Views on education for sustainable development (ESD) among lecturers in UK MSc taught courses

Personal, institutional and disciplinary factors

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Abstract

Purpose – In the new Sustainability 2.0 era of education for sustainable development (ESD) transforming, curriculum remains a high interest topic, including in the UK. Among influential factors for progress, lecturer views on sustainable development and ESD in curriculum are important. In particular, the relationship between espoused views on sustainability and development and these views institutionalized into the curriculum require further investigation. Existing qualitative interview studies of lecturers identify a range of views about sustainable development and ESD but rarely focus on postgraduate environments nor use thematic discourse analysis.

Design/methodology/approach – This active interview study enrolled a cohort of academics (n = 21) teaching into ten postgraduate UK taught masters degrees. Using active interviews and thematic discourse analysis, this study focused lecturer accounts of translating sustainable development into ESD, student attitudes and characteristics and course nature and content in relation to institutional, disciplinary, personal and other drivers and discourses. Thematic discourse analysis and NVivo 12 the study identified themes and discourses arising from the interview accounts.

Findings – In addition to identifying echoes of previously identified themes, this study focuses on the influence of interviewer–interviewee interaction and the interrelated nature of themes developed from 972 substantive codes. These themes identify the key influences as institutional, personal and disciplinary perspectives, institutional contrasts and tensions; pragmatic and passionate student characteristics; flexible sustainability principles and definitions; and social and personal ethics, ideology and equity, as key factors. Despite varying in length and depth, interviewees all show a deep appreciation for the challenges of defining and teaching sustainable development in complex institutional circumstances.

Practical implications – Faculty accounts of sustainable development and ESD practice depend on personal ethics and experiences, disciplinary discourses and institutional drivers and arrangements. Rather than focusing on simple categorizations of views in abstract, progress toward transformational ESD should acknowledge the need for dialogue about the importance of a plurality of views and discourses.

Originality/value – Thematic discourse analysis of a multi-institutional cohort affords closer analysis of contextual institutional and identity factors influencing approaches to HESD. Academic views cannot be easily subcategorized into broad conservative or radical positions. Final discussion of the relevance of institutional theory to sustainability change is also new.

Keywords Education for sustainable development, Qualitative research, Thematic analysis, Postgraduate, UK, Academic perspective, Lecturer views, Qualitative interview

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction: MSc in sustainability and development UK

Despite progress toward the third wave of transformative Sustainability 2.0 (Filho and Pace, 2016; Wood et al., 2016), sustainability commitments of universities to education for sustainable development (ESD) remain varied (Green, 2013; Sylvestre et al., 2013a/2013b). New forms of learning are being developed (Barth and Timm, 2011; Wals, 2014, p. 13) including a wide range of experiential pedagogies (Cotton and Winter, 2010; Sipos et al., 2008). While disciplines have greater challenges to addressing the broad social, economic and environmental questions of ESD than others (Fukukawa et al., 2013; Jansen, 2010), the aspirational goal remains ESD (Lozano et al., 2015; Sylvestre et al., 2013a/2013b) “not as a specialism within departments of economics or environmental science or sociology or politics, but as a fresh and necessary challenge to the ways that ideas are classified in economics, environmental science, sociology, politics and so on” (Gough and Scott, 2008, p. 167).

As Adams (2009) notes mainstreamed “Bruntland” sustainable development is a hybrid of populist, eco-centric and anthropocentric discourses, which tends to reject extreme “ideological” alternatives, e.g. deep green ideologies and de-growth narratives (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2009; Selby, 2006). Baker’s (2013) sustainable development “ladder” articulates the broad social, political and economic dimensions of SD spanning market environmentalism (Andrew and Cortese, 2013), ecological modernization (Fisher and Freudenburg, 2001), mainstream (populist), ecological economics and deep green movements. There is consensus that ESD should address this broader continuum of positions to students, through formal learning and experiential activities (Corney, 2006, p. 226; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008).

One familiar distinction used to compare ESD approaches (Mulder et al., 2012) is education about, in and for sustainable development (Kopnina, 2012). The three way distinction roughly corresponds to a factual, experiential constructivist (Corney, 2006, p. 227) and transformational value-laden approaches (and see Cotton and Winter, 2010, p. 41). The approaches to ESD reflected in this study integrate the first two approaches while debating the value of the third. Beyond the formal ESD curriculum and activities, the values expressed by the institution and academics, the so-called “hidden ESD curriculum” (Cotton et al., 2013; Winter and Cotton, 2012), is also influential.

Given the particular challenges to ESD in the crowded undergraduate curriculum (Jones et al., 2008), postgraduate courses address a growing market (Buchan et al., 2007). The taught Masters is increasingly popular, including for international students (Brody and Ryu, 2006; Drennan and Clarke, 2009). The literature is replete with cases of highly engaging personal, community, industry projects and activities at this level (Buchan et al., 2007; Fenner et al., 2005; Fukukawa et al., 2013; Grierson and Hyland, 2011; Holgaard et al., 2016). Such courses integrate experiential activities and expose students to sustainability and development issues (Perdan et al., 2000; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008; Svanström et al., 2008), although there is concern that such courses tend not to be ‘holistically integrated throughout the institution’ (Lozano et al., 2015, p. 14).

Faculty views on education for sustainable development: from categories to discourses

Lecturers are recruited into such programs for a range of reasons, bringing experiences, specific research interests and values regarding sustainability and development to teaching. This study identified twenty five prior studies on lecturer views with particular emphasis on those employing qualitative thematic interview. These studies focus on generic or discipline specific cohorts, are often institution specific, and attempt to categorize views although rarely in relation to broader discourses of sustainable development and ESD (Genus, 2014; Raco, 2005; Sylvestre et al., 2013a/2013b). Although this study pays particular attention to
the UK context, included are studies from other geographies, and the review addresses these in chronological order.

