Impact of COVID-19 on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the context of twin transition

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The impact of COVID-19 on ESD in schools

In the context of ESD, COVID-19 had at least a threefold impact on the curricula. Due to the move to online/blended learning, the critical thinking and analysis of sustainability-related information required teachers to have solid ICT skills to engage students in debate, challenge thinking, and encourage group work. Secondly, due to the lack of face-to-face contact, the typical experiential ESD activities schools normally undertake (active projects, eco-days, eco-clubs) were not possible. Finally, with external exams and monitoring of schools being postponed or cancelled, there was a need to re-evaluate how to monitor student progress and success. This lays the ground open to guidance, if not policies, on embedding sustainability competencies in school systems, and Member States could follow the lead of countries that have already done the groundwork.

Effective development of sustainability competences, which is the goal of ESD, requires pedagogies that are problem or enquiry-based. These were challenged at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many schools and teachers did not have any experience of online learning and had to develop new pedagogical approaches via digital platforms. It sometimes led, however, to positive developments, when teachers moved from a lecturing approach to embracing interactive, participatory approaches. COVID-19 led to many changes in access to traditional learning environments. The use of outdoor spaces and visits to 'green' spaces, which had always been an important component of ESD, were encouraged.

The examples of repatterning of relationships as a response to COVID-19 restrictions shows that it would be also possible to repattern relationships towards embedding ESD in school practice and curriculum, including working with businesses and communities. The adoption of blended learning also shows the ability of the systems and teachers to adapt and focus more on the role of 'facilitator' rather than the deliverer of content, which is necessary for effective ESD, too. Finally, there could be a positive potential impact on the uptake of ESD in the EU if schools continue engaging parents in learning for sustainability with their children.

The impact of COVID-19 on ESD in VET

During the pandemic, the main focus of VET systems was to ensure that both the school-based and company-based initial vocational education and training (IVET) models continued to function, so that young people could still gain the education necessary for their personal development. Countries adopted a variety of measures to facilitate online access (students, families, VET schools and training firms), spanning enhanced connectivity, IT infrastructure, devices, digital learning platforms, etc.

As for employee training, there appears to have been little systematic effort to support further employers in using lockdowns to train their staff. In those cases, with public support, continuing training was usually related to online training that was already available before the outbreak of COVID-19.

VET systems need to ensure that all learners acquire the competences needed to promote sustainable development, as well as provide youth and adults with the relevant information and awareness of it. Also, it requires stronger integration of other key functions of VET, such as the promotion of (green/sustainable) technology transfer and locally applied innovation. Before COVID-19, the promotion of ESD in VET was

generally minimal at both the European level and in the Member States. During the pandemic, it appears that digitalisation at the organisational level has been advancing more rapidly than embedding sustainability.

However, it is also necessary to point out that the pandemic has had effects that may help to make the most of this global crisis in terms of promoting sustainability. Firstly, the pandemic has reinforced public discourse on the relevance of VET to address the present and future of Europe in terms of sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience. Secondly, the various initiatives that allowed to continue accessing VET during the pandemic show a strong institutional and educational framework in Europe, which highlights our strengths and assets to move forward with the new curricula, competences and methodologies towards sustainability. Finally, in the Berlin Declaration, the roadmap for ESD is reinforced as a result of the pandemic, which allows the European Union to give a new political impetus to VET for sustainable development.

The impact of COVID-19 on ESD in higher education (HE)

The urgent shift to online learning and teaching in HEIs led to a situation where the focus was put on teachers' digital skills and use of platforms, rather than on competences in teaching and integrating ESD in HE. In addition, online learning led to lack of engagement and activity of students, as well as limited opportunities to connect with real-life experience, not to mention the increased stress and social isolation and inequality of students and teachers, in terms of internet access. The disruption of projects or restrictions on fieldwork caused by COVID-19, inflicted risks for obtaining the data and disturbed the dynamic of research. Many conferences were cancelled or postponed, which reduced communication and exchange of knowledge between researchers.

