

Inquiry on 'Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Development'

Submission on behalf of the Educational Centres Association (ECA)

1: What does the evidence tell us about the relationship between lifelong learning and sustainable development?

The ECA agrees with the Academy of Sustainable Communities that two of the five common characteristics that sustainable communities share and offer people are:

- The chance to develop their skills and interests
- The chance to get engaged in their community and to make a difference

We believe that both of these characteristics unite lifelong learning and empowerment. The ECA has vast experience of working in both of these areas: The highly acclaimed TEACH project focused on Euro-wide active citizenship, whilst the ALAC/Take Part project encouraged active citizenship in England. The ECA was also a founder member of the Community Sector Coalition, has focused on empowerment for older learners through the TEDDYBEAR project and has been actively involved in Every Action Counts: a DEFRA funded project that focuses on environmental empowerment.

There is a diversity of excellent practice in terms of adult learning and the environment across a range of organisations in the public, private and third sector, but these lack effective co-ordination or support from Government and other funding bodies. Although we can see examples of excellent practice, the Green Movement is currently still underrepresented in adult learning and there is a weak link between adult learning and the Voluntary and Community Sector where many forms of informal adult learning are based around environmental / sustainability issues.

2: Where are the gaps in evidence in relation to this theme?

In our view insufficient work has been undertaken to get a coherent answer to this question. A University of East Anglia professor is to head a £1bn national initiative to help the country better deal with environmental change. Andrew Watkinson, a founder member of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, has been appointed the first director of Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) The initiative, driven forward by the Natural Environment Research Council, is made up of 17 research, business and policy-making organisations.

We would be uncertain about putting forward our own conclusions when such a body is about to get £1bn to research this.

We do, however, believe it would be appropriate for the Adult Learning sector collectively to engage as quickly as possible with Professor Watkinson's initiative.

3: What key messages for the inquiry we should extract?

The key message for the enquiry needs to be the importance of the subject. We can't afford to have another report such as the 1993 report 'Learning for the Future: Adult Learning and the environment' by NIACE where the document is brought out and little subsequently happens. The outcomes of the enquiry need to be practical ideas that are then taken forward, rather than papers or ideas that are quickly buried or discarded.

4: What are the core generic skills that we need for a sustainable society?

Individuals need to learn the ability to change at both micro and macro level and see things differently: to change their whole behaviour. People need to be able to think beyond the conventions of their upbringing to a new vision which is more appropriate for our changing future.

Society needs citizenship training to learn the skills of tolerance, adaptability and ability to work together. Whilst one citizen may be recycling and thinking green, their neighbour may not. It is here that an understanding that not everyone will change at the same rate becomes key.

The issue of sustainability and climate change are massive ones and often this can leave people feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Through Education and in particular community learning approaches, these citizens need to feel empowered so that they can act together towards making a change.

Further skills and knowledge we need to develop for a sustainable society are basic understanding and science skills – for people to recognise the need to become sustainable they need to be able to understand the concept of climate change etc. Science has always been a weak curriculum area in adult learning and John Denham noted in his ‘Science and Society’ speech at the RSA in January 2008 that

‘If the public do not have the capacity to understand scientific evidence and risk, they face being unable to make the best decisions for themselves and their families, or, in a democracy, put the most appropriate pressure on politicians.’

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development believes that we need to develop public understanding and improve access to quality basic education. This is grossly underrepresented in UK strategies and institutions – why?

We recognise that setting up this enquiry was a bold step! However we would temper our remarks by saying that we believe the uncritical acceptance of the Leitch report (cited in the introduction) is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Starting with skills without recognising the urgent need for understanding means that the whole Life Long Learning agenda is based on a false premise. It is important that our partial remarks in this submission are read in this light.

5: What are the most effective forms of education for achieving sustainable development?

Based on the ECA’s experience these are recognised to be the importance of informal learning, intergenerational learning and family learning.