In their single institutional study, Reid and Petocz (2006) divided lecturer views (n = 14) into concept, resource (material, biological or human) and justice (intra- or intergenerational “fairness”) oriented approaches. They found lecturers view sustainability and teaching as separate unrelated issues (disparate), potentially overlapping, and intrinsically integrated. Employing in-depth interviews, Carew and Mitchell (2006) found engineering academics (n = 8) defined sustainability through four metaphors. The first (weaving) focused on the need to bring disparate elements together to create a cohesive whole and emphasize social over individual needs. The second “techno-optimist” approach (guarding) focused on resource conservation efficiencies and waste management. The third approach focused on “quantifying the costs and benefits of a decision to trade them off against each other” (Carew and Mitchell, 2006, p. 225). The final metaphor focused on system limits and thresholds. This study also found echoes of such patently discipline influenced views although often from one and the same interviewee.

Cotton et al. (2007) in their survey (n = 328) and interview (n = 20) study noted that the different conceptions of sustainable development and its relationship to ESD “imply different strategies for incorporating sustainability in the curriculum” (Cotton et al., 2007, p. 581). The dominant view they describe as “a view of sustainable development which focuses on environmental rather than social or economic concerns, and on routinized managerial actions to protect essential environmental resource” (Cotton et al., 2007, p. 586). They note that a majority see SD as “a good thing” although only one fifth are passionate and a similar percentage have no idea what SD means. A significant minority was ambivalent about including sustainability in teaching, and there was variety in actual teaching initiatives, e.g. experiential, by the majority; strong ideological approaches were generally resisted.

In an interview study (n = 14) Cotton et al. (2009) identified a number of barriers to developing ESD in universities, including that individuals face “structural barriers which made attainment of the ‘ideal’ states of ESD (both in terms of prominence and teaching styles) unachievable” (Cotton et al., 2009, p. 730). They note the idealistic as aspirational nature of ESD literature “appear somewhat disconnected from the everyday experiences of our respondents”. The authors observe most studies focus on barriers to deeper engagement, including because of lack of shared understanding and language (Reid and Petocz, 2006).

Employing a 50-item survey and content analysis in a single institution study, Shephard and Furnari (2013) found education for sustainability to be one of four possible approaches among lecturers in NZ. They identified advocates for strong versions of sustainable development, a cohort more concerned with the liberal ideas and values of higher education, a group of sustainability minded individuals but not focused on social and global justice nor necessarily balancing human and conservation needs, and “anthropocentric” teachers focused on academic freedom and with limited interest in ESD. Sylvestre et al. (2013a/2013b) focus on the potential “ideological tensions” between lecturer discourses of SD and the need for institutional consensus. They also note disciplinary thinking as a potential barrier (Sylvestre et al., 2013a, p. 1368).

Employing a Likert-scale questionnaire in a cross-university study, Botes et al. (2014) surveyed accounting academics (n = 62), finding that sustainability was insufficiently integrated in the curriculum and that accountants should play a larger role in sustainability reporting. There was consensus on the need for more education for students in this area, and evidence that in NZ the discipline was not doing enough to further ESD. Boyle et al. (2015)
meanwhile interviewed 31 Australian tourism academics, adopting a strong to weak (as in this study) approach to analyzing the in-depth interviews. They identified individuals across this continuum and categorized this work into those with a non-ideological economic and business perspective, and the view that education was about industry skills. A second group meanwhile “included issues of social justice, equity and environmental degradation when describing sustainability” (Boyle et al., 2015, p. 258).

In their 26 question national survey \( (n = 1819) \), Christie et al. (2013) found a significant number of academics had a superficial understanding of ESD, and a limited view of the skills required, e.g. critical thinking, and a predominant education about sustainability view; they observed that science-based academics were most resistant to incorporating EfS into the university. Wood et al. (2016) employs narrative analysis of interviews with sustainability champions in one institution \( (n = 11) \), and identified sustainability saviors, sustainability nurturers and sustainability strugglers. The first group integrated science based academics confident of their approaches to SD, e.g. waste reduction; the second identified a group focused on creating relationships and knowledge among students through debate and discussion; the final group saw ESD as under threat and limited in scope. All three groups highlight the difficulties with interdisciplinary teaching and programs. The authors conclude that much remains to integrate ESD on campus.

Sammalisto et al. (2015) in their survey study \( (n = 312) \) at a Swedish university found a wide range of SD interpretations and ESD practices in one university, which they categorize into 14 themes regarding knowledge, i.e. provide information, methods and models; inspiration, i.e. supporting and promoting SD work; practice and intelligence. Overall they note significant variation in knowledge and application of sustainability principles. Cebrián et al. (2015) observe interests in but barriers to uptake of ESD at the University of Southampton. In particular, lack of time and financial resources, lack of deep understanding of sustainability, current curriculum structures and ways of delivery, academic pressures, external factors, lack of organizational support and existing organizational conditions block their engagement in ESD.

Regarding lecturer views on ideological approaches, Amador et al. (2015) particularly note resistance of universities to address more “radical” questions of environmental justice, human rights, and essential exposure to conflicts of interest against a focus on an ideologically neutral academic position. For lecturers this means that “activism” is largely incompatible (Lovren, 2017). Thus, faculty views vary with respect to disciplinary backgrounds, institutional pressures, personal commitments and academic role and standing. There is resistance to ideological strong approaches and while many express a belief in the importance of the issues translating this into curriculum is more complex. Individuals are unable or unsure about how to integrate sustainability thinking into curriculum.

