

Sustainability for Everyone: Perspectives from Higher Education Leaders

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Patrick Baughan, Doug Parkin and Giles Brown

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank each of the expert speakers who contributed to the innovative webinar which forms the focus of this publication. The speakers were: Professor Nazira Karodia, Professor Eunice Simmons, Meg Baker, Professor Jim Longhurst and Professor Simon Kemp. We would also like to thank our colleagues at Advance HE involved in the organisation of the webinar and in the production of this work.

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Overview

This publication has its origins in the Advance HE member benefit activities focused on sustainability in higher education that took place during March 2021. The overriding theme was entitled *Sustainability for Everyone: Here and Now*.

The theme and its constituent events were developed on the premise (and need) that sustainability is an area of great importance to higher education, of relevance to everyone in the sector – in that everyone should have a voice and everyone needs to ‘play their part’. Specifically, the theme considered sustainability as ‘something for everyone’ in higher education where ‘everyone’ has three applications:

- + First, INCLUSION – ‘everyone’ is intended to be inclusive. No matter who you are, your background or your higher education role, sustainability needs and welcomes you – as an advocate and as an actor, to promote and practise sustainability.
- + Second, URGENCY – ‘everyone’ is intended as a call for action. Sustainability and its constituent parts represent urgent issues and, in the higher education sector, we all have responsibilities in progressing sustainable development.
- + Third, ACTION - ‘everyone’ means everyone needs to act in the here and now. No longer is sustainability just for or about future generations. We all need to play our part, as a sector, in progressing sustainability in higher education. Universities have a major role in supporting and enacting sustainability through both their business activities and in their educational offerings.

There is an increasing realisation and urgency for ‘society at large’ to engage more with sustainability, and a growing understanding of the potentially devastating costs if we do not. Key issues include climate change, destruction of the natural environment, waste and broader social issues. These issues have featured in the news frequently and have been exacerbated by the current pandemic. They are supported with a plethora of updated scientific research and various governmental / inter-governmental statements. More locally, Advance HE has undertaken several sustainability activities over the last 12 months, such as webinars and discussion groups. These have received excellent feedback and a call to do more, and demonstrate real interest and appetite in the sector. This prompted us to run our first member benefit theme focused on sustainability in higher education.

The member benefit month events

We devised three core outputs for the member benefit month. The first was a live webinar, *Leading Sustainability in Higher Education: Leading for a Lost Cause?* in which a panel of experts discussed leadership issues in relation to sustainability issues and from which this publication is derived. [A recording of the webinar can be viewed here](#).

The second was an innovative blog series, the *Voices of Sustainability* blog, in which sustainability was considered in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). There are 12 blog posts from staff and students with a wide range of background and roles, all offering unique and fascinating perspectives on sustainability in higher education. [The blog series can be downloaded as a single document here](#).

The third output is this special publication: an edited and annotated transcript of the *Leading Sustainability in Higher Education: Leading for a Lost Cause?* webinar featuring additional discussion and reflection. More details of this are provided in the next section.

As well as the three core outputs emanating from the theme, the activities combined with two other important milestones. The first was the publication of a fully updated second edition of the joint Quality Assurance Agency and Advance HE *Education for Sustainable Development Guidance* document, produced by a team of experts for the sector, and published in the same month (March 2021). [The complete guidance can be downloaded here](#).

Second, Advance HE hosted its inaugural Symposium on Sustainability in the same month, featuring keynote papers by Professor Liz Price (with Eleanor Cooke and Christopher Kitching), Professor Joy Carter, and Professors James Longhurst and Simon Kemp. The symposium had its own theme - *Facing Forward with Sustainability: Principles, Progress and Partnership*. Originally intended to be a test event to see if there was an appetite for sustainability events to be run by Advance HE, it was the largest online symposium we have ever held. [You can see further details about the symposium here](#).

Some words about this publication - Sustainability for Everyone: Perspectives from Higher Education Leaders

The main purpose of this work is to provide an enhanced transcript of the webinar Leading sustainability in higher education: leading for a lost cause? that took place as part of our member benefit theme in March 2021. It was introduced by Doug Parkin and chaired by Patrick Baughan (both of Advance HE) and comprised an expert panel of colleagues in the sector with leadership experience in sustainability and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The panel comprised:

Professor Nazira Karodia, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Regional Engagement, University of Wolverhampton

Professor Eunice Simmons, Vice Chancellor, University of Chester

Meg Baker, Interim Director of Education, SOS-UK (Students Organising for Sustainability)

Professor Jim Longhurst, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Environment and Sustainability, University of the West of England

Professor Simon Kemp, University Lead in Education for Sustainable Development, University of Southampton.

The panel discussion was organised into two sections. First, a number of provocative questions were raised about the QAA and Advance HE Education for Sustainable Development Guidance. Jim Longhurst and Simon Kemp were particularly well armed to address these questions, being Co-Chairs of the advisory group that led the development of the work. In the second part, Patrick asked the panel about sustainability leadership in more general terms, again seeking to provoke analysis and debate. Audience questions and comments were taken. Towards the end, panel members were all asked to summarise, in a few words, the qualities an authentic sustainability leader needs to exhibit in their work. Again, responses have been included as part of the transcript.

