National Discussion on Scottish Education: Response from Learning for Sustainability Scotland

Key points

- This response represents synthesis of inputs from 168 participants (our members from schools/ELC, NGOs, further & higher education and communities) at two facilitated online workshops by Scotland's United Nations University Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), known as 'Learning for Sustainability Scotland'.
- Learning for sustainability is a core aspect of education in Scotland and aligns with several other agendas; notably quality education and learner engagement. It is not merely learning *about* 'sustainability' but rather supports a suite of competencies to enable learners to fulfil their own potential, contribute to society and pursue ecologically, economically, culturally and socially-sustainable futures in an uncertain, changing world.
- When asked what kind of education will be needed by children and young people in the future, participants identified values, resilience and many skills and capacities; including critical interpretation of information. This kind of education needs joined up, holistic thinking vis and appropriate pedagogical approaches, including problem-based learning, outdoor learning, critical approaches and learner participation (so-called 'heart, hand and head' approaches).
- In response to the question of how we make this a reality, we outlined the following: take a more joined up approach to the strategic policy levers; re-direct resources to ensure equity of access to learning; support professional learning; develop partnerships, especially with communities; strengthen place-based learning; align the outcomes of the current Review of Assessment and Qualifications with the outcomes of the National Discussion, looking beyond qualifications to experiences and processes.
- Key priorities for a future education system identified in our workshops to bring about the culture change required to make Learning for Sustainability an underpinning feature of education in practice were Learning for Sustainability as a stated Purpose of Education; centring human and planetary health and wellbeing, focusing on learner needs and experiences and curriculum transformation
- Positive contributions from children and young people can be encouraged through holistic, systems-based approaches; safe contexts with real world learning; supporting and enabling learner voice; pedagogical innovation; connection, collaboration and community
- We consider that Learning for Sustainability remains core to the purpose of education and going forward, we welcome the opportunity to consider further how to embed the aspirations and actions of members in education in Scotland.

Background

We respond on behalf of Learning for Sustainability (LfS) Scotland, Scotland's United Nations University-recognised Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). LfS Scotland is a membership network of more than 1,000 organisations and individuals working to harness the full potential of learning to create a flourishing, sustainable world. (http://learningforsustainabilityscotland.org) .

Learning for Sustainability (internationally known as Education for Sustainable Development) is an international and national priority for education.

> Learning for Sustainability (Education for Sustainable Development) empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. It is about lifelong learning, and is an integral part of quality education. ESD is holistic and transformational education, which addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. It achieves its purpose by transforming society.
>
> UNESCO 2019 (https://www.unesco.org/en/education/sustainable-development)

The Scottish Government's Vision 2030+ report (2017 https://education.gov.scot/improvement/documents/res1-vision-2030.pdf) set out Scotland's continuing vision for Learning for Sustainability in educational settings through to 2030. These commitments align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030: central to

Scotland's national vision and at the heart of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework (https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/) . The Scottish Government's Learning for Sustainability Vision 2030+ Action Plan, launched in June 2019 (https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/LearningforSustainability-Vision2030ActionPlan.pdf), set out specific actions for stakeholders and delivery partners and a refresh of this Plan is currently underway with engagement of learners, educators and all stakeholders.

Learning for Sustainability (LfS) is a cross-curricular approach which enables learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable society. An effective whole-school and community approach to LfS weaves together global citizenship, sustainable development education and outdoor learning to create coherent, rewarding and transformative learning experiences.

 LfS is an important component of Curriculum for Excellence, an entitlement for learners and a core part of teachers' professional standards. It supports the development of knowledge, skills and the values at the heart of the curriculum's four capacities and provides a mechanism for promoting and working towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Scottish Government Learning for Sustainability Action plan 2019 (https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/LearningforSustainability-Vision2030ActionPlan.pdf)

Our response collates and synthesises perspectives from two workshops held with 89+79 participants respectively and thus represents views from many of the stakeholders interested in learning for sustainability and its active implementation. However, the intentions and practices of learning for sustainability overlap with other contemporary agendas; particularly those of quality education, equity and inclusion, closing the poverty=related attainment gap, entrepreneurship and learner voice. This response is thus not only of interest for sustainability, but in supporting the quality, nature and purpose of education in Scotland more widely.