**Methodology: active interviewing and thematic discourse analysis**

This interview study was cross-institutional, focused on an academic cohort working in MSc (or similar) programs. The study used key concepts, e.g. the ladder of sustainable development (Baker, 2013), sensitivity to active interviewing principles to contextualize responses (Gunasekara, 2007; Irvine et al., 2013) and attempted to distinguish views on sustainable development from practices of ESD (Wright and Horst, 2013). Following transcription of interviews, analysis was developed following thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). This is an approach, which combines thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) with focus on discourse, where “Discourses are conversations or talk with an agenda” (Singer and Hunter, 1999, p. 66). Tanggaard (2009) suggests that the aim of
analysis is to identify discursive repertoires or narratives in speaking within particular social settings and to fuel public dialogue about research themes beyond the specific interview setting. Thus, “discourse analysis can help analysis move beyond the thematising or coding of responses disconnected from questions of identity and institution” (Melles, 2011, p. 455); this is a particular focus here.

Active interviewing emerged out of dissatisfaction with the decontextualizing of interview interaction (Briggs, 1986) and focuses on the active co-construction of responses to interview questions (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In the analysis stage both the what (content) and the how (interactional structuring) are in focus (Nikander, 2012). The “what” connects themes and categories to cultural narratives (discourses), repertoires or other cultural regularities in responses (Tanggaard, 2009). This means analysis attends to both the linguistic structuring of the interaction and the content as “reflections of the social order that the speakers construct” (Freebody, 2003, p. 137). Without acknowledging such discursive regularities interview analysis remains undertheorized and disconnected from institutional and social realities.

Ignoring the context of the interview enhances the misleading impression that ideas are independent of institutional and discursive constraints. However, interviews produce accounts of social realities (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) and identities (Hegarty, 2008). In semi-structured and in-depth interviews the importance of interaction can be seen in that particular responses to specific questions, which at one point may be elaborated, modified or even contradicted in other moments (Irvine et al., 2013); as Blake (1999) notes, “people’s values are negotiated, transitory and sometimes contradictory” (p. 265). As Antaki (2006) inter alia observes interview responses are produced for some purpose, e.g. defend the institution, foreground internal politics, emphasize personal authenticity (Archer, 2008), etc. Focus on interaction also matters in that interviewer and interviewee jockey to create mutually satisfactory identities and agendas (Cassell, 2005; Chew-Graham, 2002). In the analysis below we identify some of these issues.

**Interview recruitment**

Interviewees were recruited through email and phone contact from institutions and centers with targeted taught MSc programs addressing core sustainable development issues. Individuals were recruited based on the fact that they had a role in the target program, e.g. coordinator and lecturer, and that the program had a core sustainable development subject teaching both nature and human development issues. Discipline focus (as shown below) emphasized and excluded particular issues. The recruitment strategy aimed to include discipline specific and more generic MSc programs with the stipulation that a course core (or optional for other courses) sustainable development subject addressing human, social and environmental issues was included (core SD unit). The individuals enrolled in the study either had direct teaching roles in the target discipline program or a role in the program, e.g. coordinator and dissertation director, and taught principally into other (related) programs. Academic levels enrolled into the study ranged from Tutor (PhD student) to Reader with the majority at lecturer or senior lecturer. It was important in this study to interview a balanced cohort of individuals with key and more marginal roles in teaching as they in fact are typical of HE pedagogy.

**Findings**

In the following analysis, thematic headings related to explicit interview prompts and ideas and concepts that emerged in the interview as significant are headlined. The summary headings, commentary and examples attempt to reflect albeit with limitations the
interconnected nature of nearly a thousand substantive codes \((n = 976)\) identified in the transcripts. Initial substantive codes were assigned to transcript segments, and these were subsequently brought together into interrelated themes with relevant subcategories (Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis highlights connections with previously identified themes and ideas, but the analysis pays attention to the constructed nature of answers, the institutional context and tensions and argues finally for more attention to the discursive nature of views and positions. Given space limitations I only briefly comment on the significance of interaction before moving to specific themes.

**Interview interaction**

Rarely acknowledged to date but nonetheless significant, it is important to remind ourselves as ESD researchers that in qualitative interviews we create rather than discover views and facts (Antaki, 2006), authenticity (Archer, 2008), and other elements of identity (Cassell, 2005). The current lack of attention to such issues has supported the idea that lecturer “views” can be articulated into discretely contrasting positions on issues rather than being strategic in-context accounts (Kurz et al., 2005), as also observed above.

Thus, interviewees often alluded to caveats on their knowledge and (therefore) ability to comment on departmental or institutional values and views. Some of my own discursive “moves”, including summarizing interim conclusions with interviewees, cross-fertilizing discussion with quotes and concepts from other interviews, rephrasing interviewee responses in other terms, acknowledging the caveats interviewees preface their responses with, or providing a short or extended rationale for the study, all influenced the content and direction of interviews and consolidated my identity as a fellow academic. These interventions “signal” that this is an interview in a context of caveats and micro-politics. The following quote captures some of these nuances:

> And can I ask how much because this is a question that has come up. To what extent do you find the – the triple – the three pillars version adequate or – or not too what actually you know in practice development requires?

> So that’s where I’m going to come on to my personal [laughter] to my personal view rather than institutional view as ultimately sustainable development’s not the program that I’m convenor for – so I think I have to speak at a personal level now. [I18]

As Sharp and Richardson (2001) remind us a discursive approach to sustainability and development is important because the terms “are contested, with struggles taking place over their meaning, interpretation and implementation” (Sharp and Richardson, 2001, p. 194). As I note below, these ‘struggles’ also influenced the interview and the extent to which the potential oxymoron of sustainable development required formal definitions, alternative formulations or potentially rejection. Thus, the treatment of sustainability and sustainable development as synonyms (Hugé et al., 2013, p. 187), distinct but related (Wals et al., 2016, p. 27), or contrasting (Baker, 2013) highlights the ongoing “fuzziness” but productivity of the term.

