**Going beyond transmission: promoting the transformative potential of education for sustainable development – project proposal**

This Doctoral study proposes to investigate how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can go beyond the necessary but insufficient goal of transmission of knowledge and offer truly transformative learning opportunities; enabling learners “to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Objectives and research questions:** The objectives are to explore the impacts of university-level ESD courses on students, and to determine how such courses might be designed to enable transformative learning.

Anticipated research questions are:

* What are the patterns of change of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and sustainability-related skills and behaviours in students undertaking ESD courses and how can they be explained by demographic parameters, course design and activities, and extra-curricular factors?
* In what ways do personal narratives of students and teachers involved in ESD courses illustrate transformative learning?
* How can we design ESD courses to offer transformative opportunities?

**Background and rationale:** Education over the past decades has in some cases actually exacerbated sustainability challenges[[2]](#footnote-2).There have been calls for a new kind of education that includes context, reflection and transformative learning[[3]](#footnote-3). Sterling discusses how transformative learning promotes critical reflection, such that learners develop justified opinions and reject problematic frames of reference. However, this deeper form of learning requires a process of “collaborative inquiry” between teachers and learners, and can be challenging. University ESD is taught in sustainable development, but also in geography, environmental science and other programmes. Students are demanding more ESD, more specific courses are being delivered and policy underpins it. However, there is little information on the methods and outcomes of ESD courses. Hence it is imperative to collate and compare content, pedagogy, assessments and wider learning environment on students’ behaviour as well as cognitive-affective measures such as knowledge and emotions, and to assess how ESD can offer transformative learning opportunities.

**Methodology:** Mixed methods, including:

1. Online mapping and scoping interviews to identify suitable ESD case studies.
2. Quantitative surveys of students in selected university ESD case studies to explore patterns of impacts on students’ knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, and behaviours, using a pre-/post-test design.
3. Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers of case study courses to gain a deeper understanding of their impacts.
4. A cutting-edge aspect of the studentship would involve designing and testing effects of one or more innovative learning experiences on students against a control cohort; such as *inter-alia* values-based, affective or hands-on learning activities, whether in the classroom, online, or via assessment.
5. Reflecting on and sharing results with individual participants and wider audiences, to leverage personal development and wide scale change in ESD practice.

1. Martin, S., Dillon, J., Higgins, P. & Scott, W. (2013)*.* Divergent Evolution in Education for Sustainable Development Policy in the United Kingdom: Current Status, Best Practice, and Opportunities for the Future. S*ustainability*, 5:1356-1763.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Orr, D. W. (2004). Earth in mind: on education, environment and the human prospect. Washington: Island Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sterling, S. (2011). Transformative Learning and Sustainability: sketching the conceptual ground. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*,5:17-33.  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)