

ACTSHEN – EVALUATION MEETING WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2016

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The setting of the meeting.

The group met in a meeting space at CEMUS, sat around a single table with the computer on one end. Some of the posters that had been made for the coming Sustainability Festival were shown on the board. After being introduced Ólafur asked the participants to introduce themselves and explain what their background was and what their role in the project had been – and still was – since the project is not over yet. During these introductions, some of the key aspects of the ActSHEN project were discussed, not least various forms of student initiative in higher education.

Before meeting Sue Gollifer and Allyson Macdonald had asked the group to reflect on a respond to three questions:

- (1) What worked well?
- (2) What could be changed, added or left out?
- (3) Other suggestions?

Most of the discussion focused on question (1) – and also on the related question of how the different participants benefited from the project. We also wondered whether the benefit was the direct consequence of activities related to the project or more indirect learning or support activities that might not be considered “part of” the formal project work packages. A key element in the ActSHEN project was to develop pedagogy where student initiatives have a key role, where they are central and connect to both values and visions and the wider governance (see poster below).

During the discussion, which was rather informal in character, various themes came up. I will discuss some of them here below, both reflecting the voices of the participants and offering my own comments or interpretation.

Theme 1: Tolerance and opportunity for disagreement

Quite a bit of the discussion revolved around the character of the kind of work done within the framework of ActSHEN. One thing that stood out was that within the project people met to discuss controversial issues where they could disagree with one another. One participant actually referred to this as one of the aspects of the project that was most conducive to learning. In general, the participants agreed that their own institutions or departments did not offer that kind of internal space for disagreement with the exception of Isak who said that CEMUS really had a space for critical conversation. However, he also thought that a project like ActSHEN helped to maintain that spirit and to move the discussion within CEMUS to a deeper and more varied level. Another participant said that ActSHEN had given her more strength to talk about the conflicts.

Theme 2: Recognition of academic work and freedom for creativity

A key element of the ActSHEN project was student initiative for course design. Some of the participants came into the project as students with experience in designing courses or had had considerable influence on the design of their own studies. One of these students said by being given that responsibility – or by being given the opportunity to seize that responsibility – she had been given “a place as a student to think about what I want to learn” and through that she had been given a space to think about what kind of person she was and what she wanted to do, rather than just focusing on learning for grades.

In the discussion it was also clear that many experienced considerable freedom at their institutions in the pedagogy but less so when it comes to evaluation. The rigidity of evaluation seemed both to be caused by institutional standards (for evaluation of both learning outcomes and of research activity) and student’s conception of their learning where exchange value is no less important than intrinsic educational value, especially when looking for new study opportunities. The institutional drive towards counting activity is perhaps most clearly brought out by CEMUS which is now assigning grades after 20 years of working without grades.

Theme 3: Dissemination of the project

During the project the participants have produced much material that could be of value for a wider audience and future practitioners and scholars. In order to help disseminate the material, several participants initiated work on developing the material further and then publish it on the web as a kind of web-book. That work is typical for ActSHEN in two respects. On the one hand, the project is about sharing the work and engaging in a dialogue with others. But it is also typical that someone – in this respect the younger participants – have taken initiative and are leading the work, pulling along the members that are more senior in both age and academic standing.

Part of the material itself was initially produced in a very collaborative manner which again was something central to the whole ActSHEN project.

However, although participants agreed that it was important to disseminate the various outputs that had been generated during the project, they also agreed that one of the most important part of the project was the generation of a community of learning and such a community cannot be disseminated. It can only be continued. In that respect, ActSHEN has produced new challenges for the participants.

Theme 4: Sustainability and institutional change

One participant said that almost everything they do was about institutional change and that the power struggle within the university was something which was very much a part of the work. This connects to the theme about evaluation and freedom. Although there may be considerable freedom within the university when it comes to pedagogy within individual courses, there is much less freedom when it comes to structure the workplace, determine how things are valued and evaluated, etc.

Some institutions are resistant to widespread cross disciplinary cooperation although their policies may appear to favour such work. One participant claimed that universities have failed to learn from their own students who have gone into different parts of society and done interesting things. Everyone agreed that there was too little space for informal learning within the universities. This was felt strongly since one of the most rewarding aspect of the ActSHEN project had been the informal learning during the meetings of the group and their visitors.

Theme 5: ActSHEN and the wider community

When raising the second question that the participants had been asked to consider before this meeting, name what could be changed, added or left out, the discussion took a turn towards the relation between a project like ActSHEN and the wider community outside the academia. This aspect was initially stronger in the project but faded to the side for two kinds of reasons: On the one hand, one of the initial participants whose concentration was more on corporate social responsibility and informal learning changed occupation and moved out of the program. On the other hand, since other aspects of the program – aspects concentrating more on affairs within the academia – were more than enough to keep the participants busy, the extra-academia aspects and engagement with deans and new course requirement were set to the side. However, these are important issues and could form part of a follow-up activity. Such issues have come to the fore as the project draws to its final stage.

Was ActSHEN successful?

On the general question whether the ActSHEN project was successful, all participants gave a very enthusiastic “yes”. They claimed that they had learned very much and gained more confidence in dealing with issues related to sustainability, whether course design, pedagogy or assessment or taking part in the institutional struggle within their own institutions. Thus, judging by the personal benefits of the participants the project was clearly successful and is already having impact in their respective institutions.

In the initial application, two objectives were listed as central to the project. These were:

1. What types of student-driven activities in higher education lead students, teachers and staff to richer understanding and better preparedness to work with sustainability issues?
2. What actions are needed to support and encourage university teachers and students who wish to work with and for sustainability?

