

# Teaching sustainability

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# EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IS CRUCIAL

The world faces a myriad of environmental and social challenges that demand immediate action to prevent ecological and economic collapse.<sup>[1]</sup> The climate is heating, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent, biodiversity loss is accelerating, and there are still inequalities in society.<sup>[2]</sup>

At COP26 held in Glasgow late in 2021, ambitious targets were set by world governments to tackle the most imminent challenges, but many are sceptical that these will be met. It is crucial that our younger generations are equipped with the knowledge and skills to fight for their future. Through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), educators can become important agents for change, supporting the growth of a sustainable society.

## Definition of sustainable

**development:** "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"  
[1987 Bruntland Commission Report.](#)<sup>[3]</sup>

## Education for sustainable development:

"The process of creating curriculum structures and subject-relevant content to support sustainable development"  
[QAA, 2021.](#)<sup>[4]</sup>

## THE SECTOR IS STARTING TO ACT

There is some promising movement in the education sector: a bill has been introduced in the House of Lords that could make sustainability content compulsory in the national curriculum at key stages 1-4;<sup>[5]</sup> at COP26, the Education Secretary promised the introduction of a 'Climate Leaders Award', similar to the Duke of Edinburgh award, and a model science curriculum on climate change;<sup>[6]</sup> and our recent [white paper](#) highlighted how UK universities are reacting to student demand for climate action.

Students are receptive to these changes and want to learn more about the environment and their impact on it. A survey by [Students Organising for Sustainability UK](#) conducted with UK students at primary, secondary and college levels in the period 2019-2021 showed that 84% of students thought all schools and colleges should be helping students to help the environment. Yet, there were gaps in their current knowledge – for example, only 32% of these students had heard of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>[7]</sup>

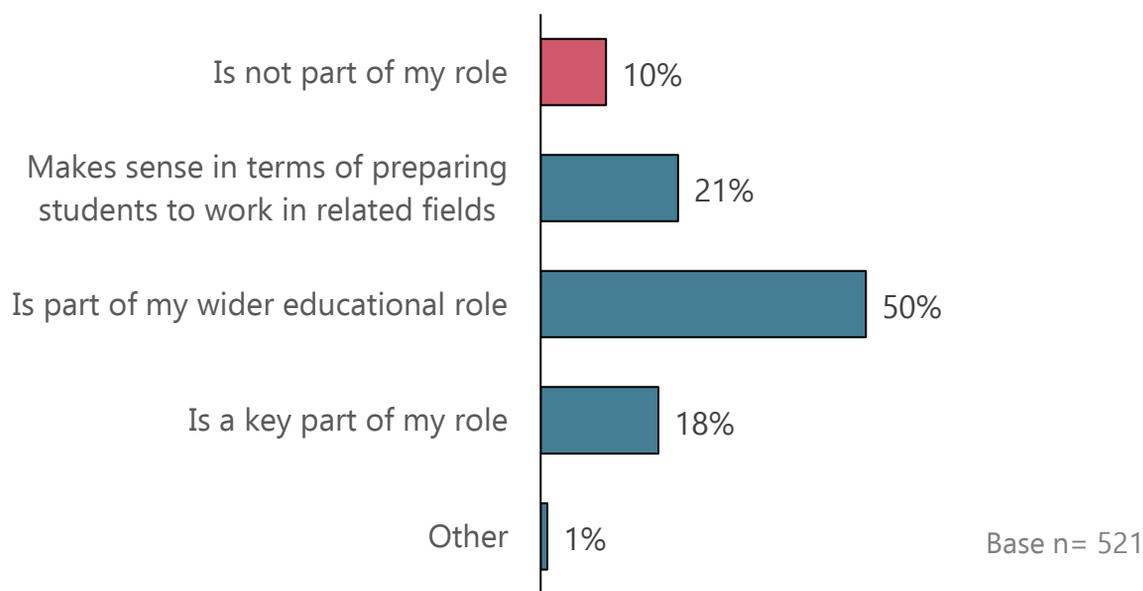
## BUT THERE IS STILL A LONG WAY TO GO

Currently, in primary school, children learn how human activity can change environments. In secondary school, students learn about climate change mostly in science and geography, with a focus on scientific processes.<sup>[8]</sup> However, conservation, biodiversity and the social and economic dimensions of sustainability fall by the wayside. In universities, although initiatives like ESD are becoming more prominent, urgent steps need to be taken in mainstreaming the Climate Emergency across all disciplines.<sup>[9]</sup> The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted attention across the sector to more immediate and short-term challenges, and there is still a long way to go before sustainability is taught in the holistic way that the future demands, to reach the ambitious targets set at COP26.

