

## An Evolving Framework for Skills for Sustainable Communities

To date the agenda linking skills and sustainable communities has been steered by the legacy of the Egan Review, 2004. This has emphasised skills gaps and the need for new ways of working in partnership. This ESRC and HCA Academy funded research Initiative reflects on recent approaches to skills for sustainable communities and the research findings from eleven independent research projects.

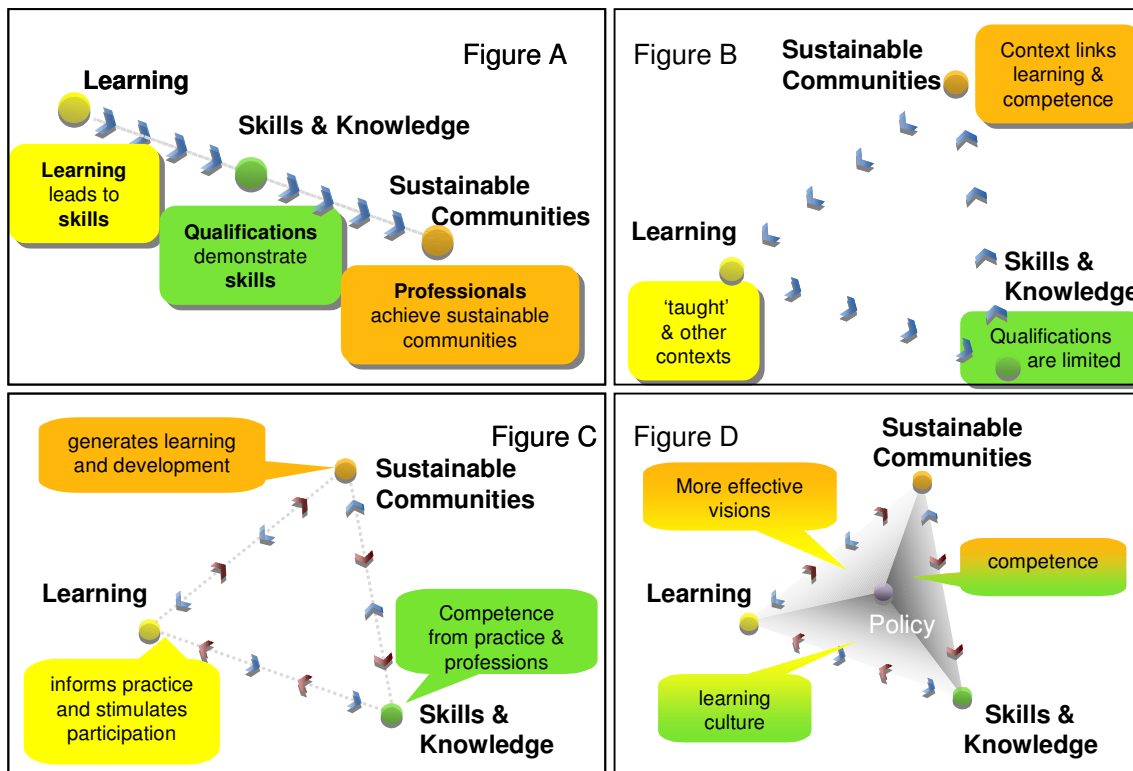
This Overview considers three challenges raised by the research:

- What is the role of learning?
- Can qualifications deliver the skills required for sustainable communities?
- Is there a clearly defined 'sustainable communities' goal against which to measure the need for skills and knowledge?

This paper argues that, in promoting skills policy, current approaches to developing sustainable communities have failed to recognise the significance of the relationships between

- Sustainable Communities
- Skills
- Learning

Separate briefings bring together the findings of the research projects on each element and contribute to this Overview. The figures below illustrate the conceptual journey explored by the co-ordinators through their review of the Initiative as a whole.