**Principles, definitions and practices: sustainable development in other words**

Responses to the initial interview prompt on the meanings of sustainable development slipped between reference to sustainability and sustainable development, and alternative interpretations, underlying principles and metaphors (Carew and Mitchell, 2006) of an “umbrella” term, which has nonetheless “enormous canvasing and heuristic capacity” (Wals and Jickling, 2002, p. 227). The overwhelming insight was that sustainability and
development – whether conjoined or not- remained a potential oxymoron in need of further definition (Redclift, 2005).

Sustainable development is a conflation of two conceptually distinct ideas. Um and is by no means obvious that it is actually feasible. (I12)

Among alternative definitions, formalized institutional (Mebratu, 1998), e.g. Bruntland, definitions, e.g. triple bottom line, were not as frequent as alternative formulations, for example, as a “hopeful” model of continued growth premised on business buy-in, technological and industrial efficiencies.

The process in which the society is transformed [...] in a way that yields constant and increasing opportunities, and satisfying human needs. (I01)

Although one interviewee explicitly rejected sustainability (versus sustainable development) as vague and “just a discourse” (I21), it was the more recognized term. For others (I07, I13) it was a “vague” term with different “aspects”. These “aspects” rarely included reference to social or justice issues, as expected (Murphy, 2012). How to respond to the potentially ‘overwhelming’ practical and definitional ‘morass’ of this oxymoron was a concern for some (Redclift, 2005):

Call it everything from the sort of classic model and sort of the meeting the needs of current and future generations to complete and total oxymoron. And where do you – how do you – what do you do with all of those definitions? (I17)

So it’s overwhelming the magnitudes of concerns that need to be taken into account in order for a project to be termed sustainable. (I11)

Acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity or not, all respondents resorted at some point to unpacking “the morass” into underlying principles, tools, e.g. Environmental Impact Assessment, or concepts, e.g. holism, triple bottom line, five capitals models, etc:

And what I do is I teach them about six of the most important principles, which I think are important within the idea of sustainable development. (I09)

Thus, many responses rephrased SD in other terms, e.g. (underlying) global absolutes, unsustainable resource extraction, or even a “new proxy” for old practices (relating it to personal and professional experiences), e.g.:

[...] in many ways now you could probably say that – sustainable design is and sustainability is maybe a proxy for – what used to be simply called um socially aware or communitarian ways of practice. (I10)

Not everyone, however, was content with the idea that sustainability – “a (wide word) for businesses to keep doing what they’re doing” (I16) and sustainable development – “a developmental model” – were quasi synonymous. While others more pragmatically saw business engagement with sustainability as essential:

So that then also drives opportunity for innovation and also for business to find new ways of standing out in a more crowded market. (I02)

I think I should make clear that I – at an operational, at a theoretical level CSR and sustainability are the same thing. [ok]. I think we’ve reached them from two different paths. (I03)

A rough distinction between “unthinking” business and economic imperatives versus socially and environmentally “just” (Agyeman and Evans, 2016) approaches was latent or
explicit, including in contrasting “our” more balanced program with more market oriented approaches elsewhere on campus (discussed below):

[...] in terms of sustainability um in some respects it’s more a definition of what it’s not [...] whole millions of people in the world who need their lifestyle improved who need their basic needs met but there are other people who are going to have to backtrack a bit to let that happen. (I06)

While constituting “just a discourse”, the concept was useful as a “narrative” reminder that human prosperity rather than economic growth or environmental tradeoffs was the key issue (I21):

Well, sustainable development is simply a discourse. And is just like a narrative that we use to remind ourselves that any development has several objectives. Yeah and so there may be tradeoffs within the subjects. (I21)

Whether explicitly through examples or implicitly all interviewees highlight how specific contextual decisions mattered in sustainability; thus, bushmeat (I14), windpower (I21) or household level needs (I18) could trump conservation in specific circumstances. In sum, emphasis on ecological, economic or socio-political factors reflected the discipline background of individuals and programs, rather than constituting absolute stronger or weaker differences in views.

**Decision making processes and tradeoffs**

For sustainable development and ESD, the need for community and public engagement, complexity and systems thinking, creativity and innovation, and consideration of intergenerational time concerns constituted another “golden thread”. Interviewees sometimes linked dimensions of tradeoff decisions to personal views and experience, which in one case put the topic outside of discussion:

[... then it becomes a trade-off [...] and how much of one are you willing to sacrifice for the other [...] I don’t think I have a particular viewpoint on this. [I12]

Students learn to use specific tools, e.g. five capitals models, cost-benefit analysis, environmental impact analysis (EIA), etc., to help navigate the decision space; a minority see acquiring such discrete skills as the main aim:

I think that comes because of the way they see the labour market and the way sustainability just are so sold as a skill [I21]

Community and public engagement, meanwhile, was important not just because of the “participatory” inclusion principle but also because of the need to set collective views in dialogue with science:

Solving the world’s environmental problems is not just a question of confronting people with the evidence, what’s happening in Nature. And just like if only we could make them understand it then they’d do the things that need to be done to make it alright. [Cos they’re rational]. But I soon started to realize that that’s incredibly simplistic. [I08]

The value of public engagement and the quality of community knowledge was an implicit and explicit topic for some respondents working directly with communities, and students could struggle with:

It needs to be a group based or community or – so that the farmer who’s been using the land for fifty years has got expertise of equal merit to the modeller but people really struggle with that idea that and students still struggle with that idea that it’s not just about finding the right expert and everything will be fine. [I15]
Experiential activities around decision making, e.g. field visits, case studies, project activities, helped students understand the “material” nature of these questions, and the potentially conflicting principles driving decisions, such as those evident in eco-houses built on islands:

And so it was interesting to see how the cohort responded to that because on the one hand it seemed like a very nice lifestyle choice [picture] a very nice picture [ . . . ] on the other hand [ . . . ] that house is probably five times as expensive as the average house on the Island. [I08]

The term “tradeoffs” gathers this idea of decision making and historically relates to the conventional strong and weak sustainability notion. While broadly recognized and used there was also resistance to the continuing validity of the tradeoff versus other (“win-win”) concepts:

