



# Leading Sustainability in Education

Webinar Summary

Community for Educational Innovation – CEI

10/06/2026

## Leading Sustainability in Education

### *Thematic Strand 3: Education for Green and Digital Innovation*

This webinar examined how education institutions can move from sustainability commitments to concrete action by embedding sustainability across teaching and learning, curriculum renewal, institutional leadership and cross-sector collaboration. Building on European policy frameworks such as the European Green Deal<sup>1</sup>, the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development<sup>2</sup>, the Union of Skills<sup>3</sup> and GreenComp<sup>4</sup>, the discussion highlighted that the green transition requires not only technological innovation, but also learning, leadership and cultural change.

Through three expert presentations, the webinar explored transformative learning and action competence, futures-oriented science education, and institutional transformation in higher education, and introduced the Education for Climate Coalition as a European community supporting collaboration on sustainability in education.

#### **Presentation 1: Closing the sustainability gap – learning to live our values**

*By Gabriela Gliga, Lecturer, Atlantic Technological University, Ireland.*

The first presentation explored the gap between sustainability values and sustainability practices. Many education institutions refer to sustainability in their missions, strategies, charters, graduate attributes and learning outcomes. However, these commitments are not always reflected in everyday teaching, learning and assessment.

The core challenge is therefore not only to teach about sustainability, but to create learning experiences where learners can practise sustainability. This requires moving from awareness and knowledge towards action, agency and reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development*, OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2022\\_243\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2022_243_R_0001)

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, *Union of Skills*, [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/union-skills_en)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Joint Research Centre, *GreenComp: The European sustainability competence framework*, [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework_en)



Two concepts were presented as especially important for designing such learning experiences:

- Transformative learning: learners need to encounter dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes that challenge their assumptions about the world.
- Action competence: learners need the capacity, willingness and opportunity to act on sustainability challenges.

These ideas are closely connected to GreenComp, particularly its focus on embodying sustainability values and acting for sustainability. The presentation argued that learners become agents of change when they are given opportunities to decide, act, reflect and apply sustainability values in concrete situations.

The main principle was that students come to live the values they practise. Therefore, sustainability education should start from doing. It should be anchored in real problems that are relevant to learners' lives. It should also hand over agency to students, allowing them to make decisions and propose action, rather than only analyse sustainability challenges.

As an example, Gabriela Gliga presented the ReLoop game, a classroom activity designed to develop circular thinking. In this activity, students work in groups and select a product or service they use in everyday life. They then apply circularity principles to redesign it. The principles are presented through simple prompts and examples, such as designing a product to last longer, making it repairable, or creating emotional value that encourages long-term use.

The ReLoop game helps students rethink how products are made, used and disposed of. It makes circularity tangible and supports learners in seeing how sustainability can be applied in practical design decisions. Before-and-after questionnaires showed positive changes in participants' knowledge of circularity and, importantly, in their confidence to act in their own field.

The presentation also discussed how such practices can be scaled. At the individual level, educators can act as multipliers by redesigning their own learning spaces. At the institutional level, they need support structures, training and resources. Atlantic Technological University's Education for Sustainability Academy was presented as one example of institutional support, offering training opportunities, resources and spaces to share good practice. At the partnership level, European projects and alliances can help educators exchange resources and strengthen their capacity. Finally, communities such as CEI can amplify impact through shared learning.



The key message was that closing the sustainability gap requires action at several levels: the classroom, the institution, partnerships and wider communities. Small learning experiences may not transform students permanently on their own, but they can contribute to a broader culture of sustainability when multiplied across education systems.

### **Presentation 2: GreenComp for futures-oriented science education**

*By Olivia Levrini, Full Professor of Physics Education and History of Physics, University of Bologna; Honorary Research Fellow, University of Oxford.*

The second presentation focused on how GreenComp can support futures-oriented science education. It drew on two European initiatives: the FEDORA project and the FEDORA Teacher Academy. These projects explore how science education can be “futurised”, meaning that science teaching can help learners develop the competences needed to engage with uncertain, plural and changing futures.

The presentation began from the observation that many young people experience future anxiety. In a rapidly changing society, students often feel uncertain about their future and about their ability to influence it. This is connected to what sociologists describe as acceleration and future shock: the pace of change is so high that people have little time to interpret what they are experiencing.

