

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Box 1.1: Chapter purposes

- To outline the topic of the thesis and clarify key terminology
- To demonstrate the relevance and importance of the topic.
- To set out the initial research questions
- To make clear the author's interest in relation to the topic
- To give an overview of the approach adopted in the investigation
- To guide the reader through the main line of argument developed
- To overview the structure of the thesis

The achievement of sustainable development has been highlighted as one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity in the 21st Century (Annan, 2001) with the role of education placed centre stage through the designation of 2005 to 2015 as the United Nations *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD)* (UN General Assembly, 2003). In the UK, the Government has signalled that sustainable development needs a response from Higher Education (HE) (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003). Extra-curricular interventions such as the use of awareness campaigns, the creation of groups and networks, the provision of events and visits, and changes to the fabric and services of university buildings and campuses could be used as part of this response. However, such interventions have so far received little or no attention in the academic literature. This thesis and associated publications produced during its creation (Lipscombe, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Lipscombe, Burek, Potter, Ribchester, & Degg, 2008) seek to rectify this shortcoming through an exploration, based on empirical investigation in the UK, that looks into the role and potential of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions.

This opening chapter has several purposes (Box 1.1). Its main aim is to introduce the subject, the argument and the approach through which this argument has been developed. To avoid ambiguity, some clarification of the term *extra-curricular interventions* is needed at the outset. Here “extra-curricular” is used to mean work not directly part of formal HE courses, nor the planning and delivery of such courses, and “interventions” is used to

mean planned actions undertaken as part of the work of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The chapter starts by considering the weakness of the HE response to ESD thus far and, in particular, the challenge posed to HE in delivering any kind of transformation towards sustainability from a *whole systems* perspective based on theory developed by Stephen Sterling (2001; 2003; 2004). The main research questions are then outlined along with an overview of the approach used to examine them. There follows some commentary on my interest as a researcher in the topic. Finally, the structure of the thesis is summarised to help guide the reader through subsequent chapters.

The majority of this chapter, and remainder of the thesis, is written in the third person, a style of writing common in scientific study, but criticised in some research traditions for creating a veneer of objectivity to work that may carry much subjectivity (Fischer, 1999; Lichtman, 2010; Wollcot, 1990). It is certainly not my intent to create distance between myself – the author - my investigation and its expression in my thesis. Rather it is a style of writing I am familiar with and one I am most at ease using. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the importance of active reflexivity through the research process as an aid to countering potential bias in interpretation. Thus, hereafter, I revert mainly to the third person style, but use first person observations in boxes and footnotes for purposes of self-reflexivity¹.

Higher Education for Sustainable Development: from curriculum content to extra-curricular context

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can contribute to sustainable development in many ways, for example, through research and campus operations, but perhaps most obviously through *education* itself. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) made clear that it believes 'the greatest contribution higher education has to make to sustainable

¹ In confining my first person self to the footnotes, the effect of reading these personal reflections is somewhat akin to switching on a director's commentary feature on a DVD feature film. It is not necessary to use this feature to follow the thesis, but offers greater transparency for those who wish to delve deeper.

development is through the values, skills and knowledge that its graduates learn and put into practice' (HEFCE, 2005, p. 27). However, it goes on to observe that this area of curriculum and pedagogy is the one area of HE 'where good practice may be weakest' (HEFCE, 2005, p. 27). The weakness of the 'educational' contribution of HE to sustainable development is highlighted in the associated literature (Scott & Gough, 2004; Sterling, 2001). Accordingly much focus during the first half of the UNDES has been on efforts to embed sustainable development content in the formal curriculum of universities (Sterling & Scott, 2008). The argument advanced here is *that a curriculum-only focus is too narrow a view. Universities have a wider educational infrastructure which can be used for ESD-related activity.*

It is possible to speculate on several reasons why extra-curricular ESD-related interventions could help advance sustainable development in HE. For example, such interventions may:

- (i) engage both students *and* staff and thus provide an opportunity for both to learn;
- (ii) reach those that 'curriculum greening' (Haigh, 2005) fails to reach, or upon whom by virtue of their academic interests will have limited impact;
- (iii) take place away from the physical constraints of lecture hall or laboratory, and serve to create a space free from traditional departmental boundaries where trans-disciplinary perspectives could emerge; and
- (iv) draw more easily on experience beyond HE

