

Outdoor Learning and the UNESCO ESD agenda: Could we do more?

by David A. G. Clarke

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development' (DESD) has just come to an end. The Decade began in 2005 and was described by UNESCO (2007) as aiming to 'integrate values, activities and principles that are inherently linked to sustainable development into all forms of education and learning and help usher in a change in attitudes, behaviours and values to ensure a more sustainable future in social, environmental and economic terms'.

In their recently published evaluation¹ of the impact of DESD UNESCO identify 10 key findings and trends:

ESD, an enabler for sustainable development:

1. Education systems are addressing sustainability issues
2. Sustainable development agendas and education agendas are converging

Importance of stakeholder engagement for ESD

3. Political leadership has proven instrumental
4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are particularly effective
5. Local commitments are growing

ESD is galvanizing pedagogical innovation

6. Whole institution approaches help practice ESD
7. ESD facilitate interactive, learner driven pedagogies

ESD has spread across all levels and areas of education

8. ESD is being integrated into formal education
9. Non-formal and informal ESD is increasing
10. Technical and vocational education and training advance sustainable development

For anyone who heeds the warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)² regarding the impacts and risks of human carbon emissions (which, frankly, should be everyone), as well as reports of our environmental impacts more broadly and the social and economic implications of a range of issues relating to sustainable development, UNESCO's evaluation of the state of ESD at the end of 'the decade' should seem like very positive news. So, what next?

The Global Action Programme

UNESCO's new 'roadmap' – the Global Action Programme (GAP)³ on ESD - is intended to continue the work done through the DESD. The scale of the goal that the UNESCO GAP for ESD sets itself is substantial to say the least. UNESCO is interested in whole society change via a shift in our current modes of teaching to modes that best promote sustainable development. The summary of the DESD demonstrates that some nations and sectors are meeting the challenge well, whilst others could do more. Although there is a developing body of theory and research discussing many areas

related to ESD suggesting best educational practice, it remains unclear how effective these approaches will be in the long term. What is clear, however, is that ESD needs to happen now – today.³

In answer to this urgency the GAP sets out five 'priority action areas', listed below. Of these areas 2, 3, 4 and 5 appear the most prominent for the outdoor learning practitioner to consider, though number 1 can also be affected by petitioning your MP and the Department for Education.

1. **Advancing policy:** Mainstream ESD into both education and sustainable development policies, to create an enabling environment for ESD and to bring about systemic change
2. **Transforming learning and training environments:** Integrate sustainability principles into education and training settings
3. **Building capacities of educators and trainers:** Increase the capacities of educators and trainers to more effectively deliver ESD
4. **Empowering and mobilizing youth:** Multiply ESD actions among youth
5. **Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level:** At community level, scale up ESD programmes and multi-stakeholder ESD networks

I will briefly visit each of these areas to describe them in more detail and to open up discussion about what the outdoor learning sector may have to offer in response to the urgent call for change from UNESCO.

Priority Action Area 2: Transforming learning and training environments

Here UNESCO focus on ensuring that institutions practice sustainable principles in their day-to-day running. Of particular importance is realising that the institution sits within a wider community, and that partnerships created between the two are strengthening sustainable development. As examples the GAP cites successful eco-schools and green-campuses where sustainability plans have been developed by head teachers, directors of vocational training institutions and principles of universities in collaboration with community leaders, parents, trainers and learners. If outdoor activity provision (from mountain biking and team building to pond dipping and field studies) is indeed a professional educational endeavor, as is often claimed by marketing materials, then heads of centres, organisations and businesses delivering outdoor education can be drawing on the GAP to establish how they can best demonstrate the principles of sustainable practice to their learners. The Carbon Trust⁴ offers advice on where you might start from a business perspective. Additionally professional bodies (for instance the AHOEC, IOL, BCU and BMC) can be looking at how to support outdoor education providers in doing this, the result of which would go beyond current measures to more actively calling for sustainable initiatives in centres and other relevant institutions.