So we’re also trying to ingrain in them new models of environmental management which is about win-win situations as opposed to tradeoff situations and trying to identify the language and the discourse and the solutions that they have win-win solutions – eh outcomes as opposed to a tradeoff. [I16]

Resistance to the continued value of talking about tradeoffs was that it could be associated with macro-level “pillar” tradeoffs rather than more complex local packages of solutions:

So – there you see – in context there’s a tradeoff but the tradeoff is not necessarily between social and environmental. No the tradeoff is between two different projects. One project of economic – of centralized energy systems and another project of local traditional services. [I19]

So, decision-making whether as tradeoff, win-win or any other concept is an intrinsic feature of sustainable development and one students must grapple with. Student experiential activities, including case studies, bring these complex and system dependent considerations into focus. Whether such experiences translate long-term into “deep” thinkers was a separate albeit related question. Some “weaker” versions of the choices, e.g. as technical material or system efficiency models, reduce the complexity and decision making challenges.

**Strong and weak approaches: what’s in a name?**

I was in addition interested in lecturer accounts of strong and weak sustainable development (Baker, 2013). The conventional strong weak contrast of environmental economics based around nature-human tradeoffs (Adams, 2009, p. 144) was familiar to many (13) although not all. Where the term had no personal purchase, respondents tried to “fit it” to existing ideas:

It’s not a term that I have used. For me there are – there are always an end in mind. So as long as you know what is sustainable and what isn’t. And what might be strong or weak is how well you plan to get to that point. (I02)

Some either had not heard of the term strong and weak sustainability or required a reminder or confirmation of interpretation:

But it doesn’t mean anything particular to you?

Not to me. I think that in Earth and Society this [comes up] this comes up. And it is I think [Name] said yeah. But I don’t think that it’s followed through somehow in the program (I13)

Few had heard or used the broader ladder concept, which includes questions of local economies, governance regimes, politics and ideology explicitly. For one interviewee it related to study experiences in the past:
I wrote in part of my literature review – wrote about strong and weak variants of sustainable development and the extent to which they correlated with different theoretical positions (I17).

For two interviewees strong and weak sustainability was a “dated” construct with limited current value typically because “localized action” was driven by other considerations:

The strong and weak sustainability means to me – a debate mostly it took place in the nineties – and between two random and absurd perspectives in my opinion. (I21)

A popular dichotomy was between environmental thresholds and human needs with the question of benefits albeit rarely with a clear (social) equity focus:

Do we get a benefit back from what we’ve committed? Can we balance the benefits to the danger and some of the less bling sustainability, where we would try and emphasize that as being more strong sustainability (I06)

Awareness of stronger approaches stretched from vague ideas to “awareness but not employed in teaching” (I05) through to wholehearted endorsement, typically of the narrower environmental economics concept interpreted through the lens of the interviewees discipline and focus, e.g. clean versus “reactive” end-of-pipe industrial processes, environmental thresholds or five capitals model:

What we are trying to do is – is a reactive approach – we are just looking at the end of pipe situation and trying to minimize that waste and trying to recycle some of the materials. (I01)

Well we talk about that early on in terms of the five capitals model, yeah. So is capital interchangeable – there’s is gross capital stock is increasing or are there limits on natural capital because they provide basic vital support systems. So that’s what weak and strong sustainability means to me. So we get it over (those two) (I04)

Or that the transition from strong to weak occurred at different societal levels:

[...] my personal response is that at the uh individual household level – clearly there is a – there is a sort of transition over time – and our [...] we’ll we get much more divorced or detached from natural resource bases (I18)

Thus, while many interviewees (although not all) were able to articulate the breadth of ethical, political and other issues addressed by strong sustainable development the conventional environmental economics scope of strong and weak was more familiar. The reality of institutional life is that programs recruit individuals with varying levels of knowledge about “basic” concepts.

Social and personal ethics and equity
While strong values-laden approaches (see below) generally were viewed with skepticism in an institutional environment of academic neutrality, all interviewees recognized the need for a social and ethical dimension to ESD although with different levels of personal relevance. Equality, social justice, were thus either theoretical or potentially also personally relevant dimensions:

I was actually a Masters student in the late eighties when things like Our Common Future were just published and that really ignited a lot of debate around that time and has – probably influenced my own thinking and understanding in a really big way (I14)

Thus, for example, beyond theoretical discussions was the need (for some) to be consequential:
I think actually to make a difference in the world we have to step beyond that for me is I guess important in my life in the way I do my research and that’s also you know something that I want to carry through (at university) [I08]

Such a repertoire was also used to typify “other” approaches, e.g. business oriented and market driven, e.g:

But secondly that ooh isn’t that a bit radical. We’re not here to campaign. So it’s seen as sets of political manoeuvres of sort of political ideologies rather than some form of objective academic fact almost. So it’s a very strange to me way of framing. But then we also have a number of economists that come from a particular position as well. (I03)

The separation of ethics from personal responsibilities varied across the interview cohort although everyone considered it a key dimension of sustainable development. While many participants preferred to exclude personal biographies and experience from interviews, for some such experiences were consequential on their current views:

But in my leisure time I was also active with friends of the earth. So I had a wider view of environmental issues and concerns. And so that’s what attracted me coming to this new centre that was starting in Edinburgh. [I08]

As I note below this personal versus formal relationship to ethics questions resembles the contingent and empiricist repertoires Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) identified in science discourse.

Contrasts and tensions: finding balance and distinction
Understanding organizational politics and strategies are essential for curriculum change to ESD (Harpe and Thomas, 2009). Previous studies have highlighted the potential institutional and disciplinary challenges of ESD, including the effect of curriculum constraints (Ashford, 2004), interdisciplinary collaboration (Blake et al., 2013), the ad hoc and isolated nature of courses (Botes et al., 2014). Notice of institutional tensions mirror the findings of Sylvestre et al. (2013a/2013b) who find competing and incompatible discourses and understandings of sustainability in a single institution. These ambiguities are also evident at senior leadership levels (Wright and Horst, 2013).