Our response is informed by comments (mostly taken verbatim, here identified in italics) written on Jamboards at

- The consultation workshop with 89 LfS Scotland and YouthLink Scotland member organisations at an online event held on 06.10.22;

- The consultation workshop with 76 LfS Scotland members from schools, local authorities, government, colleges, universities and voluntary organisations at an online event held on 07.11.22.

1. What kind of education will be needed by children and young people in the future?

Vision for Education

LfS Scotland members set out the need for a shared **purpose for education**: **to enable learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world.** This vision aligns with the international UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030 (https://sdgs.un.org/goals).

Elements of the vision for Scotland's future education system identified in our workshops were:

- *Flexible and responsive to our changing world.*
- *Joined up and providing relevant 'real-world' education and learning that is place-based, local community-based and able to put into a wider context*
- *Providing transformative learning experiences*
- *Developing real skills that can be used in life*
- *Focused on the developmental needs of children and young people*
- *Allowing time and space for educators to choose experiences that engage pupils away from pre-determined outcomes.*
- *Coherent and consistent; addressing disconnect with the current emphasis on tracking and assessment*
- *Participatory and dialogical - with inter-generational decision-making around sustainable futures between and among adults and children*
- *Placing a strong emphasis on listening to learner voice, enabling participation and action.*

'Heart, Hand and Head'

Addressing this vision for the education system will require not only curriculum content, but also development of cross-cutting competencies to deal with a changing world. A 'Heart, Hand and Head' approach aligns with UNESCO's Global Competencies for Sustainable Development (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444 page 10) and the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/).

Key aspects of education identified in our workshops were:

Values and attitudes

- *Developing values that allow young people to thrive in the world now and in the future; e.g. kindness and compassion, self-awareness, responsibility*

Skills (meta skills/competencies)

- *Making sense of huge amounts of information, identify bias and misleading information*
- *Understanding that some questions that have no 'right and wrong' answers*
- *Critical thinking and critical reflection on emerging issues*
- *Problem solving and systems thinking*
- *Creativity, curiosity, communication and collaboration.*
- *Adaptability*
- *Self-awareness*
- *Being equipped to deal with uncertainty and change and to bring about change*
- *Digital skills*
- *An understanding of and empathy with multiple perspectives*

Pedagogical approaches

Enabling learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world will require a shift from 'teaching' to 'learning', and the linking of formal and informal learning. Competences and values cannot be taught but must be developed by learners themselves. This transformative approach aligns with the findings of the UNESCO International Commission on the Future of Education June 2022 (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381984). Development of cross-cutting competencies will require action-orientated pedagogies.

Key aspects identified in our workshops were:

'*As educators we must question our own perspectives and perceived/established wisdom - being open to evolving, and finding solutions needs to be a collaborative process*'

- *Self-directed and pupil-led learning*
- *Participation and collaboration*
- *Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning; making connections across learning and across themes. (Example of this operating at the University of Strathclyde and embedded in undergraduate curricula https://www.strath.ac.uk/studywithus/verticallyintegratedprojects) to develop understanding of complex issues).*
- *Experiential and place based learning focusing on 'wicked problems' and real engagement with communities*
- *Creative learning methodologies; e.g. story telling, creative problem-solving (making things)*
- *Outdoor learning*
- *Supporting young people on how to take action*

2. How do we make that a reality?

Key aspects identified in our workshops to bring about the culture change required to make Learning for Sustainability an underpinning feature of education in practice were:

1. Learning for Sustainability as a Purpose of Education

Clearly state that our education agencies and institutions at every level (government, ELC, school, college, university) have Equity and Sustainability principles at their core.

- *Set out, and develop a shared understanding of the **Purpose of Education: to enable learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially- just, sustainable and equitable world**.*

2. Develop whole setting approaches to Learning for Sustainability

To support learners to learn about and become change agents in our changing world, with the knowledge, means, willingness and courage to take action learning institutions need, themselves, to change, so that learners 'learn what they live and live what they learn' (UNESCO 2022 ESD for 2030 Roadmap https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802).