If these benefits were found to be borne out in practice, then the argument here is *that the extra-curricular sphere could provide a useful locus for ESD activity.*

Stephen Sterling's ideas of *sustainable education* based on whole systems thinking (2001; 2003; 2004) form the theoretical point of departure for this investigation. Sterling's argument (2003) suggests that HE itself must change if it is to contribute fully to sustainable development. He highlights that it may be impossible for graduates to gain the values, skills and knowledge necessary to achieve sustainable development, unless the

institutions from which they graduate have themselves been through a transformation towards sustainability. We cannot rely on universities - unchanged - to change society, partly because HE reflects the wider unsustainable socio-economic system it is a part of. It is less clear how a transformation in HE can be nurtured, i.e. how can HE educate itself prior to educating others? The argument here is that *extra-curricular interventions possess certain qualities which, seen in the light of conceptions of education, theories of learning (Falk & Dierking, 2002; Illeris, 2002; La Belle, 1982; Polanyi, 1967) and whole systems thinking (Sterling,2003), make them a potentially important aid to the transformation and learning processes needed in HE.*

Research Questions

Two key questions - and associated sub-questions - have driven the research exploration, namely:

(i) To what extent are extra-curricular interventions characteristic of the ESD response in UK HE?

Prior to this research, there was little sense of the nature and extent of extra-curricular ESD practice in UK HE and its position relative to curricular ESD work. Little was known about how such work was perceived. In exploring this question the research sought to investigate:

- How common are extra-curricular interventions as a feature of university work to advance ESD?
- What are the main types of intervention in use?
- What are the main strengths and weakness of, opportunities for, and barriers to, the use of extra-curricular ESD interventions?

(ii) What is the potential for extra-curricular interventions to provide learning experiences that contribute both to personal and institutional change?

In order to explore the speculated benefits of extra-curricular interventions with respect to learning, both at a personal and institutional level, the research sought to investigate:

- What types of people are engaged by extra-curricular interventions?

- Do extra-curricular interventions contribute to student learning?
- Do they contribute to staff learning?
- Do they contribute to the emergence of new perspectives on sustainable development?
- How do participants view their engagement in such activities?
- Do participants report acting differently as a result of engaging with them?

Approach

The research design provides for a logical link between the research questions and material collected and analysed. It includes three main elements:

(i) A review of the literature - This element serves to situate the research within the wider body of knowledge, as well as clarify concepts and relevant theories in order to draw out the qualities that make extra-curricular interventions potentially useful for HESD.

(ii) A review of practice in UK HEIs - This element, based on a postal survey of UK HEIs, serves to establish the extent and type of extra-curricular ESD interventions in use alongside views about their qualities - positive and negative - and potential.

(iii) An in-depth study of practice at one university – This element, based on a case study developed through action research, is used to record the development and impact of a programme of extra-curricular interventions over an academic year. Here a combination of documents, counts and research notes is used to record an extra-curricular ESD-related programme. An accompanying longitudinal survey with a mixed group of staff and students - based on semi-structured interviews conducted a year apart and invitations for written reflection between - is used to appraise the experiences shaping the thoughts, feelings and actions of individuals at the case study university, prior to and during the time of the extra-curricular programme.

Researcher's interest in the investigation

My interest in and motivations leading up to this investigation are presented in Box 1.2. In summary, I come to the work with a long history of interest in, and work experience connected with, environmental issues. My interest in education is more recent and born from attempts to use informal means to engage people with sustainable development. My experience is primarily gained from work in the public sector, not academia. I am motivated to conduct this research due to a concern about the apparent unsustainable nature of contemporary development patterns. It reflects a wish to better understand my own practice, whilst simultaneously using research to help shape policy and wider practice through contributing to a better understanding of the processes at play in extra-curricular ESD.

