

Statement

on

Education for sustainable development

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Introduction

Sustainability is a core foundation of education's public responsibility and higher education institutions (HEIs) have an obligation to equip students with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to empower them to work towards a more sustainable society. Students are powerful changemakers and should form the vanguard in our fight to solve the climate crisis with a real seat at the table and a say in the strategic implementation of future proof education for sustainable development.

As outlined in our [Statement on Sustainability](#) (approved by the 77th Board Meeting in Malta), the world urgently needs sustainable development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability should be viewed holistically and higher education systems, HEIs,

media, business and policymakers all have a crucial role to play in driving the transformation towards a sustainable society.

This statement aims to:

1. Give a thorough explanation of the concept of “Climate education/Education for sustainable development” – a broad term referring to the interlinks between HE, sustainability and climate.
2. Outline ESU’s position on the role of education in creating a sustainable world and ESU’s work on the topic.
3. Provide NUSes with principles and recommendations for advocating for the implementation of comprehensive Education for sustainable development in their higher education systems.

What is Education for sustainable development (ESD)?

The goal of Education for sustainable development (ESD) is to equip individuals, communities, and societies with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to contribute to sustainable development. ESD aims to promote a holistic understanding of sustainability, which includes economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Another goal is to encourage individuals to make informed decisions and take responsible actions towards a sustainable future. It encompasses interdisciplinary learning activities to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies to critically assess and address climate change causes and build resilience to its impacts.

It also seeks to address root causes of unsustainability and promote transformative change towards a more sustainable society, acknowledging the global scope of sustainability challenges and requiring collective action at all levels. Furthermore, it should be science-based and help counter climate change deniers.

Learning and teaching

Effective and innovative learning and teaching strategies are crucial in ESD, such as interdisciplinary and experiential learning, critical and systems thinking skills development, critical use of technology and digital resources, and innovative assessment methods. Pedagogical methods must be anchored in student-centred learning and recognize diverse learning styles and needs among students. Experiential learning methods such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and service learning enable students to apply their knowledge to real-world

situations and develop practical skills. Critical and systems thinking skills development enable individuals to question assumptions and values and think comprehensively about sustainability challenges. Technology can provide opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning and enable innovative learning approaches such as simulations, virtual field trips, and online games. However it should be used critically, acknowledging that not all its functions are compatible with achieving a more sustainable future. Innovative assessment approaches such as portfolios, reflective journals, and self-assessment may be necessary to capture the complexity of learning outcomes in ESD. On a faculty level, ESD should be integrated on a strategic level with a more holistic approach to the sustainable HEI, using e.g. the **Green Office model**. Nevertheless, even within this context student involvement is a necessity to reflect the interests of all status groups at HEIs.

Skills

ESD should focus on developing a range of skills, including scientific and technical skills, as well as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Students must also be equipped with communication and collaboration skills to effectively work across disciplines and engage with stakeholders. ESD should also prioritise skills related to sustainable innovation, entrepreneurship, and circular economy. These skills are essential for creating and implementing sustainable solutions that can drive the green transition and address environmental challenges.

Skills related to community engagement and social change are also vital and students should be taught how to engage with communities and other stakeholders in promoting sustainable practices and driving social change. This can include informal learning opportunities outside the classroom, such as community centres, parks, and museums. Volunteering, which must be formally recognized and valued, can also provide students with hands-on experience in sustainability practices and opportunities to engage with communities.

Students themselves are powerful actors for change outside the classroom. By organising communal initiatives that engage local stakeholders – like in the **CityStudio model** – students can raise awareness, demands and inspire others to take action for sustainability. This type of student-led activism not only promotes sustainable practices but also empowers students to take an active role in shaping their communities and driving social change.

HEIs should foster new opportunities for students to learn about green jobs and careers, by actively promoting internships and similar opportunities in sustainable industries. By doing so HEIs can contribute to a change in attitude towards these emerging sustainable careers and promote research results that can enhance industries sustainability efforts. Where relevant, important actors from these fields, such as employers or industry stakeholders, can be included in the strategic phase to ensure that ESD provides students with the skills and knowledge necessary for green jobs and careers.

Justice and the global dimension

ESU recognizes and underlines the importance of the global dimension of ESD. In preparing students to address global challenges and become active global citizens, ESD plays a critical role. The global dimension of ESD both demands and furthers a broad understanding of global issues, such as climate change, poverty, inequality, and cultural diversity.

Climate justice is an important aspect of the global dimension of ESD that seeks to address disparities and ensure a fair and equitable transition to a sustainable future. ESD must recognize that achieving climate justice is not just about individual actions but also about addressing systemic inequalities and power imbalances.

To promote the global dimension of ESD, NUSes can work with authorities, HEIs and stakeholders to integrate the global and justice dimensions into ESD:

- **Fostering international cooperation among universities and students** is one way to promote the global dimension of ESD. ESU encourages universities to establish partnerships with HEIs from different regions of the world and to engage in joint initiatives that centre around ESD. This can be achieved through sustainable exchange programs and joint research projects that focus on global sustainability challenges.
- Moreover, NUSes can play a critical role in promoting the global dimension of ESD by **advocating for the inclusion of global perspectives in the curriculum**. This can be done by working with higher education institutions to review and update the curriculum, ensuring that it integrates the global dimension of ESD. Additionally, NUSes can collaborate with student organisations from different regions of the world to develop joint advocacy campaigns that highlight the importance of the global dimension of ESD.

Intergenerational justice is another key principle of ESD that emphasises the need to consider the long-term implications of our actions and to adopt sustainable practices that ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities across generations.