In this context, science education can play an important role. It can help learners develop future literacy, meaning the ability to imagine, discuss and act in relation to different possible futures. Futures-oriented education does not aim to predict the future. Instead, it helps learners ask “what if” questions, imagine alternatives, work with contingency and uncertainty, and act in the present with a view to shaping desirable futures.

Future studies were presented as a valuable framework for sustainability education, using tools such as the futures cone to help learners explore possible, probable, plausible and desirable futures and recognise that the future is open to influence. The presentation highlighted how sustainability challenges are complex, interconnected and uncertain, requiring approaches that move beyond linear cause-and-effect thinking. Drawing on the science of complex systems, it introduced concepts such as uncertainty, feedback, non-linearity, emergence and multiple possible futures, showing how these perspectives can strengthen science education and support learners in understanding and addressing sustainability challenges.



In addition, GreenComp was used as a framework to connect future thinking with sustainability thinking. In particular, the presentation highlighted the relationship between future thinking, embracing complexity, sustainability values and action for sustainability. GreenComp helped frame science education not only as a way to understand scientific concepts, but also as a way to develop mindsets for sustainable futures.

The presentation argued that this kind of teaching does not simply add a sustainability activity to the curriculum. Instead, it uses sustainability to rethink the curriculum itself. It asks how disciplines can be regenerated so that they support sustainability mindsets. For science education, this means moving beyond deterministic and linear views of progress and including epistemic values such as uncertainty, contingency, probability, complexity and responsibility.

The main challenge now is to move from classroom-level activities to institutional-level change. This includes understanding how GreenComp competences can be assessed and how schools and universities can value these new forms of learning.

### **Presentation 3: Sustainability transformations at universities and the role of academic leaders**

*By Anete Veidemane, Researcher, KITES, University of Twente.*

The third presentation examined sustainability transformation at the institutional level, with a focus on higher education institutions and academic leadership. It addressed how universities can contribute to sustainability, why institutional change is difficult, and how leaders can support or slow down transformation.

Universities can support sustainability by educating future sustainability leaders, conducting research on transdisciplinary challenges, engaging with society, and reducing their own environmental impact through campus operations and governance. However, universities also contribute to sustainability problems, for example through research travel, energy-intensive computing, laboratory activities and resource use.

Changing universities is difficult because they are large, complex and slow-moving institutions. One interviewee compared universities to oil tankers: they can change direction, but doing so requires determined leadership and broad institutional buy-in.

The presentation focused on academic leaders, especially top-down and middle-out leadership. Students and academics are important for bottom-up and classroom-level change. However, senior leaders and middle leaders, such as



deans, can influence structures, priorities and incentives across faculties and institutions.

Drawing on the DECODE project, the presentation discussed drivers, obstacles and support needs for embedding sustainability in higher education. Survey results showed that sustainability is expected to become increasingly important in teaching and research. Many institutions already have central-level sustainability strategies, but strategies are less common at the faculty or departmental level, where implementation often needs to happen.

The main drivers for embedding sustainability were shared values, strategic priority and requests from central leadership. The main obstacles were lack of time and lack of financial resources for education and research. The strongest support needs identified were support for sustainability strategy development, external funding, staff training and peer learning. Critical success factors included commitment from central leadership, involvement of the whole academic unit, and commitment from unit-level leadership.

The presentation then introduced five policy levers that institutions can use to support sustainability transformation:

- Strategy and awareness: developing visions, sustainability strategies and shared institutional priorities.
- Mapping and monitoring: establishing baselines, collecting data and using evidence for decision-making.
- Capacity building: offering training, peer learning, networks and professional development.
- Incentives: using funding, recognition, rankings, nudges and other motivational tools.
- Structures and regulations: creating new structures, revising internal rules, and embedding sustainability in policies, recruitment and evaluation.

These levers can be applied across the core missions of the university: education, research, societal engagement, campus operations and governance. Institutions can start by selecting a priority pathway, identifying their baseline, and then building a customised roadmap.

The presentation also discussed leadership roles in sustainability transformations. Leaders can drive change, support change, have no role, divert efforts or block efforts. The “divert” role was especially important because it does not actively block



change, but delays decisions, creates ambiguity or postpones action. This can demotivate people who are trying to move sustainability forward.