The developments of the pandemic affected the institutional framework of HEIs. The frequent changes and uncertainty led to difficulties in long term-planing of sustainable governance, and the lost income from tuition or public funds challenged the financial sustainability of HEIs. As the whole-institution approach is key for the holistic delivery of ESD, the closure of institutions and campuses disrupted the delivery of usual services and 'greening practices'. Finally, the pandemic caused barriers for community outreach, as emergency needs in healthcare and economic challenges inflicted risks of economic crisis and social isolation, followed by unequal access of people to education, technology and employment.

Besides its negative effects, the pandemic also has transformative potential for education. Creative use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in sustainable leadership, providing transparency of decision-making processes, policy measures and changes can contribute to a more enabling environment for the development of a 'culture' of sustainability, increasing the chances for quality integration of ESD in all HEI segments. Also, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic opens the space for re-designing curricula and strategies in teaching sustainability at HEIs.

Recommendations

Advancing ESD policy for ESD: future policy preparedness for education sustainability

- Rethinking education ecosystems in terms of sustainable development beyond digitalisation, bringing the educational offering into line with the prevailing social demand for sustainability.
- Integrating and prioritising ESD policies at the national, regional and local level, applying holistic and cross-sector policy approaches.
- Developing an integrated ESD information system or other SD reporting, surveillance and enforcement mechanisms which, under a harmonised and flexible approach, make it possible to monitor and evaluate countries' and regions' progress towards ESD, which in turn requires comprehensive, reliable data on ESD.
- Including ESD criteria (cross-sector, transdisciplinary, collaborative, participatory) in the provision of grants and funds for innovation in education.
- Integrating ESD planning into the lifelong learning curriculum (from early childhood education through to active ageing). Dedicating resources to expanding, adapting and innovating education and training offerings to correct the lack of coverage sustainability receives in European education systems.

Learning environments for ESD: promoting a whole-institution approach towards ESD

- Promoting a whole-institution approach to ESD: governance, estates/campus, procurement, curriculum, community/stakeholders, action learning/research.

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- Conducting constant monitoring and evaluation so that school/vocational organisation/university operation and the outcomes achieved in terms of sustainability are continuously improved.
- Promoting and supporting collaboration between students and teachers, communities, trainers and academic/non-academic staff in action research and activities addressing sustainability and the impacts of the pandemic (e.g., through collaborative project-based learning).
- Ensuring and allocating funds for financial support to students and staff (technology, tools for teaching and learning, etc.) and ensuring that policies are created to ensure that disadvantaged students have access to online learning.
- Design and develop rigorous quality assurance systems specific to education settings to guide the whole-institution approach.
- Developing clusters of schools with active and dynamic management teams to act as learning hubs by building networks around them, to move to scale and move beyond merely ad hoc activities.

Teachers and educators for ESD: providing SD capacity development in:

- Fostering sustainability knowledge and competences, using the framework developed by UNESCO (for instance, anticipatory competency, normative competency, strategic competency, collaboration competency, critical thinking competency, self-awareness competency and integrated problem-solving competency), or the future European key competence framework on sustainability.
- Innovative and sustainable blended experiential formats and work-based learning (apprentices, trainees, etc. for SD).
- Integrating sustainability and ESD into the pre-service education of teachers at all the education levels and encouraging subsequent lifelong learning and training throughout their careers.
- Supporting knowledge sharing and improving online teaching strategies based on a participatory and transformative approach.
- Creating new prescriptive roles, such as that of sustainability adviser for educators, and boosting actions and experiences that promote sustainability culture among teaching staff.

Youth and ESD: providing opportunities for youth engagement

- Supporting initiatives involving joint projects and activities between students and staff of schools, VET schools and universities, addressing the sustainability of institutions or communities or the quality of education.
- Supporting students' networks and associations in providing help or assistance to international students, those hit by the impacts of COVID-19 or those who are disabled or marginalised.
- Better support for students in identifying and encouraging their interest in SD and the development of personalised learning pathways as part of lifelong vocational guidance.

Community and ESD: empowering local communities as 'nodal' platforms for all priority action areas

- Establishing and strengthening partnerships with local stakeholders contributing to practical inputs to teaching and learning for sustainability.
- Fostering knowledge, research and innovation both within the educational ecosystems (primary and secondary education, VET and HE) and towards local communities, firms and institutions to foster sustainability and ESD.
- Involving community members in action research and capacity development programmes addressing local and global sustainability issues and global trends.