You will see that, with the help of our colleague Giles Brown, we have tried to foreground key points and arguments expressed by panel members, and interspersed the dialogue with some examples and case studies. Following the transcript, Doug Parkin concludes this mini-publication with some additional comments and reflections.

As part of the introduction to the webinar, participants were invited to contribute to a word cloud in response to the question ‘*What qualities does an authentic (higher education) leader of sustainability need to bring to their work?*’, the results of which are shown in Figure 1, below. This provided a fascinating snapshot of some of the issues and concerns at the forefront of sustainability debates.

We hope you find the annotated transcript informative and interesting. It is rare to bring an expert panel together in this way to discuss sustainability issues in the sector, especially in relation to leadership. Our view, supported by the feedback we received, is that the conversation was not only topical, but entertaining as well.

I would like to extend my thanks to all members of the panel, as well as Doug Parkin for introducing it and organising the activities, and Giles Brown, who edited and enhanced the transcript to bring out the key moments. Thanks also to everyone involved in what was an excellent series of events during our themed month Sustainability for Everyone: Here and Now, in March 2021.

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Figure 1: Introductory word cloud.



The Sustainability Webinar: Enhanced and Updated Transcript

Part 1 - The QAA/Advance HE Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Guidance Document

“Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. It is about lifelong learning, and is an integral part of quality education.”

(UNESCO, 2019)

The ESD Guidance was published in 2021 – is anyone actually going to have the time to read it?

Whether people will have time to read the Education for Sustainable Development Guidance (ESD Guidance) is an important matter, and one of the key challenges for the sector at a time when staff, students and senior leadership teams face myriad challenges, including those associated with diversity and inclusion, recruitment and retention, blended learning and assessment, mental health and hybrid working. Further, existing challenges have been dramatically compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has impacted every aspect of higher education (HE), and has resulted in extremely high workloads for staff as they have responded to different ways of working and delivering teaching and learning in HE. The sustainability agenda is not going to go away, and nor is it going to be solved overnight. However, what the pandemic has demonstrated is that change is possible, and can be implemented rapidly.

“One of the things I’ve found most rewarding during this whole tumultuous period has been with my previous role of head of education within our school, we’ve been able to demonstrate that we can innovate. We can react quickly. We can bring different dimensions into the university experience for our students. Yes, it’s been enormously stressful for everybody, without question. But we’ve been able to demonstrate that we can be agile with our responses.”

(Professor Simon Kemp, University Lead in Education for Sustainable Development, University of Southampton)

Sustainability, and sustainability in teaching and learning, are urgent agendas that require innovation. The ESD Guidance is key in framing how we restructure our curricula, programmes and modes of delivery, and as a component of their formal revalidation.

“One of the most important things to recognise in the document is that we all approached it collectively and equally ... it was not written for ESD practitioners alone and I do think we have an opportunity to really make a positive difference.”

(Simon Kemp)

The ESD Guidance is a key starting point and resource for everyone to use.

“... the reason you have to read it is because your students will expect you to do it.”

(Professor James Longhurst, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Environment and Sustainability, University of the West of England)

There are two very compelling arguments for why academic staff should read the ESD document, irrespective of discipline or faculty:

- + Graduates leaving higher education institutions (HEIs) this year (2021) will encounter many of the changes that the climate and ecological emergency will bring to the fore in their lifetime, and they will want to know that their education gives them the knowledge and resilience to counter and deal with those issues throughout their lives.
- + We know from both a Zurich Insurance study published in 2020 (see: www.zurich.co.uk/en/about-us/media-centre/company-news/2020/millions-of-young-people-want-more-climate-change-education), which surveyed a group of seven to 17 year olds in the UK, and from a decade or more of National Union of Students (NUS) surveys (see: www.sos-uk.org/research/sustainability-skills-survey), that young people see the climate emergency as probably the most important issue that they will encounter across their lifetimes, and students coming into HE expect that we, as HE providers, take these issues seriously and they form one of our key leadership and management responsibilities.

“... [students] are increasingly expecting that the content of their degree programme, no matter what degree it is, will be preparing them for the sustainability challenges of their future.”

(Jim Longhurst)

We therefore need to build and engender those understandings, attributes and competences that will help them, not just in their professional lives, but in their private lives as well.

“[a] holistic and transformational education ... achieves its purpose by transforming society, and our students will be engaged in transforming societies. They therefore need the tools, capabilities and competencies, and that’s what I hope the ESD Guidance will do. That is the reason why staff across every institution should read it.”

(Jim Longhurst)

The chairs’ foreword to the ESD Guidance “exult[s] vice chancellors and principals to support and enable its implementation”. Given the numerous responsibilities of institutional leaders, will they be able to do that?

“We can’t help students prepare to be citizens if we just don’t acknowledge the climate emergency.”

(Professor Eunice Simmons, Vice Chancellor, University of Chester)

The ESD materials have emerged from work undertaken by colleagues across the sector, QAA and Advance HE, and given the current attention and focus on the climate emergency, the launch of the Guidance is very timely. Originally thought to perhaps only be of interest to geographers, ecologists etc, it has broken out of the boundaries of the science disciplines and become much broader to the point that sustainability must be seen as fundamental to the running of any institution.

