

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: 2008 Review of ESD in HE in Scotland

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AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to look at how to engage HEIs strategically in support of ESD, or to those interested in finding out the status of Scottish HEIs in terms of ESD.

SUMMARY AND RATIONALE

This report contains the findings of a review of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Scottish Higher Education, carried out via two investigations during 2008. The research was organised by the Higher Education Academy (HE Academy) ESD Project, Universities Scotland (US) and HE Academy Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commissioned the review to build on initial research carried out in 2005-06 (Forster, 2006) and advised on the design and development of the project. The review aligns with the programme of work across the Scottish tertiary sector to contribute to the current United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), which runs from 2005-2014.

The Forster 2006 report found evidence of growing research activity and research capacity related to sustainable development, but few signs of strategic engagement or curriculum evolution in Scottish HEIs. The evidence base for the 2006 findings had consisted mostly of formal HEI documentation, with a small sample of interviews and two responses to a survey of HEIs.

THE APPROACH

First, a survey was issued to all 20 Scottish HEIs in May 2008 concerning sustainability practice in estates management, organisational strategy and academic activities; 16 replies were received, a response rate of 80%. Second, four HEIs volunteered to be case studies for further inquiry into academic approaches to sustainability: the University of Glasgow, UHI Millennium Institute (hereafter simply UHI), Queen Margaret University (hereafter QMU) and University of St Andrews. Twenty-six qualitative interviews were carried out at these HEIs between June and December 2008.

THE OUTCOMES

The 2008 inquiry has generated a significantly stronger set of survey responses than the Forster report and rich qualitative data from the case study consultations. These findings paint an encouraging picture of strategic engagement in support of ESD in many HEIs and there are signs of increasing ownership of the academic challenges, in ways consistent with the expertise within particular institutions. The findings in key areas of strategic engagement demonstrate the following points:

- 14 of the 16 HEIs (87.5%) have made public commitments to sustainability at executive level
- 8 HEIs (50%) have explicit sustainability policies or have incorporated it into their strategic plans
- 15 of the 16 HEIs (93.75%) have clear commitments to sustainable estates management practice
- 8 HEIs (50%) record specific commitments in research geared to sustainability issues
- 7 HEIs (43.75%) cite specific commitments in knowledge exchange targeted to sustainability

Sustainable estates management practice appears to be the focus of systematic effort across the sector and many HEIs are involved with the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC) Campus Sustainability Programme (CaSP) initiative.

The review also suggests that the sector is moving towards further embedding of sustainability in the curriculum and many examples of good practice were identified, in targeted 'sustainable development' programmes and in a range of academic disciplines. There are also valuable examples of the approaches HEIs are taking to create informal learning opportunities among students and staff. The survey findings on learning and teaching issues include these key points:

- 9 of the 16 HEIs (56.25%) have specific learning and teaching commitments to nurture ESD

- 32 undergraduate and 47 post-graduate programmes were identified as explicitly targeted to sustainability issues
- Various pedagogic approaches to ESD are emerging, in strategic terms and within the curriculum
- All 16 HEIs anticipate some intentional increase in their formal sustainability provision

Overall, the findings indicate positive progress on ESD in Scotland and the absence of prescription at policy level has enabled HEIs to act autonomously in response to the internal and external drivers for sustainability. The overall trajectory is towards further embedding within the curriculum, in addition to the development of targeted programmes with strong sustainability orientation.

Existing examples showed the potential for partnership work in ESD curriculum development, maximizing links to thematic initiatives such as employability, lifelong learning and community engagement. The case for institution-wide generic modules on sustainable development is far less clear and questions have been raised about the relative impact and uptake of such offerings at module level. Overall, the review findings point to a gradual broadening of understanding, from earlier activities to provide 'knowledge about sustainability' to increasing strategic efforts to engage in 'education for sustainability'.

