

## Sustainable Development in the UK: exploring education initiatives since Rio

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### Abstract

*This paper derives from a contribution we made to the Council for Environmental Education's submission to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2002), and reviews educational activities in response to Agenda 21 (Chapter 36 on Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training). Exemplars relating to policy, programmes and strategy are illustrated, alongside a commentary on their effectiveness and strategic value. We conclude that there is now a priority need for integrated and integrative leadership, both within and across sectors, which synthesises existing knowledge and good practice, and makes them available to ongoing initiatives.*

### Introduction: What's been done since Rio?

It is clear that a significant range of activities have been initiated in response to Chapter 36 and carried out by Central Government, Local Authorities, NGOs, and others, and exemplars relating to policy, programmes and strategy are provided below. In reviewing progress and recommending actions in these areas, we make three assumptions; viz:

- education has a crucial and unique role to play in helping us come to understandings about what sustainable development (SD) is, and how we might develop and recognise it;
- the learning that we shall need in the UK in order to do this will need to be developed and shared across sectors; and
- we all have important parts to play (individually, in the family, socially and in the workplace) in bringing such learning, and hence sustainable development, about.

These assumptions are consistent with the stance adopted by *Agenda 21*, and the UK Government's Sustainable Development Education Panel (SDEP) in that each accords a crucial role for learning at all levels in sustainable development. They are also consistent with the views of many NGOs as they are grounded in what Lindblom (1992), in discussing ideas around the self-directing society, calls 'disjointed instrumentalism'. In other words, progress in education and sustainable development will be evolutionary and iterative and what people, organisations and institutions do, on the ground, will be more important, if properly evaluated and shared, than grand social projects informed by external theories and imposed by experts.

In this paper then, we are operating with 'loose' rather than 'tight' frameworks for what is meant by education and sustainable development, and focus on reviewing the range of sectoral initiatives, rather than the projects themselves or their problems (see, for example, Scott and Reid, 1998). Before providing detail on a sector-by-sector basis, we now provide a brief explication of the agenda set at Rio, and what has been effective and not so effective.

### The Agenda set at Rio

The targets set at Rio for education were ambitious. They include:

- Achieve environmental and development awareness in all sectors of society, and integrate environment and development into education at all levels;



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- Set up national advisory environmental education coordinating bodies, and assist schools in designing environmental activity work plans, and enable pre-service and in-service training for teachers and non-formal educators;
- Establish national and/or regional centres of excellence in research and education;
- Build partnerships with business, NGOs, with other stakeholders, and identify workforce training needs and assess measures taken to meet them, encouraging professional associations to review codes of practice;
- Develop national and regional environmental labour market information systems, and identify workforce training needs and assess measures taken to meet them;
- Support community-based organisations, and promote dissemination of traditional and socially learned knowledge;
- Promote sustainability skills in adult education, including business, agricultural and industrial schools and training;
- Encourage integration of environmental management training across all sectors, and encourage social participation in sustainable work practices and lifestyles.

### What's been effective?

In the UK within formal education, revisions to the national curriculum have created space for innovation, and there has been an identification of sustainable development as an important aspect of curriculum aims and subject foci across the key stages. The role of government, NGOs and subject associations has been crucial in achieving this, often through partnership initiatives. Schools, however, are substantially focused on the important 'basics agenda' set by DfES which, nonetheless, in stressing literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, remains fundamental to realising sustainable development (Hopkins et al., 1996). Sustainable development initiatives across the FE and HE sectors have been attempted: the Toyne Report, HE21 and HEPS (for more detail on the latter; see article in this edition of PLANET - Ed) are significant examples. In the non-formal sector, the Council for Environmental Education (CEE), the Development Education Association (DEA) and several other NGOs have done exemplary work in advancing understanding of sustainable development and the role of education and learning in it, and in achieving an increased visibility for such issues in policy circles (e.g. [www.cee.org.uk](http://www.cee.org.uk)). Within non-formal education, two major public awareness campaigns have been conducted (*Going for Green* and *Are you doing your bit?*), and a statutory framework has been established which acts to create opportunities for the development of life-long learning initiatives focused on sustainable development. The Department for International Development (DfID) has taken an international lead in commissioning research into the central role of environmental learning in achieving sustainable development.

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## What's not been so effective?

