Education FOR Sustainability – how well is this being implemented? And how will this influence green growth and innovation?

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Why does this matter?

The release this year of the McKinsey Report ‘Education to Employment’ sounded a warning bell for future generations: there are 75 million young people without employment in economies of all kinds across the globe - Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – while those same economies all face a shortage of critical job skills.

And this problem is understated: there are potentially triple this number of disenfranchised young people if we acknowledge the extent of underemployment. Nor is this likely to be a temporary blip; in fact, it will probably get much worse. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that by 2020 there will be a global shortfall of 85 million high- and middle-skilled workers.

If even those young people who have worked hard to graduate from school and university cannot secure decent jobs and the sense of self-respect and inclusion that comes with them, can we expect a sustainable future? Or must we be prepared for more outbreaks of anger and violence like those we’re recently seen in Chile, Egypt, Greece, Italy, South Africa, Spain, and the United States.

So what’s going on? Clearly, the issues are intractably complex. Countries everywhere are paying attention to skill development and workforce participation. Countries everywhere are paying attention to economic and social development.

What if we’ve just got the fundamentals wrong: what if we’re asking the wrong questions? What if we’re looking for old solutions using old paradigms at the deepest level – ie at the level of what it means to build the economy in a sustainable way. Clearly, what we’re doing now isn’t sustainable socially, must less ecologically.

What is sustainability and why educate FOR it?

Sustainability itself is an amorphous term, but most broadly, it’s reflective of an equilibrium between ecological, economic and social considerations in order to sustain life on earth.
Education ABOUT sustainability is at best a spectator sport. The VET sector is on the field, in the game, educating FOR sustainability.

Education FOR sustainability ambitiously focuses on learning that tackles the underlying causes of unsustainability. Learning that will empower tomorrows entrepreneurs to innovate and grow in new ways that aren’t about gobbling up the day after’s opportunities. Learning how to ‘decouple’ the notion of economic growth from resource consumption. Learning that may just speak to the values and imagination of many of those disenfranchised young people around the globe who could - who must - be able to become tomorrow’s active citizens.

Learning FOR sustainability is about equipping individuals and organisations with the knowledge, skills, values, capacity and motivation to respond to complex sustainability issues through systemic change. Education FOR Sustainability is underpinned by the principles of transformation and change; of education for all people all their lives; of capabilities that allow us to adapt: systems thinking, envisioning a better future, critical thinking and reflection; and of values such as participation and partnerships for change. (Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2009)

In this way Education FOR sustainability can support the emergence of a new generation of greentrepreneurs, including perhaps many of the young people who can’t find a place for themselves in the current economy.

**What’s happening in the Australian VET sector?**

As we approach the end of the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) it’s opportune to reflect on VET’s role in Education for Sustainability here at home. How effectively is our sector equipping people with the knowledge skills and understanding necessary to make decisions based upon their environmental, social and economic implications? And how effectively are we linking that learning to new concepts of working and of enterprise creation?

The National Green Skills Agreement signed up to by COAG in 2009 has undoubtedly facilitated change in our National Training System. Core Units of Competency in many training packages focus learners on sustainable work practices, procedures and policies. New qualifications have emerged dedicated to complementing vocational skills with supervisory and leadership capability for sustainable operations and environmental management.
RTO’s have higher proportions of students than ever undertaking sustainability related learning and sustainable management of a training organisation’s footprint is broadly acknowledged as imperative.

We do have evidence that the VET focus on ‘Green Skills’ has fostered resource efficiency gains, productivity improvements, reduced environmental pollution, and improved land management practices. And our work has enhanced industry’s ability to be good corporate citizens (NSW State Training Services, 2013).

We have delivered important skills for sustainability. But have we gone far enough with capabilities and values? Are we making a difference to those underlying causes of unsustainability and truly preparing for a challenging future? And have we sparked the imagination of the next generation of entrepreneurs to create and grow businesses that aren’t’ built on consumption?