Conclusions

Support is needed at both sector level and institutional level, if strategic development in ESD is to become more deeply established in Scottish HE. Further progress will be most effective if ESD is embedded as a strategic principle in the funding arrangements envisaged by the Horizons HE task force (2008), to promote 'joined-up thinking' in institutions. It is hoped that ESD will be included in the general conditions for the General Fund for Universities (GFU) and will be a priority for specific initiatives supported by the Horizons Fund for Universities (HFU). Efforts are also necessary to promote discussion among discipline and professional communities, and to overcome the structural barriers to interdisciplinary work in HE.

Research activity for sustainability appears to grow steadily and HEIs say they intend to expand on curriculum development. This will require further strategic effort at organizational level, not least in staff development to build capacity and ownership in all subject areas. HEIs need encouragement to work on further strategic development, to create partnerships with business and community sectors for ESD, and to explore the role of informal learning and the links to lifelong learning initiatives. The general orientation among HEIs is towards further embedding of ESD within HE curricula, but research is still needed to gauge specific labour market demands across professions, industry and employment sectors.

There has been an extremely positive response to both these investigations, which forms a solid basis for further discussions. This positive engagement with the review could in itself be interpreted as a sign of progress and of growing acceptance of ESD within HE. The findings point to significant development since the initial assessment in the Forster 2006 report. However, one of the important challenges in coming years will be to identify and develop ways to measure the educational value and effects of ESD initiatives, in both formal and informal learning, in order to demonstrate credible, effective impact for the UN DESD.

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

To Individual HEIs:

1. Undertake research among the student body to gauge views on sustainability and ESD in lifestyles and professional choices, and in relation to university cultures and campus practices.
2. Explore channels to develop strategic thinking and build capacity for sustainability, through interdisciplinary discussions, online forums and staff development workshops.

To the Scottish Funding Council:

3. Reflect on ways to incorporate ESD as a thematic topic into policy development processes and to encourage initiatives from HEIs under the funding arrangements envisaged for the GFU and HFU.
4. Revise research funding strategies to enable greater status to be accorded to interdisciplinary, applied and partnership research geared to the investigation of sustainability issues.
5. Continue to support the CaSPr initiative to promote shared planning and the setting of baselines of practice in environmental management and corporate operations across institutions.
6. Explore the links between ESD and lifelong learning arising from DESD activities in other educational spheres and seek guidance from the DESD Steering Group to enhance these links.
7. Together with relevant agencies such as the HE Academy ESD Project and Universities Scotland, initiate inquiries with professional bodies and employer organisations into current sustainability needs in the graduate workforce, connecting ESD with revised employability strategies.
8. Seek opportunities to collaborate with institutions and initiatives to develop methods of recording academic and strategic progress in ESD, taking

account of organisational and subject levels of development, to assist with reporting on the impact of HE in the DESD.

To the Higher Education Academy:

9. Develop events through HE Academy Scotland and the HE Academy ESD Project to share practice and promote discussion among academics on the major themes arising from this review, such as the links between ESD, employability, interdisciplinarity, community engagement and lifelong learning.
10. Explore ways to support HEIs in the development of strategic thinking that recognises the permeable boundaries between organisational and academic development for ESD.
11. Ask Subject Centres to include sustainability as a priority theme in individual and joint bids for pedagogic research grants, to enhance opportunities for staff to work on embedding ESD.
12. Support the HE Academy ESD Project to continue its work across disciplinary, regional and institutional boundaries, and to assist in creating more effective links between good practice in Scottish ESD and other ESD pedagogic networks and resources across the UK.

To Universities Scotland and QAA Scotland:

13. Encourage discussion of ESD issues within designated subject benchmarking and qualifications review processes, and invite academics with ESD expertise to join and inform these discussions.
14. Initiate discussions with relevant committees about the presence and scope of ESD in the upcoming QE Theme *Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes*.
15. Assist in promoting discussion about ESD and interdisciplinarity among appropriate agencies across the education sector, particularly in relation to progression and the FE-HE transition.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available from:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/SFCesd08Review.pdf> (PDF 268KB)