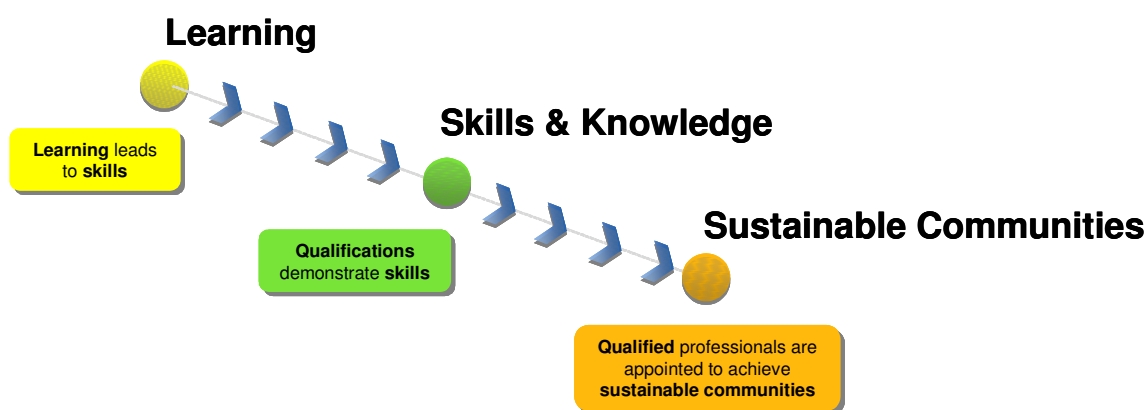
This Overview draws on selected evidence from the Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities Initiative to examine some of the assumptions and ways of working associated with the skills agenda for sustainable communities. Eleven independent research projects were commissioned in 2007/8 from universities across the UK as part of a joint Initiative funded by the ESRC and the HCA Academy. The projects sought to explore aspects of skills and knowledge for sustainable communities, following the government's Egan Review (2004) and work by the HCA Academy (Mind the Skills Gap, 2007), which established the context for the research on generic skills and the built environment. Summaries of the findings from each of the research projects, case studies and four briefings, on Skills, Learning, Sustainable Communities, Leadership and Vision are available at <http://gs.strath.ac.uk/suscoms>.

A team of three co-ordinators was appointed to review the research generated by the Initiative and to highlight the findings that resonated across the projects. They were supported in this task by a co-ordinating research assistant. This briefing therefore represents the views of the co-ordinating team looking across and drawing on the individual research projects, rather than the findings of any one project or the views of the ESRC or the HCA Academy which funded the Initiative.

Skills and knowledge for sustainable communities encompasses two complex and contested academic and policy areas – (i) skills and (ii) sustainable communities. The Egan Review (2004) was significant in both areas. First, it clearly set out the components of sustainable communities. Second, it provided a landmark assessment of the skills and learning associated with the development of such sustainable communities, identifying a range of 'generic skills' and their importance to success.

The process of change envisaged in the Review can be viewed as essentially linear:

Figure A: The linear relationship between learning, skills and sustainable communities



### ***Sustainable Communities as a Goal***

Sustainable Communities emerged as a 'branded' policy in the UK in 2003, recognising housing in a wider 'community' context and making links with policy commitments to sustainable development,

*'The way our communities develop, economically, socially and environmentally, must respect the needs of future generations as well as succeeding now.'* (ODPM, 2003)

