



European Expert Network
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Harnessing the potential of non-formal education for sustainability

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Learning for sustainability in non-formal contexts

The adoption of the European Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition (2022) formally acknowledged the need for lifelong and transformative learning to address the planetary crisis and the well-being of citizens. It recognised that educational opportunities also exist outside of schools, colleges and universities and promoted a whole-school approach to sustainability that connects non-formal offerings to core educational experiences.

Non-formal education occurs when planned, structured and intentional learning is extended beyond formal education settings. It can be targeted at a specific group or may be broad in its reach. Offerings can be brief, providing overviews of key issues and snapshots of experiences, or may take the form of workshops, seminars and short courses. Non-formal education providers include cultural, linguistic and scientific institutions; government and private organisations, sports clubs, youth and faith groups, communities of practice; as well as at heritage and national park authorities.

The current state of play

The report '*Harnessing the potential of non-formal education for sustainability*' reviewed the state of play in non-formal education in the context of learning for sustainability, with a view to informing policy decision-making and guidance in this area. It identified leading practice as well as enablers that can catalyse the transformative potential of non-formal education for sustainability. The findings and recommendations of the report have been drawn from an extensive literature review informed by scholarship, research evidence, policy reports, case studies and good practice.

Non-formal education experiences are often rooted in the learner's local environment, developing understanding and competences which are anchored in lived experiences and thus offer authentic learning opportunities. Non-formal learning presents diverse opportunities to connect with people and planet issues; build sustainability literacy skills and capabilities for active citizenship; create more hands-on engagement with the natural environment; and explore sustainable lifestyles. Specialist areas include waste and energy, climate science, biodiversity, heritage conservation, travel and transport, health and well-being, faith, ethics and culture, youth leadership, entrepreneurship and social enterprise. Levels of engagement differ between offerings, with learners as observers, recipients, participants and/or co-creators in the process. Non-formal education also reaches out to disadvantaged and marginalised groups who have limited access to education.

The value of non-formal learning to sustainability

Non-formal learning offered in a community setting can serve to **strengthen bonds** with local environments, as it familiarises learners with the unique and distinctive features of the communities and places to which they can relate. This can drive commitment for sustainability and motivate people of all ages to make choices in favour of the environment and the health and well-being of the communities with which they are associated. These offerings lend themselves well to sustainability learning as they enable the learner to explore **interdisciplinary inquiries and boundary-crossing** concerns recognising the ways in which sustainability issues transcend traditional subject boundaries.

Non-formal education experiences are often interactive and support **participatory pedagogies** such as *place-based learning*, *inquiry-based learning*, *citizen science* and concepts including *action competence*, *social learning* and *eco-justice*. They present opportunities for learners to build the sustainability competences identified in the European sustainability competence framework *GreenComp*.

Worthy of note is the role non-formal education plays in **enhancing levels of innovation and bolstering competitiveness** in EU economies. Given the growing frequency and complexity of environmental and sustainability challenges, knowledge acquired through education can quickly become outdated or inadequate, and current formal education practices are insufficient to build the creative or innovation mindsets needed to address the climate and environmental crises. In contrast, non-formal education providers are well placed and often quicker to adapt in addressing these issues.

Non-formal education providers are adopting **digital technologies** as means to improve access and educational outcomes, as well as making use of visualisation software that brings to life possible scenarios in relation to sustainability concerns. Some of these experiences also support the development of digital skills for sustainability, required for active participation in a world that is becoming increasingly digitally connected.

Advancing non-formal education for sustainability

Significant variations exist in the focus, quality and value of non-formal education offerings, nevertheless, certain key trends and policy-related observations can be shared. These can inform efforts to advance non-formal education for sustainability:

- Most non-formal educational offerings in sustainability primarily focus on building the learner's interest and knowledge base in sustainability rather than sustainability competences.
- Whilst schools, colleges and universities recognise the value that non-formal education providers bring to learning experiences, many challenges exist for teachers in identifying and choosing non-formal experiences that align with the requirements of the curriculum.
- The lack of a coherent pedagogical framework for learning for sustainability in non-formal settings remains a major challenge.
- Most providers bring specialist knowledge and interest in sustainability but are often not professionals in education. This presents difficulties when offerings need to be tailored to the different ages and abilities of learners.
- Non-formal providers struggle to adopt wider sustainability principles in their operational and management routines due to a lack of resources or support. This can mean that they may not be practising sustainability themselves, which in turn presents challenges in terms of their credibility.

Policy recommendations

1. **Cross-sectorial partnerships for learning:** Alliances and joint projects are an important means of establishing effective offerings. For example, schools can support non-formal providers in the design of learning activities to align with curriculum requirements. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are well positioned to share research that improves non-formal provision. In turn, non-formal education providers can share their expertise in experiential learning and community engagement with schools, HEIs and their students.
2. **Professional development for non-formal education providers:** strategic investment in professional development could help to catalyse the quality and effectiveness of non-formal education offerings. This should be supported by research evidence and the development of best-practice resources that question dominant linear models regarding how knowledge leads to agency and help to familiarise providers with applying green competence frameworks that can assist in the design and evaluation of sustainability learning. It will go some way in shifting the predominant



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focus from sustainability knowledge towards enhancing the transformative potential of non-formal education.

3. **Establishing standards and assuring quality:** there is a lack of professional accreditation and recognition in non-formal education when it comes to learning for sustainability. National agencies and local authorities should lead processes that help to define and agree on standards, develop guidance frameworks for enhancing the transformative potential of learning for sustainability, and offer accreditation schemes and/or awards for excellence in non-formal education.
4. **Stronger integration into mainstream education policies:** building learning landscapes for sustainability requires a clearer articulation of the value and contribution of non-formal education to learning for sustainability, particularly in policy frameworks and formal guidance. Specific policy strategies and measures are needed to advance non-formal education for sustainability as part of the connected lifelong learning landscape. These should be accompanied by support in the form of funding, which is often crucial to the long-term viability and success of such initiatives.



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