Sustainability planning: pushing against institutional barriers

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Abstract

This paper describes a case study of an institution promoting sustainability goals but acting to restrict innovation and implementation of those same goals. The issue is important because institutions have cultures which may feel antipathy to a paradigm shift toward sustainability, whilst required to usher in sustainability. There are a multitude of conservative forces representing the Dominant Social Paradigm restricting innovation, despite sustainability policy. People engaging in sustainability implementation may come into conflict with institutional representatives of the old paradigm. Resistance to the New Environmental Paradigm may permeate our own organisations.

Trying to strike a balance between implementing ecologically sustainable development and respecting institutions’ behaviour may require courage and perseverance. Institutions are often big, powerful, conservative and may tolerate bullying behaviour if threatened by innovation.

With most development takes place in urban settings, concepts of urban sustainability attempt to merge two very different fields of human endeavour - how we modify our landscape, our built environment, and how we behave in that environment.

Transport planning in Queensland, Australia displayed a tension between the infrastructure providers and the intending behaviour changers, so that project managers vested with encouraging travel behaviour change, badged as 'TravelSmart', appeared to fear innovation, fear action research which was, definitively, not under their full control. This paper explores this apparent 'internal dissonance' between the accepted need for, yet fear of change, via a case study attempting to introduce a pilot TravelSmart Destinations project to a provincial Queensland University, and the ways perseverance and maintaining focus on goals in both infrastructure and behaviour will make sustainability gains.

Keywords: sustainable, sustainability planning, institutional barriers, paradigm shift, implementation, impediments to change, ecologically sustainable development, urban travel change.
1 Introduction: plans and reality

A web search such as ‘TravelSmart’ shows much information and developed methods explaining ways to foster reduced solo urban car trips, as there is ‘how-to’ information about greenhouse gas abatement and energy conservation, health and environmental benefits of reducing car use.

This paper begins as a co-operative program between a TravelSmart coordinator at a University in North Queensland and the managing body of TravelSmart within the Queensland Department of Transport in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, Australia, then provides a case study in the interplay of changing bureaucratic personnel and the way personalities can override stated goals.

Those most empowered to assist in implementing projects that require independence, initiative, local links and knowledge may be the ones who prove most obstructive to innovation Jarach [1], Phillips [2], ACF [3], Leibovitz [4].

The agreed aim of the pilot Destinations project for James Cook University in Townsville, North Queensland was to reduce solo car use by university students and staff, to develop and test innovative approaches and document the outcomes. Implementation was delayed from February to July 2004, the Unit manager claiming the contact was not legal, and refusing to make agreed payments so that innovation was stifled at the start of the academic year, and only allowed to properly commence toward the end of the academic year, when the university community is focused on assessment rather than travel modes and travel choices.

1.1 Background

In early 2003 the author, an adjunct Lecturer in sustainability planning at JCU, with a doctorate: Toward sustainable urban travel [5], was approached by a senior representative of SocialData, the key initiator of TravelSmart world wide, and a senior representative of the TravelSmart Unit, Queensland Department of Transport, Brisbane. I had wide experience in community engagement and an international paper on transport research methodology, [6]. It was agreed that I would implement both tried and innovative approaches to develop and test TravelSmart ‘Destination’ goals, using interactive ‘social marketing’ techniques at James Cook University. Details were formalised with the University and the Unit, a contract was refined and finalised in November 2003 and a project working group of experts and ‘stakeholders’ was formed in Townsville.

The agreed goals were:

1. “To research and develop a methodology for the planning, implementation and evaluation of TravelSmart Destinations Programs by
   - undertaking a literature review, web search and discussions with key agencies and Universities who have undertaken similar projects;
   - tailoring existing TravelSmart methodology to a 'Destinations' approach.

