

Education for Sustainable Development [ESD] in the UK in 2010: a brief summary

UK National Commission for UNESCO
London, July 2010

1. Introduction

This paper is of relevance to all policymakers, practitioners and researchers interested in the response of education across the UK to contemporary social, economic and environmental issues. It is a summary of a report on Education for Sustainable Development in the UK produced by the UK's ESD Co-ordinating Group – a sub-committee of the Education Committee of the UK's National Commission for UNESCO. In itemising recent ESD activity across the UK's four jurisdictions, and offering an initial analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current provision, it updates the report: *ESD in the UK in 2008: A Survey of Action*.

2. Executive Summary

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the UK continues to gain momentum as an important emerging field of educational policy, practice and research. In 2008 and 2009 there were signs of substantial progress in embedding policies and developing practices in support of ESD in the UK across a wide range of sectors. There is also some evidence of an increasing focus on evaluating practice but it is still in its infancy in terms of assessing the impact of national policy on teaching and learning across the educational spectrum. In particular, momentum towards action on learning about climate change nationally and globally exemplified the increase in awareness and action in the UK of a key element of ESD. This deepened focus on climate change in the UK can be partially linked to the establishment of strong government policies on climate change in 2008, and the participation of the UK in international conferences on climate change in December 2008 and 2009. It is also the result of an ongoing public discourse about climate change expressed through the media in films and advertisements. ESD in a wider environment / development sense is also experiencing continued support by key UK stakeholders and actors, but there is some danger that attention to this will be marginalized by the increasingly pervasive carbon-reduction agenda that now, for example, is impacting on the activities of individual schools, colleges and universities, if not yet on the whole of civil society.

Key highlights:

- ✚ Across the UK and the devolved administrations, the continued integration of sustainable development into government and government agency operations (evidenced by sustainable development action plans) highlights an ongoing and sustained form of ESD: work-based learning and development, and the mainstreaming of sustainable development learning into government operations.
- ✚ In formal education, 'sustainable school', 'eco school' and 'global learning' type programmes are enjoying continued support and popularity from government and non-government stakeholders.
- ✚ Whilst ESD is growing in the post-16 learning sectors, progress has been patchy and is in general at earlier stages of development in adult and community learning, although there are also some excellent examples of practice in these settings. Although some of the vocational provision for example in construction has made significant progress in integrating ESD into its courses, in many other sectors the integration has been slow or non-existent.

- ✚ There is a lack of connection, and hence little realised potential for synergy, between learning experiences in formal education and what might be learnt through community involvement and third sector capacity building. In addition, there are tensions between activities that emphasise campaigning / activism / awareness-raising / behaviour change, and those favouring learning and an exploration of the subtleties, complexities and uncertainties inherent in sustainability. As yet few opportunities have been created to explore this area.
- ✚ 2009 saw an increase in the number of research and evaluative studies on ESD, but with a relative paucity of research in ESD in post 16 learning and skills, and there were a significant number of ESD-related events such as conferences and seminars.
- ✚ Networks and partnerships for ESD in schools and higher education (HE) continue to flourish, in particular (for schools) driven by the re-configuration of the Council for Environmental Education as *Sustainability and Environmental Education (SEEd)*, and through regional and devolved administration networks that involve government and non-government stakeholders working in partnership; and (for HE) driven by the work of the Higher Education Academy ESD project, the interest of funding councils and the National Union of Students, and the Environmental Association for Universities and College's (EAUC) networks.
- ✚ The acronym and phrase "ESD" is increasingly used in much of the discourse on education related to sustainable development, the environment, and climate change. What this means in terms of its ability to promote learning is debatable, and there still exists a significant challenge of articulating a common understanding of ESD across the UK's four administrations. The scope for government departments to enhance their collaboration over ESD, and render it more coherent, is considerable.
- ✚ Climate change is a particularly strong driver of ESD at present, likely as a result of the government's increased engagement in climate change-related matters, which includes establishment of a dedicated government department, and a national media campaign on carbon reduction, but also due to increased engagement of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and grassroots actors on climate change. Some UK ESD scholars have expressed the view that the ubiquity of climate change has obscured the larger picture of ESD.
- ✚ There is increasing interest being shown by the professions in how to incorporate sustainable development into continuing professional development. For example, the Professional Practice for Sustainable Development initiative (PP4SD). This remains, however, a minor initiative when set against professional training and standards as a whole.
- ✚ Please note that, although the term ESD is used in this report, together with UNESCO's preferred distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal education, the usage and meaning of these words does vary across both the UK and education sectors.

3. Exploring Issues

From the research conducted since the UKNC's last report, several key issues can be identified that give context to the larger place of ESD in the UK, provide insight into the challenges for embedding ESD across sectors, and point to areas where increased research can give a better insight into the totality of ESD actions in the UK. These are:

✚ ***Tensions between campaigning and learning***

Whilst climate change has been a strong driver of ESD, it is important to note that much of the climate change activity identified in the report has centred about campaigning and activism efforts for both the Copenhagen conference in December 2009, as well as government and grassroots supported awareness-raising on climate change. This brings to the fore enduring tensions between campaigning / activism / awareness-raising / behaviour change (strongly encouraged by government) and more open-ended (and open-minded) *learning* in relation to

sustainability. For example, it is clear that the Copenhagen conference has raised the profile of climate change itself, but it is less easy to discern how (or what) learning has taken place in relation to this increased profile. It is difficult to gauge how exactly these efforts have impacted learning about sustainability in the UK, although it is hard to escape the conclusion that not everyone engaged in ESD is committed to the notion that learners need to be helped to come to their own understandings, values and commitments to action. Whilst it is clear that there are individuals and groups who sincerely believe that it is too late for this liberal view to be taken, the evidence that people do not react well to preaching or doom-laden messages seems compelling, as is the value that educationalists have a responsibility to explore the complexities of issues and encourage dialogue across disciplines, interests and sectors.