However, there has been limited oversight in this area of the sector’s activities and the urgency with which this is being addressed. So, it is largely left to the sector itself to integrate sustainability in HE teaching and learning, ensure engagement is inclusive, and is well and appropriately led. Further, the activities of HEIs, staff and student populations, campuses and estates are diverse and distributed, and this poses significant challenges in terms of embedding ESD across whole institutions.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to re evaluate how we undertake many aspects of our core business.”

(Eunice Simmons)

“How are we going to manage our carbon emissions, our different scopes, business travel? It needs leadership at all levels across the organisation, including very, very importantly, from our students. The Chester strategy is called Citizen Students. It’s not a hierarchical approach.”

(Eunice Simmons)

The chairs’ foreword to the ESD Guidance is clear – ***“your current and future students expect nothing less of you than to support and enable sustainable development”***.

Is the timing of the publication advantageous?

The pandemic has focused our thinking about core business approaches and, interestingly, the whole sector is doing this at the same time. This has resulted in an accelerated rate of change and an unprecedented momentum; a dominant word in Figure 1 (as shown in the introduction section).

“For me, [momentum] is a massively important word. We have got to maintain the momentum of change we’ve had over the past year. It’s got to be for the benefit of the wider society and environment.”

(Eunice Simmons)

Students have been identified as a key, central voice in achieving sustainable development for everyone in the sector and beyond. What do you think students, and students’ unions, will think of the ESD Guidance? Is it enough? Will they be happy with it?

“Students Organising for Sustainability UK ([SOS-UK] www.sos-uk.org) has been working with staff and students in HE, and what is clear is that students want this.”

(Meg Baker, Interim Director of Education, SOS-UK, Students Organising for Sustainability)

A decade’s worth of survey data has highlighted that students want to see their universities incorporating sustainability into teaching and learning provision and into their courses, but not in a bolt on, greenwashing way. Sustainability needs to be truly integrated in a meaningful and relevant manner, and the ESD Guidance aims to enable educators, leaders and students across HE to work collaboratively together to achieve this - sustainability for everyone.

“While students and students’ unions will be happy that their educators are being provided with guidance to support necessary SD [sustainable development] changes, in order for these changes to really happen we need to see leadership commitment within universities and institutions through the provision of capacity and support – to give educators the time to undertake training and innovate their curricula, in partnership with students, and to actually embed what’s written within the Guidance.”

(Meg Baker)

However, it is important to remember that this is guidance, *not* policy. In light of this, HE institutions are not currently being reviewed or inspected on their sustainability actions and how these actions measure up against the ESD Guidance.

“Until it’s mandated on universities to measure the contribution their graduates make to the betterment of people and planet, rather than conventional measures (such as graduate salaries), we won’t see really meaningful change.”

(Meg Baker)

In terms of leading and developing sustainability in HE in general, are senior management team leaders going to be able to nudge institutions on the basis of the ESD Guidance? What will, for example, pro-vice-chancellors, actually be able to do with them?

The sustainable development (SD) debate has been going on for a few decades now, and it certainly isn’t finished, which makes the publication of the ESD Guidance very timely and welcome. There is already a lot of good practice in this area, evidenced by a plethora of books, articles and initiatives highlighted at HE award ceremonies. There has also been progress in greening curricula and our campuses.

Sustainability is intrinsically tied to community. The excitement is this debate intersects with how universities work with communities around issues of total environment, that is, concerns over poverty, social inequality, biodiversity. The curriculum, learning and teaching and the outreach of the university in its civic function can be harnessed to address environmental inequality and become an impetus for social growth. We can embed the principles of ESD in university practice. “The reason why I’m particularly excited about this is because it brings in that community aspect, with universities working very, very closely with communities – something that has been highlighted very much during the pandemic - concerns around poverty, social inequity, the impact of our practice(s) on our biodiversity.”

(Professor Nazira Karodia, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Regional Engagement,
University of Wolverhampton)

“So, there’s a lot there where the curriculum, the community, the students, our own practice comes together very nicely. For me, the Guidance adds and strengthens the role of the community; that civic university approach to building, embedding and mainstreaming ESD.”

(Nazira Karodia)

Looking back at the history of policy on sustainability in HE, we’ve had two or three major policy initiatives, including institutional strategies, guidance from the media, and a previous version of this ESD Guidance in 2014. In parallel, many of the issues addressed by this Guidance are becoming more and more urgent at a societal level. Given we have been here before, does this guidance represent a last chance for the sector and has the sector moved fast enough? Is this our last chance before something really serious, that we have to immediately react to, could happen?

“Nothing can actually bring forward or cast a spotlight on things as the pandemic has done. So, I think that is definitely something that’s changed and will change higher education sector forever. We will not return to our previous practices.”

(Nazira Karodia)

Given the current rate of change, and new ways of working, teaching and learning, action on the SD agenda is possible, as is the opportunity to reimagine and reorientate our curricula.

“The curriculum, any curriculum should be dynamic and responsive to new urgenciesrather than looking backwards, it’s about looking forwards.”

(Nazira Karodia)

One of the challenges is the sheer number of initiatives that are in train at the moment; for example, decolonising the curriculum and the inclusive curriculum. For senior leaders, the key is to try and dovetail and harmonise some of these initiatives because, if we look at them separately, colleagues will be overwhelmed. The sector is initiative weary and we need to convince people of the importance of SD.

“...we can reimagine, rethink the curriculum but harmonise that with other incentives and other initiatives that do need mainstreaming. Change is inclusive, not bitty.”