Box 1.2: Reflections on the path to this thesis

My own path towards this investigation has been long. I come to this study as someone with a long standing interest in, and associated experience with, environmental issues, rather than with education – an interest which has developed relatively recently. Now aged 42, upon reflection, I credit my initial interest in the environment to my schooling. In particular, the fact that I attended a secondary school with, what was unbeknown to me at the time, a rare feature - an environmental studies Department. Accordingly, I was presented the opportunity to follow a distinctly environmental path through my school education.

Choosing such an environmental path was made all the more attractive due to the presence of a particularly inspiring teacher, a legend amongst those he taught - Mr 'Bob' Jones. Under Bob's direction I can clearly remember being exposed to the idea of global warming from around the age of 11 in 1978/9. I don't remember Bob Jones being a 'preachie' environmentalist teacher at all. Far from it, he was much more matter of fact and level headed: he did not offer answers but raised many questions. Looking back, the topics that he and others covered lit a fire of interest in me that persists to this day – an interest in environmental issues and their relationship with human activity.

I cannot clearly remember my own position or activities in relation to the environment during my secondary schooling, save for a youthful interest in 'saving the planet' – a term I now loathe – that was expressed through joining Greenpeace and wearing CND badges. I do remember having no great academic pretension, and the one time desire to leave school at 16 to work as a stone mason. However, being quite successful in my school academic achievements - and possibly with few openings in the stone working field - I was easily persuaded to stay on to study A

levels, where I chose to study geography, biology and environmental studies.

My decision to go to university came late and was much more influenced by the excitement of attending a student party at my elder brother's university (he being the first in our family to study at a higher level) than any real thoughts as to what a university was for - other than being a means to getting a better job. I can recall deliberately choosing a four year environmental science course that required completion of a 'sandwich' year working in a related field. This vocational aspect mattered to me and in retrospect I am grateful for it.

One other aspect of possible significance relating to my school years is that at the age of 18, on the day I discovered I had made the grade in my A levels – with top grades in my chosen topics - I learned that my teacher, Bob Jones, had died the night before. He had been suffering from multiple sclerosis for many years. Indeed in the run up to our A' level exams he resorted to tutoring us from his car when too ill to walk to the classroom. The news turned a day of celebration into something quite different: a mixture of sadness, loss and the selfish regret that our class's ultimate success was never shared with its mentor. The subsequent funeral, the first I can remember attending, remains a truly poignant event where questions of life and death first became real to me. We paid our respects to a wooden coffin, but I couldn't help thinking that Bob was not in the box he was now everywhere. That day, I remember the sky, the breeze and the trees seemed more alive than ever. It was a powerful feeling of connection - being a part of, not apart from, everything.

My first spell at university was, as our Vice Chancellor suggested in his welcoming address, a place to be taken out of circulation in order to grow up. I can remember relatively little from the course - save enjoying the final year of study most - but a great deal about the people studying it. We were clearly a 'environmental science' community and part of a family drawn to study the environment when it was still largely unfashionable and a slightly suspect thing to do. Though small in number, the community I had now entered impressed me with its diversity of characters, ranging from would be anarchists, hunt saboteurs and adventurous world travellers to more conventional types – a group with which I associated then and now.

Apart from learning to live independently and experimenting with the type of person I might be, I can attribute two further influences from my initial university years which in retrospect seem pertinent to where I am now: my placement year with an independent environmental and transport consultancy *TEST*; and my first travel experience outside of Europe to India. The former, under the guidance of architect and 'alternative' transport pioneer John Roberts, showed me the value of rigorous research and its relation to shaping policy. Looking back now, many of the ideas we were then involved in investigating which were treated as very 'way out' and somewhat barmy, have now entered mainstream policy and are now seen as eminently sensible. The latter influence, my trip to India - inspired in part by a new found taste for South Asian cuisine developed as a student - opened my eyes to a very different world. No prior reading could have prepared me for it.