- *Community participation to co-create a systemic thinking approach to transform curriculum, teaching, governance, design, CPD and school management.*
- *Adults need to act to provide a safe environment for children, children shouldn't be taught to have responsibility to take individual climate action/individual stewardship actions*

3. Resource allocation

Make the stated purpose of education (as above) real by re-directing resources within the education system.

Priority for resources identified in our workshops were:

- *Provide equity of access to Learning for Sustainability (LfS) for every learner in every establishment*
- *Provide a funded LfS position in every local authority to close the gaps (which are massive in some areas) and support embedding in organisational culture*
- *Identify where resources in the system are being shared and how bodies outwith the system could share more effectively to streamline support*
- *Invest in teacher education (Initial Teacher Education, Career Long Professional Learning and Leadership) to develop values, skills, knowledge, confidence and a sense of agency to support this change*
- *Consider whether policies/approaches are relevant to the geographical and socio-economic contexts/locations of learners.*

4. Professional Learning for educators and leaders

Provide resources to support professional learning associated with Learning for Sustainability at every level in the education system. (GTC Scotland Learning for Sustainability Hub https://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/key-cross-cutting-themes/learning-for-sustainability/)

Key aspects identified in our workshops were:

- *Develop practitioner knowledge and ability to engage with and value children's outlook and views (as they probably have better solutions).*
- *Support educators to question our own perspectives and perceived/established wisdom - be open to evolving, and finding solutions needs to be a collaborative process*
- *Building skills, confidence and sense of agency of practitioners to deliver LfS through professional learning – professional learning is often not seen as priority*
- *Provide career pathways for educators. Real-world experience is vital for educators too.*

5. Partnership working

Provide tools and resources, such as professional learning, to drive forward effective whole-setting and community approaches to Learning for Sustainability throughout the system.

Comments made in our workshop were:

- *Solutions aren't individual. They involve others – community. Move away from individualism and individual action to nurturing community and collective action*
- *Create real partnerships outside of the classroom*
- *Encourage stronger links with local and national partners - schools and teachers can't do all of this. Others hold the expertise in these areas and as a system we could learn much from these partners.*
- *Community participation to co-create a systemic thinking approach to transform curriculum, teaching, governance, design, CPD and school management.*

6. School Experience

A culture change is required to make Learning for Sustainability an underpinning feature of education in practice. This requires changes in both education structures and learning and teaching approaches.

Comments received in our workshops were:
- *Community participation to co-create a systemic thinking approach to transform curriculum, teaching, governance, design, CPD and school management.*
- Strengthen context/place-based learning
    - *Focus learning on real life contexts, relevant to the young people, the school, the local community, international issues.*
    - *Provide learners with age-appropriate opportunities to explore local environment and what matters to them*
    - *Differentiate place-based learning for different age groups (including early years) to ensure it's relevant and relatable to children's specific experiences*
    - *Outdoor learning opportunities that connect young people with the world they live in - need to be evenly distributed (not just a token outdoor learning day)- schools need support*
- *Change the current structures within schools - particularly in secondary*
- *Review the school day, school week and school year to allow for a more flexible timetable and immersion into practical studies.*
- *A system that allows for short immersive courses, even residential.*
- *Make more use of Refreshed Curriculum 4 contexts (Opportunities for personal achievement, Interdisciplinary learning, Ethos and life of the school as a community, Curriculum areas and subjects) E.g. of 4 Contexts and Subject areas through outdoor/nature activities https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/resources/478-john-muir-award-and-the-curriculum-for-excellence*
- *Engage with, listen to and hear pupils' views*

7. Assessment and Qualifications

A focus on the development of cross-cutting competencies to address a changing world, requires new approaches to assessing attainment and achievement. These include student self-assessment, reflective writing, scenario/test case, focus group and interviews, performance observation and concept mapping. (Rieckmann, M. (2022). Developing and Assessing Sustainability Competences in the Context of Education for Sustainable Development. In: Karaarslan-Semiz, G. (eds) Education for Sustainable Development in Primary and Secondary Schools. Sustainable Development Goals Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09112-4_14).