2. To concurrently implement and evaluate a pilot of the above TravelSmart Destinations methodology at James Cook University, Townsville...”
2 The problems begin

The TravelSmart Unit Manager only directly interacted with JCU personnel in early 2004. By then the senior project officer who had negotiated the contract left the Unit. Also, three project officers assigned to JCU left in quick succession over four months. They had all, in turn, left the Unit. By the forth link person in February 2004, I was alarmed to learn the latest project officer was ignoring the contract because she was unaware of it; nor would her office provide her with a copy. I sent a copy. There were problems from January onward.

2.1 Information and contracted funds withheld

For months the Unit, against their contractual undertaking, delayed sending results of the initial survey of 400 JCU commuters, including those nominating to help. Having been approved by Queensland Transport, the methodology was also detailed to and supported by senior university staff and the project working group. Until July 2004, the Unit withheld contracted funding both to support the project and to pay for contracted review material, effectively halting the project during the critical implementation months of the University’s first semester. The Unit Manager declared the contract invalid, refusing to say how, or provide an alternative. Because contractual obligations were not being met by the Unit, others assisted in progressing the impasse, arranging a meeting in July, when financial and procedural problems were satisfactorily resolved. The project was severely compromised by loss of confidence and a deeply uncertain future during semester one.

2.2 Time, trust and momentum lost

At the launch of TravelSmartJCU in Orientation week, February, 2004, we recorded details of 57 people who wanted to help. The future of the research project was very uncertain after withdrawal of Brisbane office support.

With firm support for the intended action research Cuthill [7] – research to develop and document socially and environmentally desired outcomes within sustainability principles – from the University, the Unit personnel involved in developing the contract and the overarching Project Working Group in the latter part of 2003, by February 2004, there was a profound shift from a shared, pilot methodological development of TravelSmart ‘destination’ approaches, to the Unit-imposed expectation that JCU would be subjected to a passive ‘rollout’ of Brisbane-adapted TravelSmart programs.

Withholding support had a clear impact on the development of participatory change, intended to flow from outcomes of a meeting held with 14 interested staff and students in March 2004. The drive of that meeting shrivelled over the months when Unit funds were withheld, under unsubstantiated claims that the contract was illegal. No alternative agreements were offered until late July, although repeatedly requested.
2.3 Institutional barriers to change – obstructions from within

Slowly pressure was brought to bear on the Unit manager from higher levels of his department, forcing a meeting mediated by a senior manager. Only then would the manager present his alternative proposal, remarkably similar to the original, except the new agreement insisted the University be a passive recipient of a methodology intended as pilot and developmental, to be reviewed as a passive, hand-off observational paper. That was submitted and available on the web through JCU’s Centre for Tropical Urban and Regional Planning (http://www.tesag.jcu.edu.au/). Requests to have minutes taken were strongly rejected by the Unit manager.

3 The rocky road to some innovation

Despite these enervating and stressful obstructions, persistence produced an outcome on 11 November when the ‘JCU Car less club’ held its first meeting, preparatory to developing projects and events into 2005. Office bearers were elected, and five people offered to staff a stall in Orientation Week 2005, and ideas were flowing for greater impact of car less principles. Gaining support from the top is crucial to the success of any organisations’ efforts at ‘social marketing’ [8]. I thank the Pro Vice Chancellor and his office for their unstinting support, sometimes in adversity. I also thank the numerous Heads of Schools and many others who expressed and gave support to the emergent car less project. Those who worked hard to set up the car less club deserve praise, along with supporters within Queensland Transport, and members of the Facilities management office.

3.1 Getting the infrastructure right

Townsville, North Queensland is largely a post 1950s growth city, with ample ‘buildable’ space. It has grown into a highly car dependent urban form. To turn a culture of car use around in a landscape designed for them will take time, but there are strong moves toward sustainability planing and behaviour change. Work has begun on the perceived main ‘choke point’ in the university path network, and the University is now highly responsive to concerns about provision of smooth, direct, safe, continuous and shaded paths. The thrust of this paper is that such endeavours are demanding enough with smooth, continuous projects. Having a project blocked for six months by the support organisation is a blatant example of institutional barriers to change.