After graduation, I moved on to train as a planner. By good fortune, I started out in a section concerned with the less formal side of the trade - managing the coast and countryside. This enabled me to maintain a clear environmental theme in my work. Under the guidance of another Bob, Bob Connell, I learned more about grammar and the presentation of the written word, than from my previous university education. It was at this time that I embarked on day-release study in planning, and first became aware of the United Nations *Agenda 21*, the global action plan for

sustainable development. By the third year of my studies, I was beginning to question whether work in mainstream planning was for me. Unbeknown to my employers, I opted to specialise in planning in the developing world, partly as a result of my earlier trip to India. With respect to Agenda 21, I attended a conference at work about 'Local Agenda 21' in 1993. This, combined with my exposure to people-centred development projects through my developing world studies, was to prove a turning point in my career ambitions. At the conference, I met with and soon wanted to become a *Local Agenda 21 co-ordinator*.

My path to eventually becoming a Local Agenda 21 Coordinator was longer than expected. In 1994, having achieved my professional qualifications, I left my job as a planner to travel and study overseas. My growing interest in sustainable development led me to arrange a research placement with the All India Institute for Local Self Government which was eventually the basis for a Masters dissertation entitled 'self-help and sustainable development' (I had enrolled to complete the necessary extra modules to move from planning diploma to Masters level). My earlier interest in the environment was now wedded to a growing interest in people-centred development processes and this seemed to have an obvious expression through Local Agenda 21.

Upon my return to the UK, I found employment as the environmental specialist in a local authority's transport planning unit. Through this position, I was able to dabble in aspects of the council's Local Agenda 21 process. Eventually, four years later, I secured my dream job as a Local Agenda 21 Coordinator. This is the position that I held for seven years prior to deciding to embark on work towards this thesis.

My post-masters employment is where my current interest in education stems from. Through my experiences in trying to promote sustainable travel choices and, later on, to encourage participation in a 'bottom up' Local Agenda 21 process as well as promote the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, I became interested in the effectiveness of non-formal educational programmes and what people actually learned through them. With the benefit of my doctoral studies as a lens to reflect on my earlier views, I was undoubtedly initially of traditional environmentalist stock, seeing education simply as an instrument to affect behaviour change. Logic dictated that people would act once the deficit in their knowledge was corrected through the provision of missing information. That said, I suspect I doubted the effectiveness of such strategies from the outset, having been strongly influenced by the impact of 'bottom-up' community engagement processes, that today I would recognise as being based on *social learning*. The challenge to engage people led to my increasing use of various props and interactive media. Through a regular need to represent the council at public shows and community events – I experimented with the idea of using entertainment as a hook to engagement. It was clear that through our efforts at community events something positive was happening. However, it was difficult to determine, with limited feedback, whether we were just amusing people, or helping them learn and do new things. One clear example that something positive was happening was when a resident revisited our 'Healthy People Healthy Planet' themed zone at the town show to say thank you for our efforts the previous year. His earlier visit had led him to give up smoking. Our 'edutainment' strategy obviously could work, but how effective it was remained unclear.

By chance, and with the belief that conducting original research was a means to influence policy and practice, the opportunity to study environmental awareness at my local university was presented. I applied, was accepted, and the resultant

research proposal upon which this thesis is based was developed and ultimately approved. The standing joke is that most mid-life crises involve buying a sports car, but in my case it was to embark on a PhD to reflect over the effectiveness of previous professional efforts. The opportunity has certainly given me a chance to examine some of the types of non-formal and informal learning processes that I had been involved in instigating previously. However, the context for this research is different in that it relates to the HE sphere. One of my aims in conducting it is to understand both the benefits and limitations of such non-formal interventions.

Ultimately my aim in presenting this thesis is to use the light of scholarly enquiry to advance knowledge and practice in the field of education for sustainable development. My motivation is based on a deep concern for the environmental damage and human suffering caused by humanity's current development trajectory - a trajectory that could have a catastrophic impact, but one which I still believe we can learn to change.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter Two places the research subject in the context of the wider literature. Here the terminology is clarified further, notably how the concepts of sustainable development, education and learning are taken. This exposition is used both to highlight a dynamic notion of sustainable development built on an inherent need for learning, and to introduce the extended family of *formal*, *non formal* and *informal* modes of education - modes which, *importantly for this thesis*, may take place in the same settings. The theoretical back story is filled out in relation to understandings of learning, with a broadly constructivist theoretical basis embraced. This constructivist foundation is used alongside the ideas of *tacit*, *free-choice* and *social learning* to argue for the importance of learning from beyond the curriculum. The chapter charts the rise of education for sustainable development as a policy imperative and scrutinises its meaning, including the inherent tensions between its instrumental and more liberal educational interpretations. Sterling's whole systems theories (2001, 2003) are elaborated further, in particular the idea of *learning levels* and the suggestion that in present conditions there is a likelihood that education *about* sustainable development is most likely to find expression in curricula, whilst education *for* and ultimately *as* sustainable development both require a more fundamental epistemological transformation. The challenge of this transformation leads to consideration of limitations in HE's response to ESD,