## EDUCATORS BELIEVE THEY HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

We conducted a survey in December 2021 with 521 UK educators<sup>1</sup> from primary up to university level. We wanted to uncover what educators think about sustainability and their role in teaching it.

### I believe teaching students about sustainability...



Educators saw teaching sustainability as being within their remit and were likely to be receptive to changes to the curriculum. **50%** of educators viewed teaching students about sustainability as some part of their wider educational role and, at primary level, 26% saw it as a key part of their role.

For successful implementation of ESD, educators must feel confident in talking to their students about some tough topics that could cause anxiety and stress. 58% of educators were confident in talking to students about sustainability in general. Educators with additional teaching responsibilities, e.g. management/head of department, were more likely to feel confident (65%).

Most educators said their confidence was due to a personal interest (33%) or because students were interested in learning about it (17%). Overall, educators and students seem open to integrating sustainability into the education system.

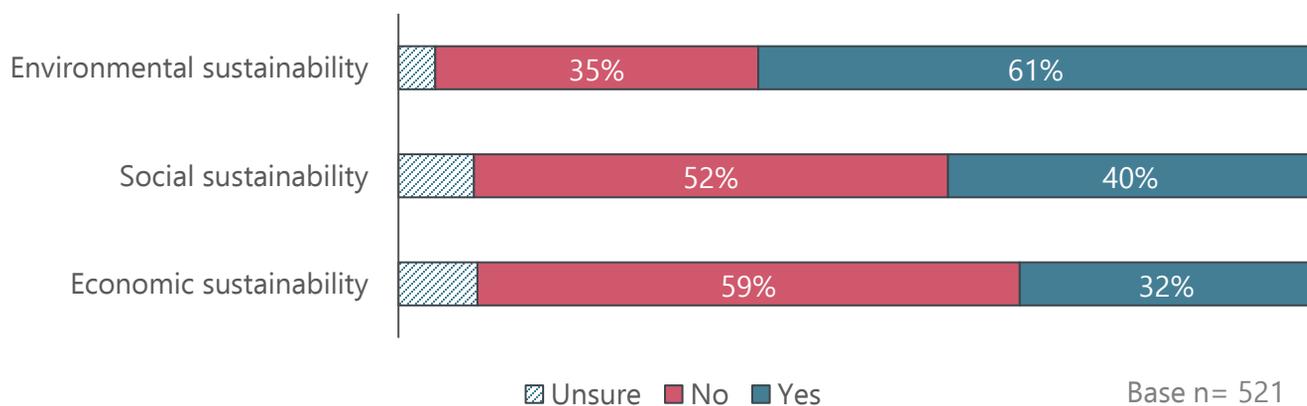
## SUSTAINABILITY IS STUCK IN THE SCIENCES

The environmental, economic and social challenges that the world faces are complex and require governments, businesses, citizens, scientists, economists and sociologists to work together in an interdisciplinary way. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change coined the phrase [Climate Empowerment](#) to advocate for education on climate action through collaboration and partnerships.<sup>[10]</sup> An understanding of sustainability is required across all subjects and disciplines if sustainable development is to be achieved. However, our survey results reveal that sustainability in education is still stuck in the sciences.

<sup>1</sup>Base n = 521. Primary school: 36%; Secondary school: 36%; Sixth form or college: 7%; Further education college: 9%; Higher education institution: 15%; Prep school 1%; Other: 7%.

Shift asked educators if they had ever planned a lesson that explored environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability. A promising 61% said they had planned a lesson on environmental sustainability. However, less than half had covered social and economic issues in their lessons. Moreover, we found only 34% of primary and secondary teachers had heard of the UN SDGs prior to taking our survey, indicating a gap in their training. This is compared to a higher level of 54% for HE educators.