(Nazira Karodia)

How do we get the SD message across to all vice chancellors? Would it be fair to say that not all vice chancellors have prioritised SD as much as, for example, has been done at the University of Chester?

The sector has, understandably, been very busy coping with the Covid-19 pandemic, which has undoubtedly limited high-level discussion regarding the sustainability agenda. There are some good institutional examples and influencers operating in the sector, but much more action is necessary.

“... we are all busy reinventing universities, and this is a moment to show that a lot of the sustainability endeavour will actually help the bottom line ... people will always prioritise other things ahead of sustainability until it absolutely is in front of them and becomes part of core business.”

(Eunice Simmons)

Whose desk would you like the ESD Guidance to land on, with instructions to read it and follow up on it, within HEIs?

While it is easy to say the Guidance should be provided to those making decisions about an HEI's education provision, if the sector is to achieve change through inclusion and action it needs to fall on everybody's desk. Within the document there is a clear direction given for professional service staff members, as well as educators and academic staff members, highlighting the need for professional staff service members to work in partnership with academic staff so that everyone thinks about what an HEI's operational commitments towards sustainability look like. In addition, it needs to be readily accessible to students.

“... students are part of that driving force for change, ... they're engaging on a practical level with learning for sustainability by implementing the sustainability change within the institutions that they're learning in. This should also fall on the desks of people in students' unions, so that they really understand what they're asking for the educators in their institutions to be doing. Education change can happen within the formal, informal and subliminal curriculums. If we just focus on the formal curricula, we are missing lots of opportunities and that is outlined within the Guidance.”

(Meg Baker)

The Guidance can also provide an opportunity for students' unions and senior management teams of HEIs to work together more closely. It is therefore imperative that frameworks are developed to support whole institutional change, connecting institutions so they can learn from one another and share good practice/what works.

“[SD] ... is not competition. It's about promoting good, high quality education and working with students to achieve that so that students are co creating the learning experience that they then also experience.”

(Meg Baker)

Everyone has some degree of agency in how they address SD issues in job descriptions, and this facilitates the ability of individuals to innovate, collaborate and move the sustainability agenda forward. However, it is much more powerful if the Guidance is adopted and actioned at an institutional level.

“What the vice chancellor and the senior leadership team can do is to empower those in the institution to take the document, to understand what it means, to have the conversation institutionally that can reinforce the messages that are here, affording students' unions the opportunity to contribute too. This engenders a rich, informing discussion that leads to strategic innovation and that leads to people feeling yes, they can innovate ... and make it work for their discipline.”

(Jim Longhurst)

The issues are serious, and need to be considered carefully, in order to deliver SD in the way that is right for, and includes, everyone – both internally within an institution and externally in terms of the local community and beyond.

“If you use the arguments that are presented in the Guidance, framed using the sustainable development goals that enable you to think across all those issues and to see them not as cherry picked individual goals, but actually as a series of things that you need to think about if you want to get somewhere on the journey towards a more sustainable, inclusive future.”

(Jim Longhurst)

Collaboration is key to delivering sustainability for everyone, and this needs to encompass both academic and professional services staff. The whole infrastructure of an institution needs to be engaged and involved to come up with innovative ideas that bring and enthuse students to address these issues. It has to work in collaboration with students. In addition, we have to move away from the mindset of institutions being in competition with one another.

“We’ve got to share best practice in a really meaningful and open way. That’s what I’ve always really liked about working with SOS and NUS groupings. That collaboration. All of us working together as a community. Because we can’t compete with each other in this area. We’ve got to share those ideas and get us working in partnership at every level.”

(Jim Longhurst)

Part 2 - Leading sustainability in higher education, leading for a lost cause?

In trying to lead sustainability across the sector, are we just fighting a lost cause?

We have seen great practice in terms of sustainability across the sector. However, we have also seen some higher education providers lag behind in terms of ESD. This is where the mandatory and compliance element might move things in a more positive direction.

“Leadership needs to ensure that sustainability is ingrained in the curriculum, how we teach and all our work including the buildings, estate and transport; leadership can make all this inclusive. It’s about that commitment by leadership teams that they will take brave actions.”

(Nazira Karodia)

There are also tensions within and beyond the sector which act as blockages to delivering a sustainable agenda. These may result from an individual HEI’s systems and structures, but they may also be economic, since sustainable initiatives and options are not always the cheapest.

“Are vice chancellors and senior leadership teams brave enough to make decisions around certain projects that might not immediately make economic sense, but make sense in terms of the community and the education of students?”

(Nazira Karodia)

CASE STUDY: “At the University of Wolverhampton, we have opened our new campus for construction and built environment, which is specifically designed for a brownfield site. The cost of reclamation and regenerating a brownfield site is currently high, but with research that may become more feasible. It is, however, vital for a sustainable environment. Moreover, this campus development exemplifies what can be achieved through collaboration, a theme which runs throughout the QAA and Advance HE guidance for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In our case, a strategic partnership between the local authority, Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) in the Black Country and support from the Office for Students (OfS) helped us in the creation of the new Springfield Campus; an organic education and skills development campus for construction and the built environment which exemplifies the values of sustainability and the circular economy. This is echoed in this ESD guidance – values being developed alongside the skills and the knowledge. I think making these brave decisions to take on sustainability projects acts as catalysts for further regeneration, and has profound implications for the skills, knowledge, research, values and critical thinking for our students.”

