

Briefing: Sustainability and Education for Sustainability for HE

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Sustainability in UK Higher Education

Sustainability has risen in presence and significance in UK HE since 2005, as part of an international movement to advance sustainability at all levels of education and model good practice in educational institutions. Aligned to this movement, the UK has pioneered several strategic developments in HE sustainability, notably:

- Significant influence by the National Union of Students, who established the student-led education charity [Students Organising for Sustainability \(SOS\)](#) to drive change. Focal points include their [Responsible Futures](#) accreditation for institutions, [Green Impact](#) scheme for Students' Unions and [Teach the Future](#) campaign. NUS have also run sizeable annual surveys for over 10 years, tracking the growth of student expectations.
- Capacity building work from the Quality Assurance Agency with Advance HE to support curriculum change aligned to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles. The new [QAA national ESD guidance](#) was published in March 2021 and is accompanied by a new requirement for all future subject benchmarks to reflect sustainability, supporting curriculum design and quality learning opportunities in this area.

Sustainability at the University

At the University of Gloucestershire we have an established track record and reputation for pioneering sustainability in the HE sector, particularly the Education for Sustainability (EfS - or ESD) agenda. Our achievements include:

- Successful 'whole institution' approach to integrating sustainability into our academic, operational and partnership activities – as seen in our [sustainability strategy and annual reports](#).
- Significant research relevant to sustainability across several Research Priority Areas, as reflected in our REF 2021 submission. Sector-leading R&D in [Education for Sustainability](#) (EfS) supporting curriculum change and professional development, with the Quality Assurance Agency and partners in over 30 countries.
- Good practices in EfS across our portfolio, supported through our [Learning Innovation for Tomorrow \(LIFT\)](#) programme and [RCE Severn](#), our UN recognised platform for learning partnerships in sustainability.

For more on sustainability across the University, browse the [sustainability website](#) and [Youtube channel playlists](#).

Education for Sustainability worldwide

The United Nations has promoted sustainability at all levels of education since 2005 via its Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programmes to support action from all nations, education institutions and agencies. The new [ESD 2030](#) agenda is seeking to accelerate this systemic change aligned to the Sustainable Development 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 development agenda post-2015, connecting global economic, social and environmental goals.

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



Sustainability – scope and meaning

The history of the concept of sustainability traces back to the late 17th century and critique of the impact of industrialisation (Caradonna, 2014, p21-7). Caradonna signals 4 central assumptions in the concept:

- *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

Sustainability 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 greater integration of global and development perspectives.

The most influential and well recognised high-level definition of sustainability also underlines its essential ‘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). In 2015, UN Member States adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as successor to the Millennium Development Goals, marking the next chapter for the sustainability movement.

Attempts to define sustainability have to deal with the complexity of balancing environmental, social and economic factors for improving human prospects whilst limiting damage to essential planetary systems. Ongoing dialogues internationally relate to desired outcomes and change strategies, inequalities between nations, sovereignty and responsibility over critical resources, plus the urgency of issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Education for Sustainability – traditions and aims

Education for Sustainability (EfS) - or Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – is field of scholarship and practice that emerged in international education dialogues (e.g. Delors report to UNESCO on education for the 21st century) and global declarations on the role of education and learning in social change towards sustainability.

EfS draws on earlier humanist traditions of education, environmental education and development education, critical pedagogy movements centred on agendas such as race or peace, more recent theories of transformative learning and education for change, as well as ideas from systems dynamics and complexity theory. It aims to transform education at all levels, from classroom practice to curriculum design, institutional priorities and education policy.

EfS aims for an education that is not simply transmitting existing knowledge or developing technical solutions, but understanding how established systems can co-opt, absorb or limit potential change to existing structures and dominant interests. It focuses on designing learning experiences that equip people with the capability to influence change and collaborate effectively to bring about greener and fairer practices in different sectors. EfS approaches encompass both intrinsic and instrumental motivations for learning and fundamentally seek to:

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

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

In higher education, EfS connects closely with dialogues around the nature and purpose of universities and the role of the universities in society. EfS is relevant to all disciplines, valuing their unique contributions as well as supporting inter-disciplinary innovation. It recognizes different start points and issues (e.g. wellbeing, consumerism, resilience, ‘green’ economies) but emphasises the need for an applied pedagogy in learning design and assessment.