Interviewees talk about departmental or institutional cultures in neutral or conflicting terms, e.g. referring to competing programs and centers across the university, departmental and individual tensions and value differences (Mulder, 2010), administrative and financial pressures, and the need for further development of the course to address potential weaknesses.

The significance of the institutional politics of ESD extended to the interview itself, including individuals asking me to confirm whether the purpose was for institutional comparisons:

So ah is the um. is this going to be highlighting differences between universities and departments or is it going to be anonymous effectively? (I15)

Differences in the institution between “us and them” were acknowledged and sometimes critiqued, e.g. ecological and social versions:

[...] for them it’s about ecological sustainability in terms of how do you sustain a [don’t take more wood out of the forest than you put in] yeah as opposed to say what about the social benefits and costs (I14)

So in our teaching group there are some people who see sustainability as something that provides a traditional business benefit [...] I am in a minority within the group who does not see it that way (I03).
Another contrast highlighted was where a competing program (“those courses”) on campus attracted more aggressive and less ethical students:

And it’s been noticed that people on those courses are incredibly competitive, incredibly. I’m not going to give you an advantage because it might disadvantage me. And our guys are not like that. They’re mutually sharing, caring self-supporting (I04)

Changes of personnel in disciplines where there was resistance to any ideological or ethical content had also brought culture changes:

Well firstly sustainability in any form is now going to be much more present on our degree programs but also strong sustainability is not considered to be quite so dangerous. (I03)

One particular institutional pressure was the need for sufficient student numbers. In one case, “manipulative” student market economics lead to low student numbers and course closure in the future:

[…] my concern about that is actually we – this is my personal opinion – have been manipulated into a situation of failing [ah ha oh ok]. […] And the university has not chosen to invest in publicity for our course in some of the newer markets [so what happens]. (I06)

The idea of different (not opposing) views within the program or across the institution was of course viewed generally as a healthy contribution to criticality:

[…] but then of course the students are prepared for this to be critical and uh criticality is an aspect of sustainability [mm hm]. it’s so much the better when people come with different views (I19).

The question of directly addressing ideological issues did surface but was rejected. As one interviewer noted the rhetoric of education for contradicted university norms:

But this implies that we’re trying to change values and beliefs and behaviors of students, which is contrary to the fundamental role of what universities are there to do like I say, we’re not here to advocate (I16)

In one context a visiting academic had brought a “polarising” strong approach, which had to be rectified with a substitute:

And he has a quite controversial take – we found that students are fairly polarised with what he says. […] We’ve brought that more close to home with a substitute – someone who we’ve been using that also looks at sort of governance, regulation, policy formulation in our outer core electives that used to be a former civil servant in DEFRA. (I04)

Thus, institutional identities are reinforced by how individual approaches differ from ‘others’. Overt ideological commitment by respondents to challenging mainstream growth dominated approaches could be problematic. A more pragmatic rather than ideological account also fits the increasing number of students, who saw job opportunities and careers in the broad field rather than activism. Finally the neutrality of academic culture also provides an additional reason to resist strong versions.

Disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses

Prior studies have highlighted the barriers to interdisciplinarity created by disciplinary filters, e.g. economic, business, engineering, conservative views of the issues, including to ‘deep learning’ among students (Warburton, 2003). Interdisciplinarity was acknowledged by all respondents as a necessary albeit challenging characteristic of ESD. It also reflected the
nature of decision making about tradeoffs, and was a consequence of enrolling students with different backgrounds:

But we are not a social sciences program. [So] Although it’s interdisciplinary I think politics is at the fore [ok right] because sustainability is about tradeoffs hence it’s about politics [I21]

So the Master’s class I’m teaching at the moment, which is natural resources governance has got fifty odd people in it but they come from – they’re here to study vulcanology – they’re here to study energy, food production as well as some of them are my own students but then – and there are students from sociology [ok in there] also in there. [I14]

However, all courses at this level ultimately focused on specific disciplinary themes, e.g. poverty reduction, energy conservation, etc. Thus some courses emphasized engineering, economic, industrial or policy concepts and issues, and this played out also in dissertation topics, which could relate specifically, in the broadest of terms, or not at all to sustainability and development:

[... ] but individual students might have very different interests and some of them might want to do some some pure natural science projects, which is just about testing some hypothesis and run through that. [I14]

Yes although it does [relate to sustainability] the diversity is so great and for some of the and it’s fairly difficult to do a dissertation topic having been in a course and so on that doesn’t touch on some aspect of sustainability. [I09]

In some senses, the relationship between the more general discussion of issues was that of application into specific projects:

And my role is is really um focused on providing the space for students to apply all of those lessons that have been learned from semester towards a design proposal. (I11)

Disciplines, e.g. economics, naturally define what matters in sustainability and development teaching:

The sustainability issue ah I tend to be more sort of ecological economics in my inputs um which um is kind of sort of [... ] Herman Daley type criteria, categorising different types of resource. Um what are the conditions required for sustainability. (I12)

We tend to not focus on financial issues much because it’s very difficult in this kind of context to take that on in any meaningful way [ok]. Um [but material availability or] so um sure we would deal with in terms of the sort of topics that students would start by investigating [I11]

Thus, although sustainable development is intrinsically interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial, discipline specialization including in dissertation topics inevitably requires choices, focus and exclusions. Hence, the idea that individuals could emerge with a fully balanced perspective on the different demands of sustainable development is influenced by this fact.

