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Change Agents UK

EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION

Towards a Sustainable Skills Academy

Rationale, findings and recommendations

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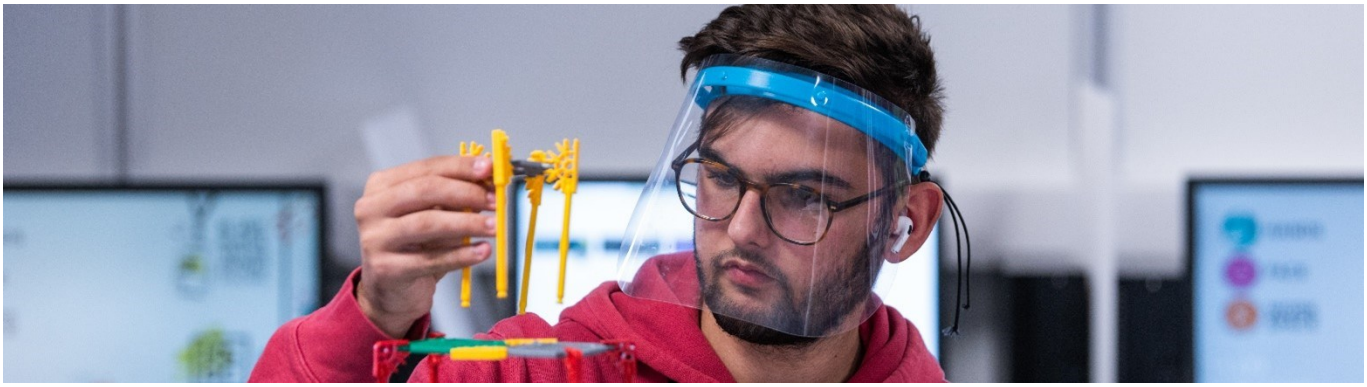

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This project set out to identify causal factors behind a problem that had been identified through discussions between various local employers and education providers: “it is difficult to recruit people with the right sustainability skills in the Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland area”. We wanted to understand root causes, examine emerging policy contexts and the wider future skills landscape before ultimately providing recommendations through a collaborative action plan for regional stakeholders to progress towards a “sustainability skills academy”.

Policy and context

Significant sustainability policy has been produced by Government in the last 18 months, including the Environment Bill[1] and Net Zero Strategy[2], alongside existing commitments to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The Department for Education’s positioning on green skills and careers is clear: *“Green jobs will not be niche. We anticipate that sustainability and climate change will touch every career.”* Whilst policy progress has accelerated, reality has yet to catch up; a recent study shows that public awareness of green jobs is low: 56% of the public had not heard the term ‘green jobs’, 62% did not understand what ‘green skills’ means and 65% felt they did not have access to any green skills training[3]. Similarly, learner exposure to ESD is low[4] and various studies show that the majority of teachers (63% - 75%, depending on the study) do not feel they have had adequate training to deliver sustainability education[5, 6, 7].

In terms of regional context, PWC’s Green Jobs Barometer measures the relative performance of UK regions and industry sectors on their progress developing green jobs. It finds that the East Midlands currently has 1.2% of its advertised positions being considered ‘green’ and is projected to have one of the largest shares of regional job losses (8.1%) as a result of the transition in so-called

[1] UK Government. 2021. Environment Act. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30
[2]UK Government. 2021. Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/net-zero-strategy
[3] YouGov on behalf of the Institute of Environmental Managers and Assessors. 2021. YouGov / IEMA Survey Results. Available at: https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/vp2sgj4loi/IEMA_GreenJobs_220412_W.pdf with further analysis available at: https://www.iema.net/all-jobs-greener.
[4] ibid
[5] ETF. 2021. Experiences of Education for Sustainable Development in the FE and Training Sector. Available at: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/resources/esd/esd-research/experiences-of-esd-in-the-fe-and-training-sector/
[6] EAUC, National Union of Students, University and College Union, Association of Colleges and the College Development Network. 2019. Sustainability in Education 2018-19. Available at: https://www.sos-uk.org/research/sustainability-state-of-the-sector
[7] Teach the Future. 2021. Teaching the Future. Available at: https://www.teachthefuture.uk/research

‘sunset jobs’ – those that will become obsolete as a result of the shift towards sustainability. This report also shows that the region has a higher carbon footprint per employee than average (10.9 tonnes of CO2 per employee compared to a national average of 9.1).

