

Sustaining our Future: A framework for moving towards a sustainable learning and skills sector



Appendix 1

Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development

1. What is the sustainable development agenda about?

The terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ are regularly used, but what do they actually mean, and what do they mean for the learning and skills sector?

Our starting point is the common definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”¹. This broad definition does not go very far in helping us to understand what the agenda really means for us. Commonly, sustainable development is understood in the context of economic, social and environmental needs and considerations that our thinking and actions should take into account, and the economic, social and environmental impacts that such thinking and actions can have.

Of course, we face pressing environmental challenges, and strategies to address those challenges, and in particular climate change, are critically important in their own right. The BIS Carbon Reduction Strategy and associated long-term targets for reducing emissions within further and higher education are therefore a critical element in the sector’s response to thinking and operating sustainably into the future, and will hold an important position within this.

Sustainable development seems an even more pertinent approach at the present time, when we face significant environmental, social *and* economic challenges as individuals, as a sector and as a nation. More broadly, we can see sustainable development as carrying with it the principle of a systemic approach to policies and services in the public sector and not least education and training. These will impact on all areas of our business; on curriculum design as much as estates and procurement.

Sustainable development approaches seek solutions to address the interconnected and global economic, environmental and social challenges facing our age. Although there is no universal agreement as to which solutions are best, a sustainable society could be characterised by:

- resource use which does not exceed the ability of the planet to replenish itself;
- a fair and equitable economic system;
- healthy, participating and just communities;
- a commitment to equality.

2. Sustainable development and the learning and skills sector

The learning and skills sector is becoming more and more aware of the relevance of sustainable development to what it does – to the skills it develops, to the learning that it offers, to the way that learning is delivered, and to the leadership and operation of organisations that deliver it. Significant policy developments such as

¹ Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment & Development (‘The Brundtland Report’), Oxford University Press, 1987; www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm

Skills for Sustainable Growth suggest an increased focus on resource efficiency, carbon reduction and sustainability in every area of providers' business.

Discussions to date suggest there is growing support for approaches which will enable providers in the sector to individually and collectively respond to the agenda. An enabling Framework or overarching strategy for sustainable development will aim to support both strategic bodies and providers in building on what they do already to support sustainable development. Such a Framework will bring collective strength and coherence to providers' efforts. It will also serve to join up and co-ordinate the strategies and activities of sector bodies in helping providers to achieve real change in this area. LSIS has taken responsibility for developing the Framework, in partnership and consultation with providers and partners.

3. Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is learning that supports sustainable development. It aims to equip us to respond to the challenges of creating a sustainable society for our current needs and for the future. ESD takes a holistic approach to environmental, social and economic elements, although differential weighting might be given to each. It is participative learning founded on clear values and principles that supports the development of more sustainable communities, workplaces and individual consumption patterns. There is no one agreed definition but commonly accepted characteristics are that it:

- extends knowledge, skills and understanding;
- develops generic capabilities including adaptability, resilience and critical analytical skills;
- adopts systemic approaches;
- fosters dialogue;
- develops global perspectives;
- empowers learners to access and understand information, take part in decision making and make informed changes in their lifestyles and consumption.

Examples of ESD are:

- vocational skills development for the expanding renewable energy sector and the transition of existing sectors to low carbon; sustainable development learning integrated into vocational subjects;
- informal lifelong learning related to sustainability that takes in a huge range of topics such as climate change, environmental knowledge, global issues, reducing energy consumption, recycling, growing and cooking food, community involvement and activism;
- learning to develop global perspectives to advance understanding of the economic, social, cultural and environmental connections and interdependencies between local and global communities;
- learning to extend knowledge and understanding to empower adults from all groups to exercise their rights to access information, participate in environmental decision making and hold governments to account on matters that affect their lives.