

**Effective Sustainability Education Conference  
18-20 February 2004  
University of NSW, Sydney**

**Sustainability Education Research Dialogue**

A key purpose of the Effective Sustainability Education Conference was to identify sustainability education research priorities (themes and forms) through dialogue with practitioners and researchers.

The “sustainability education research dialogue” incorporated a number of processes including:

- individual written feedback about research priorities provided before the conference
- research dialogue groups where participants discussed key strategic questions about sustainability education research
- an interactive mural that displayed issues raised by individual participants and research dialogue groups
- sharing these ideas in the plenary sessions on day 3.

The following document is a summary of key outcomes from this dialogue prepared by the research team. These outcomes were provided to the Conference Steering Committee and will inform the NSW Council on Environmental Education's recommendations to the NSW Environmental Trust and other relevant research organisations.

Further information about the conference is available on the NSW Council on Environmental Education website at [www.environment.nsw.gov.au/cee/conference.htm](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/cee/conference.htm)

**Research Dialogue Facilitating Team**

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## Sustainability education research dialogue

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We have organised our initial analysis of information gathered in the conference research dialogue process under three headings:

- What should be researched
- How should research be undertaken
- What support should be provided to researchers.

### Conference demographics

- Students <1%
- Schools <1%
- TAFE and VET sector 3%
- Environmental Education Centres 4%
- Industry 6%
- Non-government organisations 14%
- University and research organisations 19%
- Local government 20%
- State government 29%
- Other 3%

### What should be researched

We propose that research topics suggested by conference participants can be categorised in six areas. Under each sub-heading is a sample of verbatim comments by conference participants.

Research about improving education in schools and early childhood

- More research about education for sustainability in the early childhood years
- Environmental science and how it operates / might operate better in the last two years of secondary schooling
- How to improve the Sustainable Schools Program

Research about improving education with industry

- About education practice with small to medium businesses

Research about improving education with community groups

- Gaps in evaluating the building of capacity for community groups to conduct environmental work
- How can we measure change in community capacity?
- 'action-taking'; 'active citizenship'? How can sustainability educators assist students' critical literacy in dealing with educational experiences?
- What are the indicators of successful EfS - in what desirable ways do learners change?

Research about how people understand the environment

- What do the women in positions of power, of community opinion, making, and in leadership or family / community roles think their landscape, country or environment needs to be like
- How can non-indigenous people (I don't agree that everyone is indigenous to somewhere) develop their own sense of sacred space / belonging to their country without necessarily relying on established sectarian religions or on the beliefs of indigenous peoples?
- We should do more research about the oral histories and first layer of traditional stories for individual communities and local landscapes, about places, plants, animals and connections.

Research about defining the nature of EfS

- What do other nations consider 'good practice' in EfS
- To what extent is EfS - or ought it to be - about 'situation improvement'

Research about how EfS can engage with culture and difference

- What are the appropriate roles in EfS for 'groups with an interest' – eg corporations, governments, green groups.
- Environmental education has often paid less attention to the educational needs of some groups than others eg indigenous peoples, disabled persons, non-Anglo cultures, non-middle class people. How can EfS be 'for' everyone?

## How should research be undertaken

Conference participants named and placed value on different types of research.

- Formal and informal research
- Theoretical and applied research
- Market and social research – eg. for *It's a Living Thing* campaign to find out how people understand the notion of sustainability (the 'S' word).
- Practice-based research – about how to plan, implement, evaluate and research education for sustainability strategies. eg. about how engage community directly in planning *It's a Living Thing* campaign
- 'Grey' research – unpublished accounts of practice eg. practitioners and activists who have written reflective accounts of practice and published these as photocopied monographs; acquittal reports, annual reports ...
- Anecdotal research – stories that are interested in problems and analysis

Over 50% of conference participants placed value on **practice-based research**. Here is a sample of comments made of the particular type of practice-based research they are interested in.

