Towards a QUT Sustainability Strategy

A University (committed to sustainability) for the Real World
This strategic framework was developed by the Sustainability Working Party established by the Vice Chancellor to report to him on ways for the University “to progress the thinking and provide some initial advice on our long term sustainability strategies”.

The Working Party comprised

  Jim Reeves, General Manager, Institute for Sustainable Resources (ISR) Chair
  Dr. Carol Dickenson, Registrar
  Professor David Gardiner, Acting Executive Director, FRP
  Professor Tom Cochrane, Deputy Vice Chancellor, TILS
  Professor Martin Betts, Executive Dean, BEE
  Stephen Pincus, Director, Facilities Management
  Brian Fenn, Assoc Director Operations, Facilities Management
  Lawrence Stedman, Principal Policy Advisor, Chancellery (representing the VC)
  Julia Callaghan, QUT Environment Officer
  James Tilbury, Student Representative
Executive Summary

The strategic framework, which follows leverages off the strengths and opportunities which QUT has to make a significant contribution to sustainability via three related spheres of influence:

- as a progressive educational and research institution, engaged in the active consideration and response to contemporary issues and challenges.
- as a large community in itself of students, alumni and staff, and as a member of a broader community of South East Queensland in which it is located.
- as an innovative, responsible, well governed and well run organisation.

The report also sets out the high level Governance framework which will be required to manage and integrate the processes to be undertaken to respond to the challenge of developing a shared responsibility and unified commitment to sustainability across the organisation.

As a signatory to the Australian Technology Network (ATN) - “Declaration of Commitment to Local, National and Global Sustainability, QUT takes seriously its commitment to the principles and actions which flow from them.

This framework establishes the imperatives and mechanisms for the university to integrate the principle of sustainability into its core activities, organisational culture and management systems.
1. Background

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) - “Declaration of Commitment to Local, National and Global Sustainability”.

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) declaration was signed by the Vice Chancellor on behalf of QUT in January of this year (Appendix 1).

The declaration states that members of the network as “respected and trusted leaders in our communities we will strive for best practice in sustainability” and as “partners with government, industry, business and local communities – we will play a lead role in demonstrating by our own actions the capability to implement effective and efficient sustainable practices in our teaching, research and operations”.

The declaration goes on to outline a set of principles which have guided the form of this framework and the intentions of QUT in the area of sustainability going forward.

1.1 Sustainability and QUT

A commitment to sustainability entails a dynamic, integrated and ongoing process which considers activities and decisions in terms of the impact they have on improving or detracting from outcomes across social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The core aspirations and goals of the university are expressed in the QUT Blueprint as is the commitment to a culture of continuous improvement. While sustainability is not expressly mentioned in the Blueprint, the University leadership is currently guided by a clear understanding of the actions required if the University to continue to function and develop in a sustainable way within an environment characterised by rapid change.

There is also an awareness of the role QUT plays in responding to the challenges of global change as a leader in teaching and research for the “real world”.

The Blueprint sees the university meeting the challenges which confront it by:

- **Regenerating** and reinterpreting the characteristics that define and distinguish QUT;
- **Engaging** with communities and building capacity to take advantage of new opportunities; and
- **Experimenting** with new approaches to our work.

This Strategic Framework for sustainability will need to draw on these three elements to achieve positive change and will be a significant consideration in the refresh of the Blueprint which will take place through 2009.
1.2 Sustainability Defined

The concept of sustainability gained prominence with the publication in 1987 of the report “Our common Future” by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development – commonly known as the Brundtland Commission.

That report marked a transformative shift in the thinking around the interdependence and connectedness of social, environmental and economic factors, the report called for “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Development which meets this definition could be characterised as “sustainable”. It implies a system in which there is a balance between ecology, economy and equity.

Sustainability now occupies a central position in the planning, policy and operating processes of governments, businesses and communities. A commitment to sustainable outcomes is reflected in concepts such as the triple bottom line (TBL), corporate social responsibility (CSR), and ethical investment. It is a commitment which defines the culture and performance of entities which address issues holistically.

The current debate around climate change and the various responses to it are almost always predicated on the integration of social, economic and environmental responses.

