Greening SuniTAFE – a case study

When we began to plan for education for sustainability at Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, the National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability was yet to be published so much of our early thinking was intuitive. We were conscious that we wanted to engage staff members and students in sustainability education so that they would advocate for change. We knew that we needed to integrate green skills into all of our practices because it’s not enough to know something, the important thing is the way we apply that knowledge. Therefore the driver in our quest for the greening of SuniTAFE became the need to integrate sustainability into everything that we do.

One of the early challenges was moving sustainability away from being a political debate about climate change to language that moved the Institute forward. We began by talking about the need to conserve resources for future generations. Later we were able to demonstrate that there was economic development potential or green growth in alternative energy and other projects. We were determined to demonstrate to the Board, our staff and our students that green practices made economic sense and during these years we achieved significant energy savings through new systems and behavioural change programs.

We had a head start through our membership of the National Centre for Sustainability from the time that it was created in 2001. Our specialisation was in conservation and land management and we had passionate staff members who chased projects and created teaching programs in this area. However that wasn’t enough to influence the rest of the Institute and so in 2006 we started to think about sustainability in terms of our practices, our projects and our programs.

In the first year we threw ourselves into planning a sustainability festival in Mildura with community groups. Many of our staff members were involved – our trades’ teachers built a mobile toilet cubicle that demonstrated water conservation, alternative energy (it had a wind turbine) and insulation. Our engineering teachers and students built exercise bikes that powered blenders to make smoothies. We even had staff members organise a recycled clothing stall which turned out to be one of the hits of the day. It was a great way to get the whole Institute involved and we ran a second festival two years later. Then we stepped back and encouraged the community to take over which allowed us to focus on other things.

In the meantime our Swan Hill staff members joined forces with the Council and other groups to apply for a sustainability grant to build an eco-demonstration centre. The grant was successful and the building achieved an energy rating of 9.5. The building supervisor was a qualified builder who was also a SuniTAFE trades’ teacher and we involved apprentices from all of the trades in the build. Initially we were not sure how the local employers would respond to having their apprentices involved in green building but they all granted permission enthusiastically. There are benefits in being in a small city where everyone seems to know each other!

The feedback from the apprentices was positive and we could see that they were becoming change agents so we began to wonder how we could replicate the experience for future groups once the eco-demonstration centre was completed. This led to the idea of developing plans for a portable energy efficient building. Like many other TAFE Institutes, our trade students build portable
buildings – cubby houses, offices, toilet blocks and bungalows and so we found a grant to fund the development of a sustainable bungalow.

We worked with a local designer to come up with a modular building that achieved an energy rating of 7.5 – pretty good for a portable building. We called it a SuniPOD and the design has now become one of the ways in which we integrate green skills into trades training. We adapted the first SuniPOD to become a desperately needed nursing laboratory and so the students in health programs also learn about the benefits of a green building on an ongoing basis.

One of the big change agents for SuniTAFE was the whole of Institute professional development plan called Sustainability at SuniTAFE that we implemented throughout 2009. It was heart-warming to learn about the green initiatives that had been implemented that the management team had no idea about. It certainly demonstrated to us that sustainability was becoming integrated into our projects, practices and programs. Education for Sustainability remains a key part of our professional development program and we deliver the TAE10 Sustainable Practice Skills Set for teaching staff each year.

Another change point was in the appointment of an Environmental Officer who, amongst other activities, prepares quarterly reports for the Board which analyse utilities and fuel consumption, our air travel and greenhouse emissions and our usage of video-conferencing facilities. The reports demonstrated a reduction in electricity usage of 38% over five years. Our campuses are dispersed so our fuel usage was high and by introducing a green fleet policy we also saved 74,000 litres of fuel over a five year period. We implemented a stormwater conservation project which subsequently won a regional and state award from the water authority. We were also finalists in the Premier’s Sustainability and the State Training Awards on three occasions and just this week we received a commercial waste recycling award from the Mildura Rural City Council.

Internal and external communication is an important part of the Environmental Officer’s role and she also publishes a quarterly newsletter for the staff and students as well as being the Executive Officer for the Institute’s Environmental Committee. The Committee works in a similar way to the Occupational Health and Safety Committee – the members help to influence institute policy, they raise awareness internally and externally and they share information on education for sustainability. They also administer an annual internal sustainability award which provides $5000 to the SuniTAFE team with an award-winning idea for a sustainability initiative – many of the projects submitted involve students and staff.

In the last few years one of our most successful partnerships has been with the Mildura Rural City Council and the Sunraysia Sustainability Network. The MRCC has made a parcel of land available at the Mildura landfill which will become the Mildura Eco Village over the next few years. Our first project was a joint submission for a grant to build an Environmental Education Centre which was successfully completed recently and has just won a design award.

The Education Centre is the first building and other projects that have been funded (and will begin this year) are a community garden, the retrofitting of an old house that will be moved to the site shortly and a solar distillation project which will recycle waste water using solar energy to drive the process. All of these projects will involve staff and students and eventually we will have created a
green tourist attraction with a café, viewing platform, community garden, green buildings and renewable energy projects.

We’ve now had quite a bit of experience with renewable energy – particularly domestic and industrial solar projects. We were involved in the Solar Hubs project for Mildura which moved the city from being one of the lowest in Victoria in terms of domestic solar installation to being one of the highest. On a larger scale we worked with the Solar Alliance to create the induction programs for all of the contractors and staff members involved in the Solar Systems project at Carwarp. This will be the largest commercial concentrated solar power installation in Australia.

In many ways the Greening of SuniTAFE has been assisted by our location. Our institute is in the top corner of Victoria, it’s on the edge of the outback and it is remote – 550 kilometres from Melbourne, 400 kilometres from Adelaide and 1000 kilometres from Sydney. Water is precious and electricity is expensive so community awareness about the value of conserving resources is heightened. SuniTAFE is one of the smallest TAFE Institutes in Australia and there will be many institutes that deliver more green courses than we do – we believe that our strength has been in the integration of green thinking into everything that we do.

Win Scott
CEO
Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
28 August 2013