Self and others: identity and transformation

As Hegarty (2008) has observed, academic identifies formed through disciplinary and personal experiences influence approaches to sustainability and development. During the interview, some participants paid attention to how they became involved in teaching into the course and how their experiences and personal ethics related to teaching and learning. This diffuse theme spread across the interviews and themes in a way that was difficult to bring under one heading.
The initial interview question distinguished between a personal and an institutional response. Interviewee “discursive” pathways to answering this question varied, e.g. several participants first insisted on prefacing their interpretation as contingent on personal biography and events, e.g:

I always had an interest I guess in [...] low energy design and I worked for a practice in the late eighties early nineties, which was one of the first actually to say sustainability in a more holistic way (I10)

Well I suppose a bit of context is – I was actually a Masters student in the late eighties when things like Our Common Future were just published and that really ignited a lot of debate (I14)

There was also a broad acknowledgement that the experience of teaching on “sustainability” courses exposed lecturers to global and intercultural issues which helped evolve own teaching practices, including moving from a natural science to more political and social view:

I went through this whole kind of evolutionary process of like being in the class, listening to all this stuff, and marking the students’ dissertations and supervising some of them. And so my own perspective on things shifted enormously as time went by (I09)

Others did not find it relevant to immediately diverge to personal biographies:

Personally, what is sustainable development? Well one of the things I’ve suggested to the students is that sometimes if you’re tackling that with a cynic you perhaps need to get more onto the underlying issues (I04)

The need to link the personal with formal definitions:

Um that’s the sort of the banner view I think underneath that is well ok I’m an engineer sitting in my office on a Monday morning what the hell do I about all this [yeah]. (I05)

Some interviewees, in a variety of junior or senior roles and with disciplinary expertise that limited what they could say, provided generic responses about the issues:

So sustainability is a broader term eh than just low carbon [...] So like [NAME] said Earth and Society is one of the modules that includes a lot of information about that (I07)

Among interviewees, the inclusion or exclusion of personal engagement and history with the issues was a notable difference. This (constant) distinction between answers that referred to formal and institutional concepts versus those which linked views to personal values is reminiscent of Gilbert and Mulkay’s (1984) distinction between contingent and empiricist repertoires in scientific discourse. As Burchell (2007) observes the contingent as opposed to the empiricist repertoire “describes the view that beliefs and actions flow from personal and social inclinations, from prejudices and interests, from methodological shortcomings, and are perhaps unethical” (Burchell, 2007, p. 147).

Student characteristics and developments: passionate, pragmatic and others
This prompt generated nearly two hundred codes (n = 191) and subcategories focused on the influence of student backgrounds, e.g. disciplinary, in the program, the commitment and engagement of students, conflict and resistance they experienced, their graduate (career) focus, group cohesion, knowledge limitations and personal development. Among the responses the central idea that students should be exposed to conflicts of interest in curriculum was universal (Lundegård and Wickman, 2007). In addition to advantages, mixed backgrounds bring knowledge limitations, e.g. lack of economics or science
fundamentals, lead potentially to conflicts, e.g. science students expecting clearer definitions than social science views allow, and may affect an otherwise positive group cohesion.

The multiple experiential and intellectual activities of courses could discretely “touch” students, e.g. measuring carbon footprint, as well as more long-term reinforce their development as “changemakers” in society. It was acknowledged that a minority needed to adjust to new concepts and practices:

I mean we’re lucky with the types of students that we that we get here. You have to be motivated – you fork out the cost to do these things but um yeah they are. [and it’s a good institution] great institution critical and the questions they ask in class and so on (I09)

The disciplinary backgrounds of students could be both barriers and advantages in the courses. Thus, individual students, e.g. from the natural sciences, could struggle to understand social science and political issues addressed in the core sustainable development unit:

So it is a challenge particularly for those who’ve come from a pure natural science background where they’re expecting – expecting me to sort of I think they’re expecting me to sort of give this very fixed account of things – which is measurable and quantified and it’s sort of like – it’s just not like that folks (I15)

Some students stood out in terms of the contradiction between their espoused values and sustainability practices, e.g. regularly traveling back home during their degree on lengthy “unsustainable” flights or otherwise contradicting principles. However, the different experiential activities in sustainable development, stretching from footprint measuring, and exposure to case studies to project work did seem to provide many students with the necessary “real” prompt to develop:

I think the new generation of students some would call them millenials [yeah] I think they are great. I think they are going to change the world. (I21)

This “ethical” commitment was sometimes compared to students from other, e.g. business schools:

We’re not going to the business school where the focus is money and kind of go – eh Earth people – people? Can you – have you thought about those. Have you thought about something beyond the dollar. (I06)

Within this committed “passionate” cohort were also more pragmatic students:

[...] they become more passionate – learning more they become more passionate or – but some individuals they learn about that but are more just low carbon design (I01)

Although only affecting a minority, the conversion of sustainability thinking and principles into marketable employee skills meant some students missed the need for deeper engagement:

I think that comes because of the way they see the labour market and the way sustainability just are so sold as a skill I think whereas they are not that they are really like. (I21)

Several programs emphasized the relevance of the course to professional CPD or similar, e.g. SOAS, MMU, Glasgow, Strathclyde, explicitly mention the professional associations that recognize courses for professional purposes. Post-graduation could lead into “mainstream” jobs in the green sector:

[...] probably the majority the majority of them go into or yeah definitely the majority of them go into a fairly mainstream [mm] job that does have some green credentials to it (I09)
The potential gap between what they learn and the realities post-graduation was mentioned, especially for those for whom ESD courses were a career rather than just an ethical choice:

[...] some of the students actually will challenge during the (xxx) what they will say is whatever they are – we are teaching them it will be hard for them to go out there and sell that idea. But industry would not like to change overnight. (I01)

In those programs where social and political change was addressed or important, the issue of equity seemed challenging for some students. This finding echoes the general observation that the social dimension of SD is the least integrated “pillar” in ESD (Zeegers and Clark, 2014):

I’m not getting much of a sense from people that they disagree with some of the points we make about the social costs of existing economic paradigms. (I17)

Now some of them go oh and seem to oh this is new territory and start to absorb. And some of them you do see kind of closing over a little. (AS)

As with other themes in this interview, the question of student characteristics, motivations and challenges linked to all the other broad themes. The overall cohort was presented as a committed, sometimes idealistic or pragmatic, group with different disciplinary and personal backgrounds.