Research methodology

Desk-based research into the regional conditions was undertaken, alongside research into current and emerging policy and wider contextual factors. Interviews and surveys were held with small samples of local employers (8 employers, plus 2 LEP participants), educators (7) and students/recent graduates (12). Sustainability skills training was also delivered to 46 students from the commissioning universities. A stakeholder meeting comprising the project team, research participants and other interested parties was held to reflect on findings and consider solutions and next steps.

Findings

The most striking finding from this study was the significant challenge of engagement with sustainability research and programmes, particularly amongst SMEs, who represent over 98% of regional employers. This finding is replicated in other concurrent projects focused on decarbonisation in the region. The time constraints of the project played a part in this, but the effects of Brexit, post-pandemic recovery and market conditions leading to inflation and labour market shortages have likely contributed to this engagement issue, compelling employers to focus on short-term and survival activities.

We also determined that defining “sustainability skills” presented challenges due to the broad nature of the concept, but that research participants were better able to define “hard” or technical skills and “soft” behaviours or competencies that they need to sustain their organisations. “Hard” skills included specialist skills in areas such as ecology, forestry, sustainable infrastructure development, embedding sustainability in the ethos of the businesses, engineering, STEM, coding, spatial analysis, sustainable procurement, data analysis and carbon (and decarbonisation) literacy. “Soft” skills included requirements for skills in communication, influencing and engagement, teamwork, problem-solving and creativity.

We identified that successful recruitment may be hampered both by the fact that job descriptions for sustainability-related roles, whilst clear and structured, are not felt to be “appealing or engaging” and by limitations of recruitment processes and finding accessible and successful routes to the recruitment market.

We determined that students derived significant benefit from the skills and careers interventions delivered as part of this project and aimed at supporting their understanding of sustainability and skills for their futures, and that more could be done to equip those studying in the region for sustainable and successful futures. There are also clear opportunities for training and CPD for staff within organisations in the region.

Conclusions

There is a great deal more work to do to understand local skills needs and the challenge is more profound than "it is difficult to recruit sustainability skills in the area". The biggest single issue is engagement on sustainability-related programmes and initiatives – we had assumed a level of readiness for the project, and indeed the research questions posed, that does not yet exist. Those ready to engage with discussions on green skills are not necessarily representative of the diversity of employers across the region and our findings and recommendations are perhaps missing the

richness that greater diversity of engagement would have presented.

Notwithstanding the issues identified by the project, it is clear that there is a genuine desire among local leaders to make meaningful progress. There is a shared recognition of the potentially transformative outcomes that could be realised through a collaborative approach to sustainability skills development regionally.

Recommendations and next steps

Short, medium and long-term actions have been defined to take this project forward into the next phase, derived from both ideas generated through the stakeholder meeting and recommendations from the project team based on their findings and research.

Firstly, a clear leadership framework to take this forward within the region is needed to maintain momentum and short/mid-term funding sources need to be identified. There are a range of short-term actions that could represent “quick wins” in terms of addressing some of the issues identified. These include:

- Clearly defining a positive vision for future that makes the connection between working sustainably and business resilience and local prosperity. Ensuring language used is accessible and meaningful.
- Providing employers with support to improve their recruitment processes and increasing the accessibility and appeal of roles related to sustainability or requiring green skills.
- Developing collaborative sustainability skills programmes for graduates or people beginning careers in the region. This will help to attract and retain talent in the region, help employers to bridge training gaps and encourage the development of strong networks.
- Supporting careers advice professionals to understand more about green skills and the changing landscape of work that the net zero transition will necessitate.
- Undertaking more analysis of the “sunset jobs” in the region to target those areas first.
- Identifying means of actively demonstrating sustainability jobs and skills in different settings for those going into work (or seeking to change roles/sectors) – through case studies, profiles and storytelling as well as industry specific workshops, podcasts, and forums to discuss how to bring sustainability into different roles.

Longer-term, more complex interventions could be achieved, including targeting SMEs with a programme focused on “resilience and future-proofing" their businesses and making sustainability a solution for them to protect their business, rather than an extra target or challenge to be undertaken. This will help to shift the mentality away from sustainability representing a burden and attempt to address the consequent lack of £$engagement. Further work could also take place on embedding ESD into university programmes and developing a regional voice on skills that is used to influence relevant national policies and funding.

ETF and Change Agents UK can provide further support with future phases of the project as needed.

Delivered and written by:

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