UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

A spotlight on...

An introduction to Education for Sustainable Development (revised June 2021)

Centre for Innovation in Education

Overview

"We are increasingly asking if what people learn is truly relevant to their lives, if what they learn helps to ensure the survival of our planet. Education for Sustainable Development can provide the knowledge, awareness and action that empower people to transform themselves and transform societies" (UNESCO, 2020).

ESD develops competencies, that is, skills, attributes and values, and how they link to subject knowledge and knowledge of sustainable development. ESD supports learners across all academic disciplines and subject areas to create and pursue visions of a better world." (QAA, 2021)

Benefits

- Develops future employability skills (World Economic Forum, 2020).
- Enables students to make fulfilling career choices.
- Supports the Liverpool Curriculum Framework; global citizenship, authentic assessment & active learning.
- Catalyst for developing innovative learning and teaching.
- Motivational topic for many students and staff (NUS, 2021).

Putting it into practice

Relevant to your subject area, review where you currently include, or could include, the development of the following student sustainable development skills, attributes and values (ESD competencies). Detailed descriptions and supporting information for each competency can be found in the QAA's ESD guidance document (QAA, 2021 p20-22):

1. Approaching problems that analyse how all the elements within a system influence one another (systems thinking).
2. Understanding and meaningfully contributing towards current and future challenges, whether in a local or global context (anticipatory thinking)
3. Conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising and evaluating information (critical thinking).
4. Transitioning to sustainable alternatives or developing sustainable solutions to current problems or issues requiring strategy (strategic competence).
5. Communicating effectively with colleagues, clients and stakeholders, ethically and professionally across platforms, disciplines, cultures, national boundaries and cyber-physical interfaces (collaborative competency).

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6. Responding to complex, ill-defined problems that can include missing, contradictory or contested information. Typically, such problems require multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and research methods and address different value systems and conflicting priorities (integrated problem-solving competency).
7. Recognising how students' emotions, motivations and personality impact on their actions and behaviours (Self-awareness competency).
8. Understanding and reflecting on the norms and values that underpin students' own actions and those of other stakeholders (normative competency)

Use the extensive resources and case studies in the QAA's ESD guidance (QAA, 2021 p23-38) to review how your module and programme learning outcomes, learning environments, assessments and teaching practices support the development of the eight UNESCO's ESD competencies.

Align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

Consider the relevance and application of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in your subject area. See the associated Enhancing curricula with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals Spotlight guide.

Engage students in the process

Consider opportunities for students to become involved in enhancements within your modules and programmes. This could include students suggesting topic areas, or mapping the programme against the SDGs for example. The Green Guild supports an NUS project for students to map the SDGs into their programmes – select the ESD option on the website for project details.

Explore co- and extra-curricula opportunities

Explore opportunities to incorporate real-world projects and initiatives that are relevant to your subject area (EAUC, 2019).

Challenges

- The term 'sustainability' can be problematic and hard to define in many subject contexts. Focus on appropriate real-world complex problems and student competency development.
- Research and practice into ESD can appear complex and tends to be developed for sustainability focused programmes. Select elements of this research that you think have most application.
- It can be difficult to find space in an already packed curriculum to include sustainable development as a new subject. Focus on existing areas of your programme that can be adapted and enhanced.
- Inter-disciplinary learning can be problematic particularly if assessments are shared.
- Some students may not find sustainable development motivational, and there may be distinct cultural and value differences between students that may require sensitive facilitation.

Additional Resources & References

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at cie@liverpool.ac.uk

A full list of references are available on the Centre for Innovation in Education website.

Author: Nick Bunyan October 2020