Discussion
In the previous subsections some of the findings have been discussed in relation to the existing literature. In this section, more general discussion is developed. Despite a small cohort of respondents (n = 21) this thematic discourse study identifies multiple interrelated themes and factors defining academic approaches to sustainable development and ESD. Prior studies of lecturer views identified subgroups with degrees of commitment to anthropocentric and eco-centric ideals and practices, and varied knowledge and commitment. In comparison to prior studies, this study explored a wider range of factors and did not assume that individuals held dichotomous and distinctive views. Nuanced context dependent views within the constraints of organizational expectations and influences were an overwhelming finding.

Although lecturers have variable knowledge about the full continuum of anthropocentric and eco-centric positions, the question of social, personal and political dimensions of ESD is everywhere articulated, including with reference to experimental activities for students (Domask, 2007). In saying this, it is important to see lecturer narratives as products of discipline affiliations and experiences as well as institutional pressures on what is possible and preferred, e.g. fee-paying degrees as paths to employment rather than just “enlightenment”. As Hegarty (2008) notes “Universities have to find new ways to articulate their relevance and to maintain their own unique commitment and contribution, whilst also responding to the very needs of a global workforce which will underscore and enshrine their (continued) relevance” (2008, p. 683).

As Fien (2002) observed regarding ESD “few studies have sought to go beyond description to include a critical and theoretical analysis of findings or to ground explanations in social or organizational theory” (Fien, 2002, p. 144). Connor and Dovers (2004) remind us that accommodation to existing sustainability discourses is a common feature of organizations and their actors and that (with respect to normative change), “Institutions and the configuration of institutional systems of governance embody values
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Core SD unit</th>
<th>Target program</th>
<th>Related programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunel university</td>
<td>I01 Introduction to Strategic Sustainable Development</td>
<td>MSc Sustainability, Entrepreneurship and Design</td>
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<td>I04 Driving Change towards Sustainability</td>
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<td>MSc Theory and Practice of Sustainable Design</td>
<td>MSc in Environmental Design of Buildings</td>
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<tr>
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<td>MSc Theory and Practice of Sustainable Design</td>
<td>MSc in Sustainable Building Conservation</td>
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<td>MSc Environmental Sustainability</td>
<td>MSc Carbon Management</td>
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<td>MSc Advanced Sustainable Design</td>
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<td>MSc Environment and Sustainable Development</td>
<td>Multiple MSc programs</td>
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<td>MSc Environment and Sustainable Development</td>
<td>Multiple MSc programs, e.g. Economic Development</td>
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<td>I14 Perspectives on Environment and Development</td>
<td>MAMSc Environment and Development</td>
<td>Multiple MSc programs include subject</td>
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<td>Lancaster University</td>
<td>I15 Perspectives on Environment and Development</td>
<td>MAMSc Environment and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manchester metropolitan</td>
<td>I16 Science for Sustainable Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCL barlett</td>
<td>I21 political ecology of environmental change</td>
<td>MSc Environment and Sustainable Development</td>
<td>Multiple, e.g. MSc Urban Development Planning</td>
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Table I. Interviewee profiles

Views on education
that, for the rules to be viable, must be resonant with those held by a sufficiently large group of the populace subject to the imposed constraints” (Connor and Dovers, 2004, p. 204).

Ultimately individuals within this interview cohort reflect these influences but also struggle to establish a distinctive academic identity in the context of such pressures. In relation to this, Everett speculates that “one diagnosis of academia’s own glacial pace in recognizing the mismatch between what we teach and the problems students face is that the academics who design and implement the curriculum are products of this same monotonic educational system” (Everett, 2008, p.240). Although “monotonic” seems excessive, the institutional arrangements and environment do influence what ESD can be.

Conclusion
As Hegarty (2008, p. 687) notes, existing mapping, survey and individual institution studies have paid little attention to academic culture and institutions, arguing that “in the light of the role of academic identity and its determinant impact on scholarly culture and practice, we might need to consider a different approach?” Thus, this study finds that in a context of embedding of mainstream sustainable development on university campuses, taught postgraduate programs tend to project a mainstream ESD approach albeit with foregrounding in some programs of its contested nature (Connelly, 2007). This mainstream approach, as alluded to above, is an institutional response to expectations in the higher education institutional environment.

This study highlights ways in which organizational and institutional expectations perhaps rather than just discipline differences influence lecturer responses to the ethics and practices of ESD. In saying this, this study recommends in future more attention is paid to institutional theory of organizations to analyze university responses to sustainability (Iarossi et al., 2013). Institutional theory, which is largely absent from current ESD research, may help explain some of these results. Thus, Glover et al. (2014) note that coercive (external forces), normative (institutional peers) and mimetic drivers, i.e. influence organizational responses to sustainability transitions.

In future, there should be a greater focus on the relationship between views of sustainability and development and the institutional arrangements that condition and influence views on ESD. Resisting the idea that there is one “correct” conception of sustainable development, variety has been described as “fertile opportunities for the use of exciting and innovative pedagogies” (Cotton and Winter, 2010, p. 41). Thus, “openness for interpretive flexibility […] and variations in practice are the key to SD integration in a university context” (Sammalisto et al., 2015, p. 53). Greater networking among departments and institutions might also help further such a cause, and lead to the transformative approaches advocates for change demand. In some contexts more than others, students are not being challenged to cope with or even acknowledge the broader political and social agendas typical of stronger discourses at play in sustainable development. Based on the existing literature, this remains a global issue and is not confined to the UK.

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Further reading


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