

Guide to ESD in practice

Supporting the development of new targeted sustainability initiatives in education settings to develop strategic competence and collaboration competence

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1. Intended outcomes

This activity forms part of a Master's level module. In this module:

1. Students demonstrate an understanding of the range and complexity of environmental and sustainability issues and values.
2. Students analyse their role as facilitators in generating empowerment through action-based learning.
3. Students propose a programme of activities relating to a sustainability issue using a wide range of appropriate strategies and structures that link to current theory and approaches and take into account national priorities.
4. Students demonstrate an awareness of the importance of education for a sustainable environment by planning a programme that will create a positive climate for learning and take into account principles such as social justice, social values, equality and positive citizenship.
5. Students will engage in critical reflection, based on reading and research, of the development of their understanding of learning in, through and for the environment.

As a consequence of these module outcomes, an additional intended outcome is to create impact by facilitating the implementation of meaningful sustainability initiatives in early years settings, primary schools, high schools and third level institutions in Scotland. These initiatives are developed based on priority areas identified by students through an exercise where they reflect on the status of sustainability education in their own work setting. These initiatives can be broad ranging and could relate to building the capacities of young people, building the capacities of their colleagues, transforming learning environments to be more conducive to ESD, empowering young people to seek or effect change, enacting sustainability-focused policy in their setting or engaging young people or colleagues with the local community. As such, it is intended that the learning gained through this module is proliferous and disseminated far beyond the classroom.

2. Participants

The participants in this example are students undertaking a module called 'Learning for Sustainability' as part of an MEd programme. Learning for Sustainability is a curricular area in Scottish education seen as the responsibility of all practitioners to deliver and the right of all young people to experience. Learning for Sustainability is an umbrella term that refers to Education for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship Education and Outdoor Learning. A majority of participants are either primary or secondary school teachers undertaking a Master's part-time. The module has also been taken by those working in third level institutions. Therefore, this practice can be adapted to meet the needs of anyone working in any educational setting.

3. Activity/project

This module is broken up into three sections – Section 1 is based on Education for Sustainable Development, Section 2 focuses on Global Citizenship Education and Section 3 covers the pedagogical approaches associated with Outdoor Learning.

The activity being submitted as an example of good practice is the assessed activity of this module. The module assessment has two components. As part of this module, students are required to individually plan and implement a sustainability initiative in their own educational setting. The initiative can take place at any point during the module and the duration differs depending on the setting.

The first assessed component is a presentation on the initiative itself and can include aspects such as: how the initiative relates to the SDGs, how it relates to the triad of sustainability, how it relates to current educational/national/international policy, how it relates to the needs of their setting, how it impacts the young people, their colleagues, themselves and the wider learning community, how the initiative will be sustained going forward, etc. The second component is a written reflection where students reflect on how their understanding of Learning for Sustainability has changed over time, how it now relates to their professional practice and the next steps in their journey in embedding the SDGS, ESD and LfS into their work and settings.

In order to facilitate this work, the first session of the module aims to answer the questions ‘What is Sustainability?’, ‘What is Learning for Sustainability?’ and ‘What is Education for Sustainable Development?’. This ensures that all students have a common understanding of the holistic nature of sustainability issues. This first session cumulates in the students being set an individual task.

It is identified by UNESCO that the main priority action areas of Sustainable Development Education are:

- + advancing policy
- + transforming learning and training environments
- + building the capacities of learners and educators
- + empowering and mobilising youth
- + accelerating sustainable solutions at local level.

Choose one of these areas and think about it in relation to your setting. Create a seven-minute presentation that outlines:

1. Why you believe this is a priority area for your setting?
2. What opportunities exist for you to develop upon this area?

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3. What challenges might you face when facilitating change?
4. What would be the desired outcome for your setting (staff and learners) should this area be developed?

These presentations are then delivered to the rest of the group at the next seminar. It is this thinking that forms the basis of their own initiative that they will deliver in their own educational settings.

