

## FOREWORD

When the Viking settlers came to Iceland in the late 800s it was to find new challenges so that their way of living could be strengthened. Some settled and survived but even so they needed goods and expertise from their cousins on the mainland. This is still the case in 2016 as the Nordic countries collaborate in many areas supporting networks and projects through common funds.

One such fund is Nordplus Higher Education (HE) whose programme serves as a framework for eliciting the ideas of those working in HE across the region and putting them to work. Some of its objectives are:

- To strengthen and develop Nordic educational cooperation and contribute to the establishment of a Nordic-Baltic educational region;
- To support, develop, draw benefit from and disseminate innovative products and processes in education through the systematic exchange of experiences and best practice;
- To contribute to the development of quality and innovation in educational systems for lifelong learning in the participating countries by means of educational cooperation, as well as cooperating with workplaces, about development projects, exchanges and building of networks.

In 2013 a group of scholars several of whom knew each other from earlier Nordic cooperation developed a project proposal called ActSHEN short for Action for Sustainability in Higher Education in the Nordic region. This proposal was funded by Nordplus HE for the period 2013-2016.

One product of the project has been to produce a series of studies reflecting on our own work and development as project activities were constructed and evaluated and designed to foster student initiative. The project followed a set of guiding principles for sustainability education that became more nuanced with time.

The first principles listed in the proposal drew on the *Quality criteria for education for sustainable development* produced in Denmark by Breiting, Mayer, & Mogensen (2005) and later translated across Europe. These guide action at three operational levels: *teaching and learning*, *the school as a unit* and the *external community* in which the school is situated. The work at each level is characterized in turn by knowledge, respect and understanding. These operational levels meant that an early topic in the project, in late 2013, was a discussion on limits set by the university as an academic unit and the making of the curriculum as well as the effect of policy on practice.

Next, a revised set, known as the *Helsinki Principles*, was developed at an ActSHEN meeting in June 2014 in Helsinki. Several project members wanted to consider and produce a more detailed set of guiding principles than those arising from the *Quality criteria* (Breiting, Mayer & Mogensen, 2005). The group agreed on four principles

for the development work carried out over the next 12-18 months: these were *educational outcomes, management, pedagogy and student influence*.

In 2015 several members of the project attended the 8<sup>th</sup> WEEC Planet and People conference held in 2015 (see <http://weec2015.org>) in Gothenburg in 2015 and presented papers about ActSHEN. In discussions with others of what was learnt, it was felt that our work would benefit from reviewing the 2014 principles. Stephen Sterling, professor of sustainability education at Plymouth University, agreed to spend two days with us in Helsinki in early March 2016. Under his guiding hand what is now called the *Helsinki framework* was developed. The initial ideas, the actions and reflections of the project members and the Helsinki principles morphed into a framework with three principles for sustainability education underpinned by student influence on their own learning. This would include having a say pedagogy i.e. on what, how and why some topics should be available, what sort of rules and organization define the management and governance of the educational institution and what sort of involvement with the larger community would be reflected by the vision of the university and the values of its staff?

This small book is the story of the three-year ActSHEN project and development of courses which give students more influence i.e. more voice and more choice. You can read about the way the project participants made some significant changes to the way they worked, tackling their vision and values, questioning their pedagogical practice, adopting new forms of governance and support, all in a quest to develop student engagement in courses in sustainability education. We hope that you enjoy the papers and that you will be able to use some of the ActSHEN ideas in your own work.

There are four sections in this short book that present papers by project members. These papers are introduced in the chapter titled *Action for Sustainability in Higher Education*.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank colleagues and friends, old and new, who worked to make this project possible.

*Allyson Macdonald, in Reykjavik, December 2016*

*Project leader*

*On behalf of all the ActSHEN project members*

## REFERENCES

Breiting, S., Mayer, M., & Mogensen, F. (2005). *Quality Criteria for ESD-Schools: Guidelines to enhance the quality of Education for Sustainable Development*. Vienna: Austrian Federal Ministry of Education.