- Case study analysis and promoting outcomes of projects on the ground
- Investigate practitioners methods of information assimilation
- Dealing with (avoiding?) rushed analysis of delivery of on-the-ground projects
- Research needs to be matched with the needs of practitioners
- What are the tools that practitioners need?
- Need to distinguish between carrying out a sustainability project and turning it into research by data collection, evaluation and connecting it to other parallel projects, to turn it into research (ie. comparative and programmatic research)
- More rich qualitative data .... Setting up dialogues between people
- Desire by practitioners for more case studies
- Development of best practice models and guidelines
- Fund action research projects that target and measure change
- To what extent do agencies model environmentally sustainable practices?
- Adaptive management – research linked with env management
- Document examples of feminist praxis
- Readers and unis books etc – articulated to academics

Approximately 50% of conference participants expressed interest in strengthening **research and practitioner partnerships**. Here is a sample of verbatim comments made.

- Involve practitioners in research – don't have access, little opportunity to feed into research and shared learning, need to strengthen the relationship between researchers and practitioners.
- I feel uncomfortable that we are being persuaded to form partnerships with university and research institutions... what about developing skills so we can research?
- Better relationships between practice and research

- Putting research into practice
- Research has to be grounded in practice
- Theorising practice
- Opportunity to find potential partners/kindred spirits
- Opportunities to attract corporate and industry funding through partnerships.

We estimate that about 50% of conference participants discussed the value or otherwise of **participatory action research**. Here is a sample of verbatim comments.

- Call that research not be seen as an entirely different process to practice.
- Expressing interest in fostering more reflective practice
- Interesting and huge gap between aim of participatory citizenship with the top of ladder and 'real people's desires' – from the survey research delivered (AUSSCAN, Who Cares for the Environment?) which suggests that Australians do not want so much participatory responsibility but for government to regulate and "do it for them".
- We're discovering that top-down, expertise-driven education programs don't work, but we lack evidence about the effectiveness of participatory approaches .... Will someone please research this, otherwise EE will continue to stall?
- Some academics feel that EE is moving in an anti-intellectual direction & their research is not being put into practice"
- This is also in PAR we're discovering that top-down, expertise-driven 'education' programs don't work: but we lack evidence about the effectiveness of participative (PAR) approaches. Will someone research this, otherwise EE will continue to stall.
- How effective are participatory research approaches?

About 10% of conference participants expressed interest in **longitudinal and front-end research**.

### What support should be provided to researchers

Over 50% of conference participants expressed interest in strengthening ways to **disseminate research findings**. Here is a sample of suggestions made.

- more clearinghouse facilities – places where people can obtain unpublished and published research materials
- access and availability to research – much research is being conducted on a fragmented and ad hoc basis, no centralised mechanism to draw together to make it meaningful and provide linkages between different sectors
- making it accessible to practitioners, not just to academics and researchers
- Development of working groups to undertake research on particular topics... eg. drawing together all local government staff together by way of a research group (e-mail or formal meeting) focusing on how various small businesses can become more sustainable. Each person is given a topic to research and all information is drawn together to develop into a booklet.
- Develop a web site with searchable online databases... eg. imagine a database about bushfire education ... there are evaluation reports and a Nature Conservation Council of NSW project officer is keen to locate them
- Forums for exchanging practice, journals of applied practice
- National research dialogue network, national research coordinator
- See what works by bringing people together
- Big problem with siloing of information between local government, state government and other organizations – jealousy re- budgets
- Need research about what research is out there – a storage house for research done

About 20% of conference participants made written comments about **researching curriculum development and delivery**. Specific suggestions included:

- Training package competencies – changing

- Training *as* research
- Models for program/project evaluation
- Research to evaluate training packages and delivery – map ‘blind spots’
- How can EFS reach all students in higher education?
- Strategies to include marginalised groups in research

About 20% of conference participants made written comments about **strengthening a culture of research, inquiry and evaluation**. Here is a sample of comments.

- Raise awareness of ARC-funded research
- Connecting past/existing research - transferability
- Connecting the ‘tribes’ – research relevant to full range of stakeholders, learning from other sectors
- Involve decision-makers in research process
- Inter/transdisciplinary research
- Integrating the project & evaluation & research