

## Getting Started with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

### Reflecting on Sustainability in Teaching and Learning

UNESCO describes Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a transformative and action-oriented approach to learning that supports students in developing the knowledge, skills, values and agency needed to contribute to more sustainable and just futures (UNESCO, 2020).

ESD is not only about understanding sustainability challenges, but also about supporting critical reflection, exploring different perspectives and developing the confidence and agency to make informed decisions and take appropriate action in response to complex social, environmental and economic issues. It is not about telling students what to think or how to act, but about enabling critical thinking, informed choice and responsible decision-making (QAA & Advance HE, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

In many cases, aspects of ESD may already exist within modules, programmes, learning activities or the wider student experience, even if they are not currently described in these terms.

Many programmes may already engage with aspects of sustainability through:

- ethics and professional practice
- critical thinking and reflection
- applied or challenge-based learning
- interdisciplinary collaboration
- community or industry engagement
- future-focused discussions
- consideration of social, environmental and economic impacts

### Why This Matters to Students

Student feedback gathered across SETU highlighted a strong interest in more meaningful and applied sustainability learning across programmes and disciplines. Students emphasised the importance of real-world examples, interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, workshops, site visits and opportunities to connect sustainability learning with campus initiatives, local communities and future professional practice.

Students also highlighted the importance of moving beyond awareness raising towards opportunities for practical action, collaboration and participation in sustainability-related initiatives and decision making within the university.

The reflective prompts below have therefore been informed by both student feedback and sector ESD guidance, including work from UNESCO, QAA & Advance HE and Responsible Futures.

This guide is intended as a reflective conversation prompt to support staff in recognising where ESD may already exist within teaching and learning, while also identifying opportunities for enhancement or getting started.

It is not intended as a checklist for rewriting modules, redesigning curricula or adding additional content. Instead, the guide encourages reflection on existing practice and consideration of small, meaningful and discipline-relevant opportunities to strengthen sustainability connections within teaching, learning and assessment.

The aim is to help make existing connections more visible while identifying opportunities for further development where appropriate.

Further support, resources and workshops are available for staff and programme teams who would like to explore ESD in more depth, including curriculum enhancement, assessment design, interdisciplinary learning and embedding sustainability across the wider student experience.

### ESD Reflective Questions:

| How might students...                                                                                                                                             | Why                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Ideas and approaches                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>How might students explore sustainability issues, SDGs or future challenges connected to their discipline, future profession or local and global contexts?</b> | Sustainability challenges affect all disciplines and professions. Exploring these connections can help students understand how their subject relates to wider social, environmental and economic issues and future professional contexts. | Use SDGs, case studies, guest speakers, professional examples or current issues as discussion starters. Encourage students to reflect on how sustainability connects with their future careers or discipline.                                                    |
| <b>How might students explore connections between social, environmental and economic issues?</b>                                                                  | Sustainability challenges are interconnected and often involve complexity, trade-offs and unintended consequences. Systems thinking helps students explore relationships and wider impacts.                                               | Use systems mapping, stakeholder analysis, cause-and-effect activities or real-world sustainability challenges viewed from multiple perspectives. Frameworks such as Doughnut Economics, the SDG Wedding Cake Model or the Iceberg Model may support discussion. |
| <b>How might students reflect on different perspectives, values or responsibilities connected to sustainability challenges?</b>                                   | Sustainability issues often involve competing priorities, ethical questions and different lived experiences. Reflection and dialogue can support                                                                                          | Use discussions, debates, reflective activities, ethical dilemmas or case studies to explore different viewpoints and implications of decisions, technologies or policies.                                                                                       |

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|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | empathy, self-awareness and critical thinking.                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>How might students explore, imagine or help shape more sustainable futures?</b>                                                                                                                                                                         | Futures thinking encourages students to consider how present actions may affect future generations, communities and environments.                                                                                                                     | Activities could include future scenarios, storytelling, speculative design, visioning exercises or backcasting activities linked to disciplinary or professional contexts.                                                               |
| <b>How might students work collaboratively to explore or respond to real-world sustainability challenges, including opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder engagement or community-connected learning?</b>                         | Sustainability challenges often require collaboration across disciplines, professions and communities. Collaborative learning can support communication, problem-solving and strategic thinking.                                                      | This may already happen through group projects, placements, studio work, practical activities or challenge-based learning. Consider interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder engagement or community-connected learning.              |
| <b>How might students connect learning with sustainability action on campus, in the community or through professional practice through placements, Living Labs, volunteering, site visits, regional partnerships or applied projects?</b>                  | ESD is not only about understanding sustainability challenges but also about connecting learning with real-world action, experience and agency. Whole institution approaches emphasise connections between curriculum, campus, community and culture. | Opportunities may already exist through placements, volunteering, fieldwork, Living Labs, student societies, community engagement or campus sustainability initiatives.                                                                   |
| <b>How might students actively shape, contribute to or influence sustainability-related learning, activities or initiatives within their programme or wider university experience through co-creation, partnership working or student-led initiatives?</b> | ESD encourages students to actively participate in shaping more sustainable futures and learning environments. Student partnership and participation can strengthen relevance, motivation and engagement.                                             | Invite students to propose sustainability themes, projects, case studies or community issues connected to their interests, discipline or local context. Consider opportunities for co-creation, peer learning or student-led initiatives. |

*The reflective prompts have been informed by approaches used within sector ESD frameworks and curriculum guidance, including work from UCL, Trinity College Dublin, QAA and UNESCO.*

## Next Steps

Education for Sustainable Development does not require every module or programme to address every sustainability issue or approach. ESD is often most effective when sustainability connections are developed progressively across modules, programmes and the wider student experience (QAA & Advance HE, 2021). This was also reflected in student feedback gathered across SETU, where students highlighted the importance of sustainability learning being introduced and developed progressively across programmes and connected meaningfully to their discipline, campus experience and future professional practice.

In many cases, aspects of ESD may already exist within teaching, learning, assessment or co-curricular activities, even if they are not currently described in these terms. Small, meaningful and discipline-relevant changes can help make these connections more visible and support students to engage critically and thoughtfully with the complex challenges shaping their future professions, communities and societies (UNESCO, 2020).

This guide is intended as a starting point for reflection and discussion rather than a checklist for curriculum redesign. Staff and programme teams may wish to use the reflective prompts individually, within module review discussions or as part of wider conversations around teaching, learning and curriculum enhancement.

As programmes evolve, sustainability themes and ESD approaches may also become more visible through learning outcomes, assessment, teaching approaches and wider curriculum enhancement processes, including constructive alignment, programme review and quality assurance processes (QAA & Advance HE, 2021).

For those wishing to explore these ideas further, the accompanying **ESD Reflection and Enhancement Worksheet** provides a practical resource to support reflection on existing practice, identify opportunities for enhancement and consider possible next steps.

Further support, resources and workshops are also available for staff and programme teams interested in exploring ESD, sustainability and curriculum enhancement in more depth.

## Further Reading & Resources

- Advance HE & QAA (2021). *Education for Sustainable Development Guidance*. Gloucester: QAA and Advance HE.
- Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. 4th ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Sterling, S. (2012). *The Future Fit Framework: An Introductory Guide to Teaching and Learning for Sustainability in HE*. York: HEA.
- UNESCO (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2020). *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*. Paris: UNESCO.
- [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)
- [EAUC – The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education](#)
- [UCL Sustainability Curriculum Resources](#)
- [De Montfort University SDG Curriculum Resources](#)