Our challenge - and our opportunity - is to consider how our sector can support an advance from ‘small and painless steps’ (Crompton, 2008) to systemic change : we need a shift in the current paradigm of continual economic growth based on resource consumption towards sustainable economies where today’s growth is not gobbling up tomorrow’s.

Our sector therefore needs to ask how we can educate in ways that not only
- build resilience to deal with destructive economic, social and natural events
- deliver a much more timely response to the problem of atmospheric greenhouse gases
- challenge current patterns of unsustainable consumption of material resources but also
  - stimulate creativity and innovation at the deepest economic level.

An example

The nation-wide delivery of the Vocational Graduate Certificate in Education and Training for Sustainability through the North Coast TAFE, Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE and Swinburne University of Technology partnership is built on the notion that Education FOR Sustainability requires a different way of thinking and doing.

Repeatedly, we see VET educators undertaking the program grappling with the concept of a teaching role that is not focussed on ‘filling empty vessels’. Information is NOT in short supply, so the trainers role as the disseminator of information to build knowledge or skills is redundant. What is needed is the development of skills in both VET practitioners and learners that support the filtering, analysis, critical assessment and practical application of this information into real-world situations. And the development of perspectives that generate completely new ways to build wealth and well being.
Education for Sustainability calls for an awareness of worldviews, an unlocking of values and creation of new pro-sustainability identities. The theory and practice of transformative education, action-based learning design, individual behaviour and organisational change does provide us with some proven tools, but for many practitioners this is a challenging journey.

However, we can accelerate this capability in our practitioners. And from there it’s only a small step to the next level: seeing graduates applying those same transformative principles to new ventures that grow our economy in totally new ways.

**What else can our sector do right now to support lifelong learning and leadership for sustainability?**

Sustainability education in VET has emerged in a somewhat fragmented way - originally through the development of accredited courses, then through generic units of competency available for contextualisation across training packages, and more recently to dedicated training package qualifications and industry identified skill sets. Some of the training is complementary to existing vocational skills (for example: 22105VIC Diploma of Sustainability); some is for specialist vocations (for example: Grid-Connect Solar Installers Short Course or CPP41110 Certificate IV in Home Sustainability Assessment).

But we are currently missing some key pieces:

- First, an entry level qualification that can provide a pathway for people leaving secondary education or re-entering tertiary education who are keen to pursue a career or a higher level study in sustainability.
- And secondly, a set of contextualised capabilities, not just competencies, that apply sustainability principles to innovation at work and to business leadership.

A pro-sustainability culture is visible up and down the business model of an enterprise, so the VET sector has a role to play in workforce development approaches that link sustainability to the enterprise’s growth strategy. But if that growth strategy is to be decoupled from resource consumption, then it’s not enough for the training to be tied to immediate business needs. It must also develop leadership, a knowledge of the big issues, and the change and innovation capabilities that can deliver previously unimagined opportunities to the enterprise, to its industry, and to the nation.

It is not clear whether the policy makers in the VET reform space get this. There is nothing in the entitlement models or the skills priority mechanisms around Australia that suggest they do. So it’s difficult to be optimistic that the current system and its reforms will support the emergence of our next generation of green innovators and sustainable thinkers, nor
whether they’ll drive the changes we need in how VET organisations behave and in how VET practitioners approach their job of making learning happen in ways that grow our national prosperity without harming future well-being.

**Cross sectoral partnerships FOR systemic change**

Despite the potential of the VET sector to facilitate, even elicit change within businesses, organisations, communities and individuals through transformative learning, the potential for deep systemic change for sustainability is constrained by our broader political, social, cultural and economic constructs. VET must find ways to work in partnership with all tiers of government, private enterprise, other education sectors, the non-profit sector and communities to advocate for an approach that is beyond ‘green growth’ as we’ve know it till now and of a scale that is proportional the challenges that lie ahead. And VET policy makers must approach reforms with this long term, globally critical purpose in mind.

**References**


Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG), *Green Skills Agreement*, 2009