(Nazira Karodia)

The journey into the post pandemic world for higher education is also an opportunity to develop, action and embed the sustainability agenda. Do we fall back into old habits or grapple with the really good things we’ve learned to do as a consequence of having to operate with agility and urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic?

“The UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) is coming up later in 2021, coupled with the Green Industrial Revolution the government is talking a great deal about (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020). The HE sector will have a critical role in supporting these through our research, as well as creating the workforce that will go into the green businesses of tomorrow. It’s a great moment. We just need to make sure that we take advantage of it ... for our students’ sake.”

(Jim Longhurst)

***Is sustainability, and our work in sustainability, really serving everyone in higher education?
Are we succeeding in reaching out to all groups and communities in the HE sector?***

In 2021, *The Guardian* published an article entitled ‘*We need to be heard*’: the BAME climate activists who won’t be ignored’ (Kale, 2020) providing support for the contention that the sustainability agenda isn’t currently perceived as a concern for all, and is predominantly a white middle class activity. This concern extends beyond national boundaries too; is it more associated with people in rich industrialised societies who can afford to be concerned about these issues and demand action? Given the ESD Guidance ambition is to make sustainability ‘something for everyone’, difficult questions need to be asked – are we reaching everybody in terms of the message and the work that is being done to ensure the sustainability agenda crosses economic, social and environmental boundaries?

Sustainability is not as inclusive as we would like. To date, the focus has been predominantly on the environmental aspects of the agenda, with other important components such as the economic and social aspects often seen as add-ons rather than being integrated in a more holistic way.

“... these [social and economic factors] need to be fully incorporated and, like decolonisation, require us to actually reform how we do education; what students are being taught, what students are experiencing through their learning process ... also, what they’re exposed to and how they’re encouraged to interrogate and critique their learning processes so they can create a better future and contribute to innovation for the future. That’s what ESD aims to achieve, and it is about making education more inclusive and contributing to a better society.”

(Meg Baker)

“... we should be able to address the climate emergency through climate justice.”

(Meg Baker)

There is certainly an urgent need to rewrite and reframe the middle class, white narrative with which sustainability is currently associated, and we need to ensure our staff are equipped with the competencies to be able to feel confident to do it too. Moving the narrative towards social justice is imperative to ensure an inclusive approach.

“We have focused very much on the economical and materialistic side in higher education. I think it’s about how now we bring in sustainability concerns around social inequality and poverty. That’s where the work becomes more real because you will be working much more closely with communities.”

(Nazira Karodia)

“It’s about evaluating what the purpose of education is and hopefully, it’s about contributing towards the betterment for society and for our planet holistically.”

(Meg Baker)

It is very important to align all the priorities associated with the inclusivity and social justice agenda, and the sector needs to work to ensure there is a sustainability theme through its SD plans. In addition, we also need to ensure research, and research in the curriculum, is considered and that we do not allow the impact of the pandemic to impact adversely on our focus and ambitions in relation to sustainability.

“... the Global Challenge Research Fund [UKRI, 2021], part of the UK’s official development assistance (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2020) and which addresses the UN sustainable development goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) currently has a £120 million gap between the current budget and the committed projects that UK HE now has to find ... this sends completely the wrong signal about sustainability and also says to international partners that well, we thought this was important last year, but now we’re prioritising something else.”

(Eunice Simmons)

There is an expression in management consultancy that ‘what gets measured gets done’. How does this apply to improving the leadership of sustainability in universities and colleges?

Data is collected for a variety of reasons across UK HE, for use both internally (for example, from an annual staff survey) and externally (for example, for league tables), and these feed into management decisions. Sustainability needs to be integrated into these measurement exercises and used as a way an HEI judges its provision in this area.

“All these things are ways in which we can gather data about the temperature and rate of change in the institution in respect of its sustainability ambition, how it’s playing out in the way we routinely do our business ... and routine is the real thing here – this shouldn’t simply be an add on; it is about the ethos and values espoused by an institution, and everyone living those values.”

(Jim Longhurst)

There is also a danger that ‘what gets measured gets used in league tables’, and the resulting competition in the sector can prevent collaboration taking place – ‘if you keep things to yourself you progress in the league tables’ mentality.

“... we do need metrics to be able to report, and we do need to have those indicators through our quality assurance mechanisms to show how embedded sustainability is. The SDGs are a great framework for that in terms of ensuring we work across the whole of institutional spectrum. However, I think for me sustainability only really works when it doesn’t need to be measured. When it’s just there. When it’s everything, when it is fully part of the philosophical approach. When it is truly embedded there is no need to monitor it, because it’s everything.”

(Simon Kemp)

In just a few words, what qualities does an authentic HE leader of sustainability need to exhibit in their work?’.

Jim Longhurst

Authentic – passionate – they need to listen

Simon Kemp

Collaboration – inclusivity – integrity

Eunice Simmons

They need to be future focused – but care about the present - and they need to know the difference between influence and power

Nazira Karodia

Adopt civic university principles

Meg Baker

Authentic – collaborative – inspirational

Doug Parkin

Inspiring (to inspire around the agenda) – inclusive (in the conversations) – integrity (about why it matters)

Patrick Baughan (Chair)

Belief – determination – an ability to appeal to, talk to and take everyone on the sustainability journey.

