

### A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: ESD, Employability and External Engagement Event  
Report

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#### AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone interested in the intersection between ESD, employability and external engagement.

#### SUMMARY AND RATIONALE

This report provides a summary of discussions at an event held at the University of Stirling on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009 for the Higher Education Academy Scotland, in conjunction with the HE Academy Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Project. The event was designed and facilitated on behalf of the HE Academy ESD Project by Dr Colin Brooks and Dr Alex Ryan to explore the intersection of ESD with two related thematic topics in HE: employability and external engagement.

This event was organised in response to research carried out during 2008 to capture strategic developments, pedagogic activity and sector-level priorities across Scottish HE, during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 (UN DESD). This research culminated in a report, the *2008 Review of ESD in HE in Scotland* (February 2009), which was submitted to HE Academy Scotland, Universities Scotland, and the Scottish Funding Council.

The Scottish Executive prepared an action plan for the UN DESD, *Learning for Our Future* (2006), and during 2009, consultation and planning is underway via the UN DESD Action Plan Steering Group to prepare for the second half of the DESD. In this second phase, particular attention will be paid to the role and work

of tertiary education and to the issues arising from the HE research detailed above, together with the findings from research carried out across the further education (FE) sector during 2008.

Initial responses to the *2008 Review of ESD in HE in Scotland*, from participants in the research and from those who commissioned and reviewed its findings, noted the relative weakness of 'external' or 'public' engagement among the range of activities undertaken by HEIs, and the uncertainties expressed in HE in relation to labour market demands and the needs of employers in relation to 'sustainability literacy'. This provided the impetus for the April event and the choice of opening presentations, plus the focus for discussions in the second half of the meeting.

#### DESIGN AND PARTICIPATION

Fifty people expressed an interest in the meeting (and, where they were unable to attend, asked to be informed of the tenor of the discussion and the outcomes of the day). In the end, approximately 36 attended, which included varied types of roles: 12 members of academic faculty; six participants with different roles across the education sector; five HE educational development specialists; five participants from national and commercial organisations external to HE; four postgraduate (PG) students; and four colleagues in HE careers/employability roles.

It was striking that no one who could be classified simply (and perhaps crudely) as a commercial employer attended the event. This was despite endeavours on the part of the organizers to invite participation from those involved in large-scale graduate recruitment processes and from private sector businesses operating as placement providers to undergraduates, particularly in the field of environmental management. It appears that there is a need to find more effective means of engaging these parties in strategic discussions with those responsible for taking forward sustainability issues in HE, in relation to the skills profile of future graduate cohorts and the strategies adopted by individual HE institutions and at sector level in terms of HE policy.

After a brief introduction by Colin Brooks and Alex Ryan, there were two presentations, followed by brief discussions and comments. These two opening sessions were chosen to directly tackle the two key themes of the event, 'employability' and 'external engagement', and to prompt participants to consider ways of linking these themes with 'ESD'. The first was given by Dr Bethan Wood of the Dumfries campus of the University of Glasgow, with exemplification by Andrew Cole, past student at the Dumfries campus and Project Officer with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The second was given by Dr Jim Smyth and Dr Alasdair Ross of the History Department at the University of Stirling, with exemplification by Melanie Johnson of CFA Archaeology and David Sowerby, volunteer on the Prestongrange Industrial Archaeology Project.

After lunch, participants formed into five groups to discuss a range of questions suggested by the organizers and to generate comments and reflections on the issues at stake (see Appendix in full document). These groups contained a mixture of participants from different roles and backgrounds, and an additional short period of reflection was spent with participants in groups of similar professional roles. Finally, four participants – from academic, graduate student, secondary education, and consultancy backgrounds respectively – were invited to offer brief and astringent comment on the issues that needed urgent attention, prior to the concluding comments and thanks to the participants for their contributions by Colin Brooks.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At the close of this event, it was striking that during the second half of the DESD there is still an urgent need to continue to bring people together: secondary education, FE and HE; communities and private sector employers; students on different programmes and from different institutions. There is also the need to work more fluidly and swiftly towards understanding of, and sensitivity to, sustainability as an underpinning principle of HE experience and programmes. The following specific issues are worthy of particular attention as headline points:

1. Leadership in HE was being called into question, but was discussed extensively and with some urgency; it is clearly more necessary than ever. In the face of national and international demand and student interest, HE cannot retreat into a recitation of piecemeal initiatives, a culture of specialisation, and disaggregation of the university experience in an audit-driven climate. HE will need to adopt sustainability as a key to innovation and to the delivery of its core values, and in the present economic climate, developing a culture of enterprise in this area may prove to be even more essential.
2. There was evidence of insufficient interchange in the relationship between academic faculty – who are most often responsible for organising placements – and careers staff – who are responsible for supporting students in seeking subsequent employment. It is possible that the majority of careers staff are not sufficiently aware of placement opportunities, nor enabled to become more actively involved in supporting academic staff in the development of work-related learning experiences. A similar question was raised with respect to colleagues in educational development/teaching and learning units.
3. The value of placements was strongly evidenced, particularly in strategic efforts to enhance the ESD dimensions in graduate attributes and employability, and to generate mutually beneficial partnerships between HEIs and external organisations (which can also lead to further research and knowledge exchange activities). There is a need to manage expectations on all sides – students, academics and placement providers (the organisers had heard elsewhere of placement providers who had felt defensive in the face of student expertise). Further attention should be given to the role of HEIs themselves as providers of placement opportunities, not least in their Estates divisions.
4. There was perhaps less direct discussion of ‘employability’ within the groups than might have been expected, and it is possible that this could be linked to the uncertainties in many quarters about market demands. It might be that

there is a need for greater engagement between HE and the business community, including the major graduate recruiters, to enable clearer articulation of the needs of employers regarding sustainability. It was also apparent that more understanding is needed in HE about placement work undertaken in secondary education by students entering HE – and the decrease in work-related learning and competence for HE students. Further research is warranted in this area, to generate greater understanding about competencies and skills .

5. It seems fair to suggest that the needs of all varieties of employer for student skills in the area of sustainability (very broadly interpreted) will remain considerable for many years; this need for skilled labour ought to serve as an inducement for other HE programmes to offer placements. However, challenging questions remain about 'scaling up' placements and creating work-related learning opportunities that can reach more academic subjects, while also taking into account any concerns with 'academic fit' and the ability of academics to provide foundational knowledge, given the ongoing challenge of balance to create an appropriate curriculum. A constructive response from the disciplines (and the HE programmes to which those disciplines are geared) to the challenge of ESD is crucial.
6. Informed community engagement with sustainability necessitates the involvement of the full range of academic disciplines, but there appears to be less understanding about ways to communicate the value and place of the human sciences within sustainability initiatives and in tackling pressing social problems. This connects with the broader problem of locating funding for voluntary and community projects that articulate the importance of cultural and community sustainability, when perhaps the 'ecological' messages, and efforts towards resource efficiency, are the most vocal, tangible and graspable dimensions of sustainability.
7. It is important to note the connection between the regulatory context (as a key driver for ESD) and its reflection in local council activities, plus the role of councils in delivering on national investment in lifelong learning and in promoting heritage conservation. The relative deficit in charitable and academic funding for projects addressing community resilience and local conservation suggests that HEIs might do more to engage with councils to support 'joined-up' thinking in areas such as adult education and museums (i.e., not just in areas of environmental management within councils that have more pragmatic regulatory requirements). The case for extending lifelong learning opportunities in sustainability issues is a strong one and should be set out thoroughly.

## TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. The HE Academy, in co-operation with other public bodies in Scotland, should continue the series of meetings of which this event was one. There are clear indications of themes that merit further attention:
  - *ESD and Interdisciplinarity*: Sustainability understanding does not undercut disciplines; it is largely based on mastery of those disciplines – but it often requires transcendence of individual disciplines. There is a need to support colleagues in applying this principle in the variety of HE curricula and subject areas.

- *ESD across the Educational Sectors*: It is extremely important to tie together secondary education, colleges/FE, HE, and lifelong learning, to map the thread of sustainability running through each sector, to see the progression of understanding at each level, and to take account of this in proposing changes.
  - *ESD and HEI Leadership*: It is equally important to tie together different aspects of HE institutions, as their infrastructure provides the context for informal and formal learning. In this area, the concerns and expertise of the EAUC become particularly relevant, and student participation in these discussions is crucial.
2. At national level, those planning phase 2 activities in Scotland's DESD should act imaginatively and decisively to bring groups from across the educational sector together with those outside it, to encourage integration at key points of fruitful synthesis and strategic leverage. There is particularly urgent need for more discussion between HEIs and enterprises (including private and public sector organisations, and professional bodies with a stake in the development of HE curricula and the quality of graduate output).

The challenges of sustainability require from students and faculty the qualities characteristic of HE: adoption of a focused question, rational marshalling of evidence, and the presentation of cogent and persuasive results. HE is well placed to develop the momentum of ESD by the provision of information, expertise and people (staff and students), to employers and, crucially, to the public at large. The degree of innovation and leadership HE can bring to bear will be key to the realisation of its potential to educate for sustainability.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available from:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/StirlingESD2009.pdf> (PDF 196KB)