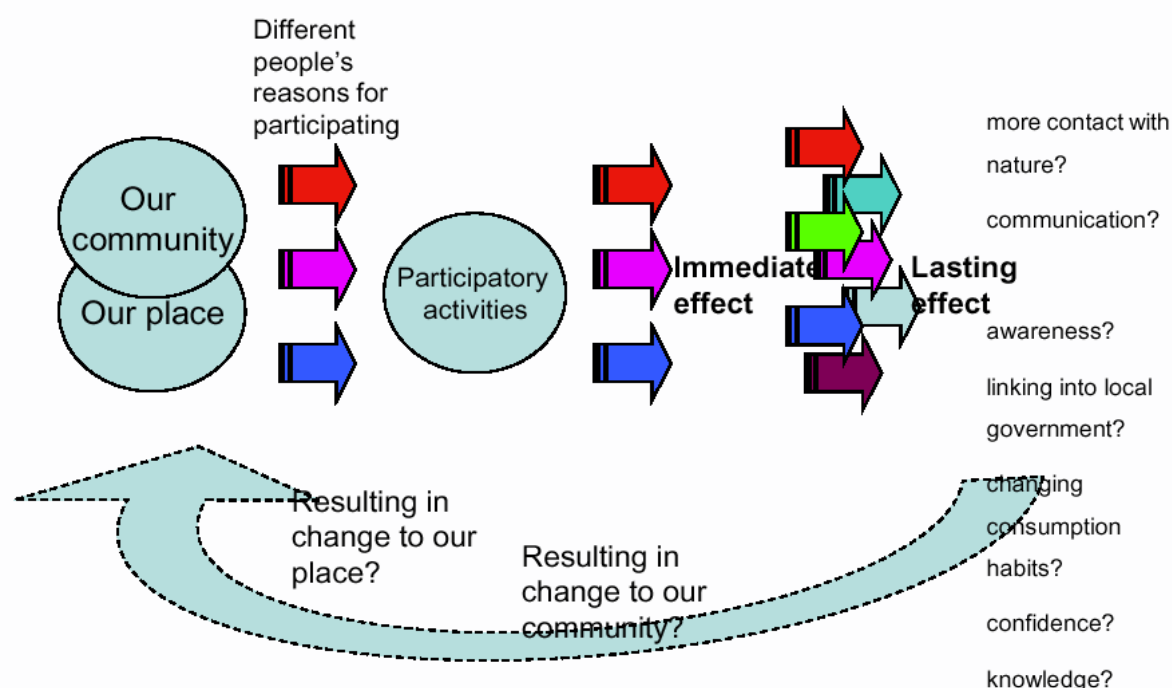
The 2003 report set out 12 key requirements for sustainable communities that were subsequently adapted by the Egan Review (2004) into 7 components, to which the Bristol Accord in 2005 added an eighth 'characteristic' – equity. The eleven research projects comprising this Initiative each worked with the concept in different ways and a report of Initiative findings with respect to sustainable communities is contained in Policy Briefing 3.

For some of the research projects, the identification of what sustainable communities meant in a local community context was a positive and revealing process:

- Researchers at Queens University Belfast<sup>a</sup> worked with local people in communities in Belfast to explore their understanding of sustainable communities and to develop local plans that would generate wider cohesion and better connected communities.
- Primary and secondary schools worked with the University of West of England<sup>a</sup> researchers to discover their understanding of sustainability (see research findings and case studies for more detail).
- Researchers at Cardiff University worked with established community based sustainability initiatives.
- Researchers at Napier and Liverpool universities worked with community visioning and planning processes.

In all cases, the importance of understanding a range of perspectives of sustainable communities, suggesting that there is no single cohesive vision of sustainable communities. Rather there are multiple, local community and individual visions. In particular the research challenges the belief that there is a clearly defined 'sustainable communities' goal or vision that is shared beyond a local and immediate context. This is significant, not only for sustainable communities policy, but also for assessing the skills and knowledge required to achieve sustainable communities.

Figure 1: Evaluation of Imaginative Engagement (Selman, 2009)

