QQI Executive Response to DES Education for Sustainable Development Consultation

QQI’s interest in the consultation reflects its statutory role in (*inter alia*) assuring the quality of programmes of education and training; access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners and safeguarding the integrity of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

**1. How would you define `education for sustainable development'?**

The term does not require definition (its meaning is self-evident) once the embedded term ‘sustainable development’ is understood. Education for sustainable development’s scope warrants elaboration though.

The proposed definition of sustainable development is thought provoking because of its dependency on an understanding of the meaning of the term ‘*needs of the present’*. The word ‘needs’ here leads one to ponder the link with necessity and how needs contrast with (are differentiated from) desires for the unnecessary. It also leads one to question whether there any circumstances in which addressing the needs of the present could justify compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs?

A more adaptable definition of sustainability might focus attention on some overarching concept of the wellbeing (survival) of the global population. Definitions are important in this domain because they can lead sometimes lead to conclusions that might not be foreseen by the casual (or event astute) observer and these might turn out to be unacceptable or present difficult moral dilemmas. It is important therefore in this kind of work, paraphrasing Neils Bohr, never to express oneself more clearly than one thinks. A vague definition that can be adapted or whose interpretation can be altered may be preferable to a precise one that may lead towards unforeseen unacceptable consequences.

The concept of sustainability is intriguing. There can be a romantic view that sees it in terms of presentation of a balance. However, sustaining anything however big or small always comes at a price. If one arrangement is to remain steady then other things have to change. This is ineluctable. The human population has already reached the size where this factor is a practical consideration and not just an academic one.

We have seen how in the past even the most brilliant and enlightened societies have descended to the depths of depravity and chaos when survival is at stake. The best defence against this is to ensure that initial education and training forms people who can think as individuals and act in solidarity with others; discern between wise and foolish guides; weigh up evidence; make arguments; use information and communicate.

The discussion document highlights three pillars: environment, economic and social. These three concepts can be reduced to two independent ones without losing their power to assist in analysing the issues in this context, viz.: the physical world (generalisation of environment) and society (where society includes societies). Economics is a particular science that can help understand the interactions between societies and the physical world but it is certainly not the only such science and it is by no means a complete characterisation of this interaction.

An alternative to the three pillars or the reduced version above (Environment and Society) is the following (the reader is invited to reflect on how this could be justified):

* world
* society
* person

The advantage of making ‘person’ explicit in this context is that education is (at least) a person (learner) centred activity. Societies can learn too and it is important to understand the dynamics of this.

Education and training has an important part to play in equipping people and societies with the knowledge, skills and competences to survive.

The sustainability of the arrangements for the provision of education services is important of course. But it is of a quite different nature and is a much narrower and more concrete challenge. Therefore, it might be useful to address it separately in future progress reports and discussion documents.

**2. What is the key priority for making education for sustainable development a reality?**

**II. Objectives, challenges and actions Objective 1: Embedding education for sustainable development at every level of the education system**

**3. How can education for sustainable development be most effectively embedded at every level of the education system? Please give practical examples if possible.**

All worthwhile education is relevant to sustainable development. Poor quality or trivial education or training is inimical to it. The better the quality the education the more it can help support sustainable development.

It can be tempting to ‘do our bit for sustainable development’ by busying ourselves with add auxiliary units or modules on sustainable development to all and sundry and similarly to augment quality assurance criteria and learning outcomes-based standards. A deeper approach is necessary.

A systemic approach is more likely that this to make an impact. This is not least because piecemeal additions to curricula can dilute programmes to the extent that people come out knowing less not more. There is a risk in cluttering education and training goals with targets for this that and the other. The concept of critical mass applies to learning. This is the amount of learning required for a learner to make a ‘breakthrough’ in a subject. This breakthrough concept is important. Unless critical mass can be achieved in a subject it is probably better not to teach it at all.

Education and training (synonyms with slightly different connotations) are concerned with formation of individuals. It is especially important that initial education (formation of the young) should be to equip people to fulfil roles in society and using their understanding of themselves, society and the world to contribute to their own and society’s wellbeing. What matters most is that people learn how to think; that they develop practical understandings of systems (societies, biological, ecological, physical and economic, cultural).

In summary, a high-quality educational formation will enable a person to learn for themselves later in life and that is what is required for sustainable development. Nothing new required then? No, not quite! We need to do better than we are doing it now—far better in some cases.

**4.What are the key challenges relating to this objective?**

Improving quality and standards are two challenges that we must all face up to. There has been far too much complacency about the performance of Ireland’s education system at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (further and higher). This has been enabled by the scarcity of objective measures of performance such as PISA and other regulatory problems. Ireland needs to find objective and systematic ways of determining how well the education and training systems are performing and for regulating the system. Concerning the regulatory problem see ‘***Qualifications systems and related concepts – a QQI background paper***’ May 2013. [http://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Consultation/Qualifications%20Systems%20and%20related%20concepts.pdf](https://publicadmin.qqi.ie/Downloads/Consultation/Qualifications%20Systems%20and%20related%20concepts.pdf)

In particular, the development of capacity to validly and reliably assess learning must become a top priority at all levels of education and training. This is to ensure that learners (and their teachers) are properly informed about their achievements at every stage. This is required not only to improve teaching and to support learning but also to support confidence in qualifications.

**5.What actions are required to address the challenges?**

**Objective 2: Promoting public awareness of education for sustainable development6.How can the public awareness of education for sustainable development be promoted?**

The framework of qualifications with its tools for comparing expected learning outcomes can help to address the challenges facing education and training. One of its chief advantages is that it focuses attention on educational goals (learning outcomes). Having specified goals makes it easier to teach, to learn, to gauge progress towards their achievement and to certify achievement through the award of a qualification and to quality assure and regulate.

Our earlier comments address many of the questions that follow. Rather than repeating the same points over and over again we will not address them all separately.

**7. Who are the key stakeholders in promoting public awareness of education for sustainable development?**

**8.What are the key challenges relating to this objective?**

**9. What actions are required to address the challenges?**

**Objective 3: Promoting capacity building in support of education for sustainable development**

**10. How can we promote capacity building in support of education for sustainable development? Please give practical examples of how this can be done.**

**11.What are the key challenges relating to this objective?**

**12.What actions are required to address the challenges?**

**Objective 4: Promoting high standards of environmental management in education institutions**

**13.How can we most effectively promote high standards of environmental management in education institutions? Please give practical examples if possible.**

**14.What are the key challenges relating to this objective?**

**15.What actions are required to address the challenges?**

**III.Additional views**

**16.Comments on the background paper would be appreciated:**

We commented earlier on the definitions used in this paper.

**17.Please make any other point you consider relevant to the issue of education for sustainable development.**

**18.If there is documentation you are aware of relevant for this topic could you please provide a web link orreference:**