Questions raised by webinar participants

How does the panel suggest supporting academic teaching staff, particularly those new to sustainability, to operationalise ESD in the curriculum? What provision is needed for this to happen?

- + Share resources across your institution so that staff don't have to begin again every time sustainability is tackled in different areas of your activities.
- + Share examples of how to reframe curricula within and cross disciplines/faculties, including around assessment.
- + Use your HEI itself as a learning space for sustainability, and use it to frame settings for learning that live and breathe sustainability.
- + It is important to have quick, easily accessible resources that people can access at any time internally, and to develop mechanisms whereby institutions can access the resources from other institutions. This has worked well (for example the Green Academy programme). See: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/green-academy-2-change-programme. The sector needs to re-engage with those conversations and establish a way of delivering such resources (including financial resources).

Shouldn't sustainability be 'V5' in the Professional Values Framework Dimension of the UK Professional Standards (Advance HE, 2011)? Shouldn't applications for Fellowship to Advance HE be required to evidence this value?

- + It is important to see institutions, from HE providers to bodies such as Advance HE, demonstrating that they have placed significant commitment towards progressing sustainability. Fully embedding this within the Fellowship scheme would be an important signal, as would an explicit sustainability element across other professional, professional accreditation and statutory awarding bodies.
- + Professional standards frameworks need to be enabling, not reasons for educators not to make changes.

The UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals include a commitment to economic growth, yet some economists suggest economic growth is incompatible with climatic and ecological sustainability. Is ESD therefore flawed at root, and do we need to take a more radical position?

- + In terms of growth per se, this is linked to whether institutions need to still be the same size as previously, and it raises some hard questions, such as:
 - how does our environmental impact vary with institution size?
 - are all areas of our activity sustainable?; and if not
 - do we want to close some and grow others?
 - what size we need to be to be economically sustainable and viable, but also minimise environmental impact?

Thus, sustainability and size are inextricably linked, and governing bodies often expect vice chancellors to have *growth* models!

- + SDGs are criticised for a number of things, but they're the least worst of the options we have available to us.
- + If we are serious about sustainability we have to think about this in a holistic way so that we balance out the positives and negatives. Each institution will need to think about that in their own context, and in their operational hinterland.

"We've got to reach what might be a more sustainable outcome ... I'm not convinced we'll ever have true sustainability, but we will get closer."

(Jim Longhurst)

Might there be an argument that sustainability/sustainable development is even broader and more timely than the climate emergency?

- + There is no question whatsoever that sustainability and sustainable development are so much broader than just the climate emergency.

"So much of what we do within sustainability, so much of the SDGs, is miscommunicated with the focus just around the climate emergency."

(Simon Kemp)

- + There are many dimensions to the climate emergency, including:
 - gender equality
 - different methods of growth
 - ensuring fair and equitable economic growth
 - engendering a logically aware society
 - involving the voices of your people.
- + It is not just about ecology and climate emergency – it is about *people*. People are at the heart of absolutely everything, and everything that people do has an impact on sustainability.
- + If people are excluded or marginalised, and see themselves on the receiving end of, for example, racism or prejudice, they may disengage from future planning or indeed *any* planning.
- + Many HEIs are so called ‘anchor organisations’, and the pandemic has highlighted the civic role our institutions play. It goes beyond the classroom, and it is imperative to integrate sustainable development goals into all aspects of the curriculum, all aspects of how the university works and how the university interacts with its environs.

What role can academic developers or educational developers play in harmonising to change the curriculum, decolonising, and inclusivity?

- + It is all about creating a community and a network of practitioners to identify how they can innovate, and use what they are doing to collaboratively tackle the sustainability challenges we are facing.
- + Networking and collaboration, promoting knowledge exchange, and breaking down internal and external boundaries, will ensure that we can make a collective effort to make progress in sustainability, and make that progress a lot faster. Silos hinder progress.
- + Use sustainability education as the tool to address climate injustice and the climate and ecological emergency in a very real way, and with a sense of urgency.
- + Collaboration is key.
- + Draw out new collaborations that didn’t previously exist, particularly with students.
- + Don’t re invent things - look at the frameworks that are already there/available.
- + Examine the curriculum more broadly across the institution and create a framework that links all of these things together rather than trying to address challenges individually.

Do you think that the time will come when the sector will be regulated if we don’t do more? Perhaps individually as institutions?

- + In the current context a move from encouragement towards more regulation is unlikely in the next few years, though there will be lots of exultations to embrace and embed sustainability within all aspects of HEI business.
- + Some institutions will embrace sustainability faster and more effectively than others, and those who do are likely to find that their missions are supported by students.
- + There has been recent development by the QAA of having the requirement that all forthcoming subject benchmark statements are going to have to refer to the ESD Guidance document.
- + If we get the structures in place, we can innovate and collaborate from there.
- + The current government appears not to have the appetite for more regulation other than through registration of universities and colleges. This is to some extent because it does not generally view us as institutions; it views students as the key unit. It may however come from bodies such as the research councils, who may push it as they have done with the gender equality debate.

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Reflections and conclusion – using the ‘here and now’ to shape the future

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The central theme of this member benefit initiative has been the leadership of sustainability. These reflections, therefore, begin with some thoughts about leadership itself, particularly in relation to change and the dynamics of choice, urgency and inertia. There then follows a discussion of four levers for strategic engagement that link closely with key observations highlighted throughout this report.