Keeping the focus broad

There is the considerable risk that the on-going controversy about the validity of the data and models that underpin our understanding of climate change, and what seems to be an increasing public scepticism that humans and the way we live have at least some responsibility for it, will impinge negatively on attention given to the much wider set of issues that *sustainability* represents. There is, therefore, the twin need to resist the validation of *climate change education* (or *somesuch*) that might act as a rival, and narrowing, focus to ESD, whilst seeking to ensure that where climate change is a learning focus (within formal programmes of study, for example), its purpose is to help learners gain plural perspectives on the scientific and other issues, appreciate their possible implications, and think about what their own intellectual and practical responses might be. Meanwhile, it is too early to say how far the rising carbon management agenda might have a positive or narrowing effect with regard to attention paid to ESD in educational institutions.

Media influence

The role of the media and its influence on people's learning and engagement in sustainable development warrants additional research not covered in this report, and which can give insight into the tension highlighted above between awareness-raising about ESD and actual learning. Media, viewed very broadly, are also influential in relation to ESD within formal and non-formal approaches, not only in respect of the understandings that students and other participants bring to the table, but also to the understandings and conceptual frames that teachers, tutors and other professionals have. It is hard to see how the influence of the educator / trainer can ever be absolutely distinguished from that of the media in all its forms – both direct and vicarious, through peer influence, for example. Even the validity of learners' self-reporting of influence would seem to warrant due scepticism.

Further and Higher

This report has focused heavily on school, and higher, education which, while reflecting the amount of activity occurring in these sectors, also points to a need for further research on ESD within other sectors. A comparative lack of development of ESD within further education (FE), compared to schools and universities, in England was noted. Some progress on FE in Scotland could be identified, including a report on Scottish FE colleges and sustainability, and the March 2010 launch of the government's updated action plan which may present opportunities to increase support for ESD within FE. In Wales, ESD is embedded in FE policy and a number of projects are taking place. In both HE and FE, however, there is a need for a greater focus on teaching / learning whilst acknowledging that estates, procurement, and management more generally, and research, do themselves give scope for learning: a point that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) acknowledges, for example. It is particularly important that previous benchmarking studies are brought up to date.

✚ **Non-Formal sectors**

ESD in sectors, such as youth work, community activity, and actions taken within business and industry more widely are hard to pin down. Making more of an effort to identify and analyse these seems important. There is some indication of efforts to introduce ESD into the professions, for example through the agency of Professional Practice for Sustainable Development (PP4SD) but this is a minor initiative seen against professional training and standards as a whole.

✚ **Connecting the sectors**

There is a lack of connection, and hence little potential for synergy, between learning experiences in formal education and what might be learnt through community involvement and third sector capacity building, and an opportunity is being lost to address the tension, outlined above, between campaigning and learning. The growth of the *Transition* movement represents one example where community led innovation is beginning to be supported by academic research and research councils. Another dimension is a tendency to see change focused around what individuals and families can do, ignoring that many issues and decisions are only amenable to more concerted social action. Developing social action skills through practice in real-life contexts is a tangible example of where connection between sectors is indispensable.

✚ **Professional development and training**

The idea that educating the educators ought to be the priorities of priorities is an old UNESCO ideal, but there is little indication of much activity in the *mainstream* programmes that focus on the professional development of teachers and lecturers in the formal education sectors; the reluctance of the Training and Development Agency for Schools in England (TDAS) to grasp this nettle is particularly inexplicable. As such, this places the onus on those interested in such matters to ensure that excellent practice is identified, analysed and disseminated.

✚ **English Government Departments working together**

Given the nature, breadth and significance of sustainability, it is inevitable that a number of government departments will have interests in supporting ESD and its associated learning, and it is a considerable strength that they do so as enthusiastically as they do. Having departments work together as synergistically as possible would seem important, and the newly shared vision and global learning strategy of DCSF / DFID with young people prepared for life in an interdependent world, empowered to engage with the global challenges they will face, and encouraged to take action as global citizens has to be welcomed. The consultation period on the vision / strategy (8 March to 31 May) represents an opportunity to help shape a significant policy commitment. Further, it is important that BIS and DECC coordinate efforts to orient education towards securing a low carbon economy.

4. Looking ahead

More research is needed on where the main gaps in ESD are across the UK, and to show differentials in progress and level of activity and action to support policy in the different sectors. One prominent gap, for example, is the lack of an overview of progress made (as opposed to actions taken). A related, but arguably less significant one is the lack of progress on agreeing an ESD indicator. Agreement on major gaps, and ideas on how they might be plugged, now seems necessary.

.....

UK National Commission for UNESCO