

Mapping opportunities for learning for sustainability in Scotland

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Executive Summary

The field of education for sustainability has evolved. The development of a new organisation, Learning for Sustainability Scotland (Lfs Scotland – Scotland’s United Nations recognised Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)) has catalysed reflection on and exploration of the framing, scope and opportunities of education for sustainable development and, in particular, learning for sustainability (Lfs) in Scotland.

The aims of this project were to produce an opportunities map for Lfs; to explore areas in which Lfs is well advanced in Scotland and those in which we have achieved less; to articulate an ideal state of Lfs and appropriate targets; and to set this against a global context.

We began with a brief literature review and historical overview. The principal action plans and history of development of Lfs in Scotland were summarised. We explored how Lfs can be experienced throughout the life course of an individual, through formal and other influences. We then undertook more interactive research, drawing on the experiences and expertise of our Steering Group and members.

The methodology included initial scoping with Lfs Scotland members, followed by an interactive Delphi process undertaken with up to 14 members of the Steering Group of Lfs Scotland.

Delphi Round 1 explored the ideal state of Lfs in Scottish sectors, Scotland as a whole and globally; assessment of the UN Decade of ESD (UNDESD) and Scottish targets for the last decade; proposed targets for sectors, Scotland as a whole and globally. Round 2 consolidated mutual targets and an assessment of progress made to date against targets defined in round 1; yet permitting diversity of views to emerge. Input from Lfs Scotland members was sought at an AGM and a final Round 3 then sought consensus on points of agreement and divergence; and on action points to take forward. Respondents represented a range of sectors (school, Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), Non-Government Organisation, community, government), with some having multi-sectoral interests. All had local and national experience with ten also citing international experience.

This Delphi process allowed us to engage key informants and members to develop strategic priorities based on dialogue. By so doing, we redefined our field of theory and practice. This process also encouraged reflection by and between practitioners and academics in learning for sustainability. We hope to take these results forward as an example of collaborative, dialogic working; as outcomes to inform practice; as ideas to provoke further thinking.

Our starting point of exploring an ‘ideal state’ of Lfs gave us the opportunity to open up definitions and framing of this concept. Iterations allowed us to develop consensus around this issue and derive a comprehensive framing of Lfs. We recognised that the UNESCO targets set for the UN DESD were ambitious but broad, but the Scottish targets for the second half of the decade offered a more relevant action plan. Whilst it was agreed that these targets had been largely met in some sectors, particularly in schools, there was agreement that the remaining challenges were significant and much work remains to ‘mainstream’ Lfs in HE and FE and in informal and non-formal learning contexts.

November 2015

After three Rounds of discussion, a holistic framing of learning for sustainability emerged as:

Learning for sustainability enables visioning of sustainable futures and planning of the journey towards these aspirations. These futures would be culturally specific and contextualised within place, enabling different visions to be realised with a spirit of collaboration. This learning strives to create a fair and flourishing society and enable empowerment, particularly of the currently disempowered, whilst ensuring we live within ecological limits. Ultimately such learning uses innovative pedagogies and relevant curricula that enable a process of ongoing reflection to support specific skills as well as personal and community resilience within our changing world. It encourages people to reflect on values and may lead to escape from a market based, competitive and consumerist dominated worldview.

The strategy for action includes a joined up, systemic, interdisciplinary approach building on partnerships across governance sectors and scales (from local to global). We need strong leadership to pursue innovative practices. Our policy makers will need to be committed, sensitive and brave to develop embedded and integrated policy and action across not only school and other formal education, but also informal (such as community, business) and non-formal (such as media, culture) sectors. Individuals, families and communities will learn through individual transformative experiences as well as collaborative capacity development. Such learning will enable critical reflection and action for value based goals. It would respect traditional, local and practitioner forms of knowledge as well as academic knowledge.

and the role of LfS Scotland as:

The role of LfS Scotland is to cut across sectors and enhance network and partnership in a space full of different organisations and initiatives, recognising the fundamental role of learning in our journey towards sustainability and releasing the potential of individuals, communities and sectors to create human and planetary wellbeing. It can help maintain the place of Scotland as a world leader in the field of learning for sustainability. It is uniquely placed to exploit local partnerships and deliver a joined up, systems approach with a synthesis across sectors, issues and stakeholder groups. It is unbiased and independent, benefiting from the previous success of the SDE network, held to account by a diverse membership constituency and known for commitment and expertise in its staff and Steering Group. The timing is right for LfS Scotland to take Scotland forward and pursue the momentum of the successful UN DESD whilst continuing to play a major role on the international stage in ensuring that learning underpins the emerging UN Sustainable Development Goals.

LfS Scotland as a network organisation is poised to take forward activities to further develop this area of thinking and practice.

Priority actions agreed by Delphi key informants and members include maintenance of the momentum established by the UN DESD, with further events, seminars, policy engagement and networking facilitation key in this endeavour.

Additional agreed areas of activity include deepening of engagement with community groups, HE and FE, business and ultimately a more responsive conversation with the popular media. There is potential to facilitate Scotland's role in the UN's Global Action Programme and to contribute to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

However, challenges lie ahead in communicating the wider aspects of sustainability and supporting the shift to a fairer, greener, values based Scotland whilst recognising the plurality of perspectives around what this might mean.