His card describes John Lavarack as the manager of Campus Sustainability at the Institute for Sustainable Solutions at the University, which does not really do justice to the scope or scale of the challenge his role entails. But the job title has a positive, problem-solving ring to it, as does the person filling the position, who seems undaunted and realistic about the impact he can have on a university campus of such density, diversity and age. Lavarack has to think globally and act locally every day, putting into practice the green mantras others simply spout as good intentions.

With a healthy dose of humour and scepticism about all the greenwashing schemes and jargon that pervade the debate about global warming and the responsibility humans have for the state of the planet, Lavarack is a low-key advocate and activist. He’s not going to waste time preaching; he’d rather just get on with it. Despite a towering stature, he’s not about heroics or praise, just results.

His strategies are pragmatic in design and execution: “I focus on the 6000 staff, not the 45,000 students because it’s the staff that set standards and they are the ones turning things on and off,” he says, while conceding that if departments paid for their own power bills, instead of having them taken care of by Campus Infrastructure Services, they would have even greater awareness and sense of responsibility for saving resources.

“Energy audits are very tricky to do,” says Lavarack, who is also aware that he cannot force anyone to implement or adhere to green strategies. “Everything is undertaken in a voluntary capacity, not as University policy.” But he is helping develop a sustainable workplace initiative, which will include a team of go-to-ers who can advise departments on sustainable purchasing and energy saving practices. “We are also developing data that will allow us to pinpoint a room and work out what is going on in there and why. We want to be able to show faculties what they are using, to help shift awareness.”

Water is one of Lavarack’s unqualified success stories. “We have some of the best storm water harvesting systems in Sydney,” he says proudly, pointing to Gadigal Green garden, which recently won an industry award for excellence in storm water management.

“And by checking all our water meters, we’ve been able to reduce our water consumption from 500 megalitres a year to 360, just by identifying and eliminating leaks around the place. We’ve drought-proofed the campus by using a low drip-feed watering system and drought resistant plantings – except in the Quadrangle, which still needs to be hand-watered to maintain that historic and perfectly manicured swathe of green.”

A breakdown of the water usage across the University reveals that 30 per cent goes on lawns, another 30 per cent on air conditioning, 16 per cent is used in toilets, 25 per cent on irrigation and four per cent on drinking.

Then there’s E-waste, a relatively new but significant and long-term problem on a university campus. “We set up an on-demand E-waste collection program in 2006. We’ve collected 115 tonnes in three years – saved from landfill and recycled. By working with Sims E-recycling metal contractors, who have built a new plant for this kind of material, we can...
Through no fault of their own, the worst offenders on campus are lab buildings. “They are resource intensive, and require the use of extractor fans to deal with high risk substances,” explains Lavarack. Another target for improvement is the rural campus at Camden where the departments of veterinary and agricultural science are based. “High water use is a problem there,” says Lavarack.

A more contentious issue is what Lavarack calls “thermal comfort”, in other words, the temperature inside buildings. “It is a totally subjective and personal issue. Sixty per cent of the University is still not air-conditioned but people want it. They would also get very upset if you asked them to lower the heating in winter. In this game, you really do have to pick your battles.”

Airline travel is another prickly subject. “At the moment, no one is obliged to carbon offset their travel,” says Laverack. “But we do encourage video conferencing as much as possible.”

Given the complexity of the challenges his role involves, it would be easy for Lavarack to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. “It can feel a bit Sisyphean at times,” he admits, “but there is cause for real optimism. There is a lot happening thanks to social change arising out of the media, the advocacy of people like Al Gore, the shift in the political climate, here and around the world. One minute it feels like the University is slowly chipping away at the problem and then there’s a sudden shift, which accelerates the process. We are definitely moving in the right direction.”

Lavarack is keen to encourage members of the University to feel a sense of ownership of the sustainability issue. “I don’t own the agenda, they do. We have now got a task force set up to reduce our carbon footprint, but we are still working on how to reduce our resources use and increase efficiency, conserve and restore biodiversity, promote human health by addressing pollution and air quality concerns and making ethical choices in our purchasing policies. This year we’ve also handed out $500,000 to seed interdisciplinary research on sustainability.”