3.2 The December 2004 report

Adapted extracts from the December 2004 report sent to the Unit follow. Some institutions will resist change. People and organisations who advocate change and attempt to play a contributory role may come up against subtle or bewildering resistance, perhaps from the most unexpected quarters. Persist.
3.2.1 Report executive summary
There are many ways to help people take more responsibility for their transport-related greenhouse gas emissions, and their health. Typing TravelSmart into a search engine will provide much well-presented detail: For destinations, engage staff and visitors, be patient with infrastructure providers as they begin to gear up for the time beyond car-dominated urban travel. This is central, along with copious, well targeted information, inducements both for change, and to support ‘champion’ volunteers.

Having ‘focus’ days for TravelSmart behaviour appears to have merit, as does nurturing local innovation to encourage more people to adopt TravelSmart behaviour. Survey and analysis by the Brisbane TravelSmart Unit indicated a drop in car use to JCU on Wednesdays, previously identified as the day with the highest car parking demand.

In areas where the urban form is low density and parking is relatively plentiful and cheap, an effective program needs to rely on promoting health aspects of reduced car use. Where there is a premium for parking and road space, helping people to learn how to use the public transport system or ride-share will also help reduce solo car use.

TravelSmart-type projects, whether badged as Active Travel or Car less, will greatly expand in coming years as the greenhouse gas crisis is properly appreciated. We will soon see depletion of cheap petrol, diesel and natural gas, with large price rises in transport fuels (websearch petroleum future).

A literature and web review showed that strong support from the parent body, access to TravelSmart information and incentives and room for local innovative response to specific local conditions is a winning combination. The example of ‘Champions’ whose input can be harnessed produces a rolling effect of travel behaviour change. Using easy-access data-based ride share programs has produced positive results, from ride to ‘van’ share.

In gauging the level of ‘unmet demand’ for travel alternatives, we need to carefully weigh the existing convenience of solo car travel and parking against the rewards and costs of alternatives.

3.2.2 Some review details
As with most destinations, schools or work places, JCU embraced and supported the TravelSmart approach because of concerns over parking availability, peak road congestion and the global aspects of vehicle emissions attached to travelling to and from the University. The TravelSmart project was also supported because it fulfilled some of the University’s environmental policies of pursuing sustainability goals, including the health benefits of encouraging ‘active’ travel - walking and cycling. If the construction of extra parking areas could be postponed, there were clear and direct financial incentives as well. A student-based ‘traffic count’ survey [9] indicated some success of the JCU program.

3.2.3 TravelSmart meets a perceived need to reduce car use
Using ‘champions’ to lead and encourage by example is part of a broader process to get desired change. This is well understood in human geography’s innovation

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theory: a simple way of conceptualising what all TravelSmart and like approaches attempt: a normative or innovation uptake model fig. 1 [10].

![O’Neil’s 2004 innovation uptake model.](image1)

Figure 1: O’Neil’s 2004 innovation uptake model.

![Relationship of likely TravelSmart success to existing access infrastructure and use.](image2)

Figure 2: Relationship of likely TravelSmart success to existing access infrastructure and use.

With congested road and parking infrastructure dominated by solo car users and underused attractive alternatives, the TravelSmart process is easy, fig. 2.

The JCU ‘before’ Survey stimulated 20 pages of written comments from survey prompts, indicating strong interest in urban travel. The JCU coordinator fielded or generated a total of 867 emails in 2004. Bike use and walking were
supported, with some concern about danger. There were concerns over price, frequency and reliability with bus use.

There was an expressed unmet demand for safe and attractive alternatives to solo car use. By October, T-shirts were designed, printed and distributed, fig. 3, along with hundreds of ‘car less’ buttons. Central to the long term goals of establishing a self-sustaining reduction in car use, committed staff and students formed a JCU Car Less Club in November 2004, Fig. 3, and placed an article in the JCU student diary for 2005. Instant changes are unlikely, but a gradual, long term paradigm shift [11] is plausible. Infrastructure changes making walking and cycling safer, smoother, more direct and ‘normal’ is a process rather than a result.

Figure 3: The founding members of JCU car less club.