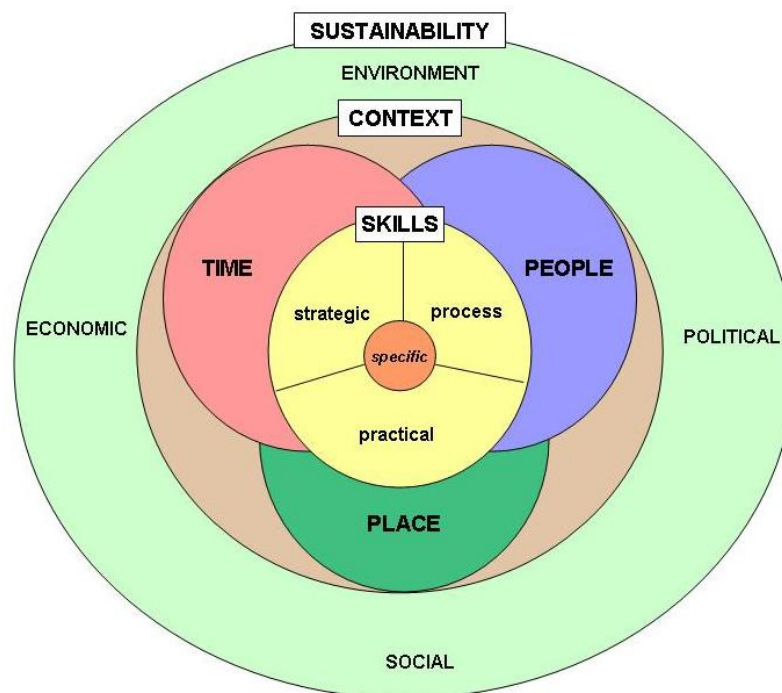


The research at Sheffield University specifically set out to engage with sustainable river basin management. Evaluation of learning from the project was based on assessing the changes brought about by the learning activity, which in this case was a series of creative writing workshops. The evaluative model for the project (below) has similarities to the linear process described above. The key changes are in the recognition of multiple perspectives and the introduction of a loop that demonstrates that 'our community' is constantly changing.

Research from the Initiative also consistently emphasised the role of practice and experience in sustainable communities in learning and developing skills, portraying them often as inseparable.

Cardiff University researchers proposed a model in which key elements of local sustainability initiatives (time, people and place) and skills (strategic, process, practical and specific skills) are placed wholly within a sustainability context.

Figure 2: Skills & Sustainability Model (Marsden, 2009)



### Measuring Skills

The Egan Review emphasised 'generic skills',

*'We believe that it is the generic skills, behaviour and knowledge that will make the difference between successful delivery and failure. Skills such as the ability to create a vision, leadership to achieve buy-in to the vision, communication, teamworking, project management, process re-engineering, understanding sustainable development, effective financial management, understanding the economics of development and the processes of local democracy.'* (p10)

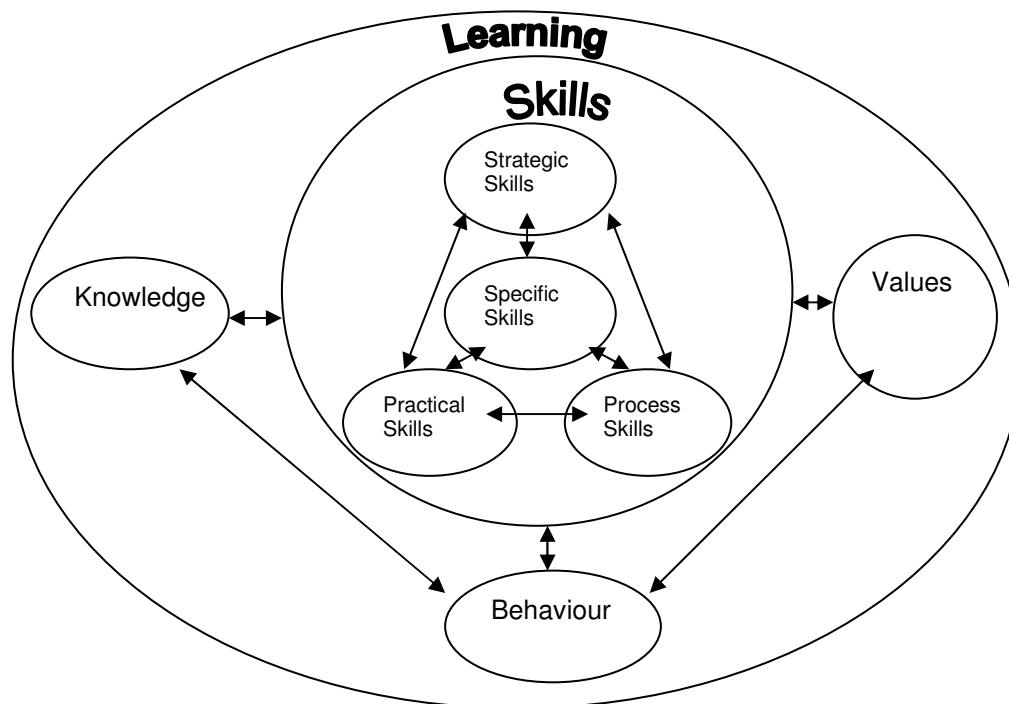
Turok & Taylor (2006), presented a skills framework for regeneration based on four generic skills groups – *strategic, process, practical and specific skills*. The framework supports Egan's focus on generic skills and in fact does not cover specific skills,

