

Celebrating ten years of Learning for Sustainability Scotland

Speech by Professor Peter Higgins, Director, and Professor of Outdoor, Environmental & Sustainability Education, at the University of Edinburgh

Thank you, Peter.

For my input tonight I'd like to offer a bit of background to the how the Centre became established.

There is an old Russian proverb - Success has many parents, failure is an orphan.

This is a tale of the many parents!

As most of you know, Scotland has a strong and long-standing and internationally-recognised commitment to sustainability and sustainability education. Indeed, the great Scots Polymath, Sir Patrick Geddes, once a lecturer at this university, is widely attributed with the origin of the concept 'think global, act local,' and with innovating 'environmental education courses' in the early 20th Century.

More formal approaches to Sustainable Development Education in Scotland were promoted towards the end of the century by amongst others, Professor John Smyth of the Universities of Paisley and Stirling, who was an inspiration to some of us here today. John was a UK representative at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and co-wrote the education chapter of the Rio Declaration, with amongst others a Canadian colleague, Prof Charles Hopkins, who will pop up again in my story in a moment.

In the next 20 years or so, a range of organisations with a focus on Sustainable Development Education emerged in Scotland. In particular, the SDEN, the SDELG and the SEEC. Individuals who were members of some of these are here tonight.

By 2011, I had become involved in an international UNESCO sustainability education programme for teachers with Prof Hopkins, who by then held a UNESCO Chair at York University in Canada. Discussions with him about RCEs prompted me to start a conversation with these Scottish

organisations about plans to maintain momentum when the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development came to an end in 2014. We met several times and agreed to work together towards establishing an RCE (Regional Centre of Expertise).

We drafted an application with the able help of Amy Woodgate an intern in the University at the time, and submitted it with the support of a wide community of interest including Scottish Government, Education Scotland, our universities and others.

After some negotiations about the scale and scope of the RCE, the UN University agreed to us establishing a national Centre in December 2012. As Peter said, the local name was decided on to align with Scottish Government education policy, which we will hear more about from our Cabinet Secretary.

Our purpose and strategy, to promote and support the concept and practice of Learning for Sustainability in Scotland were agreed by members at our first AGM held in October 2013. A Steering Group and Chair, the excellent Rehema White from St Andrews University, were elected.

Initial short-term support came from the transfer of staff from WWF Scotland - Betsy King and Morag Watson, supported by Abi Cornwall. This was time-limited and we had no core funding - but we kept going due to income through small contracts from various sources including Education Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and others.

Since then, there have been staff changes, with Morag leaving at the end of 2014 and Abi in January 2019. The three remarkable staff who now do all the work now are Betsy King, Kirsten Leask, and Jenny Haggarty.

Whilst I can't condone reading emails on holiday, we probably wouldn't be here this evening without an email I read in July 2015 whilst on holiday on the Isle of Coll. It was from Susan Armstrong from the British Council Scotland office, who had been taking the Massive open-access on-line course (MOOC) in Learning for Sustainability my colleague Beth Christie and I and others had developed with the support of Amy and the University of Edinburgh MOOC team. The email encouraged us to submit a proposal under the British Council's 'Connecting Classrooms' programme. Several of us worked through the weekend, submitted our bid just in time for the deadline on Monday, and were awarded a contract to work with Scottish Teachers on this international partnership programme.

This was the beginning of a relationship that enabled us to deliver Career Long Professional Learning for teachers in schools all over Scotland, collaborating with the Scottish Development Education Centres, the Scotland Malawi Partnership, Education Scotland, and others until 2021. It was also influential in the GTCS encouraging teachers to apply for Professional Recognition for learning for Sustainability. Although the Connecting Classrooms programme became a casualty of Brexit - we continue to have a strong relationship with the British Council, working with them through our MOOCs and each of the last three COPs.

We have worked closely with our very supportive Scottish Government colleagues throughout, and specifically on Learning for Sustainability policy. Ian Menzies of Education Scotland deserves special mention for his consistent and steadfast support throughout.

In the past few years, the Centre has been funded to deliver other Scottish, UK, European and international projects and has also made valuable contributions to teaching in the University. Moray House School of Education and Sport has always supported the Centre, and since 2022 has underwritten the current staff posts, for which we are deeply grateful.

So that's the history ... we would not be here celebrating our 10-year anniversary without all the 'parents' you have heard about, and indeed others who provided support. You will hear a more contemporary perspective on the Centre from Rehema later.

But now I would like to hand over to Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