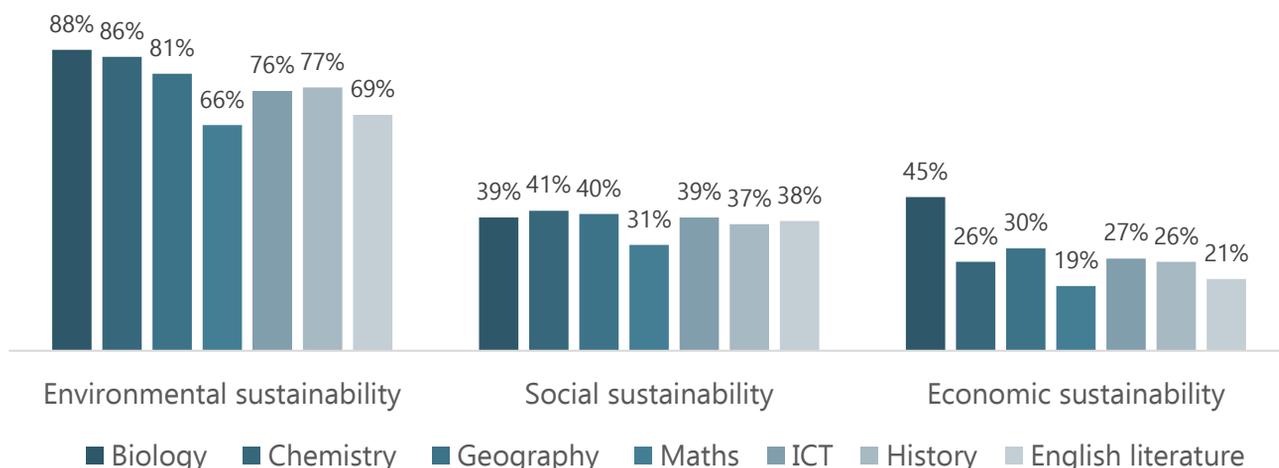
**Have you ever planned or run a lesson that explored...?**



Key stage 1-5 educators teaching biology (88%), chemistry (86%), combined sciences (86%) and geography (81%) were most likely to have planned a lesson on environmental sustainability. Less than half of these science and geography teachers had taught the social and economic dimensions. There was no single subject that took ownership of social or economic sustainability. Moreover, science (35%) and geography (33%) teachers were more likely to think that teaching sustainability was a key part of their role compared to other teachers who saw it mostly as being within their wider educational role. Educators were currently focusing on the science and mechanics of the climate crisis, which neglects the social and economic dimensions and the interrelationship between disciplines.

**Educators (key stage 1-5) who had planned or run a lesson that explored sustainability by subject**

Base n= 521



## WHERE IS THE SUPPORT?

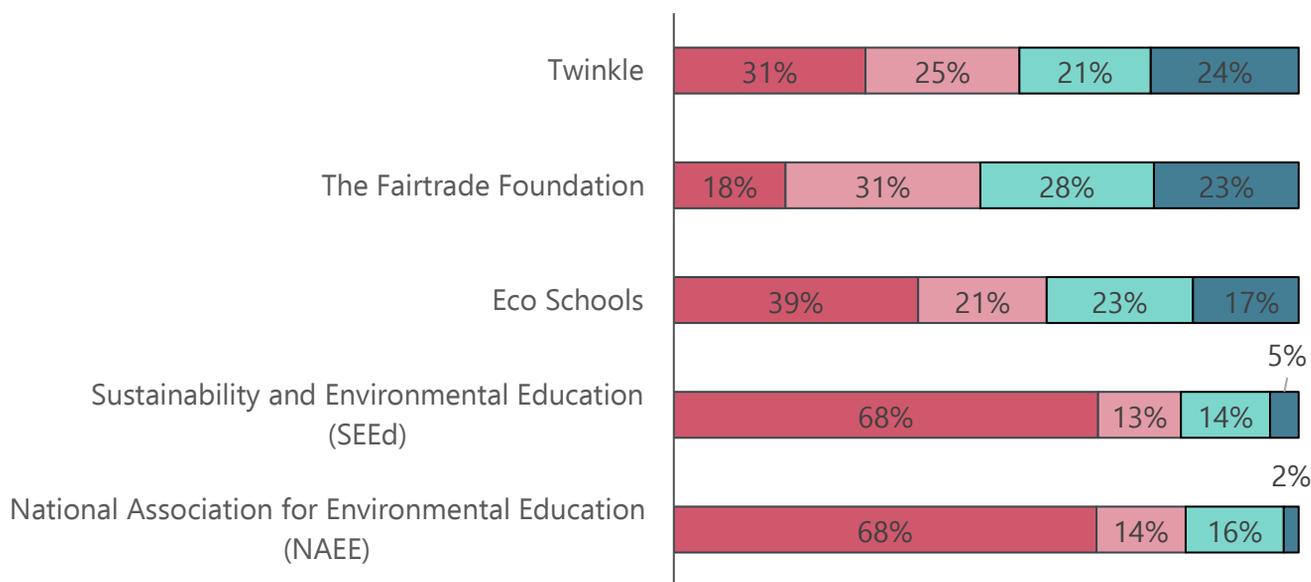
Educators felt that teaching sustainability was in their remit and most felt confident in speaking about it to their students when there was personal or student interest. However, 55% of educators felt they had not received adequate training to educate students about sustainability and this was brought into focus by a similar number (52%) who had never heard of the UN SDGs before completing the survey. There is a gap between what educators want to achieve and the tools they are given to implement their beliefs.