In summary we would suggest: -

- Family learning – ECA’s work on the Green Family learning project (see attached outline) and the importance of family learning on values, world view etc
- Intergenerational learning – We still have a generation that lived through an age where a lot of the messages we need to get across for the future were embedded in daily life i.e. grow your own, reuse of materials, cooking etc. This is an important wealth of experience that won’t always be available and we need to capitalise on it now cf Older and Bolder.
- Informal learning – role of VCS, media, empowerment. Use example of ECA’s work on EAC pro’s and cons and how it uses both formal (training for Community Development workers, accredited training for Community Champions) and informal (groups engagement) education to get across its message.
- Empowerment – schemes such as Every Action Counts (EAC) and BBC Breathing Places (ECA have involvement in both) help people to see that although there is a bigger picture, they can take actions where they live and contribute to making a difference.
- VCS has many examples of informal learning based around the environment through voluntary work i.e. BTCV. WI have trained volunteers to help with informal learning work and have proved that informal groups are effective.

6: How can we ensure that there is a strong global dimension in lifelong learning, linked visibly to local concerns?

We need to raise awareness of the link between environmental and social justice – those with low skills / income will suffer more /first from effects of climate change i.e. rising food prices and fuel poverty. They, as well as those people in a stronger economic position, need to be equipped to deal with this. We also need to raise awareness of the effect that this will have on other populations not just ourselves. These include civil unrest / wars over resources and the fact that this in turn may affect them due to population migration to this country. People need to be aware that climate change is a global problem that must start to

Submission on behalf of the Educational Centres Association (ECA)

7th August 2008

be addressed at a local level. We should support people to become prepared to give evidence and take part in long term strategic thinking. People need to be encouraged to work through Local Strategic Partnerships and take advantage of opportunities in Community Empowerment (see latest White Paper). The value of developing community owned Parish Plans needs to be appreciated and there is a need for similar engagement in urban communities.

7: What kinds of infrastructural development are needed to strengthen the part lifelong learning plays in promoting sustainable development?

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development believes in the importance of improving access to quality basic education, developing public understanding and awareness, and the reorientation of existing educational programmes. The attached speech by Commissioner Kuneva recognises at the level of the European Commission the need to empower citizens to become informed and responsible customers through better information and more education.

http://www.e-c-a.ac.uk/media/uploaded_files/MKU_Equal_Ops_Riga_04_12_07_3.pdf

Some member states already include consumer education in their national curriculum. “Also with the issue of Climate Change becoming one of the absolute policy priorities of our time, it is our duty to help the European consumer make sustainable environmental choices”

Basic science needs to become a stronger curriculum area in adult learning – we acknowledge that this has been historically difficult and will need intensive work on curriculum and materials development underpinned by effective staff training if it is to be effective. There also need to be improvements to links between education providers and public broadcasting, so planned provision can be timed with TV broadcasts to gain maximum interest in the subject.

A sustainability thread needs to be overtly introduced to all provision and learning should integrate a sustainable agenda into wider work of VCS. A clearer definition of sustainability that resonates with people is needed in order to embed it, and a realisation of the importance of ‘really’ informal learning should be made.

We need to foster a positive disposition towards sustainability instead of it being seen as the negative, ‘what I can’t have.’ The recognition that to engage the maximum amount of people there needs to be not only a low entry bar to encourage people to take action but this should be supported by positive incentives!

Organisations should reflect sustainability at an organisational level to members / users and paid staff and volunteers ought to be adequately trained, supported and encouraged. There is a need for such social and environmental capital to be more highly regarded.

Further infrastructural changes could also include the introduction of taster sessions to act as a good starting place for environmental courses, and this, amongst other changes, means sustainable funding is required. Finally we need to determine the ways in which adult learning can be sustainable, relevant and enabling to communities.

To conclude, if the NIACE sponsored Commission is to mean anything the very brief period for responses to this vital question was far too short and the framework for evidence too shallow. We shall look to see how it is recommended that matters are now taken forward and would be prepared to use our own limited resources to engage further.

We need to build the Grand Coalition c.f. BBC Breathing Places to address the magnitude of the agenda.