In its origins the term ‘to lead’ means to show the road or path ahead. Building on that, the notion of strategic leadership is essentially about *shaping the future*. Implied within both is the existence of choice.

Many with responsibility for senior leadership in large and complex organisations, particularly organisations with deep roots in tradition, will be familiar with the idea of strategic inertia. In these settings most things are slow to change. Various terms have been used to describe this such as change immunity, loss aversion, initiative fatigue, cultural stasis and status-quo bias. However, it is important to recognise that the status quo is itself a choice. It may often be a hidden choice, one that did not emerge through conscious exploration and selection, but it is a choice, nonetheless. And that choice will have consequences.

Any student of psychology will have come across the concept of delayed gratification (Mischel, Shoda and Rodriguez, 1992). Based on Freudian ideas, there is the ‘pleasure principle’, the instinctual seeking of pleasure and avoidance of pain (seeking pleasure today and evading pain). This is contrasted with the ‘reality principle’, which is to delay gratification on the expectation of far greater returns in the future (pain today for gain tomorrow). Studies exploring this phenomenon show that far more of us tend to be driven by the pleasure principle, including in decision-making, than are inclined to use reason and delay gratification. This has clear implications for an agenda such as sustainability where, even today, many people see the consequences as belonging to a remote future. For individuals there is also, incidentally, a correlation between the ability to delay gratification and other positive outcomes such as social competence, self-assurance, physical and psychological health, career success and even academic achievement. So, here again we have an insight into both decisions and consequences: the choices we make today in the ‘here and now’ and how they may shape the future.

With regard to sustainable development specifically, a key question is whether we have yet reached the tipping point in our collective consciousness between the perceived sacrifices involved in change

and the consequences of not changing. For decades the inertia around the sustainability agenda and climate issues has been fundamentally caused by two things: firstly, a disconnect between sustainability and other related agendas, and secondly and most importantly, a dislocation between decisions in the ‘here and now’ and outcomes in a relatively distant future. The fact that those outcomes and their severity have been heavily contested has significantly added to that fundamental dislocation. All of this has hitherto served to take away from any real sense of urgency and marginalise the voices calling for change.

The status quo in response to sustainable development, to characterise it in a single question, might previously have sounded something like this: ‘*Why should I make changes and sacrifices today for something way in the future that might not happen?*’ This is the pleasure principle at work, particularly if we are being asked to delay gratification until a future generation. And this presents a fundamental educational challenge. One which involves raising awareness, questioning assumptions and changing perspectives so that we do not go on putting the choices made today ahead of the consequences for tomorrow. Remember, the status quo is a choice.

In 2019 the Oxford English Dictionary announced ‘climate emergency’ as the word of the year (OUP, 2019). Defined as “a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it” the term was selected because it was considered to capture the “ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing year”. It was also regarded as a word having “lasting potential as a term of cultural significance”. This significance remains to this day and intensifies, with the clear suggestion as more and more governments and organisations make climate emergency declarations that the tipping point for urgency may finally have been reached. The evidence of the impact of climate change in the ‘here and now’, along with increasingly dire consequences for the future, has made the challenge of sustainability central to everything we do. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the diverse and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted and promoted by the United Nations (United Nations Development Programme, 2015) that aim to ensure, through a balance of social, economic and environmental sustainability, “that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity”.

From the outset something that attracted me to this project was its title, *Sustainability for everyone: here and now*. As the discussions in this report clearly illustrate, for leaders to successfully shape the future around sustainable development they must first create meaning in the ‘here and now’. Leadership always takes place in a context and articulating the narrative of sustainability in a way that resonates for people operating in that context is the first job of leadership. The second is to develop a shared vision – a vision for everyone – that propels our intentions into the future with commitment in terms of both action and impact. This is fundamentally a challenge of education and engagement. So, what are the levers for strategic engagement in organisations?

