

Brookes Briefing on IDEAS

This Brookes Briefing addresses one of the elements of the [IDEAS Inclusive Curriculum Model](#).

Sustainability mindset

Education for sustainable development (ESD) overlaps with many other aspects of teaching and learning. Sustainability is often misconceived as being primarily concerned with the environment, conservation or energy saving, yet the focus on a just, inclusive and equitable society is also critical for addressing the social, environmental and economic concerns outlined in the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the targets of those goals aims to embed sustainability education into education for all learners by 2030, covering a range of issues including 'sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development'. (United Nations 2015)

Although developing knowledge and understanding of sustainability challenges must be an integral part of all subject areas and disciplines, it is also vital to nurture the competencies and mindset necessary to enact the transformative changes needed. ESD recognises that every graduate must acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to 'unlearn unsustainability' (Wals, 2010).

Why is sustainability mindset important?

The urgency of global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and rising social and economic inequalities, means that education for sustainability mindset is embedded in policy at University, national and international levels. At QAA level, all Subject Benchmark Statements have now been updated to include ESD (Kemp, 2022). We are mandated, and it is our responsibility, to include this in our programmes at all levels and in all disciplines, although what that looks like will vary across levels and disciplines.

Higher Education has a pivotal role in 'supporting the knowledge, skills and competencies that students and staff need to develop to contribute to a more sustainable future' (Advance HE and QAA 2021). Oxford Brookes strategy aims to equip our graduates with 'the skills, knowledge, mind-set and attributes necessary to face new challenges and thrive in a complex, uncertain world' (OBU Strategy 2035). One of the ways we do this is through a focus on the Brookes Graduate Attribute of *active citizenship*:

Prepared to proactively engage with both local and global communities. Knowledge of the local and global perspectives of one's discipline. Critical awareness of the complexity of diverse perspectives, cultures and values and the ability to question one's own perspective and those of others. Ability to use knowledge and skills to improve society through actively engaging with issues of equity, sustainability and social justice (Oxford Brookes University 2010).

Students and employers also want to see more emphasis on ESD in university courses. SOS UK, Sustainability Skills Survey, 2020-21 noted that 79% of students want to see Sustainable Development 'actively incorporated and promoted through all courses'. Findings from the THE consultancy Report (2022) confirm 'how important sustainability is to students but also how much they see sustainability as a wide ranging and all encompassing movement'. Sustainability

competencies, many of which are recognised as key attributes for graduate success and employability, are recognised as the most sought after skills in the workplace, yet often the weakest evidenced (QS Skills Gap, 2019)

Principles and Practices for sustainable mindset

1. Start somewhere

Sustainability mindset is often called a 'wicked problem' (e.g. Advance HE and QAA 2021), which means the solutions to many of these problems aren't straightforward, and cannot be solved by working in just one domain at a time.

So a key principle is: don't let that put you off making a start.

Look at the list below, and pick one, two or three which feel most relevant to your students and your discipline. You might begin with a seminar activity where you ask students to brainstorm the ways sustainability affects them, the discipline, and their future working lives.

Indicative list of sustainability concepts from Sterling 2012:

Carrying capacity	Climate change	Population
Biocapacity	Green transport	Millennium Development goals
Ecosystem health	Low carbon economy	Participative democracy
Ecological footprint	Energy descent	Social inclusion
Carbon footprint	Renewable and nonrenewable energy	Meeting needs locally
Corporate social responsibility	Sustainable construction	Sustainable and transition communities
Sustainable economies	Natural resource and full cost accounting	Sustainable systems
Environmental limits	Adaptive management	Resilience
Sustainable consumption	Eco efficiency	Health and well-being
Cultural diversity	Waste and pollution	Ethical trading and investment
Global citizenship	Community regeneration	Social and natural capitals
Social and environmental justice	Human rights	Futures scenarios.
Ecological design	Biodiversity	
Sustainable food and farming		
Environmental law		

2. Enhance your own understanding of sustainability

Some ideas for how to start with this:

- Seek out published case studies of sustainability pedagogy in your discipline. There are some for virtually every discipline: see the resources and reference lists below for some starting points.
- Look for activities other people have used that you can adapt to your own context, and see where you can fit them in.
- Find out about the pressing sustainability topics in the typical employment destinations of your graduates.
- Keep an active eye out for the ways your discipline and its skills, knowledges and behaviours, can have a part to play in sustainability issues that you hear about.

3. Use the IDEAS question set

Think about how your students would answer these questions now (or ask your students!), and use those answers to inform your future teaching and course development.

1. Where in my course am I able to explore definitions of sustainability, taking account of social equity, economic viability and environmental sustainability?
2. Where in my course is there discussion of how I can increase my agency in relation to sustainability?
3. How does my course support me in developing my active citizenship around social, economic, environmental and cultural global challenges?
4. Where in my course can I develop the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, and an appreciation of cultural diversity?
5. How will I be able to have safe but challenging discussions about differing views about sustainability?
6. How is my course preparing students for a working life as changemakers in a greener, more circular economy?
7. How does my course support students to develop the emotional, intellectual and practical capacities to live well with each other and with the planet in the era of climate change/crisis?
8. How does my course help me to move from 'safe' spaces to 'brave spaces' in respect of sustainability?

4. Look for places to enhance future-facing skills

The skills students will need to develop their sustainable mindset are also applicable across many of our disciplines, and will be familiar already from your existing learning outcomes. The UNESCO key competences for sustainability give these as key methods in ESD:

- Collaborative real-world projects such as a service-learning project and campaigns for different sustainability topics
- Vision-building exercises such as future workshops, scenario analyses, utopian/dystopian story-telling, science-fiction thinking, and fore and back-casting
- Analysis of complex systems including community-based research projects, case studies, stakeholder analysis, actor analysis, modelling and systems games
- Critical and reflective thinking including through fish-bowl discussions and reflective journals (UNESCO 2018, p.50).

5. Seek interdisciplinarity

An aspect of sustainability's status as a 'wicked problem' is that it cannot be solved by silo thinking, or single-disciplinary practices, so seek ways to build cross-disciplinary groups to engage in sustainability topics. Possible starting points:

- Is there another school in your faculty with complementary topics where you could partner to support both sets of students in practice working with wicked problems?
- What about in other faculties?
- Within your own discipline, can you give students different roles within a scenario activity?

6. Build sustainability mindset into your assessment

We know that students tend to be motivated by assessment (Brown et al 1997), so this is a strong approach to encouraging them to develop their own sustainability mindset. Actions to consider:

- Add an option to your list of possible assignment topics which deals with a discipline-specific aspect of sustainability.
- Rework your assessment criteria and/or learning outcomes to include a focus on aspects of sustainability mindset.
- Give your students real-world problems to work on in their assessment tasks.

7. Plan how you will enhance your sustainability teaching in the future

Build it into your programme reviews. Look for ways to add sustainability mindset topics into your learning outcomes, to redesign assessment criteria to value future thinking, to give students the chance to practise – in both low and high stakes ways – the varied aspects of sustainability mindset which will be present in their working lives. Talk to employers about the sustainability attributes they want to see in new graduates.

By Elizabeth Lovegrove, with thanks to Cathy d'Abreu for the initial context setting.

Resources and further reading

The Future Pathways project at Oxford Brookes Business School is full of useful resources, contacts, and runs a weekly series of learning lunches on ESD topics:

<https://sites.google.com/brookes.ac.uk/future-pathways/home?authuser=0>

Sterling, S. (2012) Future Fit. Advance HE.

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/future-fit-framework> This is a useful practical guide, including suggestions for lots of low-key places to start, and ways out of a variety of (perceived) obstacles, including time in an already crowded curriculum, and how to make connections between sustainability and the 'less obviously relevant' disciplines, including lots of examples (though note that some web addresses might be out of date).

IDEAS model: Sustainability mindset

<https://www.brookes.ac.uk/staff/people/ideas-model/elements-of-the-model/sustainability-mindset>

References

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