laying the ground for the presentation of a list of the qualities of, and potential roles for, extra-curricular interventions. Finally, some consideration is given to what little has been said about extra-curricular interventions, thus far, both in relation to ESD and in other fields. This highlights the gap that the remainder of the investigation seeks to begin to fill.

Chapter Three outlines and defends the methodological approach used in the investigation. Here the philosophical basis of the research, allied to a critical realist outlook, is established and the argument advanced that the exploratory approach adopted is suited to opening up a novel area of enquiry. The chapter links the research questions to the mixed methods design – comprised of extensive (questionnaire survey of UK HEIs) and intensive (case study of practice at one university) frames. The relationship between the methods employed, data types collected, and timescale of the investigation is charted before the approach to data handling and the wider analytical processes are elaborated. The chapter advances arguments to support the suitability and veracity of the methods employed as well as detailing how ethical issues are handled.

Chapter Four relates the implementation and findings of the questionnaire survey of UK HEIs designed to establish the extent of extra-curricular interventions and record perceptions about their qualities. The preparation, format and deployment of the questionnaire survey are highlighted at the outset. The survey response is then examined to establish how representative it is. The findings of the survey are presented to confirm the extent of extra-curricular ESD-related interventions and their relative position in ESD work. They are also used to explore whether extra-curricular interventions are perceived to have any of the positive qualities speculated, and what limitations and barriers are believed to exist that may hinder the realisation of such beneficial qualities.

Chapter Five presents the first part of the in-depth case study of practice. This first part introduces the case study institution – Bright College University. It describes the basis and evolution of its work to coordinate ESD leading up

to the year of the study. A record of the extra-curricular interventions that were used at Bright College during the study year is then presented, with data on the numbers and types of people engaged by these interventions also detailed where available. This record covers those interventions overseen via Bright College's Environmental Committee, with whom the researcher was placed on a part-time basis, and those instigated from elsewhere within the institution. The character of the ESD offer is reviewed, with the main roles for the interventions instigated summarised and considered in the light of the roles speculated upon in Chapter Two. The 'reach' of the programme across the university community is also considered, both to explore the degree to which it extends beyond those engaged by subjects traditionally allied with sustainable development, and its effectiveness in engaging students *and* staff.

Chapter Six presents the second part of the case study. First, the characteristics of the study participants followed are considered. The one feature to unite those in the study group is their 'membership' of Bright College's Sustainable University Network mailing list - the network itself being one of the central extra-curricular communication measures promoted by the Environmental Committee. The 'joining stories' of study participants are thus given some consideration in order to establish the circumstances, expectations, hopes and fears for their involvement with the network. Developing upon this, participant conceptions of, and attitudes, feelings and behaviours in relation to sustainable development at start of the study year are documented and appraised. This part gives some consideration to the prior influences on participant understandings of sustainable development in order to gauge the relative influence of formal and non-formal/informal influences. It also presents a model to depict the possible relationship between the different conceptions of sustainable development recorded.

Chapter Seven, presents the final part of the case study. Here the experiences of the staff and students 'followed' over the study year are considered so that the influence of the extra-curricular programme, introduced in Chapter Five, can be gauged. The changes recorded in

people's conceptions, thoughts, feelings and behaviours at the end of the study year, and the influences attributed to bringing them about, are considered. It is here that the influence of the extra-curricular programme is reviewed.

Chapter Eight, summaries the main conclusions reached through the investigation. It is used to revisit the key questions raised in this opening chapter, and consider the implications of the findings for knowledge, policy and practice. This chapter also considers the limitations of the research and points out some potential future lines for enquiry.