

ELSA – the English Learning and Sustainability Alliance

HEFCE COMMISSIONED REVIEW OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

We write to you on behalf of the *English Learning and Sustainability Alliance*, established in 2012 to bring together England's key stakeholder groups with interests in learning and sustainability in order to inform national debates and influence policy and practice. As a 'Group of Groups' the purpose of the Alliance is to lead, promote and influence crosscutting strategic policy for learning and sustainability in England, working with key practitioners, strategic bodies and policy makers.

In setting up the Alliance we were mindful that for many of those coordinating policy for learning and sustainability within and across diverse learning contexts, and who recognise the pivotal role of learning *in* sustainable development, there is an absence of any independent group to facilitate and lead this important societal and economic challenge. One of our key operating principles is to monitor and review national progress on learning and sustainability and make recommendations. It is primarily in this context that we are responding to this review of the HEA because –“*education for sustainable development*” is one of the HEA's seven strategic themes, and moreover, one reinforced in the recent grant letter from the respective funding councils.

In this context we are keen that the higher education sector is kept informed of significant developments, especially where they contribute to national policy. Currently, we see the contribution that education and learning for sustainability can make to job creation and the green economy, as well as to raising standards and quality in all learning contexts, as of paramount importance in moving the UK to a more sustainable and prosperous future. The HEA has a crucial role to play across higher education in this respect.

We would draw your attention to the following recent policy developments relating to the review you are undertaking:

1. We were pleased that this year's government grant letter from BIS to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, as it has since 2008, highlighted the important role higher education plays in developing sustainable development. The letter states:

We thank the Council for its activity which has contributed to the HE sector's good progress in sustainable development. ... We look forward to the development of a new sustainable development framework that should seek to build on the achievements of universities and colleges and the enthusiasm of students and continue to support institutions in their efforts to improve their sustainability. (para 28)

We believe that the phrase, “the enthusiasm of students” is a reference to the cumulative evidence from consecutive student surveys commissioned by the Higher Education Academy and conducted by the NUS and Change Agents-UK, in 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13. These rigorous and extensive surveys of nearly 15,000 undergraduates have shown that students believe that employers value sustainability skills. Almost 80% of second year students surveyed in 2012 view universities as key facilitators of these skills by bringing environmental, social and economic issues together. We anticipate this will give HEFCE a more widely accepted mandate to support and influence the development of innovative ways of leading curriculum and teaching reform within our universities. We believe this intervention by the HEA has already had a profound influence on HEFCE's own strategy. An indicator of this is the grant aid of £5million by the Council to fund student union activity on sustainability over the next two years. Given that universities and business influence much of the 16-19 curriculum, and that the green economy is now developing strongly in the UK and overseas, we believe the HEA should work with professional bodies, employers and universities and FE colleges to review both the emerging economy's sustainability skills needs, and the appropriateness of what is currently taught to 16-19 year olds. By prioritising research in key policy dimensions such as the green economy the HEA could help the HE and FE

ELSA brings together England's key stakeholder groups with interests in learning and sustainability in order to inform national debates and influence policy and practice. As a 'Group of Groups' its purpose is to lead, promote and influence the strategic policy discourse on learning and sustainability in all contexts across sectors and interests in England, working with key practitioners, strategic bodies and policy makers.

sectors to identify ways of supporting the student experience which would facilitate employment and entrepreneurship in new and emerging economies.

2. We are also pleased that the HEA is working in partnership with the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education to introduce good practice guidance that links learning and sustainability to the quality enhancement of learning outcomes for students.

3. We believe learning for sustainability is an essential strategic priority for the HEA because the Academy, as well as providing discipline-focused support to HEIs, also offers vital cross-disciplinary support in how to integrate sustainability into HE curricula and the whole student experience. This intervention is significant because university students will need to engage with a range of 21st Century sustainability challenges in their work after graduation. Issues such as climate change, ecosystem degradation, resource depletion, poverty, and the need for social justice and sustainable consumption, as well the issue of a growing world population, have relevance to both industry and civil society. The 2013 HEA-commissioned NUS and Change Agents UK national survey confirms the importance that students place on this agenda.

4. HEA's role is to support improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in Higher Education in the UK. Its key purpose is to support quality enhancement through support for subject disciplinary teaching and institutional change programmes. In this context, the *Green Academy Programme* is an important example of a new strategic intervention by the HEA, albeit on a relatively modest scale. This programme has been the subject of two evaluations to date and its impact on institutional change at a strategic level has been telling, although more complex and challenging changes to curriculum, and teaching and learning, have been more limited so far. It is clear to us that the *Green Academy Programme* needs to continue and to be expanded, as does its evaluation.

In order to contribute to a more sustainable and higher standard of higher education provision, the HEA needs to seek evidence on the effectiveness of the support it provides, and in so doing revise and enhance current services and outcomes. In our view, some of the interventions it makes are not fully evaluated, especially through longitudinal processes to demonstrate unequivocally that the change initiated progresses understanding of sustainable development principles amongst staff and students.

5. The HEA's role is to improve teaching in order to improve student learning outcomes. Sustainable development is about improving people's lives whilst living ethically and within environmental limits. Thus, learning and teaching, and sustainable development, are both improvement processes, working towards the same end goal – improving lives and life-chances.