Sustainability going forward as expressed by QUT academic Janis Birkeland requires physical development to achieve “net positive impacts over its lifecycle over pre development conditions by increasing economic social and ecological capital”. Once again the climate change responses are all based on the requirement to drastically improve the business as usual requirement. It is about reversing environmental impacts and rebuilding ecological capital – creating positive benefits through our activities and actions, not just minimising negative impacts.

The ATN Declaration require that the signatories:

“strive for best practice in sustainability by anticipating the future and accepting that we must prepare now by building the capacity to measure, monitor and address the impact of our ecological footprint within local, national and global contexts”

Thus the first step is for QUT to make an explicit statement in relation to the ATN Declaration along the following lines:

“QUT will undertake to meet the challenges articulated in the ATN Declaration by establishing sustainability as a core principle which guides the culture, decision making, activities, investment and management of the University”
2. The QUT Approach - Three pillars of Action

Universities, have a central role to play in the area of sustainability by virtue of their scale, influence and ability to contribute to problem solving through cutting edge research and thinking.

This strategy is built around the three aspects of QUT as it functions as a university, a community and a business. Each of these aspects represents a different set of opportunities for the university and its community to act to perform more sustainably. It also recognises the capacity of QUT to contribute to more sustainable outcomes at a local, national and global level.

The three pillars outlined below also correspond to the top level organisational architecture of QUT and therefore align with opportunities for broad-based senior level sponsorship of this strategy within the QUT planning framework.

2.1. QUT as a University – “Influencing Thinking and Practice”

Goal: the inclusion of the concept of sustainability as a core element of learning, teaching, research and innovation within the university.

Sponsor: DVC A

Implementation: University Academic Board, Teaching and Learning Committee, University Research and Innovation Committee.

As a large, modern university QUT is committed to delivering graduates equipped with up to date knowledge, awareness, and skills, ready to meet contemporary challenges.

The “real world” positioning of QUT also guides the focus of research, and strategic partnerships across internal and external boundaries. This is a focus on research and innovation which contributes to the resolution of contemporary and real issues, sustainability being a theme which is at the centre of these issues.

Current Initiatives.

A “sustainability” unit has been developed for all first year students in BEE; a further minor is also available to students studying in all areas of BEE.

Sustainability has relevance to all disciplines; it is important to explore the meaning of sustainability and its intersection with the discipline area being taught. It is difficult to comprehend any contemporary field of employment or professional practice where sustainability or impacts on sustainability was not a matter of interest.
QUT currently has a number of leading edge initiatives in the area of sustainability across the university:

- teaching and post graduate research in the area of environmental law around carbon trading, environmental banking and other areas of environmental law;
- the Faculty of Business is developing strategies to promote corporate social responsibility and sustainability in complex and dynamic environments;
- the Institute for Sustainable Resources plays an important role within QUT in managing a diverse research portfolio which directly relates to the development of solutions to the sustainable management of resources, environments and the social dimensions of change.
- disciplines such as engineering, architecture, design and planning, have a clear focus on sustainability as an intrinsic driver of professional practice.
- BEE is aligning its strategic focus to producing sustainable outcomes in the areas of infrastructure, complex urban systems, smart transport and energy to develop a world class reputation for research into sustainable infrastructure and systems;
- the use of Samford Ecological Research Facility (SERF) as a “living laboratory” and vehicle for community engagement and education in ecological services.

Action: Sustainability will be adopted as a key pedagogical principle and form part of the curriculum in undergraduate courses, and a research theme across the university.

Outcome: QUT graduates, teachers and researchers will have relevant skills and understandings to enable them to engage in the dialogue and action around sustainability in a broad variety of contexts, particularly in their core discipline or field of practice.

2.2 QUT as a community – Changing Behaviour and Attitudes

Goal: Active engagement and participation of the university community in the advancement of sustainability through collective and individual action.

Sponsor: Registrar

Implementation: University Engagement Committee, Alumni Board, Environment Officer, Facilities Management, Marketing and Communication Institute for Sustainable Resources.

