

F O C U S



The quiet education revolution

When the United Nations introduced the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in 2005, Australia already had many of the building blocks in place to increase learning about sustainable development in schools, the workplace and the wider community. **Robin Taylor** reports on commitments three years into this ambitious education transformation.

The federal government's strategy for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, developed in 2006, is called 'Caring for our Future'. It provides the vision, goal and strategic approach for the international initiative.

Australia is well on track to meet its commitments, with the national strategy, a national council on education for sustainability (which advises government on education about sustainability in industry, business and the community as well as the formal education sector), and a national education for sustainability network, comprising officials in education

and environment departments across the Commonwealth and states and territories – a growing forum and coordination mechanism. States and territories are rolling out local education planning under the national guidance.

Most countries are now in the process of developing their national action plans and deciding priority issues. Australia has many of the structures in place to support a national approach and is one of the few countries that has established a national research program. The Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) at Macquarie University develops

An early year student investigates invertebrates on World Environment Day 2008.

WA Department of Environment & Conservation

insight to improve the quality of education for sustainability.

According to the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA), which is overseeing plans for the Decade, Australia is now in a good position to identify the priorities and deliver on them.

The national action plan, under development, will identify priority actions to engage and assist communities, industry, governments and education institutions to adopt more sustainable practices.

Gearing schools up

At the beginning of the Decade in 2005, the government established the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI), recognising that education for sustainability is more than a curriculum issue. Students participate through 'action learning' supported by physical sustainability facilities installed in schools.

The program also seeks to involve the local community through parents, local government and local industry, to help schools and their communities become more environmentally sustainable.

Following a pilot program in New South Wales and Victoria, more than 2500 schools across all states and territories are now participating in AuSSI. Some have already reported reductions in waste collection of up to 80 per cent, in water consumption of up to 60 per cent, and savings on energy consumption of 20 per cent.

Activities which have been undertaken by some of the schools include increasing native vegetation in the school grounds and local areas to attract birds and other fauna, developing bush tucker or kitchen gardens, and implementing a recycling policy for the school.

DEWHA has been working with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on Australia's sustainability issues and has provided input into the new national educational goals for young Australians.

The federal government also funds an 'Education for sustainability' grants program with the objective of involving industry, community and higher education providers. This provides support to national strategic programs involving people who can have an influence across an industry or sector.

Current grant recipients, for example, include the Responsible Investment Association of Australasia which is developing a 'Responsible Investment Academy' to train advisers and the public about making responsible investments, and an advertising association trying to improve sustainability in retail marketing. The government has also supported educational projects to train professionals in climate change adaptation and in sustainable engineering and industrial design, as well as to develop sustainability skills through vocational education. These will be in increasing demand in the future.

Engaging adult learning

Acting Director of ARIES, Janelle Thomas, says the Australian Government really pre-empted the Decade with the National Action Plan for Environmental Education for Sustainable Futures, which was introduced in 2000.

'That plan provided a framework to guide Australia's activities and response to the decade,' she says.

ARIES now carries out research to

establish the status of education for sustainability in Australia and identify areas where capacity needs to be increased in both education and industry.

In industry, for example, a project called 'Sustainability in supply chains', involving participants from the food manufacturing and construction industries, has helped to achieve sustainability gains in corporations and their supply chain operations – such as better procurement standards and improved packaging, resource use and waste management – and progress towards organisational change for sustainability within corporations.

'Sustainability challenges are very complex, which is why we use the learning-based approach,' said Ms Thomas.

'We are trying to encourage business to go beyond business-as-usual and the short-term business case approach, to be more resilient by identifying sustainability issues and responding to them in a meaningful way.'

In another project in the tertiary education sector, ARIES has worked with staff in five university business schools to mainstream sustainability in their courses.

'In the area of tertiary education, different countries have different needs; for example some countries need to address gender equality in education and other basic human rights issues, whereas in Australia we have different sustainability challenges,' says Ms Thomas.

'The sustainability issues don't slot themselves neatly into any one discipline so in tertiary education we need to equip people with the skills to respond quickly to the issues of sustainability such as climate change.'

'We need to develop in graduates and students the ability to work with complexity and uncertainty and dynamically evolving issues, and to develop skills to collaborate across disciplines.'

The project has involved working on two fronts: getting additional subject areas on sustainability into curricula, and ensuring that all the core subjects address sustainability as part of what they cover.

'Experience from participants in our projects showed that universities need to embed sustainability across the whole curriculum as part of their explicit learning outcomes,' Ms Thomas points out.

'Universities still have progress to make in recognising and embedding sustainability as an integral and crucial part of an entire degree or course.'

The aims of the Decade

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005 to 2014) recognises the need to integrate sustainable development into education systems, at all levels, to make education a key agent for change.

It aims to promote education as the basis for sustainable human society and to strengthen international cooperation towards the development of innovative policies, programs and practices of education for sustainable development.

Some of the challenges for the decade recognised by UNESCO are: better integration of education for sustainable development into relevant development policies and national action plans; development of guidelines on education for sustainable development; emphasising education for sustainable development in non-formal as well as formal education; and increasing monitoring, evaluation and reporting of sustainable development education initiatives and their outcomes and impacts.

Opening the Asia Pacific regional launch of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in April 2006, UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura said, 'Ultimately, the Decade's goal is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in attitudes and behaviour that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all.'



Participants in a sustainability education workshop in Western Australia. Murdoch University

More information:
ARIES, www.aries.mq.edu.au
Government sustainability
education initiatives,
www.environment.gov.au/education