## EDUCATORS LACK AWARENESS OF PROVIDERS

Some charities, membership organisations and providers currently offer teaching resources and educational advice on teaching sustainability and the environment. For example, the [UK National Association for Environmental Education \(NAEE\)](#) has been doing great work to offer educators curriculum guides and a journal to support the delivery of impactful lessons. But Shift found that 68% of educators had never heard of NAEE and only 2% had used their sustainability resources.

### Primary and secondary level:

#### What is your awareness of the following organisations and their resources?



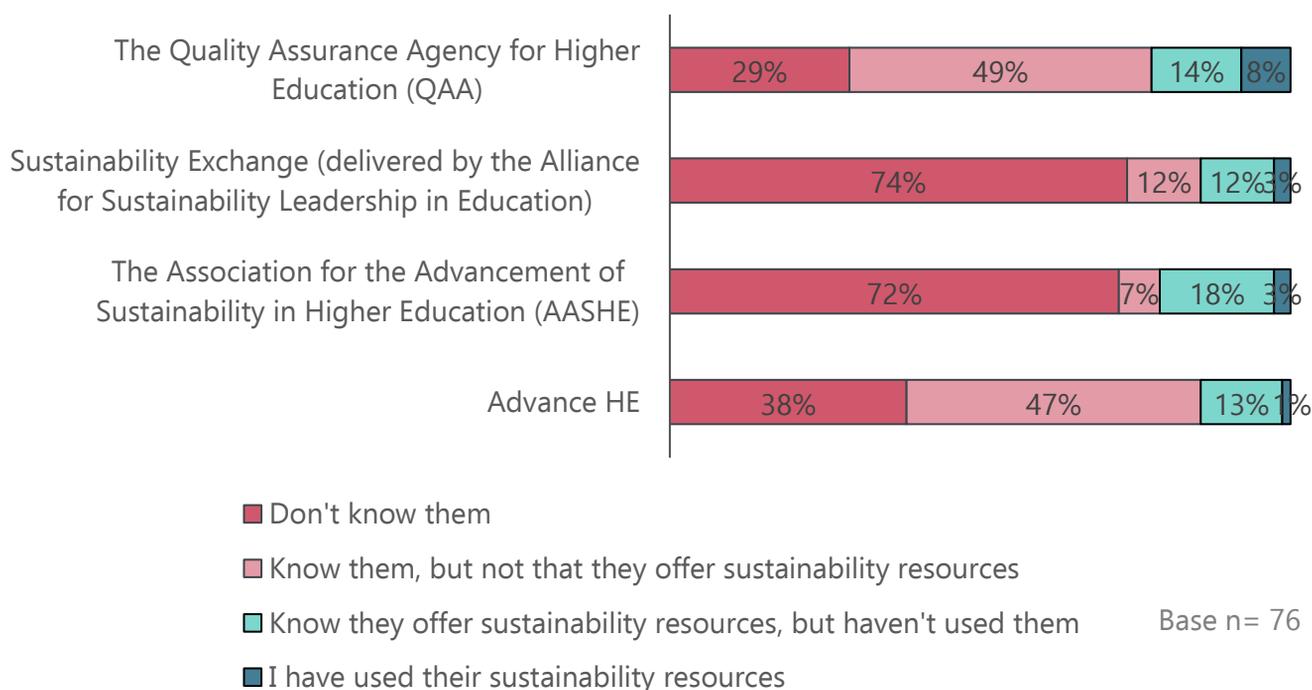
Base n = 414

- Don't know them
- Know them, but not that they offer sustainability resources
- Know they offer sustainability resources, but haven't used them
- I have used their sustainability resources

Most primary and secondary teachers were using Twinkle resources (25%) to help them teach sustainability, but use and awareness were low overall.