The government has made it clear that it wants public sector organisations to take a lead in sustainable development, by promoting and delivering this through policies as well as practice, as this is fundamental to its vision of being the "greenest government ever". Indeed the former Sustainable Development Commission argued that sustainable development should be a guiding operational principle for all organisations.

In this sense, the HEA should also pay attention to improving its performance on the services it provides, as well as mitigating the unsustainable impacts of its own administrative and operational activities; sustainable development should be a key part of performance management in all of the contexts in which the HEA operates. Like performance management, sustainable development is not a single issue dealt with by a single individual or group. It is a way of doing things that should permeate every part of an organisation in order for it to be successful. Key features of sustainable development include the need to plan for the longer term, to consider the wider impacts of local actions, and to deliver environmental, social and economic improvements in a joined up way.

To match the government's aspiration, the HEA's sustainable development and performance management objectives should seek to:

- Ensure the efficiency and effectiveness and sustainability of its own services and positively influence those of the HEIs it supports
- Reconcile its long-term aspirations with those of the present (safeguarding and improving the quality of current provision without compromising the quality for future generations)
- Assess how different aspects of well-being can be developed through synergies across environmental, social and economic dimensions, avoiding harmful silo effects of focusing on one aspect of well-being at the expense of the others
- Consider the impacts of improvement on the wider community including at regional, national and international scales
- Evaluate the learning from its teaching support programmes and survey work, reliably and objectively to inform and communicate effective practice in sustainable development to all relevant agencies.

6. The HEA's role in quality enhancement has a wider international resonance in the context of the OECD's (2005) key competencies that define what outcomes a quality education should deliver. These are broadly categorised as a set of tools to:

- interact effectively with the environment
- enable individuals to engage with others in an increasingly interdependent world
- enable individuals to take responsibility for managing their own lives within a broader social context.

These are set in the wider framework of social justice, human rights and sustainable development (OECD, 2002), but are also increasingly well-accepted mantras for business and industry. The UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) argues that education embracing sustainable development must share the characteristics of any high quality learning experience but emphasises that an additional criterion must be that the process of learning and teaching model the values of sustainable development. These include:

- Respect for the dignity and human rights of people throughout the world and a commitment to social and economic justice for all
- Respect for the human rights of future generations and a commitment to intergenerational responsibility
- Respect and care for the great community of life in all its diversity which involves the protection and restoration of the earth's eco systems
- Respect for cultural diversity and a commitment to build locally and globally a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace. (UNESCO 2006)

Few would disagree with these guiding principles but how these are interpreted and implemented in teaching and learning, and their contribution to enhancing the quality of higher education provision, is at the heart of what the HEA's education for sustainable development programme should be addressing. Regrettably, there is evidence that strategic priorities such as the explicit commitments to sustainability are being marginalised because of the way that the HEA uses the resources currently available to it. The academic lead who coordinates this element of the strategy has limited time, administrative and line manager support, and we do not think that this is adequate when considering the significance of the work that the HEA can do across the sector.

We hope these few comments offer a summary of some of the more effective interventions that have been made by the HEA, and also point the way to making these more effective in the future.

.....
“That which is known is no longer stable. The shelf-life of knowledge can be very short. In many disciplines what is taught and how it is taught are both stalked by the threat of obsolescence. In a changing world, Europe’s graduates need the kind of education that enables them to engage articulately as committed, active, thinking, global citizens as well as economic actors in the ethical, sustainable development of our societies.”

“The European Union’s higher education institutions are the focal points for imparting what is known, interrogating what is not, producing new knowledge, shaping critical thinkers, problem solvers and doers so that we have the intellectual muscle needed to tackle societal challenges at every level necessary and advance European civilisation. Europe’s graduates remain the most effective channels for transferring knowledge from universities and colleges into the broader society, enriching the individual, the family, the community, the workplace, the nation, the EU and the wider world.”

European Commission (June 2013) Modernisation of Higher Education-Improving the quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe’s Higher Education Institutes. <http://tinyurl.com/nr8dltv>

Yours Sincerely

The English Learning and Sustainability Alliance

Change Agents UK

Nick Goodman nickgoodman@changeagents.org.uk

Stephen Martin esmartin@talktalk.net

Consortium of Development Education Centres

Clive Belgeonne clive@decsy.org.uk

Andrea Bullivant bulliva@hope.ac.uk

Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges

Iain Patton ipatton@eauc.org.uk

Environmental Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Network Technology Strategy Board / Society for the Environment

Carolyn Roberts carolyn.roberts@earth.ox.ac.uk

Forest School Association

Jane Acton jane@natureworkshops.co.uk

Learning and Skills Improvement Service

Conrad Benefield conrad.benefield@lisis.org.uk

National Union of Students

Jamie Agombar jagombar@nussl.co.uk

Charlotte Taylor Charlotte.Taylor@nus.org.uk

South West Learning for Sustainability Coalition

William Scott w.a.h.scott@bath.ac.uk

Sustainability Schools Alliance

Ann Finlayson ann.finlayson@se-ed.org.uk

Transition Network

Isabel Carlisle isabel.carlisle@me.com

.....
October 2013

.....
ELSA brings together England’s key stakeholder groups with interests in learning and sustainability in order to inform national debates and influence policy and practice. As a ‘Group of Groups’ its purpose is to lead, promote and influence the strategic policy discourse on learning and sustainability in all contexts across sectors and interests in England, working with key practitioners, strategic bodies and policy makers.