Priority Action Area 3:

Building capacities of educators and trainers

Priority action area 3 works on two levels. Whilst it is interested in helping educators develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required to implement ESD in their teaching, its particular thrust is in making sure that institutions and policy that has any remit to train an educator have ESD as a foundational focus - be this in the guidelines that teacher education institutions must adhere to in the development of their teacher education programmes, or in-house educator training at technical and vocational colleges. Further to this, in-service training of educators should be aligned with the ESD agenda and, perhaps most significantly the accreditation of practitioners as educators should demonstrate the motivation and commitment of the educator to educate their learners for sustainability. Currently ESD is absent from the national governing body leadership award frameworks of both the BMC and the BCU, but is also absent from the IOL accreditation framework, though more room is given for critical appraisal of practice here. Whilst the IOL's Environmental Sustainability Policy⁵ is an excellent start, the GAP suggests much more is required of our educational organisations in terms of placing ESD front and centre in educator training. The message from UNESCO is clear; if you are responsible for educator education you must look to how you can saturate your initial and in practice training frameworks with ESD.

Priority Action Area 4:

Empowering and mobilizing youth

I'm quoting Whitney Houston against my better judgment, but 'the children are our future' and UNESCO make this truism ring clear with priority action area 4. The young will be the leaders, voters and consumers of the future. They, and their children, must cope with the unsustainable development we bequeath them as well as take up the reins of the emerging sustainable development agenda, and they need to be empowered with knowledge of the impacts of daily choices and actions to achieve this. Further to this the young are a vital source of creativity, determination, and innovation who can provide workable alternatives and solutions. Whilst UNESCO really push e-learning opportunities with this priority action area, there is also an emphasis on increasing the number of youth-led ESD initiatives. The aim is to help the young to realise that they can change things, and that they do not have to be passive recipients in the world they inherit. For outdoor learning to achieve this our education programmes would have to emphasise learning experiences where students not only had autonomy and ownership of their learning, but were engaged in projects that were longitudinal in nature, community orientated and designed to contribute to sustainable development in some way. This takes focus away from one off experiences in outdoor learning provision if it is to incorporate the priority action areas identified by UNESCO.

Priority Action Area 5:

Accelerating sustainable solutions at a local level

In our local environments, the places where our outdoor practice is regularly based and the places where our learners live their lives daily, is where UNESCO believe ESD can have the greatest impact. In this way education becomes a project not just of our education institutions - be they schools, outdoor education centres or adventure education businesses - but of the whole community, and for the whole community. UNESCO is interested in strengthening multi-stakeholder networks. For outdoor and adventure education centres this means opening up our practices to strengthen already good connections with local authorities, schools, colleges and universities to create collective ESD projects which are extended beyond one off residential trips in a student's school life.

What does outdoor learning for sustainability look like? Are we 'green' because we take groups outside?

There has been a small but steady flow of academic literature and research discussing the relationship that outdoor learning may have to fostering attitudes to the environment and helping promote ESD. A recent edition of the Institute for Outdoor Learning's academic journal (*Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*) is a special issues exploring if outdoor education has any specific or special role to play in fostering environmental sustainability. The editors of the special edition suggest that prevailing ideas about the manner in which outdoor learning and sustainability combine are being questioned by researchers; so this is a developing, exciting and by no means settled area of theory and research.

However, when faced with the question 'does being outdoors in 'nature' make you care for the environment more' we can state that, whilst it has many physical and health benefits, more is required than simply being outside in green areas to develop sustainable behaviours. A recent review of theory and research by Christie and Higgins (2012)⁶ of Edinburgh University suggests that outdoor practice where there is an 'ecologically-literate' facilitator helping students develop their ecological-literacy is a significant factor. Ecological literacy here means 'our ability to understand the basic principles of ecology and to live accordingly' (Capra, 2009 p.245)⁷. Other key factors are that educational experiences outdoors need to be structured, carefully considered and promote critical thinking and student empowerment if they are to be successful in developing action for sustainability. These approaches all align well with the UNESCO GAP. Christie and Higgins also highlight how theory and research suggests 'direct hands on experiences' and a focus on local places may prove fruitful avenues for outdoor sustainability education in practice. This emphasis on participatory approaches to learning matches UNESCO's evaluation of the DESD where they state that innovative pedagogies that promote 'learning by doing' have been particularly influential in the DESD.

There is, then, an opportunity for the outdoor learning sector to engage more clearly and enthusiastically with the ESD agenda. There is much good outdoor learning practice that already aligns with ESD. In some cases we can simply take a look at the Global Action Programme, be content that we are on the right lines and perhaps make more of a fuss about it - by telling more people. On the other hand it seems as though, as a sector, we are largely unaware of the UNESCO ESD agenda and how we can and should embrace it in our practice as professional educators. In short, we probably could do more. ■

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