

Whose Knowledge Counts? Rethinking Sustainability Education in Higher Education

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1. INTRODUCTION & AIM

Sustainability education is a growing priority in UK higher education, guided by frameworks such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, these approaches often rely on universal assumptions that can marginalise Indigenous and place-based knowledge.



AIM: This conceptual study critically examines sustainability education through a decolonial lens and explores how more relational and epistemically just approaches can be fostered.

2. METHODS



Conceptual analysis informed by decolonial theory and Indigenous scholarship.



Critical examination of ESD and SDG discourses, policy documents and literature.



Identifies key tensions in sustainability pedagogy and explores alternative, place-responsive approaches.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Three key tensions shape sustainability education in higher education:

1

Global policy universality
vs. local epistemic plurality



Global frameworks risk marginalising Indigenous and place-based knowledges and overlook diverse ways of knowing and being.

2

Institutional inclusion
vs. epistemic justice



Inclusion initiatives may not challenge underlying knowledge hierarchies or address power imbalances.

3

Policy compliance
vs. meaningful educational
responsibility



Focus on compliance and metrics reduces sustainability to technical outputs, not critical engagement with power, history and futures.



Indigenous perspectives offer alternative understandings of sustainability grounded in relationality, responsibilities to land, and more-than-human relations, challenging Eurocentric and technocratic approaches to sustainability.

4. THEORETICAL LENS



Decolonial theory highlights how education systems privilege certain knowledge systems while silencing others (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Mignolo, 2011).



Indigenous scholarship emphasises relational, place-based understandings of sustainability grounded in responsibilities to land and more-than-human relations (Ajaps, 2023; Whyte et al., 2016).

5. CONCLUSION



A decolonial approach to sustainability education calls for moving beyond universal, competency-based models toward more relational and place-responsive pedagogies. This involves recognising multiple knowledge systems, engaging critically with colonial histories, and fostering epistemic justice. Sustainability education should be a space for critical dialogue about power, knowledge, and contested futures—not simply delivering predefined outcomes.

6. FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES



Future work: Empirical research with educators and students to explore how decolonial and Indigenous pedagogies can be meaningfully integrated into curriculum and institutional practice, and how relational, place-based approaches can inform transformative change in higher education.

Key references: Advance HE (2021); Ajaps (2023); Andreotti (2014); de Sousa Santos (2015); Mignolo (2011); QAA (2021); UNESCO (2017); United Nations (2015); Whyte et al. (2016).