

Australia's Response to a UN Decade in Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005-2014 provides a significant platform to enhance the profile of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in formal and informal learning spaces and ultimately to assist in transforming our future into a more sustainable one. The article presents a brief summary of Australia's response to the DESD since its announcement in 2003. It argues that if stakeholders interpret the Decade as "business as usual", rather than as a chance to reflect on how to be more strategic and reach out to key decision-makers or how to be more effective in involving a greater number of stakeholders in learning and change for sustainability, then the opportunities presented by the DESD will be missed.

A Decade of Opportunity

Over recent years the social dialogue around sustainable development has moved from establishing a case for sustainability to identifying ways in which individuals can lead more sustainable lives. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005-2014, declared by the international community¹ in response to a recommendation made at the World Summit for Sustainable Development, intends to take these discussions to yet another level. The Decade seeks to stimulate dialogue on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and enhance its profile in formal and informal learning spaces so that it can assist in the transformation to sustainable societies worldwide.

In October 2004, the United Nations released its International Implementation Scheme for the Decade. This document lays the foundation for national and regional responses to DESD and calls for national governments to integrate ESD into government policies and action plans (UNESCO, 2004). The Scheme presents a global vision for the Decade:

The vision of education for sustainable development is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.

(UNESCO International Implementation Scheme, October 2004, p. 4)

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How this vision will translate in different countries and different regions is yet to be seen. National governments are asked to strengthen their contribution to sustainable development through developing education and learning strategies (UNESCO, 2004). ESD is not new to Australia. Several groups from business and industry, schools, government agencies and NGOs have been wrestling with this concept seeking ways of implementing it in practice.² In Australia, the Decade provides an unprecedented opportunity to enhance current efforts in ESD so that they have real and sustained impact (Tilbury, 2005a,b,c). It could help focus a move away from the isolated actions which have characterised ESD in recent years to the strategic investment of resources and efforts that will result in greater impact and more systemic change (Australian Government, 2005).

Australia's Response to the Decade

The first Australian Decade events occurred under the leadership of the NSW Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) which organised seminars to seek national input into the World Summit draft documents (July, 2002) and the draft international implementation plan for the Decade (February, 2004). These seminars also served to raise awareness of the opportunities a Decade could present to Australia and to begin to explore a ten year vision for Australia. In January 2005, the Victorian Association for Environmental Education (VAEE) extended the dialogue organising a DESD forum and inviting the Australian Government to present its preliminary plans for the Decade³. After the event, VAEE facilitated a state-wide alliance to continue to raise this awareness at a more local level and explore potential activities to implement the DESD objectives. The NSW Government, in co-operation with AAEE, also facilitated a day's workshop in November 2005 to celebrate the Decade and identify a vision for the Decade in NSW. In Western Australia, similar workshops were held throughout 2005 facilitated by Department of Environment and Conservation and Water Corporation to explore collaborative opportunities.

That same year, the Decade was launched internationally by UNESCO and supported in the region by the UNESCO Bangkok Office which produced two documents to assist National Governments and UNESCO National Commissions to plan for the Decade. These documents presented a Strategic Plan for the region identifying needs and priorities (UNESCO, 2005a) and report of current ESD status and activities in a selected number of countries across the Asia Pacific (UNESCO, 2005b). Australian activities and plans were reported in these documents. However, many Australian stakeholders are yet to engage with these valuable documents and to make links between their activities and those of others in the region.

Representatives from the regional UNESCO Office, responsible for Asia Pacific documents, were invited to contribute at a national symposium held by the Australian National Commission in July 2005. This symposium was the first official event of the Decade in Australia. It sought group discussion and stakeholder advice on key strategic areas for the Decade. The Final Report from the symposium (National Commission for UNESCO, 2005) identifies the need to integrate sustainability into national state/territory and institutional education plans at all levels and across all sectors by 2014⁴. It prioritised the inclusion of sustainability into education plans rather than the development of specific DESD activities or programs or the mainstreaming of education and learning into sustainability plans.

At this meeting, the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage outlined their existing approaches to ESD and the alignment of current activities to the aims of the Decade. At the symposium the Australian Government stated it would build on existing initiatives to strengthen ESD at policy and program

level in all sectors. It also emphasised the importance of partnerships, monitoring and evaluation and broadening of EE to ESD, with a focus on economic, social and environmental aspects.