*'because of the large number of distinctive roles that exist and the assumption that these are mostly established occupations or functions that will tend to have well developed education and training systems with recognised qualifications and accreditation. It is generally accepted in the*

*literature that the biggest challenge for regeneration lies in the more generic, cross cutting skills. This was reinforced by our research.'*

Several of the research projects conducted under the Initiative pointed toward contributions made by Turok & Taylor, notably their model, showing skills as a set within a broader learning context, that also shows a role for values (see diagram below).

Figure 3: Broad Skills & Competencies for Urban Regeneration (Turok & Taylor, 2006)



Findings from across the Initiative support the significance of generic skills in creating sustainable communities and also the inclusion of 'values' in a model. Among the key conclusions from the Initiative are:

- Not all generic skills can be formally taught and assessed – engaging in practice or simulation are vital learning processes (all research projects)
- Qualifications are useful in building confidence in individuals and employers, particularly at entry points (Kingston and Exeter Universities)
- New ways of learning do not always require 'experts' (Queens University Belfast<sup>a</sup> & Sheffield University)
- Generic skills are evident in higher education, but absent or disguised from professional body requirements (Kingston University)

These conclusions challenge a policy focus on qualifications as a measure of skills. Findings from the research projects relating to skills, learning and qualifications are reported in the individual project reports and in Policy Briefings 1 & 2 on skills and learning respectively.

The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) reports that '*the most common measures of skills are qualifications*' and qualifications continue to be seen as '*the most important lever in our control*' (Leitch, 2006). The focus remains on generating an economic return for investment in skills and qualifications. The acquisition of a formal qualification remains one of the key ways through which the provision of 'skills' is assessed. The Leitch Report underlines the utility of qualification levels as an important comparative metric. Those involved in formal learning emphasise the value of qualification

as an externally accepted sign of competence and completion of learning tasks. However, the Review acknowledges '*there is no perfect measure of skills*'.

Three key issues emerge from this focus on qualifications:

a) The value of other forms of learning and other ways of evaluating competence has tended to be downplayed. Voluntary and community organisation feel under pressure (and are encouraged by funding bodies) to have members 'qualified' through training so that they can show they have the requisite competence.

b) Some forms of learning are elevated over others. In particular, the emphasis on qualifications means that *formal learning* taking place in pre-arranged classroom, or on-line sessions etc tends to be more widely supported (eg through CPD course provision, degree courses, on-job training). In contrast, without the back up of independent assessment and quality benchmarking *informal learning* (learning as a by-product of some other activities) has not been widely incorporated into policy beyond the field of community education.

c) Skills are seldom clearly defined. Often the term is used to capture those methods of working acquired through learning or practice and what Bailey (2005) terms '*capabilities, competences and attributes*'. Whilst the separation of 'generic' and 'specific' skills assists like other descriptors of skills, they are used in non-standard ways and potentially cause confusion and non-comparability.

Combined with the focus on skills deficits, the desire to measure 'skills' through qualification has a tendency to separate skill acquisition from the *application* of learning and training.