Comments received in our workshops were:
- *Recognising non-academic / non-traditional learning*
- *Recognising all achievement*
- *Looking at the processes, not just the outcome*

5. What are the most important priorities for a future education system?

Key priorities for a future education system identified in our workshops to bring about the culture change required to make Learning for Sustainability an underpinning feature of education in practice were:

1. Learning for Sustainability as a stated Purpose of Education

LfS Scotland members set out the need for a shared **purpose for education**: **to enable learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world**. This vision aligns with the international UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030.

- *'Learning with the world' at the heart of all educational experiences.*
- *Provide consistent messaging across the system.*

2. Curriculum Transformation
As stated in Q1 addressing this vision for the education system will require not only curriculum content, but also development of cross-cutting competencies to deal with a changing world. A 'Heart, Hand and Head' approach aligns with UNESCO's Global Competencies for Sustainable Development (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444 page 10) and the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/).

Comments on priorities for transformation of the curriculum received in our workshops were:

- *'Learning with the world' at the heart of all educational experiences.*
- *Putting human and planetary health and wellbeing at the centre, and investing resources in these*
- *Supporting a whole-setting and community approach to learning for sustainability*
- *Evolving the curriculum to reflect the changing demands of our world.*
- *Sustainability values, skills and knowledge become fundamental and embedded in all learning and all career pathways.*
- *Focusing on cross-cutting values and skills for learning, work and life (see Q1)*
- *Creating commonality of language across the 'skills' landscape: core, meta, green, future skills etc*
- *Allowing young people to apply knowledge to real-life contexts in a meaningful way; e.g. through interdisciplinary learning, problem solving scenarios, project based innovation, case studies, work experience, STEM ambassadors, business mentors*
- *Allow more time for experiences within the curriculum not totally focused on outcomes. To achieve an outcome you need to have experiences*
- *Include themes and approaches such as :*
  - *Knowledge and understanding of the systemic causes of the climate and ecological emergency e.g., excessive consumption*
  - *Connecting people with nature*
  - *Critical Literacy*
  - *Global citizenship*
  - *Mindful and applied outdoor learning*
- *Ensuring progression of the Broad General Education from primary through into secondary*

3.Reframing 'Putting Learners at the Centre'

'Putting the world at the centre of education' (Biesta 2022 SERA), requires educators to enable, listen to, hear and respond to 'Learner Voice'.

Comments received in our workshops were:

- *Supporting meaningful opportunities for young people of all ages to take action in response to local and global challenges*

- *Weaving positive learner success and contributions into an effective whole-school and community approach to LfS*
- *Supporting holistic, system-wide collaboration to meet learner needs (GIRFEC, Community Learning and Development/youthwork, family learning)*
- *Educators working in tandem with young people in their learning*
- *Young people having opportunities to lead their learning*
- *Addressing young people's eco-anxiety and opportunities for action*
- *Creating skill pathways which are clear for young people*
- *Dealing with the long term impacts of COVID/poverty which will impact children and young people for many years to come*

4. Targeting Resources

Make the stated purpose for education: 'to enable learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world' real will require re-direction of resources within the education system.

Priority for resource allocation identified in our workshops were:

- *Identify and break down existing barriers and systems which are preventing change.*
- *Support in-depth in-service and pre-service teacher education in LfS to develop skilled and confident educators who are supported to deliver LfS meaningfully*
- *Provide resourced spaces for practice sharing*
- *All LfS opportunities across early years settings, state schools and independent schools need to be equitable and evenly (but well) resourced*
- *Make links across the policy landscape (STEM, UNCRC, DYW etc etcetc)*
- *Connecting people with nature requires quality outdoor learning environments everywhere*
- *Promote partnership working and collaboration beyond the school gates*

9. How can children and young people be helped to learn about our changing world so they feel able to positively contribute?

Evidence from research undertaken by Scotland's Children's Parliament in 2022 (**https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/Learning_for_Sustainability_Childrens_Parliament_Report_2022_Small-1.pdf**) showed that children under 14 yrs understand that they have a right to a healthy, happy and safe environment and planet and want to be engaged and be part of conversations of matters that affect them. In SOS-UK research carried out annually since 2010,(https://www.sos-uk.org/research/sustainability-skills-survey) around 80 per cent of students want their institutions to be doing more on sustainability, and around 60 per cent want to learn more about it.

