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Building capacity for change: Embedding education for sustainability into Teacher Education through action research and networked partnerships

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Teacher education as a sector has been remarkably slow at responding to the issues of climate change and sustainability. While there have been individual academics, and parts of systems, within the teacher education who have been addressing these issues since the 1970s, in effect the overall picture is one of 'patches of green', a term coined by Elliott (2003) to refer to the early childhood education for sustainability (EfS) field but which also aptly applies to teacher education. What is needed is for the patches to be connected so that EfS in teacher education becomes comprehensive and coherent. We argue that the best way forward is through networked, capacity-building approaches to achieve system wide embedded change.

This paper reports on a multi-partnership action research project (IQuEST), involving five Queensland universities with teacher education faculties/departments; EIDOS, a Queensland-based social policy 'think tank' and research Institute; and key stakeholders representing Education Queensland, Department of Natural Resources and Water, Environmental Education Centres and community-based environmental education organisations. The study used participatory action research as its methodology, to develop a systems approach to mainstreaming sustainability into teacher education in Queensland.

As an evolutionary research process, action research is well suited to environments in transition or where there is a desire to explicitly bring about change. The systemic approach is also important for targeting change at a number of levels within the teacher education system as it explicitly aims to provide a supportive policy environment for changes that are required. In essence, the study sought to develop teacher educators' understandings about EfS, while at the same time, bring about tangible changes to pre-service teacher education programs in Queensland. Embedded into the design of the study, also, was the concept of self-organised communities of learners as the project team engaged in learning, sharing, journaling and critiquing their own and each others' projects.

As a result of embarking on this highly complex research and change process within teacher education, a range of structural, organisational, pedagogical, and conceptual challenges emerged. These required the participants to be highly flexible to their own contexts and develop a range of new skills in communication and organisational change. On the other hand, the process also highlighted previously unexploited opportunities that have much to offer the future mainstreaming of sustainability in preservice teacher education and will inform future cycles that have been planned for this project.