

Expert seminar on sustainable development 31 July 2008

Summary of discussion

This note summarises the key points and issues for further consideration by the Inquiry that were raised during the seminar.

1. Sustainable development as a framework for lifelong learning As sustainable development moves into mainstream discourse, there is a danger of its being reduced to simplistic (and therefore meaningless) aims and messages. But it is a complex concept which stresses the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental concerns, and demands new approaches in all areas of policy, including lifelong learning. 'Business as usual' is not an option. There are arguments for placing sustainable development at the core of lifelong learning, providing an overarching conceptual framework for policy and practice. Parallels with the development of approaches to equal opportunities can be helpful, for understanding both what this might look like and the challenges and obstacles to achieving it.
2. Global dimensions Sustainable development stresses the need for action which recognises that global as well as local and national contexts impact upon our daily lives and are fundamentally inter-related. Risk, complexity and uncertainty are central challenges for individuals and communities in this globalised context. Lifelong learning has an important role to play in the development of the 'global skills' that will strengthen people's capacity to deal individually and collectively with the opportunities and challenges that are presented by globalisation. Such skills cover a wider range of capabilities than will be addressed by the narrow focus on vocational skills that dominates post-16 learning. Critical thinking skills and the capacity to evaluate and interpret political, scientific and media messages are particularly desirable.
3. The 'value – action gap' Global skills are not only practical, but also address questions of culture and values. While evidence points to growing awareness of issues associated with sustainable development, such as climate change, it is clear that many individuals, communities, employers and policymakers continue to pursue behaviour that is unsustainable. Lifelong learning has the potential to open up creative spaces in which people can explore their own values, behaviours and attitudes towards risk, uncertainty and change. At key transition points in the life course, such learning interventions may prove to be particularly powerful. However, behaviour change is needed not only at the individual but also at the societal level. And the limitations of learning to bring about 'values led behaviour change' also need to be acknowledged. Economic considerations can be more effective in causing changes in behaviour.
4. Reconnecting the social and economic Learning and skills policy in the UK has resulted in growing polarisation between skills for economic development and learning for wider personal and social purposes. Sustainable development makes it clear that such a dichotomy is both unhelpful and untenable. It provides a way of reconnecting the social and economic purposes of learning and developing more holistic approaches. At the same time, sustainable development poses a powerful challenge to the prevailing policy focus on skills development for economic growth and international competitiveness.

Learning for activism, and learning that draws on the knowledge and experience of those outside the adult education sector, including social movements, are important dimensions.

5. Workforce and curriculum It is not yet clear what the form and content of the curriculum to support sustainable development should be. More examples of good practice are needed, locally, nationally and globally. However, it is unlikely to be solely an 'expert curriculum' based on developing knowledge about sustainable development. Rather, there may be greater potential in developing approaches which empower the lifelong learning workforce to build their own skills and knowledge to embed sustainable development within the curriculum. The example of embedding literacy and numeracy could provide a useful model here.
6. Environmental capability It is important that debates around sustainable development are not reduced to simplistic consideration of environmental issues. An emphasis on the environment and neglect of an integrated consideration of critically important economic and cultural dimensions has been apparent at all levels. However, the notion of 'environmental capability' could be added to the group of capabilities being proposed by the Inquiry to describe key areas (such as health, personal finance and citizenship) in which all adults should be supported to develop and apply their understanding and skills.

Inquiry Secretariat
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