Much progress has been with the first of these objectives – as will be evident in the web book that will be published. As for the second objective, it is more contextual and bound to individual institutions. Still, some telling examples have been generated.

However, one participant also said that there were pressing issues at hand and that they could not wait 10 years for institutional change to happen. Lack of ability to influence the larger structures was a pressing issue and a project like ActSHEN and the kinds of changes it could bring about, although valuable, were too little and too slow.

This last concern points to the importance of the dissemination of the ActSHEN project to a wider audience – both generally through publications on the web, but also more strategically towards specific people that can be key players in the ongoing institutional power struggles.

In a poster produced for the Sustainability Fair at Uppsala University 15th of December 2016, the ActSHEN group made the poster shown in figure 1. In this figure ideal student influence is placed in the centre and thus, in some sense, connecting through pedagogy to vision & values and governance & support.

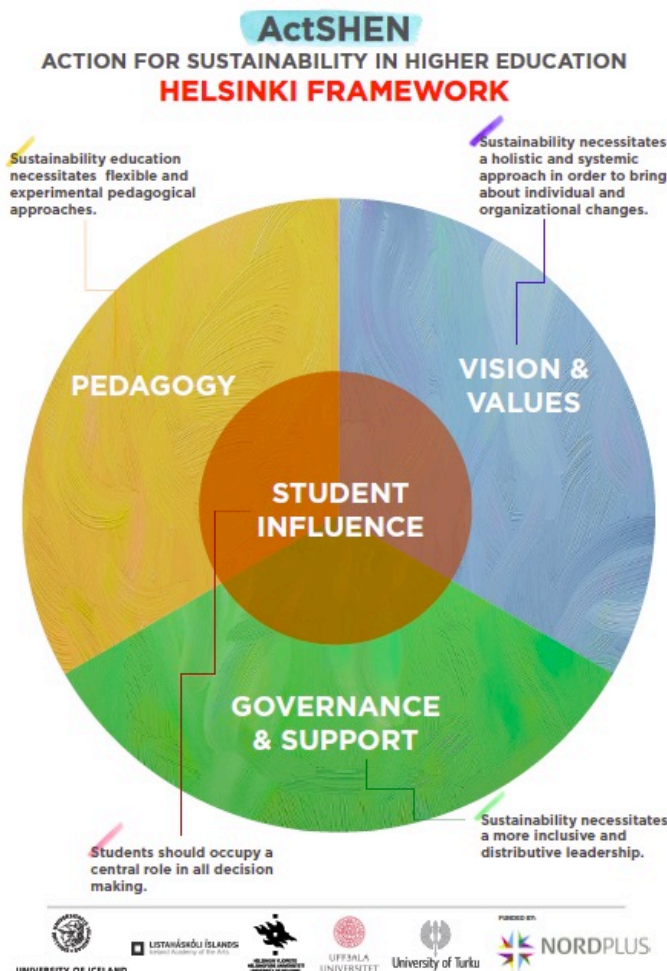


Figure 1 A structural model for ESD in higher education

However, a more conventional model (one representing the dominant state of affairs) would probably place governance & support at the centre with institutional conventions and preferences being dominant. Part of the conventions are deeply

rooted in the organisation of different disciplines and their separation into different schools and departments. With the emphasis on student initiative and influence and cross- and trans-disciplinary work, ESD as developed through the ActSHEN project does not call for educational improvement but for transformation.

Thus the work of ActCHEN has shown that the vision for sustainability education is more radical than simply improving current structures would allow. What is needed is a transformation of some of the fundamental organizing principles of higher education.

One outcome of the ActSHEN project was to develop this vision, articulate and ground it in actual practices within higher education. Another outcome was to empower the participants to advocate such changes in their own local work environment. Yet another part was to form a community of scholars for learning and support in favour of this vision and other aspects of ESD in higher education. Finally part of the project is to articulate and present this vision to a wider audience that is as yet unspecified, could be anywhere on the globe but shares the interest and the feel of urgency that has characterized the ActSHEN group. The project is preparing a booklet with descriptions of studies which might serve as a catalyst in other fields and settings.

I would like to conclude with a quote from the book *Cultural Miseducation* by the American philosopher of education, Jane Roland Martin. Her concern is not sustainability but the way in which the wider culture is an active participant in the education of young people.

Cultural miseducation occurs when so many cultural liabilities or such devastating ones are passed down that a heavy burden is placed on the next generation; or, alternatively, when invaluable portions of the culture's wealth are not passed down. (Martin, 2002, p. 5)

Questions about educational changes, such as the ones the ActSHEN group has been raising, are often posed as questions about student learning (pedagogy, curricula) or as questions about institutional changes. Martin, in her book, is asking the reader to consider such questions in a wider perspective as questions about cultural changes – and as such as questions about what in our culture is of value and who is in a position to value it thoroughly, for instance, curricula and institutional design.

What I have written is not an evaluation of the project – it is neither based on sufficient reading of the proposal or the various products nor on the kind of interviews with the participants that an evaluation would call for. It is rather a reflection on the outcome of the proposal based on reading of some of the key documents and a discussion one after noon where I served more as a facilitator than an evaluator. And, therefore, what I have written here is more of a reflection based on the meeting and continued discussion with various participants. I hope these reflections will be of some value to the participants in the ActSHEN project.

Uppsala, December 15th 2016, Ólafur Páll Jónsson