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Learning for Sustainability in Scotland: Issues for Education

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

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Learning for Sustainability in Scotland: Issues for Education

Developing the knowledge, attitudes, skills and values that lead to sustainable and socially responsible behaviours must continue to be an educational imperative. Recent Scottish and international research studiesⁱ have identified that beyond the well-established 'knowledge and values' dimensions of Learning for Sustainability, it is associated with the higher order skills required for academic attainment and 'quality education' (Education Scotland, 2015; Laurie *et al.*, 2015).

Key points for consideration

- Teachers and parents in the Scottish study reported that pupils in schools committed to Learning for Sustainability displayed enhanced learning and motivation and readiness to learn, increases in confidence, and development of skills for life, learning and work.
- The Scottish research also suggested that schools that commit to LfS gain significantly in cultural aspects: enriched ethos of school and improvements to the community spirit, and improved reputation and standing of the establishments in their communities.
- The UNESCO 18-nation study found similar results: in many high-scoring PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) countries, academic performance increased in schools committed to Education for Sustainable Developmentⁱ (ESD) and gave more meaning to curricula, leading students to be more engaged, committed, and self-confident.
- In these schools ESD promoted acquisition of additional relevant knowledge and skills, as well as perspectives and values, and helped prepare students for an uncertain future by instilling flexible competencies, empathy and creativity.
- These schools also engaged more with local communities by opening opportunities for students, parents, and others, to be involved in meaningful ways.
- Finally, teaching (and teachers' commitment to on-going professional learning) improved through innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. The Scottish Government has made Learning for Sustainability a core educational priority, but much more can be done to embed this in school practice.

ⁱ The Scottish 'Conversations about Sustainability' report (Education Scotland, 2014) and the UNESCO International Research Project (Laurie *et al.*, 2015), of which the Scottish study was one of 18 national contributions.

Briefing

Practice and policy development in 'Outdoor Learning' and 'Learning for Sustainability' in Scotland has been informed, and heavily influenced by the research and teaching of the outdoor and sustainability education staff at Moray House School of Education ... [this work] is of international significance.

Prof Charles Hopkins, UNESCO Chair in Education for Sustainable Development, January 2016

Sustainable development is a Scottish Government key national performance outcome and features in many aspects of government policy. A greener and fairer nation is one of its overarching strategic objectives, emphasising the importance of societal change towards a sustainable future, and highlighting the key role of education.

'Learning for Sustainability' (LFS) is a unique concept developed in Scotland, based on local and international research which brings together Education for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship and elements of Outdoor Learning with the intention of helping young people to understand, envision and act positively to secure a sustainable future (Higgins & Lavery, 2013). Engaging with sustainability requires learners to consider complex interdisciplinary issues that span a wide range of areas in the sciences and social sciences, gaining skills that are vital for many aspects of life in a modern world. A commitment to LFS (and Outdoor Learning) has been associated with raising attainment in Scottish schools and across 17 other nations in a recent UNESCO report (Laurie *et al.*, 2015).

Key commitments and next steps for Learning for Sustainability

Scotland and Manitoba stand out as examples where high-level political leadership, coordination with stakeholders and accountability helped these jurisdictions to set the vision and goals for the promotion and adoption of ESD in educational policies and plans.

UNESCO (2014)

Scotland's international reputation in the area of LFS is well recognised (Martin *et al.*, 2013; UNESCO, 2014). The Scottish Government decision to implement all 31 recommendations of the 'Learning for Sustainability Ministerial Advisory Report', relating to the whole school experience of 3–18 year-olds (Scottish Government, 2012), has led to five key commitments:

- all learners should have an entitlement to Learning for Sustainability;
- every practitioner, school and education leader should demonstrate Learning for Sustainability in their practice;
- every school should have a whole school approach to Learning for Sustainability that is robust, demonstrable, evaluated and supported by leadership at all levels;
- school buildings, grounds and policies should support Learning for Sustainability.
- a strategic national approach to Learning for Sustainability should be established.

The formal process of embedding these recommendations has continued but substantial change is an on-going process, and requires central policy commitment and co-ordination to ensure that Scotland meets its international commitments in this area, including to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **Scotland needs an education action plan for the SDGs:** LFS can shape educational thinking and practice to help interpret and implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. This requires a supported and monitored SDG education action plan for Scotland for the next five years. This is a multi-dimensional project requiring collaboration across a wide range of Government policy areas.

- **All Scotland's schools must be 'Sustainable Schools'**: Recent progress needs to be consolidated and integrated to fully embed the entitlement to Learning for Sustainability for all learners. This requires concerted effort by Government and related agencies, schools and teachers, third sector providers and others to include LfS in curricula and inspection regimes, to support teachers and education leaders through professional development, and to ensure LfS is a central focus in any review of Curriculum for Excellence.
- **Ongoing support and monitoring is necessary**: To ensure progress on all 31 recommendations of the 'Learning for Sustainability Ministerial Advisory Report', and the developments outlined in the 'Vision 2030+' report, Education Scotland (2016) requires a designated post and responsibilities in relation to LfS.
- **SDGs and LfS must be integrated with other Scottish Government policy priorities**: Whilst these educational issues are global and national educational imperatives in their own right, they have a broader context which relates to many, if not all Scottish Government policy areas. Issues such as the management of Scotland's landscapes and seas, dealing with climate change, community development, renewable energy, countryside tourism, health and wellbeing and others are all intimately connected to sustainability. Introducing integrated policy approaches to these issues in the next Parliament would demonstrate both commitment and 'joined-up' government.
- **Teacher Education Programmes must include LfS**: Learning for Sustainability has been embedded throughout the General Teaching Council for Scotland's (GTCS, 2016) Revised Professional Values and Standards through which all registered teachers/education professionals are expected to demonstrate in their practice irrespective of career stage. Every Local Authority, Teacher Education Provider, school and individual teacher is required to demonstrate LfS in their relevant educational context. Teacher education programmes are accredited by the GTCS and must reflect the values and expectations within the Professional Standards Framework. These changes will take time to become fully embedded and will require concerted on-going support and monitoring.

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Further information

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