A plethora of initiatives, however, does not amount to a national strategy, and many disparate initiatives, valuable in themselves, have not yet been linked to advantage, locally, nationally and/or farther afield. Often this is because teachers, local government officers, NGO employees, and others have lacked the understanding and/or the infrastructural support to realise such integration, particularly at the interface of bottom-up with top-down approaches. Examples are the development of unconnected life-long learning and sustainable development initiatives in some local authorities, and the lack of integration between school curriculum development and LA21. Work-related to sustainable development continues to be seen as a costly bolt-on to existing programmes, rather than as a means and opportunity better to achieve existing goals.

### Sectoral Analysis

We now examine educational initiatives in five sectors, setting out significant initiatives in terms of policy, programmes and strategy, along with an evaluative commentary on the main issues and challenges we now face.

## 1. Formal Education Sector

**Key Stakeholders: Government - Local authorities - Schools**

### Exemplar Activities

- Department for Education and Skills (DfEE) and Department of Energy (DoE) published *Taking environmental education into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, a strategy for environmental education in England;
- The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority's *Teaching environmental matters through the National Curriculum* provided exemplars of school and field work, 1996;
- Setting up the Government's *Sustainable Development Education Panel (SDEP)*, 1998;
- SDEP report to DfEE/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) on *Education for sustainable development in the schools sector*, 1998;
- Establishing *Curriculum 2000*, adding ESD to National Curriculum aims (without prescribing what schools should do, or specifying learning outcomes), 1999;
- Explaining in eight of 12 National Curriculum subject booklets how ESD could be promoted, with specificity in geography, science and citizenship, 1999;
- Providing on-line support by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for teachers/schools in relation to ESD, 2001;
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES)'s *Developing a global dimension in the school curriculum* providing guidance for head teachers, governors and local authorities, 2001;
- DfES Curriculum Division appointing adviser on ESD, 2001.

### Main Challenges

The work of the Government panel (SDEP) has had little impact on schools and FE/HE; it needs to focus on these sectors through collaborative activities with subject and professional associations and with NGOs in order to stimulate curriculum and pedagogical development. Further, it needs to lobby to make funds available for detailed research studies into work on learning and sustainable development, including meta-analyses of existing studies.

There is no coherent set of aims for the whole curriculum in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. DfES, with QCA, needs to consult widely in order to develop this, and to show: (a) that education is a crucial component of developing our understandings of sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles/activities/futures; (b) that active partnership across sectors and between institutions is crucial for progress; and (c) that the limited opportunities afforded by the curriculum are supported by a coherent and resourced strategy for life-long learning; see Blewitt (2001).

DfES needs to: (a) make it clear that the government sees proficiency in literacy, numeracy and ICT as prerequisites for sustainable development, (b) encourage schools actively to build on this important, emerging skill basis; and (c) support schools by encouraging funding and evaluating innovative practice. DfES and LEAs need to sustain their important efforts to keep learners in full-time education, and to ensure that schools have access to either internal or external means of support for work germane to sustainable development, e.g., EU funding. Government as a whole should articulate a clear strategic vision of the relationship between sustainable development and economic growth as a driver of policy, and a strategic vision of how education (teaching and learning), and the skills agenda relate to these.

## 2. Post-16, FE & HE Sector

**Key Stakeholders: Government - FE/HE institutions - Business**

### Exemplar Activities

- Establishing the Committee on Environmental Education in Further and Higher Education (Chair: Peter Toyne) and commissioning its report, *Environmental responsibility: an agenda for further and higher education*, 1993, and commissioning a review in 1996;
- Funding the CEE/MWF/DoE research project and resulting series, *Taking Responsibility in HE*;
- Funding the Higher Education 21 Project to promote examples of best sustainable practice in HE, 1997-99;
- ESRC funded *Global Environmental Change* programme (Agenda 21, Chapter 37 on mechanisms for capacity-building);
- Piloting (HEFCE) environmental management projects;
- SDEP and Further Education Development Agency encouraging sustainable development in FE through publication of *Towards sustainability: a guide for colleges*, 1999;
- Establishing (HEFCE) *Higher Education Partnerships for Sustainability (HEPS)* to help higher education institutions deliver and share strategic sustainable development objectives, 2000-2003.

### Main Challenges

The momentum established through the Toyne Report was lost when HE21 failed to help a budding interest in the curriculum to flower. There is little evidence that the lessons of this failure have been learned by the SDEP – or by HEFCE where activity relating to curriculum and sustainable development is slow. HEFCE should: (a) commission and publish evaluation studies of emerging practice in relation to both academic and management aspects of sustainable development; and (b) promote networking between academic, business and professional associations. HEFCE should extend the sustainable development in FE initiative to all providers, and share and promote good practice. DfES/QCA need to ensure that new post-16 arrangements allow for sustainable development issues to be appropriately covered. DfES should encourage FE/HE funding councils to fund sustainable development-focused research related to life-long learning.