Further topics, such as the climate crisis and young people, global citizenship education, activism in education, outdoor learning, conservation and rewilding, outdoor environments and wellbeing, to just name a few, add to this knowledge base during the module.

4. Assessment or evaluation

As this is an accredited module, the assessment criteria for the module dictates whether a student has successfully met the outcomes of the module.

The first assessed component is a presentation delivered by the students to the full class group. The content of this presentation focuses on the sustainability initiative the student has planned and delivered in their setting. As such, it is used to assess a number of the module's intended outcomes. Firstly, it serves the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the strategies and structures chosen by the student to inform the planning of their initiative. It also presents the opportunity for students to explain how their plans link to current theory, thinking and national priorities in the fields of education and sustainability. In addition to this, it allows the student to demonstrate their awareness of the importance of ESD and exemplify how their initiative created a positive climate for learning. The benefit of having students present to each other, rather than just to the assessors, is that it allows the whole cohort to share developments, good practice, new pedagogical ideas and also share solutions to the challenges they faced when implementing their initiatives.

The second assessed component is a written critical reflection. This reflection is intended to give the student space to demonstrate their understanding of the complexity of environmental and sustainability issues and critically analyse their role as a facilitator of Learning for Sustainability. The student is also invited to reflect on how their understanding of sustainability has changed over time. Thus, this element of critical reflection, based on reading, research and their own first-hand experiences provides a method to assess how their knowledge and understanding has developed due to partaking in this module.

The success of this activity also lies in its impact. It has led to the conception of sustainability initiatives in early years settings, primary and secondary schools across the country. In the past five years, the module on which this guide is based has been taken by a total of 48 students, which has led to sustainability initiatives and projects being set up in 48 educational settings. Using an average class size of 30 young people (and assuming the initiatives were not open to more than one class, although many were), approximately 4,530

young people have been introduced to sustainability issues as part of their education due to their teacher taking this module. This is a significant impact.

5. Useful resources

UNESCO (2021) *Education for sustainable development for 2030 toolbox*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/toolbox

[Presentation task slide](#)

6. Example of practice

A necessary step is ensuring that all participants have a shared broad and holistic understanding of what the term ‘sustainability’ means. This opens a wide variety of opportunities for the participants when defining their new initiative while also giving the chance to ensure their initiative fulfils a need identified in their setting.

It would be incorrect to assume that there is already a base level of understanding present because Learning for Sustainability is present in the National Curriculum. Teachers come from a broad range of subject areas, undergraduate degrees and backgrounds, which gives them a particular world view that may or may not have been challenged yet. Therefore, this first session, which answers three big questions, is very important. This broad understanding has led to an equally broad range of initiatives that bring topics into the classroom, such as: habitats and ‘the big bad wolf’, upcycling furniture for the local community, the co-publication of a book of poetry written by young people about a local nature reserve, decolonising the texts used in the English classroom, the co-creation of outdoor classrooms with young people and a series of drama lessons based around the emotions evoked by the climate crisis amongst others.

In addition to this, as a tutor, it can be very tempting to sometimes suggest what an initiative might look like when asked for advice. It is important not to set limits on the students and their ideas of what is possible or necessary in their own settings.

Some feedback from module evaluations is included as further evidence of good practice. In the 2022-23 academic year, the module scored a 100% ‘definitely agree’ rating on:

- + lecturers are good at explaining things
 - + the lecturer is enthusiastic about the subject
 - + the module is intellectually stimulating
 - + the module gave me opportunities to apply what I have learned
 - + students have the opportunity to voice their opinion on this module
 - + I feel that my opinions and contributions are valued by module staff
 - + overall I am satisfied with this module.
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Comments provided by students included:

“I really enjoyed this module. It has enhanced my practice and allowed me to implement my learning into my daily practice and outdoor learning. It has given me confidence to push forward the policies of sustainability in school. The learning I have gained has positively impacted on the children I teach.”

“There was a well rounded approach to LfS with expertise from two excellent tutors.”



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