



SD indicators for education

SDC proposal to the DfES and Defra

The SDC made the following proposal to the DfES and Defra on 23 June 2006 concerning the indicator of education for sustainable development announced in the UK SD Strategy.

Recognising the Government's commitment to develop a sustainable development education indicator, the SDC convened two workshops in late February 2006 to explore possible options with leading academics, education practitioners, non-profits and government officials with an interest in using the results. A record of these workshops was prepared by a consultant, John Huckle, and is available on the SDC website.

Prior to the workshops the SDC recommended a change to the wording of the indicator from "the impact of formal learning on knowledge

and awareness of sustainable development" to a broader measure of "the extent to which individuals have developed the skills, knowledge and values to be active citizens in creating a sustainable society" (abbreviated form "individual capability to contribute to a sustainable society"). Measuring the impact of formal learning was thought to be overly constraining and difficult to disentangle from other influences on behaviour like culture, family, peers, media and advertising, at least without major fundamental research.

In brief:

- Participants explored a range of approaches to assessing individual capability to contribute to a sustainable society. They expressed a preference for approaches that value learning over teaching, practical experience over theory, and were not enthused by approaches that seek to assess the relevant skills, knowledge and values through traditional written tests. Few, if any, of the more automated assessment methods – polls, surveys, quizzes, tests – were thought to provide insight into actual behaviours, and some risk being dominated by factors such as literacy level and family background. Such complications are not unique to this indicator. The well-being indicator (also proposed in the UK SD Strategy) is similarly complex but is benefiting from significant research prior to its formulation, coordinated by a cross-government working group (W3G, or Whitehall Well-being Working Group). Thus, while an indicator of 'individual capability to contribute to a sustainable society' could be developed for children, young people and/or adults, its precise form would be difficult to determine without a similar-scale research exercise.
- Participants sought to shift the focus of the indicator from individual learners to educational institutions. In a schools context, there was much support for s3, the self-evaluation tool developed by SDC/DfES for sustainable schools, and one indicator could be the percentage of schools rating themselves good or outstanding. Ofsted may be in a position to collect the necessary data through focus surveys, or by inference from school self-evaluation forms, or there may be a mutually supportive link worth exploring with the incoming 'school profile'. Similar instruments could be identified or developed for FE colleges and universities. Institution-level indicators work on the assumption that if a place of learning, like a school, lives a sustainable development ethos and enables its student to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills, this will establish positive, sustainable behaviours later in life. Unfortunately this assumption is not tested and therefore an institution-level indicator is at best a partial surrogate for more detailed individual analyses, and possibly misleading.

In summary, the feedback we received from the workshops suggested that the Government should develop an institution-level indicator based around self-evaluation of sustainable development performance. The limitations of this approach in terms of the accuracy of the results, and the potential false connection between institutional and individual performance, suggest that a sample of learners would also need to be studied to complement the institution-level analysis. In a schools context, for example, 100 secondary school s3 forms could be analysed alongside interviews with a similar number of KS4 pupils to help test the accuracy of the self-evaluation data. An indicator could then be formed as the product of two sets of results. It would seek to measure the degree to which the school (or other place of learning) is successful at developing learners' capability to contribute to a sustainable society.

There are of course many other ways to create an ESD indicator. The two outlined below are quite simple to implement but less accurate and revealing in terms of their usability:

- Assessment of the policy context for sustainable behaviour change: a paper exercise supported by selective focus groups and interviews with practitioners to evaluate policy performance. The process would contrast government policy intentions with reality, and identify potential enhancements. The SDC could conduct this exercise either by itself or through an independent partner. The resulting indicator would clarify whether the education system was on track to equip young people with sustainable development knowledge, skills and values.
- A survey of learners conducted by an independent polling organisation. A large sample of learners could be included in the survey, which would seek to assess key sustainability knowledge, skills and values, and enquire into actual behaviour. This approach has the advantage of

simplicity, but the known phenomenon of the values-action gap (the fact that people say one thing in surveys and do another) means the results will always be subject to inaccuracy, and therefore contestable.

We do have a recommendation for DfES and Defra:

- Begin a dialogue with Ofsted (or other partners) over the possibility of conducting a regular survey of sustainable school performance either based directly upon the s3 self-evaluation tool, or by inference from conventional school self-evaluation forms. This work would build on Ofsted's Focus Survey on sustainable development this year 2006, and help to extend the value of s3.

In parallel, to help us understand the robustness of this approach, we recommend that DfES and Defra:

- Explore options for commissioning a regular sample of interviews with individual KS4 pupils, drawing on lessons learned through the current (DfES-funded) research being undertaken by Chris Gayford of Reading University.
- Commission a longer-term research study into the formation of sustainable development capabilities in young people and potentially adults. This will be necessary to untangle the range of factors influencing sustainable (or non-sustainable) behaviour formation, and to build on key research from other fields.
- Explore with LSC, HEFCE and Lifelong Learning UK the possibility of developing parallel indicators for FE, HE and places of work, respectively.

Clearly there will be cost implications for all of these options. We would be happy to help broker links to potential contractors if that would be helpful.