Our workshops identified the following ways to supporting children and young people to learn about our changing world:

1. Developing whole-setting approaches to Learning for Sustainability

To support learners to learn about and become change agents in our changing world; with the knowledge, means, willingness and courage to take action that learning institutions need, themselves, to change, so that learners 'learn what they live and live what they learn' (UNESCO 2022 ESD for 2030 Roadmap https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802).

- *Community participation to co-create a systemic thinking approach to transform curriculum, teaching, governance, design, CPD and school management.*
- *Adults need to act to provide a safe environment for children, children shouldn't be taught to have responsibility to take individual climate action/individual stewardship actions*

2. Real-world learning

Research evidence shows that making learning relevant and contextualised by using and applying values, skills and knowledge is motivating, meaningful, inspiring and results in improved attainment and achievement (Scottish Government 2020 https://www.gov.scot/publications/educational-outcomes-learning-sustainability-brief-review-literature/pages/3/)

This approach was highlighted in our workshops:

- *Support learners to engage with their local community - the idea of moving from local, to national, to global enquiry.*
- *Solution- based learning so children and young people both have a voice and an understanding that they can change things*
- *Link up with other organisations, groups, informal learning opportunities - so that children and young people are feeding in not just through school*
- *Teachers and educators need time and space to catch up with the changing world; policy, behaviour, mindset and understanding is moving so rapidly.*
- *Engage with social enterprise and youth philanthropy*
- *Conversations about jobs, lifestyle, actions that would most make a difference to the world*

3. Enabling, listening to and hearing 'Learner Voice'

Today's children and young people present and future that are at stake and they are becoming increasingly vocal and active globally, demanding urgent and decisive change and holding world leaders accountable, for example for Climate Change. To enable learners to contribute to building a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world they require opportunities to be creative and active and to lead. (UNESCO 2022 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802)

Approaches to enabling, listening to and hearing' Learner Voice' identified in our workshops were:

- *Children's Calls to Action and needs across all ages need to be listened to and embedded in changes to education*
- *Hearing young people versus listening to them and developing that into making change - there can be a gap*
- *Genuinely valuing and acting on young people's ideas and opinions and not just paying lip-service to pupil voice. Teachers don't always know best.*
- *Providing opportunities for young people to lead their own learning*
- *Young people need to be able to shape the curriculum as it is developed to address the changing world - migration, war, energy crisis, sustainability, nature and climate emergency etc*
- *Continue to ask children and young people throughout the full education process*
- *Facilitate young people in actions they wish to take so they can be change makers*
  - *How to stay motivated and take action when repeatedly ignored*
  - *Sharing stories of progress and success to combat despair*
  - *Skills required, and a space provided to be able to take action*
  - *Knowing their rights and how to utilise these*

4. Using effective Learning and Teaching Approaches

At a time of change, the role of educators is also undergoing great change. Educators in all educational settings can help learners understand the complex choices that a socially-just, sustainable and equitable world requires. In order to support learners, educators themselves need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes and to use appropriate teaching and learning approaches. (GTCS Learning for Sustainability Hub https://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/key-cross-cutting-themes/learning-for-sustainability/)

Approaches identified in our workshops were:

- *Be given different meaningful opportunities for learning in real world contexts, in dynamic outdoor settings*
- *Experiencing doing their own social/environmental project. I tested it in France, they choose their topic, imagine a solution, and do it up to the end + help to strengthen new skills*
- *Awareness of local issues, planning and supporting change in their own area.*
- *By experiencing.... the world, their communities.... and through that experience develop understanding*
- *Pedagogies of outdoor learning, collaborative working, digital tools, social enterprise etc will support this work.*
- *Support curiosity. Confidence that discovery is good and not only challenging and risky!*
- *Educators should not think about sustainability in terms of problems that are out there to be solved or in terms of 'inconvenient truths' that need to be addressed. Rather, to help learners anticipate that as soon as we appear to have met the challenge, things will have changed and the horizon will have shifted once again.*
- *Show them positive stories, e.g. climate action globally and in their local area*
- *Learning about how to hold others to account*
- *Support teachers to facilitate this - many are too stretched to undertake extra training in LfS*
- *Connection, collaboration and community are at the core of everything we need to be doing to tackle LfS, the mental health crisis and the cost of living crisis. Sustainability = healthy emotional needs too*

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