Three key mechanisms arising out of the National Action Plan for Environmental Education (Environment Australia, 2000) would serve as the vehicle for the Government's initiatives in ESD for the Decade:

- the *National Environmental Education Council (NEEC)*, an expert advisory body to the Minister comprising people from a variety of sectors; its role is helping set priorities in Education for Sustainability;
- the *National Environmental Education Network (NEEN)*, with representatives from Commonwealth, State and Territory environment and education agencies to promote better coordination of activities. This forum has had a significant role in the development of the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative and the national ESD policy statement for Australian Schools, "Educating for a Sustainable Future"; and
- the *Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability*, based at Macquarie University, which is to undertake education for sustainability research aimed at promoting improved environmental practice in the Australian community in support of sustainable development.

The Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage has prepared a formal Government Strategy for the Decade (Australian Government, 2006). The strategy, released in 2006, seeks to mainstream sustainability across the community through education and lifelong learning. The strategy outlines the broad approach to be adopted by the Australian Government to provide national leadership in ESD. The Minister for the Environment and Heritage sought input on the strategy from all Australian Government Ministers asking them to reflect on how their portfolios may contribute to the objectives of the Decade.⁵

The Australian Government has also recently committed to developing a monitoring and evaluation framework for DESD (Tilbury and Janousek, 2006). The framework, which is to be underpinned by ESD indicators, will assist to:

- assess the effectiveness of national government ESD initiatives contributing to the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD);
- report to the public and internationally on Australia's progress during the Decade; and
- improve implementation and effectiveness of Australian Government ESD policies and programs.

The results will feed into the Australian Government's policy and planning for the Decade, including the development of a new National Action Plan, and design of new programs. These indicators will also be useful in guiding and providing national leadership to other stakeholders in reporting on progress with their initiatives throughout the Decade.⁶ The new National Action Plan is the Australian Government's major contribution to the first half of the DESD, and will set out priorities and actions for the next 5 year period.

In addition to the activities and commitments listed above, few other national stakeholders have engaged with DESD. Perhaps the most notable exception is the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, which released a policy on ESD in June 2006 encouraging universities to develop their own responses to the Decade (AVCC, 2006). Otherwise, only a handful of NGOs, local councils and small environmental groups have organised events for the Decade with the purpose of exploring the opportunities that

this international movement can bring to their work (Tilbury, 2005b). Many more have adopted the UN DESD logo and identified their existing programs as a contribution to DESD.

In the end....

The Department of the Environment and Heritage in its paper, *“Extending the Vision: Australian Government engagement with the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014”*, (Australian Government, 2005) acknowledges the opportunities that this Decade can bring to Australia. It argues that the UN DESD will provide a platform for Australians from all walks of life to share experiences and learn about the implications of sustainable development for their lives.

The paper points out that The UN General Assembly has a crowded agenda for the next ten years:

As well as a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development the years 2005-2014 are also the International Decade of Action “Water for Life”. We need to be particularly careful to ensure our engagement with the DESD is meaningful to ensure the scepticism that sometimes surrounds International Decades, Years and Days is not justified in this case.

(Australian Government, 2005 p. 3)

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development provides a platform for improving the profile and effectiveness of efforts in this area. However, in the end, it will depend on how meaningfully stakeholders engage with national efforts and on whether they reflect upon the experiences in ESD to date. There is a tendency to adopt the UN DESD logo or label existing activities as DESD initiatives - when in reality those activities would have been developed regardless of whether there was a UN Decade or not. This is not seen as an issue by UNESCO which is encouraging wide ownership of the DESD and sees the labelling as a way to celebrate practice across stakeholder groups. This may be a valid strategy but it is important to also encourage groups to reflect on how to (a) be more strategic and reach out to key decision-makers who are yet to see the relevance of this area to their work and (b) become more effective in involving a greater number of stakeholders in learning and change for sustainability. If the Decade means “business as usual” for those already engaged in ESD, then opportunities will be missed.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

Endnotes

1. The Decade was adopted by the UN General Assembly through Resolution 57/254
2. See The National Review Series (Tilbury et al., 2006)
3. See <http://www.vaee.vic.edu.au/whatsnew/news.html>
4. See <http://www.deh.gov.au/education/decade/index.html>
5. See <http://www.aries.mq.edu.au>

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