Four levers for strategic engagement

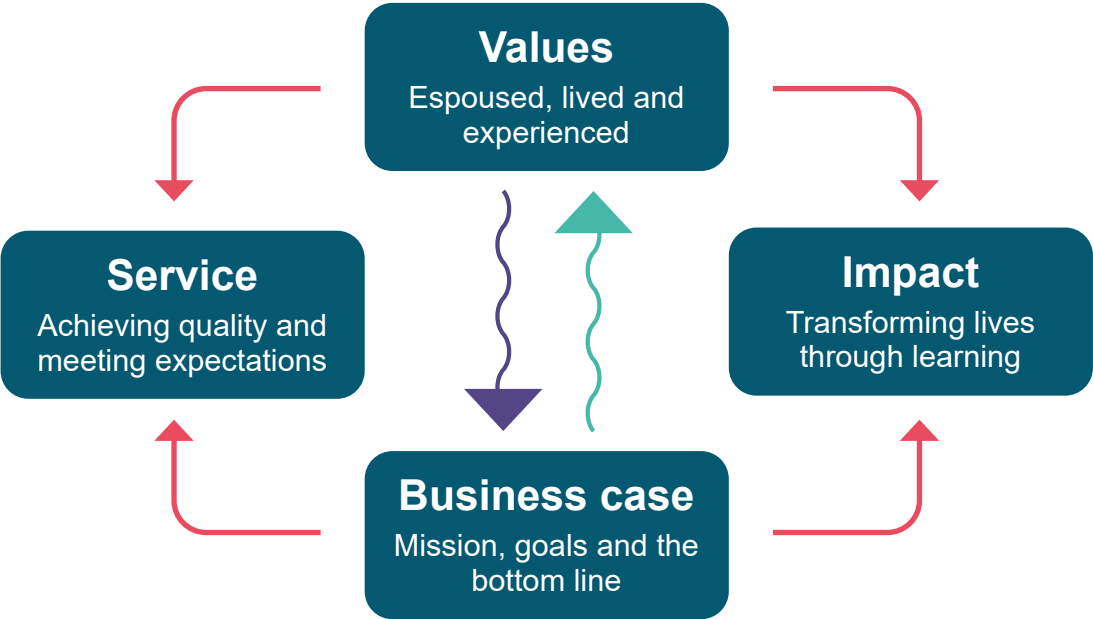


Figure 2: Four levers for strategic engagement

Although referred to as levers for ‘strategic’ engagement, these four areas are not just for influencing those recognised as decision-makers in the organisation. They are actually the primary means for collective engagement, alignment and organisational coherence operating across all areas and levels (note: variations of this model have been presented elsewhere). They operate as a set of decision triggers for both formal processes and the informal adoption of initiatives and behaviours. The triggers work by activating a series of questions that are fundamentally about identity:

- + **Values** – what do we stand for?
- + **Impact** – what are we here to achieve?
- + **Business case** – linked to purpose, what makes us efficient and effective?
- + **Service** – what are the current and future needs of those we serve?

Having strong answers to all of these questions is a cogent strategic position for any leadership team, but only if, as the arrows in Figure 2 suggest, there is a harmonious interplay between the areas. Dissonant responses, for example between the values we feel we stand for and the needs of those we serve would be strategically destructive. Likewise, then, if you are looking to negotiate with and ‘persuade’ senior decision-makers regarding a proposed new initiative, the more levers you can pull on the better. Pull all four convincingly and you are likely to move the response from ‘we can’t afford to...’ to ‘we can’t afford not to...’.

Fascinatingly, throughout the live webinar that was the basis for this report, these four levers appeared in different ways in relation to sustainable development. Working this time in reverse order:

Service – a strong emphasis was placed on the needs and expectations of students. This acknowledged both the increasing desire held by students for sustainable development to be incorporated appropriately within the curriculum, and the wider imperative to equip students to meet the sustainability challenges that the future will hold, linked to citizenship.

Business case – the opportunity to integrate sustainability with core business was powerfully highlighted, particularly harnessing some of the educational innovation and organisational reinvention flowing from the Covid-19 pandemic experience. As part of this a key transition needs to take place from a ‘bolted on’ to a ‘baked in’ approach to sustainability within institutions. Demonstrating a tangible link between sustainable development and the financial bottom line is an important part of the business case. Linking back to service, as one key example, meeting student expectations around sustainability will be important for growing or maintaining student numbers with all of the associated financial implications.

Impact – the observation was strongly made that “sustainability is intrinsically tied to community” (Professor Nazira Karodia), and that brings with it a host of implications in terms of impact. Alongside the educational and research missions of higher education institutions, both of which have strong transformational potential in terms of sustainability, there is also an important role for institutions to play as beacons of good practice and agents of change in relation to a range of community-based issues from social mobility through to biodiversity. Harnessing this “civic function”, as it was described, opens up important new dimensions in terms of articulating strategic impact.

Values – the *lever of levers*, perhaps, when it comes to both strategic (collective) and individual engagement. What do we stand for as an organisation and as a community? The speakers centred powerfully around this question in relation to sustainability. Referred to by some as the ‘deep roots of human motivation’, values as articulated by organisations can be *either lived or laminated*. Part of the essence of what has been termed ‘authentic leadership’ is a clear and visible alignment between values and actions. In fact, in many ways they should be so visible that people have a strong sense of what your values are without the need to tell them. Values and their articulation through practice is a central feature within the ESD Guidance, which was a key part of the webinar discussion, and the notion of values being developed in an embedded way alongside skills and knowledge was strongly highlighted. As regards organisational level values, it is important to question the merits of putting forward sustainability as a separate value, as opposed to having sustainability enmeshed within the values framework overall. Professor James Longhurst captured this strategic approach very convincingly, asserting that sustainability “shouldn’t simply be an add on; it is about the ethos and values espoused by an institution, and everyone living those values”.

It was both exciting and heartening to hear through the webinar discussion what felt like a moment of leadership awakening in relation to sustainability. Rather than a one-dimensional dialogue of how to promote sustainability, the dialogue pointed towards a much more sophisticated and strategic way of engaging hearts and minds, as this report captures. Driven by values, this discussion brought together a commitment to service, particularly as regards students, a focus on impact, with the institution's social and civic functions fully acknowledged, and an appreciation of the business case as institutions look to reinvent themselves for the future. As leaders, the choices we make in the 'here and now' regarding sustainability, turning our back on the status quo, will reshape the future more profoundly than ever before. The danger of not approaching those choices as 'sustainability for everyone' is that we will end up with sustainability for no one.

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ISBN number: 978-1-9163593-4-5