## 3. Non-formal Education Sectors

**Key Stakeholders: Government - NGOs - Community groups - Local authorities - Business - Trades Unions**

### Exemplar Activities

- Government support for CEE and, through it, its many stakeholders;
- Earmarking *Environmental Action Fund* resources to support education;
- Debating sustainable development within the *Children's Parliament on the Environment*;
- DETR's *Are you doing your bit?* campaign, and DfID's *Building support for development* raise public awareness and understanding of issues, and public service broadcasting emphasises sustainable development;

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- Encouraging NGOs to carry out innovative projects on sustainable development (eg, Oxfam, Wildlife Trusts, Living Earth).

## Main Challenges

DfES supports CEE and DEA as the bodies best able to represent stakeholder interests. This should continue. In a similar way there has been support for individual NGOs; however, it is not clear that schools are deriving much benefit from this. Government should ask CEE/DEA to work with QCA and others to draw together and evaluate NGO activity in relation to the formal sector.

Government needs to co-ordinate funding of education related to sustainable development to encourage innovation. Local and Regional Authorities need to integrate sustainable development and ESD into community planning and other mainstream initiatives, and all stakeholders need to put greater emphasis on engaging the media in communicating their sustainable development-focused work.

Government needs to be aware that business and trades union groups are likely to fully incorporate sustainability initiatives within their practice only where (as for example in the case of environmental management systems) these are clearly embedded within the wider context of economic growth.

## 4. Life-long Learning

**Key Stakeholders: Government - Local authorities - FE/HE - Community groups- Business - Trades Unions**

### Exemplar Activities

- Establishing *Local Agenda 21* initiatives;
- Local Government Act 2000 gives local authorities the power to promote local social, economic and environmental well being, and a duty to prepare community strategies, which set out to improve local quality of life and contribute to sustainable development;
- Performance and Innovation Unit 2002 published *Resource productivity: making more with less* and *In demand: adult skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, both making links between education and sustainable development;
- Learning & Skills Development Agency sponsors seminars on *Learning to Last: Skills, Sustainability and Strategy*.

### Main Challenges

Local Authorities should integrate LA21 and school curriculum initiatives, and share effective practice with stakeholders. They need, with government, union, and business support, to mainstream sustainable development issues within existing and new life-long learning initiatives. The government needs to require and enable the sharing of good practice between local and regional authorities, community groups, and development agencies on sustainable development, and to ensure that current and future education/training/skills initiatives address sustainable development.

## 5. Multi-sector Approaches

**Key Stakeholders: Government - Local authorities - Schools - NGOs - FE/HE - Community organisations - Business - Trades Unions**

### Exemplar Activities

- DoE publishes *This Common Inheritance*, and DETR publishes *Quality of Life Counts* listing sustainable development education indicators;
- SDEP establishes working groups on Schooling; FE/HE; the Workplace; and General Public and Households;
- SDEP produces guidance on establishing ESD awareness-raising strategies for government departments, endorsed by Green Ministers Committee;

- DfEE/DETR/CEE code for producers of educational resources supporting sustainable development;
- DfID commissions research into how environmental education can be mainstreamed into its programmes in order to help meet international development targets.

## Main Challenges

Government needs to provide more targeted support for research and development in the creation of infrastructure for an effective Learning Society, and to encourage further research and development on mainstreaming environmental and development initiatives between stakeholders, especially trade unions, business and community groups. It also needs to continue to stress collaborative initiatives between, and across, all its Departments and Agencies, to ensure that the distribution of initiatives is appropriately balanced, and that more is done to turn words and good intentions into actions.

## Conclusions

Our review suggests that there is now a priority need for integrated and integrative leadership, within and across sectors, which synthesises existing knowledge and best practice, and makes them available to ongoing initiatives. Such leadership would include the following:

- commissioning research, particularly into (a) the mainstreaming of sustainable development issues into learning and (b) the relationship between sustainable development and life-long learning;
- making better use of existing research, long-term cross-sector strategic planning, development of transferable skills and flexibility;
- cross-sector monitoring and evaluation of progress in education relating to sustainable development;
- identification, support and coordination of champions throughout different sectors;
- networking of practitioners in order to examine effective practice;
- promotion of, and leadership contributions to, UK, European, Commonwealth and international developments.