Policy interventions and support have through this approach placed emphasis therefore on:

- support for new learning and training
- qualifications to evidence the learning of generic skills
- expanding training for professional groups on generic and transferable skills

In contrast less attention has been given to

- how/where learning takes places
- the importance of context and organisational practices in shaping learning
- the different opportunities to apply/share learning

The current 'linear' model therefore focuses more on interventions to increase learning opportunities to acquire skills (qualifications) and less on other possible *connections*. In noting this emphasis, this is not an argument for a refocusing away from qualifications themselves. Rather, as the research in the Initiative indicates, there is an opportunity to explore the more complex relationship between learning, skills and practice through closer analysis of the links between learning and skills –reflected in the triangular model illustrated in Figure B.

### **Additional Policy Levers**

While acknowledging the importance of qualifications and the role they play in generating confidence among individuals, communities and employers that skills have been evidenced, all the research projects underlined the importance of *how* skills were acquired. It is increasingly recognised that skills that are not obtained in a formal environment or subject to formal assessment can still be of significant benefit to sustainable communities.

Among the key conclusions from the research Initiative on knowledge, skills and learning are:

- Learning processes and styles need to suit both what is being learned and the learner (Liverpool and Cardiff Universities)
- Individuals and leaders need to become more confident in identifying skills (University of the West of England<sup>b</sup>, Anglia Ruskin University)
- A learning culture in organisations, professions and communities assists the development of sustainable communities and cross-disciplinary working (University of the West of England<sup>b</sup>)

Turok & Taylor (2006) also concluded that :

*'The single most important means of learning regeneration skills is from observing what other people do. This practical experience appears to be valued more highly than formal education or training courses.'*

This raises the question of what policy levers, other than qualifications, might be suggested by the research that would help support skills and knowledge for sustainable communities.

### ***Learning and training***

As Policy Briefing 2 indicates, the current system is focused primarily on the individual perspective. The research in this Initiative emphasises the ***social perspective of learning*** and opens up new ways in which learning can be supported:

- co-production of knowledge (Queens University Belfast<sup>a</sup> & University of the West of England<sup>a</sup>)
- creative engagement (Sheffield University)
- supporting local action-oriented forms of learning (Cardiff University, University of the West of England<sup>a</sup>, & University of Exeter)
- creating social learning opportunities through the workplace (Liverpool University, Anglia Ruskin & University of the West of England<sup>b</sup>)
- supporting staff to take on brokerage/translation roles beyond the workplace or profession (University of the West of England<sup>a</sup>, Queens University Belfast<sup>b</sup>, University of the West of England<sup>b</sup>)

In supporting learning, the projects also highlight the significance of the wider learning environment, and the role of organisations to create:

- motivation for continual learning
- a purpose of learning and training
- opportunities for putting learning into practice

### **Competencies**

The current focus tends to emphasise “skills for the sake of them” rather than:

- (i) on their value within the context of application and practice; and
- (ii) those abilities individuals have which arise from forms of learning and experience beyond training.

Together these competencies need to be judged by the efficacy of skills in the workplace – by evaluating the change or transformation that occurs, rather than the number of boxes ticked. This is a

journey, the purpose of which is to grow and develop, rather than merely to arrive at a pre-determined location. Competencies need to incorporate the ability to reflect and learn in order to move beyond the simpler measurement of retained knowledge or reproduction of particular actions.