Student and youth participation

ESD in higher education should foster active citizenship and provide opportunities for students to participate in sustainability initiatives and decision-making processes at local, national, and international levels. It is also essential to create an inclusive education system that addresses the diverse needs of students from all backgrounds. Recognizing and supporting student-led sustainability initiatives in higher education is also crucial.

ESD in higher education must equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values and provide opportunities for them to actively participate in decision-making processes. By doing so, we can create a sustainable future that is shaped by and for young people and students, empowering them to take ownership of their future and participate meaningfully in society.

Academic and teaching staff

Academic and teaching staff play a central role in implementing ESD initiatives and creating a learning environment that fosters sustainability values and skills. Supporting academic and teaching staff is essential in promoting ESD in higher education institutions. By providing training and professional development opportunities, resources, recognition, and incentives, institutions can help academic and teaching staff to incorporate sustainability into their teaching and research.

Dealing with sustainability topics has to be a natural part of learning processes that should motivate students and academic staff to find solutions to sustainability issues themselves.

Resources such as sustainability guides, teaching materials, and online tools can help academic and teaching staff to incorporate sustainability themes into their teaching and research. Creating a community of practice focused on sustainability and ESD can provide a forum for academic and teaching staff to share ideas and best practices.

Research

Research is crucial for understanding and addressing complex sustainability challenges. Research provides insights into the root causes of environmental, economic, and social issues, and can inform policy and practise for creating sustainable solutions. ESU recognizes the importance of research in ESD and supports the long-term development and sustainable funding of research, with a solid focus on the protection of academic freedom and integrity.

Participatory research methods should involve engaging communities in the research process. NUSes are encouraged to promote sustainability research by advocating for interdisciplinary research collaboration and encouraging students and academic staff to engage in sustainability research. Furthermore, NUSes are encouraged to advocate for state funding for the sustainability research topics.

Research can also support the development of sustainable policies and practices. By providing evidence-based insights into sustainability issues, research can inform the development of policies and practices that promote sustainability.

Evaluation research can provide feedback on the impact of sustainability initiatives, identifying strengths and weaknesses and suggesting ways to improve them in order to encourage more effective sustainability strategies and practices.

ESU's work on ESD

ESU's work on ESD will take a multi-level approach and consist of:

- 1) European-level advocacy and global engagement**, drawing on Generation Climate Europe, of which ESU is a co-founder, and partnerships with e.g. Climate Students Movement, SOS International and the Global Student Forum.
- 2) Supporting NUSes in their advocacy** for effective and student-centred implementation of ESD as well as facilitating the sharing of best practices and successful case studies.

European-level advocacy and global engagement

- On the European level, ESU will actively work through GCE and with its member organisations. Our vision for GCE is a strong voice for climate action and sustainability, that promotes our holistic approach. ESU will ensure the ESD advocacy is a priority for GCE and use our position to advocate for projects

that explicitly integrate and focus on ESD.

- ESU will engage actively with the sustainability education initiatives of the European institutions and multinational organisations. We will monitor e.g. the implementation of the Council recommendations on learning for sustainable development and the Council conclusions on skills and competences for the green transition.
- ESU will actively engage with 2030 Agenda and global climate action, e.g. the Conference of the Parties (COP) and promote the voice of youth and students in these processes via initiatives like the **EESC Youth Delegates to the COP**. ESU will work with Global Student Forum (GSF) on securing a global outlook in ESD and rooting it in climate justice principles.

ESU's advocacy will be based on the following pillars from the concept of ESD as presented above:

- **Advocacy for the Integration of ESD into all levels of education:** Based on the model of lifelong learning, ESU will call for the integration of ESD into all levels of education, from primary school to university, to ensure that students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to contribute to sustainable development. By giving opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to deepen their understanding and skills on sustainability, microcredentials can also play a crucial role in this.
- **Multidisciplinary approach to ESD:** ESU will promote a comprehensive and integrated approach to ESD that emphasises multidisciplinary by developing cross-disciplinary curricula, promoting interdisciplinary research, and using innovative teaching methods.
- **Focus on the global dimension of ESD:** The emphasis on a global perspective in ESD should also address justice, including climate and intergenerational justice. ESU should call for increased international collaboration and exchange programs for students across Europe and the globe to promote a comprehensive approach to ESD and ensure that students have the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to sustainable development.

- **Advocate for meaningful participation of youth and students in sustainable development:** ESU should emphasise the importance of active and decisive involvement of youth and students in decision-making processes related to sustainable development, at all levels. ESD must always be based on student-centred learning.
- **Invest in teacher and academic staff training and support systems:** ESU should advocate for increased investment in training programs and support systems for teachers and academic staff, ensuring that they have the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to effectively teach and promote ESD.

Supporting NUSes in their advocacy

- ESU will encourage and facilitate a continuing exchange of best practices between NUSes on ESD implementation at the national and local levels. Through monitoring developments in the sustainability sector, in research and new data, ESU will assist NUSes engage with ESD in an evidence-based and effective way.
- ESU will continuously provide NUSes information about relevant projects, trainings and funding opportunities on sustainability topics. ESU will actively work to open up GCE to the NUSes as a platform for them to also engage more broadly with sustainability (e.g. on nature restoration, circular economy and clean mobility)
- Through its communication channels, ESU will work to raise the visibility of ESD and its importance in order to help NUSes make its effective implementation a priority in their national context.

Suggested literature and resources

- **BM77:** ESU Statement on Sustainability
- **BM79:** ESU Policy Paper on Public Responsibility, Financing and Governance of Higher Education
- **UNESCO:** Education for Sustainable Development: a roadmap
- Council recommendation on learning for sustainable development
- Council conclusions on skills and competences for the green transition

- European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience
- **GreenComp:** The European sustainability competence framework
- EUxCoE Youth Partnership: Sustainability checklist
- City Studio
- Green Office Movement