Figure 4: JCU upgrades identifies path chokepoints.

3.3 General lessons and recommendations (R).

R1. Develop trust and continuity with all stakeholders.
R2. Acknowledge the link of Destination, surroundings, and unmet demands for alternative transport, fig. 2.
R3. Allow that the host destination and surrounding councils will want to upgrade infrastructure (in all their sustainability policies). Allow that this will take time. In a spirit of cooperation, path continuity is now an open dialogue between the Facilities Management office and users. The University has proved willing to maximise path continuity and safety for users, fig 4. Figure 4 shows a destination of good will (indicated by embracing TravelSmart to begin with). Infrastructure upgrades are likely to follow the focus on TravelSmart behaviour and needs.

R4. Expand TravelSmart intervention programs to run for more than one calendar year. North Queenslanders have ‘Murri time’: some things can only mature at their own pace. Compacting a full start-to-finish project into one year does not allow much time for gestation or latent synergies to develop.

It is recommended that TravelSmart programs in future take a longer time frame than one year, that there is a ‘destination’ driven, rather than a ‘support provider’ time frame for implementation of the project. Safe paths and behaviour change may need time to self reinforce.

R5. Queensland Transport develop a free ride-share destination web based data base shell.

R6. Queensland Transport or other transport departments fund a public transport data base for all population centres in their jurisdiction. A web-accessible data base is already operating for SE Qld. Entered start and finish times and locations provide the user with details of how to best get from A to B.

R7. Allow the host Destination a reasonable degree of autonomy and encourage innovation. People; champions, who wish to promote alternatives to solo car use may come up with things like wearable buttons, fig. 5.

R8. Encourage identification of suitable once-per-week Focus Days, using e-distributed posters put up by supporters in each teaching and work area fig. 5.

Figure 5: Distributed, locally designed button and e-poster to place in supporters’ work or study areas.
4 Conclusions

Service providers need to remain consistent in the undertakings of their work units, not allowing stress to override the agreed processes of projects. Consistency may be hard to achieve but bureaucratic processes need to support the stated goals of their own work units. Professional continuity is imperative for bureaucracies to support agreed projects. But for the strength and solidarity of people within JCU and Queensland Transport, the JCU project would have been destroyed. Any readers who have or may come up against seeming personality-based institutional barriers to sustainability change should persist, although there may be a personal cost. Despite the emergent resistance to this innovative pilot, there were successes, and useful lessons. Promoting Wednesdays as car less days achieved some success in travel behaviour change.

There are travel behaviour influences that are ‘universal’. Convenience of car use is in tension with road congestion, parking ease, cost or stress and suitability of alternatives. When cars are easily and cheaply used and parked, with long distances from main residential areas, in an already car dependent, behaviour change without high petrol price increases may be small.

Each Destinations project must try to get as many supporters to the program as early in the process as possible, maintain professional continuity, and consider strategies that will maximise change within their unique situation. Long time frames and slowly updated path and end-of trip facilities are likely to flow from any well-managed TravelSmart process.

Developing and distributing free software for use by destinations to facilitate ride sharing was identified as highly desirable to further TravelSmart Destination goals.

Destinations can help badge themselves ‘green’ by embracing TravelSmart principles of reward, support and information on travel alternatives.

TravelSmart innovation and uptake will have an intrinsic pace for each destination. Flexible milestone dates, tailored to the rhythms of the host destination may help supporters feel ownership of the uptake process.

The methodology developed by TravelSmart Queensland and other TravelSmart proponents converge on engagement, commitment, support, information, inducements and rewards; relying on champions and volunteers to help in the normative shift to more sustainable urban travel. TravelSmart Queensland had a well developed draft Destinations program. With mutual respect in guiding and supporting host TravelSmart destinations, their methodology is sound, comprehensive, logical and likely to be as successful as the many other TravelSmart projects already working to reduce greenhouse gases and fossil fuel depletion, while promoting environmental and personal health. Under supportive leadership, TravelSmart Destinations, as refined by Queensland Transport, has a bright future.

References