QUT has approximately 40,000 students and 3,700 staff and active, influential alumni. This is a large and interconnected community which could be likened to a medium size regional city. There exists a powerful opportunity to engage the QUT community in the development and delivery of a strategy which results in real improvements across a range of measures of sustainability.
Positive outcomes can be anticipated at a whole of (QUT) community, group and individual level, on and off campus.

Successful initiatives in sustainability currently existing in universities as with other institutions/organisations are based on communication, engagement and clear pathways for involvement of their constituencies. These include staff, students, suppliers, customers and partners.

The response to the recent drought and the dramatic reduction in per capita use of water is an example of the convergence of awareness, education, empowerment and enabling strategies to facilitate change in individual and community behaviour around water use.

Engagement of the QUT community has a similar potential to reduce the environmental footprint of the university, as well as to encourage more sustainable lifestyles outside the university.

“Student interest was clearly ranked as the primary driver in advancing sustainability initiatives, while faculty and staff interest, consistency with University culture and values and good public relations followed in order. Cost savings were also indicated as a key driver by a majority of respondents.” - The University of Virginia 2006 Sustainability Report.

QUT has a number of organisational initiatives in place for staff and students related to sustainability:

- Encouragement of public transport usage (free Gardens Point/Kelvin Grove shuttle bus),
- enhanced bicycle facilities,
- some recycling opportunities,
- water and energy saving opportunities,
- student health and support services,
- adoption of a reconciliation strategy and indigenous education strategy,
- support for campus activities and clubs,
- commitment to social diversity and inclusion,
- opportunities of financial support for students.

Action: The development and implementation of a comprehensive engagement strategy around sustainability be developed for the QUT Community and its partners.

Outcome: Active engagement of students, staff, faculties and divisions in progressing sustainability both institutionally and individually.

2.3 QUT as a sustainable business – Improving business viability while reducing the environmental footprint and providing improved social dividends. Goal: The integration of the concept of
sustainability at all levels into the decision making, management and operation of the university.

Sponsor: ED FRP

Implementation: Vice Chancellors Advisory Committee, PRC

Key Leadership: Administrative Services, Finance and Resource Planning, Facilities Management

QUT is a large and complex business employing a sizeable and diverse workforce. It develops, manages, operates and maintains a large portfolio of assets. It is a significant purchaser and consumer of goods and services, including energy and water.

QUT operates in a competitive and changing environment where it must compete for the human and financial resources required to undertake its core functions. It must also manage its operations economically and efficiently.

The “QUT Blueprint” sets out the challenges and the direction that the university is moving in to remain energetic, viable and relevant.

Sustainability in the context of this strategy means that there is awareness and a cohesive approach to the measurement, management and continuous improvement of the social, economic and environmental performance of the organisation.

Action: Adopt and support a management process to govern and coordinate the establishment of priorities, metrics, performance measurement, reporting and improvement initiatives related to sustainability across the university.

This will start a journey which will reshape decision making across the board. In particular, decisions will need to address where feasible, positive and explicit outcomes in sustainability in all three identified dimensions - social, economic and environmental. This process should in itself be understandable and efficient. This will be a means by which many things that are currently done well and are underway across the University can be? viewed through a different lens.

It has implications in the following areas;

- strategic and business planning,
- human resource planning and management,
- compliance activities,
- purchasing and procurement,
- resource usage, management of consumption and minimisation of waste,
- infrastructure development and management of existing infrastructure and assets,
- investment strategies and policies,
- maintenance, operation and replacement or renewal for existing assets,
- waste management,
• triple bottom line reporting.

Areas such as finance and resource planning and facilities management will have high levels of engagement in the process initially.

The Governance Model see attachment 2 would involve the Sustainability Working Party (membership to be reviewed) maintaining overall responsibility, and directly Reporting to the Vice Chancellor. Membership should be from those areas which key leadership is required, augmented by community and student representation.

Each of the three pillars outlined above would be overseen by a subcommittee, Chaired by a relevant working Party Member and with other members drawn from across the University who have particular involvement/expertise in the area.

Also attached is the proposed “Roadmap for Sustainability” (Attachment 3) which outlines the 6 phases or destinations on the sustainability journey. It is proposed that this be employed as a tool to Guide the implementation of the above strategy.

**Outcome: A Sustainability Report incorporated in the QUT Annual report.**