**Higher education:**

**What is your awareness of the following organisations and their resources?**



Use and awareness of providers were even lower for higher education providers, with only 8% using QAA’s sustainability [resources](#).

Despite the positive attitude of educators towards their role in ESD, there is a need for providers to communicate the support that is available to those educators.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We need to address environmental, economic and social challenges simultaneously to create a better and more sustainable planet. We have the chance to integrate health and well-being into the fabric of our economic system, and promote the value of nature. Educators are in a position to play an essential role in this transition to instil urgency for action in younger generations and provide them with the necessary skills to mitigate against and adapt to global heating.

Our survey shows there is still a lot of work to be done to integrate sustainability across curriculums and ensure that education settings are teaching all three dimensions of sustainability. Although educators want to learn how they can teach their students the skills they will need to thrive, the fact that so few educators are aware of the UN SDGs is an indicator of how they’re not currently provided with the foundation knowledge and training they need.

# WHAT CAN YOU DO? AND HOW CAN RESEARCH HELP?

Our research has highlighted the urgency of pushing the sustainable development agenda across the education space. Collaboration is crucial for success and we need the input of all actors to embed sustainability into the sector. Research evidence can be used to generate confidence and buy-in to effect rapid change. Here are some of the ways in which Shift Insight research can help across sectors:

## **Publishers and resource providers**

Quantitative methods, interviews and focus groups can help you explore the views and experiences of educators teaching and students learning sustainability, to ensure your resources are impactful and audience-appropriate, and that marketing messages are well targeted.

## **Higher education institutions**

We've seen how the embedding of sustainability in the curriculum resonates differently across faculties and roles. Running surveys and workshops with people inside and outside your institution can ensure that you understand and take into consideration all of your stakeholders' views, and create equity and buy-in to decisions.

New course content and programmes and educator training offers can be thoroughly tested with learners and audiences to ensure they deliver what's needed for a sustainable future.

## **Governmental and not-for-profit bodies**

Understanding public behaviours is important for the development of policies. Qualitative research methods and observational approaches can unlock your understanding of the different stakeholders, including educators, students and parents, and create campaigns that resonate to bring sustainable actions to the forefront of people's minds.

## **Campaigners**

If you are a sustainability campaigner, use this paper, our wider [sustainability reports](#) and wider academically researched reports to support and evidence your message. Together we can push for legislation that seeks to include sustainability in the curriculum and support educator training.

Since 2002, we have grown to become a leading research consultancy – originally focused solely on education, but then expanding into the complementary areas of Membership and Sustainability, alongside Learning.

Shift Sustainability's employees are experts in market research and consultation. We use research methods geared towards sustainability issues, for example, bespoke frameworks and advanced methods to understand what matters most to stakeholders and consumers, and behavioural science approaches to understand and motivate sustainable actions. The projects we work on are key in identifying and addressing global and local challenges. In this age of shifting mindsets and competing priorities, where success comes to those who listen and adapt, we give organisations the evidence and insight they need to make a real impact.

To find out more about us, please visit our website: [shift-sustainability.co.uk](https://shift-sustainability.co.uk).

We are members of the Market Research Society and European Society for Opinion and Market Research. We are also registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and inform them of any personal information held. Our researchers fully abide by:

- [The Data Protection Act 2018](#) and [GDPR](#).
- [The ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research](#).
- [The MRS Code of Conduct](#).

# REFERENCES

- [1] [https://www.wob.com/en-gb/books/d-h-meadows/limits-to-growth/9780330241694?gclid=CjwKCAiA866PBhAYEiwANkIneH8TeZQ-BLK5Oy3rV\\_n6QmBMW9Snsb8kT1k02R2O\\_B7PD53UAqF3qxoCY80QAvD\\_BwE](https://www.wob.com/en-gb/books/d-h-meadows/limits-to-growth/9780330241694?gclid=CjwKCAiA866PBhAYEiwANkIneH8TeZQ-BLK5Oy3rV_n6QmBMW9Snsb8kT1k02R2O_B7PD53UAqF3qxoCY80QAvD_BwE)
- [2] IPCC, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>
- [3] United Nations, [https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd15/media/backgrounder\\_brundtland.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd15/media/backgrounder_brundtland.pdf)
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- [10] <https://cop23.unfccc.int/about-us/partnerships/current-calls-for-partnerships/call-to-partner-in-promoting-action-for-climate-empowerment#eq-1>