There is a body of existing work which has begun to explicate the necessity of cross-sectoral coherence in economic and educational approaches within which the education sector has an important role to play. See, for example, Hopkins et al. (1996), Gough, Walker and Scott (2001), Gough and Scott (2001), Scott and Reid (1998; 2001). Government, its ministries and agencies have a crucial role in stimulating such leadership, and in ensuring that local, national and international funding is well-targeted and readily available. They have an equally important role in encouraging all stakeholders to take the initiative. In providing this encouragement, government should also have an eye on how learning can be identified and consolidated amid the plethora of initiatives that such an approach will stimulate. A national strategy is now needed across all education sectors. The recent World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg presents an excellent opportunity to review the many UK educational initiatives, to learn from them, and to develop a coherent approach.

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## Sustainable development education in the UK: the challenge for higher education institutions

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### Abstract

*This brief article outlines some of the UK initiatives towards sustainable development education and the sorts of sustainable development standards that all practitioners and professionals would be expected to accord with if the Government Sustainable Development Education Panel proposed recommendations are adopted.*

### Defining Sustainable Development Education

Sustainable development education enables people to develop the knowledge, values and skills to improve their quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.

### UK Initiatives - The Sustainable Development Education Panel

In 1998 a Government Sustainable Development Education Panel was established to consider issues on education for sustainable development, in its broadest sense, in schools, further and higher education, at work, during recreation and at home; and to make practical recommendations for action in England.

The Panel reports directly to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and is chaired by Sir Geoffrey Holland, the Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University. It is in its fifth year of operation.

### Its Terms of Reference

- to promote a strategic approach to sustainable development education in England;
- to identify gaps and opportunities in the provision of sustainable development education and consider how to improve that provision;
- to promote an approach which will reduce duplication, increase cooperation and develop synergy between all sectors and groups involved;
- to consider whether and what targets should be set for various sectors;
- to highlight best practice and consider the means of disseminating it more widely;

- to make recommendations to key players on priority areas for action;
- to assess the effectiveness of this approach.

The general idea is that sustainable development education should be a seamless process which begins in the nursery and is systematically progressed throughout the formal education process and reinforced in society. The Panel set out its key aims for the further and higher education sectors in its first Annual Report.

It calls all FHE institutions, by the year 2010 to:

- be accredited to an internationally or nationally recognised sustainable development management systems standard;
- have staff fully trained and competent in sustainable development; and be providing all students with relevant sustainability learning opportunities.

Within the same time frame it also calls on the Higher Education Funding Council to:

- have made a defined level of sustainability performance relating to house-keeping, curriculum and community responsibilities, a condition of grants to institutions.

These recommendations embody a view that students learn from their learning programmes and from the learning environment; that institutions should practise what they teach; and that the principles of sustainable development should be consistently reinforced through all learning settings and learning programmes. They also embody a recognition that the FHE sector needs to define acceptable sustainability standards both in terms of its core business (i.e. education and research), its house-keeping practices and its broader community responsibilities.

So far, most progress has been made in relation to house keeping practices. We now have in place a range of cross-sector national policy initiatives to encourage and reward environmental responsibility e.g. waste reduction and energy efficiency. There are also a number of FHE specific initiatives designed to generally encourage the integration of environmental or sustainable development responsibilities into FHE management practices, for example:

- the Forum for the Future's HE 21 Project (1997-99) and its Higher Education Partnerships Scheme (ongoing);
- the Higher Education Funding Council's Environmental Management Guide (1999);
- the Association of Colleges Towards Sustainability Guide (2000).

As regards raising the competence of academic staff and implementing the necessary adjustments to academic programmes and professional standards, progress is slow.

The first challenge has been to identify exactly what sustainability learning is required by different professions. In 1999 the Sustainable Development Education Panel in partnership with the HE 21 Project, developed sustainability learning specifications for four HE sectors: business, design, engineering and teacher education.

In its second year the Panel began to think more specifically about the role of professional bodies and it undertook a review of the responses of twenty key professions to the sustainable development challenge. It came to the conclusion that a new kind of mechanism was needed to ensure that sustainable development standards were integrated into professional practice.

It is not clear yet exactly what this mechanism will be, but there is currently a proposal being considered by ministers for the establishment of a series of sustainable development standards open to all professionals. This proposal has been led by Sustainability First and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment.