Education for Sustainable Development Guidance

Executive Summary

March 2021

The Education for Sustainable Development Guidance is intended to help UK higher education institutions incorporate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within their curricula.

QAA and Advance HE, together with a group of experts representing academic, business and student communities, published a new version of the guidance for 2021, with the aim of supporting students from any discipline to acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to develop values and take actions to transition society towards sustainable futures.

Who is it for?

It is written for staff involved in curriculum design, and course management and delivery, and will also be of value to senior management teams, staff with responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement, and those directing teaching and learning. It aims to make the topic as approachable as possible for a non-expert audience.

The guidance supports curriculum design and gives guidance on teaching, learning and assessment approaches. It reflects changes in understanding about, and priorities in, sustainable development (SD) and the increased urgency for everybody in society to take positive actions in addressing SD issues.

How can it be used?

The guidance recognises that there are many ways in which this may be achieved, offering suggestions to inspire, inform and enable ESD to be designed into and across curricula as part of a whole-institution approach. It can be used as both a course design reference point and as an advocacy aid for those supporting ESD agendas in their organisation.

The full document contains a comprehensive **introduction**, followed by four main sections:

- **Section 1** offers an introduction to how both SD and ESD are interpreted and defined.
- **Section 2** discusses how to get started with ESD, while recognising the importance of strategic, institution–level commitment and support when looking to progress ESD.
- **Section 3** focuses on teaching, learning and assessment approaches for ESD. It introduces the key competencies for sustainability, course and module learning outcomes for ESD and guidance about developing learning environments to support ESD.
- **Section 4** includes references and resources.

Introduction

Sets the context and some of the recent global developments: the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, and the COVID–19 pandemic. The UK's recent plans including A Green Future, declaration of a Climate Emergency, net–zero Greenhouse Gas emissions legislation and the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution are also covered.

Recent trends in students' expectations are explored – an increasing majority think that SD should be incorporated into their institutional practices and curricula – as are changes in the workplace and society.

> " It is essential to learn about sustainable development throughout any degree course, as the future of the planet and climate change affects every single individual, and each individual should be made aware of the situation and how to be more sustainable.
> *Bitsy Pout, 2nd Year Student, University of Southampton* "

Section 1

Sets out the two key terms in the guidance:

> **Sustainable Development** – an aspirational ongoing process of addressing social, environmental and economic concerns to create a better world.
>
> **Education for Sustainable Development** – the process of creating curriculum structures and subject–relevant content to support sustainable development.

The section aims to avoid academic debates around the concepts of 'sustainability', 'sustainable development' and 'education for sustainable development'. Instead, it refers to the term's origins and argues that the aims of the UN SDGs, and what they seek to achieve, are necessary for a positive future for life on earth.

Figure 1: Sustainable Development Goals

The guidance moves the terms of SD and ESD beyond being solely about environmental issues, focusing instead on interconnections and interdependencies between economic, social and environmental factors. ESD is part of an educational change agenda allowing us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be, supporting learners to create and pursue visions of a better world.

It outlines the role of higher education in supporting the knowledge, skills and competencies that students and staff develop to contribute to a more sustainable future, encouraging providers to embrace ESD and demonstrate leadership. It recognises that transforming curricula can be daunting and frames the SDGs as a starting point.

Section 2

Applies ESD in practice, discussing how to position ESD strategically and operationally across curricula. It offers guidance and identifies ways of involving key players, beginning with students and continuing through employers, enterprise organisations, academics, professional service teams, governance and communities.

The guidance prioritises engagement with students, in particular collaboration and co-creation of learning, as well as identifying activities that are already happening in their communities. The guidance is presented as a series of key pointers, for example:

ESD is best achieved when:

1. ESD objectives, targets and KPIs are part of the institution's strategic priorities and subsequent strategies and policies.

2. The framing of ESD within the curriculum is included in the validation of new courses and ongoing review of existing courses.

3. ESD is central to the staff and student induction process, as well as staff appraisal and/or promotion criteria.

4. ESD is articulated within quality assurance and enhancement processes.

5. Staff development to enable ESD is fully supported at an institutional level.

The changing priorities of employers are discussed and we stress how ESD competencies can accelerate sustainable change once students enter the workplace. Academics are positioned as central to implementation as their approaches to curriculum design, teaching and assessment provide learners with opportunities to gain the key competencies. It is crucial that academic staff reflect critically on their own knowledge and skills.

The role of professional services teams and senior management in establishing institutional commitment and securing required resources is set out. Finally, the benefits of providers engaging with communities and how they can positively contribute to social, environmental and economic progression and regeneration are outlined.

Signposting and examples from practice are provided throughout the guidance.
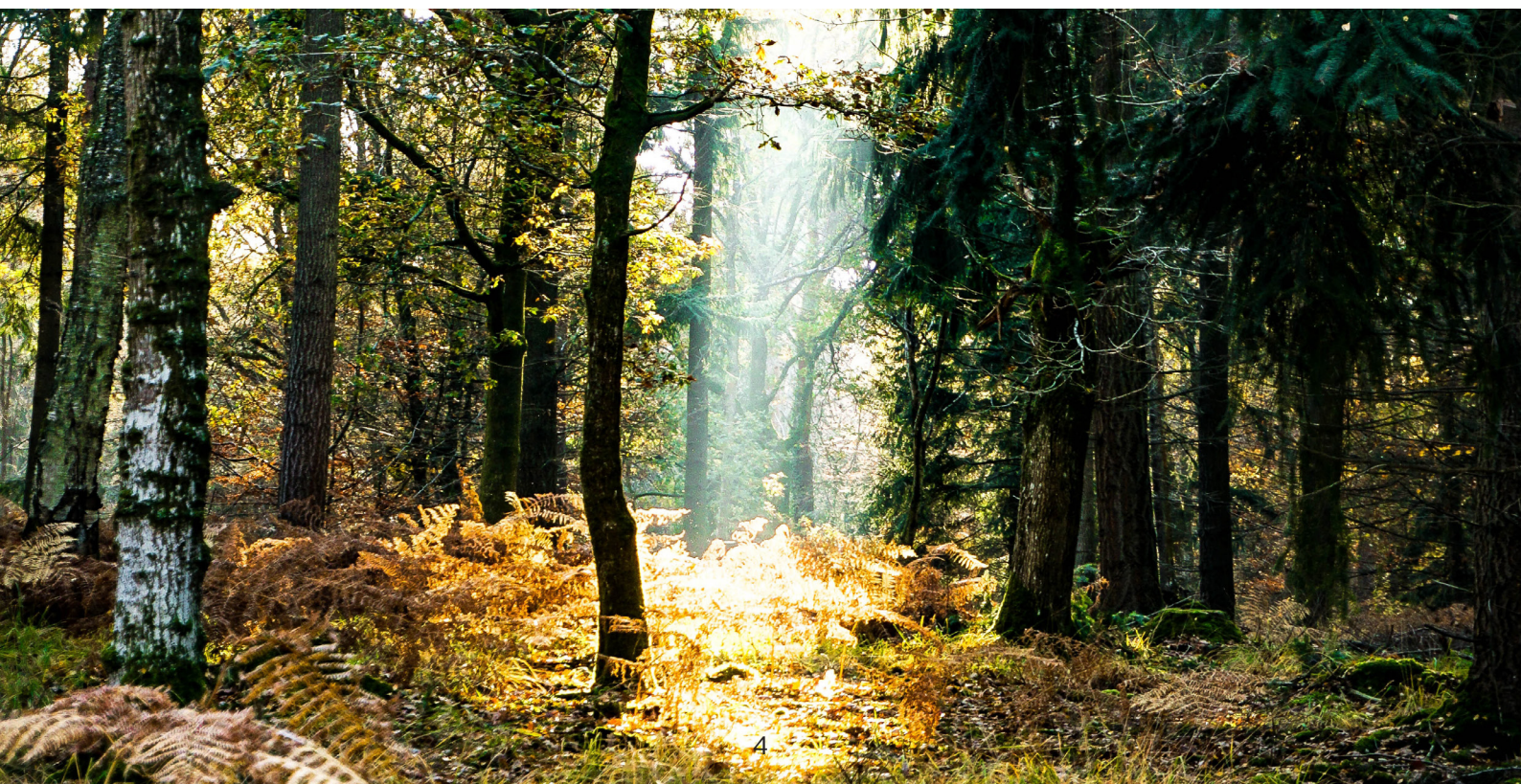
Section 3

Provides insight into UNESCO's key competencies for sustainability and how they align with ways of thinking, ways of practicing and ways of being as part of a transformative journey.

Learning outcomes are presented aligned with the following key competencies for SD:

- systems thinking
- anticipatory thinking
- normative competency
- strategic thinking
- collaborative competency
- critical thinking
- self-awareness
- integrated problem-solving competency.

This section presents a discussion about interconnecting subject-specific learning outcomes with the UN's SDGs and ESD competencies. We provide advice on how learning environments, curricula, and teaching and assessment practices can be developed to support ESD. We also set out illustrative examples of teaching practices for developing key competencies.

Section 4

Contains key references and resources for those who wish to delve further into the subject area, track some of the historical development of ESD, and gain a fuller understanding of its approaches and potential for impact.

It is recognised that higher education providers will be at different stages in engaging with ESD. In addition to this guidance, both QAA and Advance HE will run associated workshops, training and webinars, as well as producing further targeted support to help staff at all levels within higher education providers to get started with and progress ESD.

Read the full guidance

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the contents of the ESD Guidance. The full document is available to QAA Members and Advance HE Members at the following links:

QAA Members: https://membershipresources.qaa.ac.uk/s/article/Education-for-Sustainable-Development-Guidance

Advance HE Members: http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning/education-sustainable-development-higher-education