

ESD for all? Do 'Sustainability Competencies' need decolonising?



- 01**
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to develop learners' cross-cutting competencies to make a positive difference to sustainable development challenges, such as reducing inequalities, enabling economic prosperity and preventing environmental harm.
 - An 8-competency framework put forward by UNESCO¹ in 2018 was given prominence in the joint **AdvanceHE/QAA 2021 guidance on ESD curriculum design** for the UK HE sector.² These competencies include systems thinking, critical thinking, collaborative working and adopting a self-aware and values-driven approach.
 - How should competency frameworks for ESD take into account the **critique offered by the Decolonising agenda** of higher education pedagogy, assessment, and Eurocentric perspectives?³

- 02**
- ESD competency frameworks have been criticised (even by their own authors) as being **overly Eurocentric**, both in terms of authorship, underlying research and the socio-cultural contexts in which they can be successfully applied.^{4,5}
 - Little research has explored what 'sustainability competencies' should mean in **broader societal contexts**, such as countries with greater levels of poverty, weaker democratic institutions, risks to free speech or where there are ongoing conflicts.
 - This issue is **highly relevant for any taught course** which seeks to empower diverse learners, including international students, to effect transformative social change professionally or personally, particularly in non-Global North contexts.

03 What competencies does ESD aim to help learners develop?^{1,2}

Ways of thinking

Systems thinking

Anticipatory (Future thinking)

Critical thinking

- ▶ Recognise and understand relationships
- ▶ Analyse complex systems
- ▶ Understand and evaluate multiple outcomes
- ▶ Create own visions for the future
- ▶ Question norms, practices and opinions
- ▶ Consider how systems are embedded
- ▶ Deal with uncertainty
- ▶ Apply the precautionary principle
- ▶ Assess consequences and risks of actions
- ▶ Take a position on sustainability issues

Ways of practicing

Strategic

Collaboration

Integrated problem-solving

- ▶ Develop and take innovative actions
- ▶ Design impactful projects
- ▶ Facilitate collaborative and participatory problem solving, dealing with group conflicts
- ▶ Respect and learn from the needs, perspectives and actions of others
- ▶ Utilise appropriate competencies and frameworks to solve sustainability problems
- ▶ Develop viable, inclusive, and equitable solutions

Ways of being

Self-awareness

Normative

- ▶ Reflect on values, perceptions and actions
- ▶ Reflect on role in the local community and global society
- ▶ Understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one's actions
- ▶ Recognise diverse values, principles, trade-offs, uncertain knowledge and contradictions

04 Insights from a Decolonising lens

POINTS OF CRITIQUE

- A Decolonising lens brings into question many aspects of higher education practice³, which in the case of ESD competencies includes:
 - **How knowledge is developed** (Sustainability Competency frameworks are largely based upon insights from Global North societies)
 - **Who conducts research** (Sustainability Competency frameworks have been largely developed by academics in Europe and North America)
 - **Representation** in teaching and learning — both who is teaching and also the stories/examples used as case studies or evidence.
 - A more **holistic view** of knowledge and being, that includes spiritual aspects such as purpose and faith as drivers of behaviour⁶, or which respects and seeks to learn from the know-how and worldviews of indigenous communities^{6,7}
 - **'Coloniality'** as a mindset can be viewed as an underlying root cause of unsustainability (and inequality), whereby people and resources are viewed as resources which can be exploited for the benefit of those with power to do so. Arguably this is inextricable from 'Modernity'.⁷
- Sustainability Competencies have been put forward as **universal** for all people and settings — yet a core tenet of sustainability is that every society (and the planet as a whole) is a complex system and as such, knowledge and actions need to be tailored to their specific context.
- These perspectives suggest a significant risk that sustainability competency frameworks **may offer a poor fit** outside of contexts in the Global North where broadly similar social rules, socio-economic development patterns, organisational structures and democratic structures prevail.

KNOWLEDGE IN CONTEXT

- Demssie et al. explored these issues in a 2019 paper examining competencies for sustainability professionals in Ethiopia.⁵ Their findings indicated strong agreement with the broad types of competencies in section 3, but some potentially significant omissions including:
 - Commitment to **Social Justice and Inclusion** - considering the needs and values of diverse groups, including future generations.
 - Applying **Indigenous resources** and knowledge to promote sustainable development.
 - Balancing **Sustainable Development Dimensions** — particularly, ensuring that economic concerns do not over-ride others.
- These omissions each have a common thread, of recognising and addressing **imbalances in power**, whether that is marginalisation of particular stakeholders or communities or of indigenous knowledge and worldviews in general.
 - Thus, dominant competency frameworks perhaps do not focus enough on the need for citizens and practitioners to work on **issues that are contested and where large power disparities exist**.
 - This challenge will be universal, but perhaps more significant outside the Global North.

05 Diving Deeper: What's missing?

BEYOND COMPETENCIES

- In 'The Sustainability Mindset Principles'⁶, Rimanoczy argues (pg. 148) that **developing sustainability competencies is insufficient** for educators, as they only aid **Adaptive** actions (those that lessen negative impacts on social/environmental issues).
 - To go further and trigger **Preventative** actions, a shift in underlying mindset is needed.
 - This requires teaching and learning that seeks engagement with **emotional and spiritual intelligence** and **transformative** pedagogic approaches not commonly used in higher education settings.

COLONIALITY AS ROOT CAUSE

- If a **colonial extractive mindset** is a root cause of both unsustainability and inequalities, this creates potential for joint working between educators focussed on Decolonising and Sustainability issues.
 - This can enable a deeper exploration of the underlying **values and beliefs** driving inequity and unsustainability
 - This insight can provide a rationale for adoption of **innovative pedagogies** which seek to address these root causes and to challenge **power imbalances around knowledge and practice**.

06 What next?

EXPLORATION WITH STUDENTS

- Moving beyond Eurocentric approaches to teaching sustainability is not just a matter of principle — it is also a **practical concern** at DMU and elsewhere where many students will apply their learning internationally.
- The authors will explore these issues alongside DMU students in Masters teaching in the 'Energy and Sustainable Development' programme and through DMU-wide sustainability workshops, by
 - Discussing the ideas presented here and **what competencies are needed in diverse contexts**
 - Developing teaching and learning activities that **explicitly explore Coloniality** and aid the development of a holistic **Sustainability Mindset**.

References

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