing this relationship and to performing the task of critical friend. Others (Kember & Associates, 2000) have highlighted mutual trust and rapport as preparatory steps to facilitating action research. Critical friends need to develop interpersonal capabilities such as influencing and emphasising (Fullan and Scott, 2009), building trust and rapport and collaboration through interacting with the existing cultural and political system (Buchanan and Badham, 2008). Thus flexibility in the approach and in the different roles adopted is intrinsic quality of critical friends (Kember et al., 1997).

CONCLUSION
This chapter shows the contribution of critical friends and second-order action research in acting as a catalyst for critical reflection, creating a shared vision, and supporting learning and action within communities of practice or teams working towards embedding sustainability within HE. The study suggests that more empirical research using second-order action research approaches is needed to discover and foster new understandings of, and organisational change towards, EFS, and that participatory and emancipatory approaches, such as action research, can foster this transformation and learning.

The critical friend role has enabled reflection and action, together with the identification of specific needs of the members of the programme and the factors influencing their engagement and action. This research has demonstrated the potential of using these approaches to rethink current practice in embedding sustainability and to lead to new practices and actions of the studied community of practice. The critical friend role and second-order action research can contribute to better decision-making in terms of sustainability because it questions practice, current assumptions and worldviews. The findings of this study have shown the role of action research in opening up communicative space and action (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; 2009) allowing the team to see the challenges and opportunities they faced while contributing to reflection-in-practice. Through these processes and practices, university teams and members can develop new ways of understanding, and new practices for embedding EFS within their professional practice and within the organisation. This type of research and process can lead the learning of individuals to wider organisational learning and change towards embedding sustainability, with
critical friends being key in the process to ensure critical reflection, collaboration and improved action within communities of practice focusing on embedding sustainability within HE.

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