### Skills through application

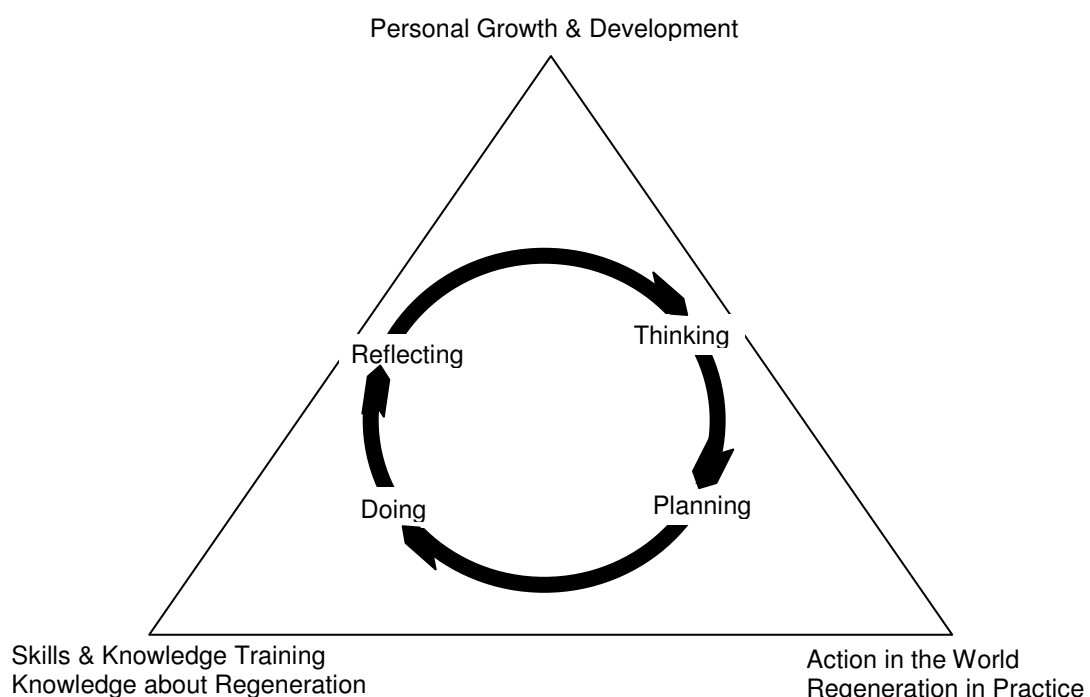
To accommodate and reflect the value of social learning, individuals need motivation, confidence and opportunity, organisations need supportive management, professions need to engage more with situated learning, and there needs to be further research into how best to foster continual learning and reflection, and, most importantly, the application of learning.

Work by Peel (2005), looking particularly at community capacity building and active citizenship in regeneration, again emphasised the context for learning – placing Kolb's (1984) learning cycle in the context of different strands of learning,

*'learning about the different skills involved in regeneration practice, specifically through being involved; and learning about one's self and one's capacity to play an important community role as an 'active citizen'.*

This model seems to capture many of the messages from our research Initiative, presenting skills as inextricably linked to both learning and action (see Figures B and C).

Figure 4: Towards Active Citizenship in Community Regeneration (Peel, 2005 adapted from Kolb, 1984)



The current policy approach is making a positive contribution towards filling some of the skills gaps identified through the Egan and subsequent reviews. In particular, it has brought generic skills into arenas of learning that were dominated by specific skills. It has however, meant that less emphasis and fewer resources are targeted to meeting other aspects of skills and knowledge associated with sustainable communities.

In particular there is a need to augment the skills deficit approach with:

