

A personal perspective from Glenn Strachan on the HEA-ESD Conference held at the University of Bradford on 10 and 11 July 2007

“**Progress and Potential**” was a good title for this conference. All the parallel sessions demonstrated the **progress** that is being made with regard to ESD in the higher education sector, but in many of the parallel sessions which I witnessed there was tangible excitement from some of the participants about the further **potential** of the ideas being discussed.

Tension and balance

Many of the debates that emerged in the plenary sessions and the parallel sessions were characterised by tensions that needed to be brought into balance or resolved by accommodating both aspects of the debate in order to achieve a significant shift towards ESD in HE.

The following paragraphs touch on some of the themes and debates that caught my attention while visiting several of the parallel sessions and, as with many of the sessions, the debates are identified but no attempt is made to resolve them here. They could be seen as proposals for the future work of the HEA-ESD Project. Reference is made to a number of the presenters that I managed to hear speaking but there were just as many that I was unable to attend as three sessions ran concurrently.

Subject context

An early debate emerged around the tensions between disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. How much disciplinarity do you have to have before you can have inter-disciplinarity? This question emerged in discussions in Jenneth Parker’s session on “Sustainability as a dynamic research and development programme”. Andy Young’s project on eco-design at Sheffield Hallam used the students to branch out and engage with other disciplines to achieve their aim of developing an eco-house design and bring an inter-disciplinary approach to the project.

Institutional context

How can curriculum development happen in respect of ESD if the institution does not “walk the talk” of sustainability? Mark Cleary illustrated the dilemmas and external pressures facing vice-chancellors who are committed to the ESD agenda.

The management framework and the policy context of every HEI is unique and hence the need for an approach to ESD that can accommodate that diversity.

Policy

The examples presented by Plymouth and Bradford illustrated the importance of both **ownership** and **leadership** in successful whole-institution policy development.

A journey towards a shared vision or an unknown destination?

Leadership and vision have roles to play in charting the development of an institution, but at the level of staff development Stephen Sterling and James Gray-Donald illustrated the potential benefits and the excitement of starting a conversation with a group of staff on the subject of ESD without knowing where that might lead.

Participation

Not surprisingly participation was one of the strongest themes to emerge throughout the conference. Where, when and how should we engage students in ESD? Are there different roles for the formal and informal curriculum? Bryan Lipscombe and Chris Rochester explored how extra-curricula activities contribute to ESD.

Is helping students to learn more effectively at the heart of the pedagogy of ESD? Participative learning and particularly experiential learning featured in several sessions, but Colin Beard from Sheffield University provided a critical review of what experiential learning might really mean.

While “chasing the lost folksonomy of sustainability” Jeremy Tridgell from Falmouth juxtaposed epistemology of ESD with the pedagogy of ESD.

Mark Cleary in his keynote presentation raised the question “Do we really understand our students?” As far as many of the session leaders at this conference were concerned the answer is, yes.

Real world

For many people at this conference (although not all) the real world equated to the corporate world. So what is the relationship between the corporate world and the HE curriculum? For Mark Cleary the skills agenda is a key part of this relationship, but as we debate the knowledge and skills associated with sustainable literacy how close are we to the skills identified by the graduate employers? There were certainly examples of the corporate world getting involved with ESD projects such as the eco-design house at Sheffield Hallam.

Worldview

ESD challenges our worldview and this can be both disturbing and liberating. In Jenneth Parker’s and Ros Wade’s session one participant commented that he wanted to know “Who the hell he was?” - he used to know that he was an environmental scientist but engaging with sustainable development had left him uncertain about his identity. However, Geraint Ellis from Belfast showed how sustainable development could be used as an organising framework to bring together diverse ideas, staff and disciplines.

Contested understanding

The discussion around the multiple meanings and the contested understanding of sustainable development and ESD re-occurred throughout the conference. Mark Cleary raised it at the start and it was present in Amanda Lewis’ session on teaching sustainability at Kingston towards the end of the conference.

“We all bring our own bit of understanding.” “You cannot tell people about it, they have to come to their own understanding.” “We need to help students to be comfortable with uncertainty and the lack of a simple answer.” “How can we work across disciplines without a common understanding and language?” These were some of the comments heard during the course of the conference.

Timescale

In the first plenary session Carolyn Roberts from Gloucester raised the question of timescale and the urgency associated with the ESD agenda. This was an issue that concerned a number of participants given the difficulty of achieving anything approaching rapid change in the HE curriculum. No answers emerged, but in relation to the question of timescale I think it is always worth remembering the question posed by Primo Levi “If not now, when?”

So what was the overall mood of the conference? My personal perception was one of a group of professionals with a sense of purpose and a mission to achieve change in their institutions and the sector. I felt this to be the case because I witnessed the commitment to grapple with the tensions that I have identified above. Attending the conference was a very positive experience.

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