

Briefing: Sustainability and Education for Sustainability for HE

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1. Sustainability – agreed meanings and international initiatives

In 2015, UN Member States adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), marking the next chapter for the sustainability movement. The history of the concept can be traced to the late 17th century and critique of the impact of industrialisation, alongside efforts to solve issues impacting on forestry (Caradonna, 2014, p21-7).

The movement has gained visibility since the 1960s and the rise of environmentalism, with momentum building through key forums such as the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (the ‘Earth Summit’) and UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 (‘Rio+20’ Summit). Since the 1980s, its environmental focus shifted to the broader concept of ‘sustainability’ and integration of global and development perspectives. The most influential high level definition of sustainability also underlines its ‘futures thinking’ orientation:

“Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Our Common Future - the Brundtland Report of the 1987 UN World Commission on Environment and Development)

Understandings of sustainability or sustainable development are hard to pin down, due to the complexity behind the aim of balancing environmental with social and economic considerations. This recognises the inevitable conflicts and trade-offs involved in improving human prospects whilst also limiting damage to essential planetary systems. Major issues include different agendas and opinions about desired outcomes and how to achieve them, ongoing inequalities between developed and developing nations, and of sovereignty and responsibility over critical resources. Caradonna outlines 4 central assumptions or ideas contained in the concept of sustainability:

- *Economy, Society and Environment are connected* – concepts of the ecosystem and ‘systems thinking’
- *Societies have to respect ecological limits or face collapse* – the idea of unavoidable ‘limits to growth’
- *Societies seeking longevity have to plan for the future* – the need to adopt an intergenerational ethics
- *Societies are more sustainable if they localise and decentralise* – the idea in the motto ‘small is beautiful’

Reference: Caradonna, J.L. (2014) *Sustainability: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sustainable Development – the UN Global Goals

In 2015, UN member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals arising from the 2012 ‘Rio+20’ summit as successor to the Millennium Development Goals. This intergovernmental agreement – *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* – aims to advance the post-2015 development agenda, connecting global economic, social and environmental goals.

For more: see [UN SDG website](#) or watch this brief film outlining the [Global Goals](#)



2. Education for Sustainability – informing traditions and core aims

Education for Sustainability (EfS) - or Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – is now a growing field of scholarship and emerging practice across the globe. It emerged in tandem with international education dialogues (e.g. the Delors report to UNESCO on education for the 21st century) and global sustainability declarations which emphasised the importance of education and learning in supporting social change towards sustainability. In higher education, it connects closely with current dialogues around the nature and purpose of universities.

EfS draws on earlier humanist traditions of education, environmental education and development education, education change movements around agendas such as race or peace, more recent theories of transformative learning and change, as well as systems dynamics and complexity. It aims to transform education at all levels, not just in classroom practice but in curriculum design, institutional priorities and education policy.

The vision of EfS includes all disciplines, valuing their unique contributions as well as inter-disciplinary innovation. It recognizes the different starting points and issues (e.g. wellbeing, consumerism, 'green' economies, community resilience) but also the need for radical approaches to learning. An education that simply transmits knowledge or develops technical solutions is viewed as inadequate in EfS, given that established educational and social systems can co-opt, absorb or limit the scope of potential change to existing structures and dominant interests.

EfS instead attempts to use relevant knowledge with critical pedagogy and it attempts to blend both intrinsic and instrumental motivations for learning. As Sterling explains (2001, p53), EfS aims for learning experiences that:

- Widen our frameworks of analysis and extend current boundaries of concern and understanding
- Make patterns and connections across silos, exploring possible influences and likely consequences
- Build positive alliances and synergies that can help bring about change, based on systems thinking

Reference: Sterling. S. (2001) Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change. Totnes: Green Books

The United Nations and Education for Sustainability

The UN promoted sustainability at all levels of education via the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 (DESD), triggering action from nations across the globe and engaged Higher Education institutions and agencies in Education for Sustainability. The current [Global Action Programme \(GAP\)](#) followed the DESD, with the [GAP road map](#) seeking to scale-up and accelerate progress and systemic change in education systems to support the 2030 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals.



3. Sustainability in Higher Education and at the University

Engagement with sustainability in UK HE has increased significantly over the past decade and across the globe, with all UK sector agencies having actively engaged through the UN DESD. The [NUS sustainability team](#) is now a charity called Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS), supporting Student Unions through sector-wide engagement programmes for students. It also continues to conduct annual skills surveys that track the growth of student interest in sustainability and their expectations in terms of university practice and curriculum development.

Sustainability and UK HE teaching and learning agencies

The Quality Assurance Agency included Education for Sustainability as one of its cross-cutting themes for institutional teaching and learning strategies in the last revision of the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* and in 2014 released [national guidance](#) on curriculum development and graduate outcomes in sustainability, supported by the HEA and NUS. The Higher Education Academy worked through the UN DESD by funding pedagogical and curriculum change projects, as well as its UK Green Academy programme supporting university teams to develop sustainability as an enhancement priority.



At the University of Gloucestershire we have an established track record and international reputation for pioneering the sustainability agenda in the HE sector. For more on how we develop sustainability across the institution, browse the [sustainability website](#), which includes the [sustainability strategy and annual reports](#).

We are recognised for integrating sustainability into academic activities, using pedagogy-led approaches linked to the whole student experience as well as public engagement through our UN RCE Severn partnership platform. The *Learning Innovation for Tomorrow (LIFT)* programme, offers funds and support to staff to develop their Education for Sustainability focus and experiment with curriculum change and pedagogical research in sustainability.

LIFT is led by the Sustainability Team and supported by the Academic Development Unit. Learn more and browse examples at the [LIFT web page](#) or browse materials on the [Youtube channel LIFT playlist](#).