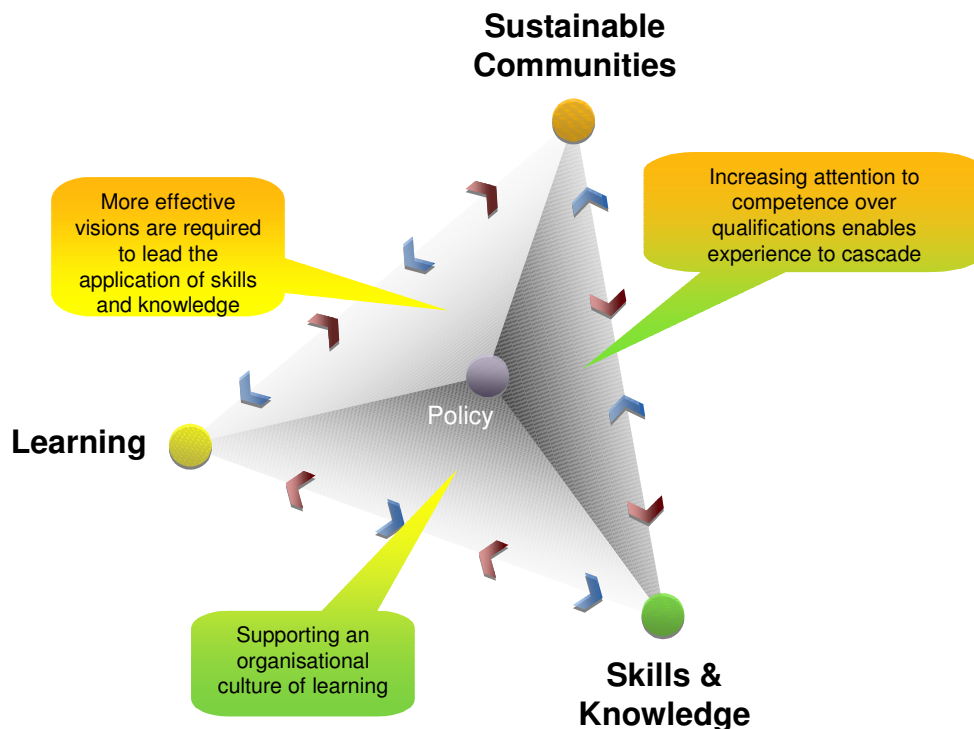


1. greater awareness of, and support for, alternative forms of effective learning and other dimensions of learning which enhances competencies more widely
2. enhanced motivation for learning through more support for those involved in learning to be able to apply the learning and their competencies through application
3. enhanced leadership learning and training to recognise and support links between competencies and skills.

### Conclusions:

A number of models have been proposed for skills and sustainable communities. The aim of this paper is not to provide a definitive new model or framework, but to point up the direction of change suggested by the research Initiative. The direction of change is clearly away from the simple, linear approach towards a more complex, dynamic framework with a number of policy levers such as indicated in the figure below:

Figure D: policy levers connecting skills, learning and sustainable communities



The Initiative has challenged the definitions and interpretations of terms at each apex of the triangle and emphasised the relationships between them, resulting in a more complex, dynamic framework.

#### **Lessons from the Skills & Knowledge for Sustainable Communities Research Initiative:**

1. there are multiple, independent perspectives or visions of sustainable community which need a stronger guiding vision
2. greater awareness of, and support for, less formal forms of effective learning could enhance competencies for sustainable communities more widely
3. more support for bringing together work and learning experiences would enhance motivation
4. enhanced leadership learning and training is required to recognise and support links between competencies and skills.

## Research Projects Funded by the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Initiative

UNIVERSITY	PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER	TITLE
Anglia Ruskin University	Hockey, Ann	Skills & Knowledge Builder for Sustainable Communities
Cardiff University	Marsden, T.	Motivating and Supporting Skills, Knowledge & Learning for Sustainable Communities
University of Exeter	Leyshon, Michael	Environmental Skills for Young People in Rural Communities
Kingston University	Sayce, Sarah	Skills Development for Built Environment Professionals
University of Liverpool	Kidd, Sue	Learning through Appraisal in Spatial Planning
Napier University, Edinburgh	Deakin, Mark	Learning from What Works in Sustainable Community Development
Queen's University Belfast <sup>a</sup>	Gaffikin, Frank	Building Capacity in Divided Communities
Queen's University Belfast <sup>b</sup>	Murtagh, Brendan	Skills for Managing Spatial Diversity
University of Sheffield	Selman, Paul	Engaging with Rivers
University of West of England <sup>a</sup>	Percy-Smith, Barry	The Role of Schools in Developing Sustainable Communities
University of West of England <sup>b</sup>	Smith, Ian	The Practice & Potential of Situated Learning

## Other References

Arup/ASC (2007) *Mind the Skills Gap*, The HCA Academy, [www.hcaacademy.co.uk](http://www.hcaacademy.co.uk)

Egan, J. (2004) *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister & RIBA, London.

Leitch, S. (2006) *The Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills: Final Report*, HM Treasury, London.

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (2003) *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Wetherby, West Yorkshire

Peel, D. (2005) *Training citizens for a management role in regeneration*, *Planning Practice and Research*, Vol. 20:4, pp443 — 457

Turok, I., & Taylor, P. (2006) A Skills Framework for Regeneration and Planning, *Planning Practice and Research*. Vol. 21, No. 4 pp:497-509