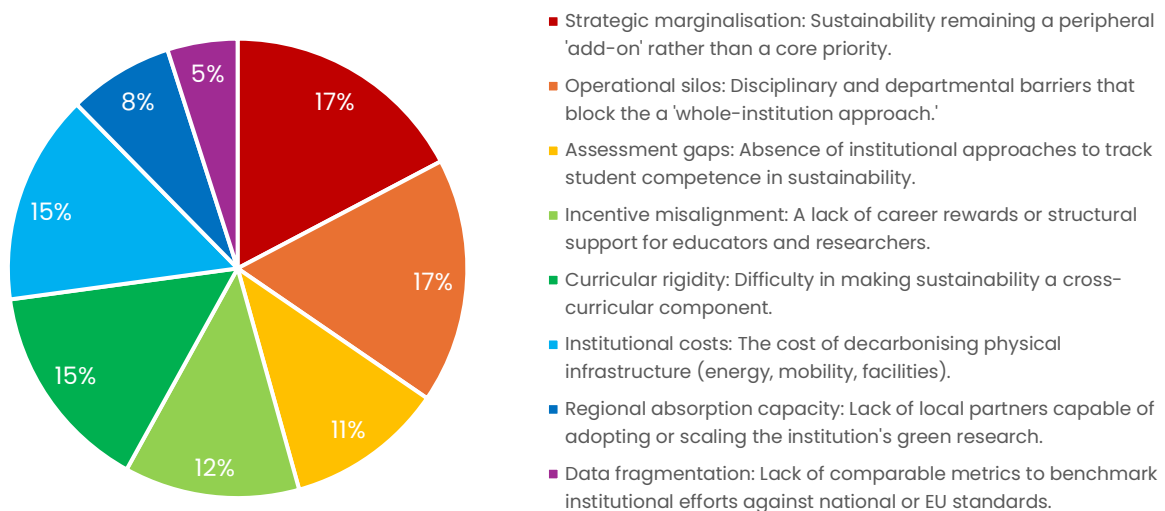
Finally, the presentation highlighted tensions that leaders must navigate during implementation, especially around priorities, pace and process. These tensions concern which dimension of sustainability should come first, how fast change should happen, and who should be involved.

The presentation concluded with a reflection from the University of Auckland. In discussions about the university’s mission, one professor suggested shifting from being “the best in the world” to being “the best for the world.” This small change captured a broader shift in how universities can understand their role: not only as institutions competing for excellence, but as institutions contributing to a more sustainable and just future.

**Interactive poll: Barriers to integrating sustainability in education**

A live Mentimeter poll asked participants to identify the main barriers preventing education institutions from achieving green transition and sustainability targets. The results, based on 24 responses, were spread across eight options, highlighting the main challenges.

**Figure 1. Which barriers prevent the achievement of green transition and sustainability targets in education?**



## Introduction to the Education for Climate Coalition

Susana Campoy Folgoso introduced the Education for Climate Coalition, a participatory European platform that supports education communities working on sustainability and climate action.

The platform was created in the context of the European Education Area and the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development. Its purpose is to mobilise students, teachers, education institutions, non-governmental organisations, policy makers and other stakeholders around education for sustainability.

The Education for Climate Coalition provides a space to share information, exchange good practice, discuss challenges and support each other. The platform works around five main priorities: Teacher training, bridging education with science, developing green competences, raising awareness and changing behaviour.

The platform currently has more than 2,000 users. It allows members to promote projects, share materials, participate in events, and join groups. It also hosts the GreenComp community, where discussions, resources and activities related to GreenComp take place.

Upcoming Education for Climate Coalition activities include the Youth Climate Lab from 13 to 18 July, focused on eco-anxiety and resilience through education, and the annual call for innovative green education actions. Selected initiatives will have the opportunity to present their work during Education for Climate Day.

## Upcoming Activities

- **Call for Good Practices:** Share initiatives or policies [on Education for Green and Digital Innovation](#).
- **CEI Study Visit:** New Bulgarian University, July 2026 (closed call).
- **CEI Semester poll on Education for green and digital innovation:** insights will provide evidence for our upcoming 2026-I Thematic Report. [Vote here!](#)
- **CEI Thematic Report on Education for Green and Digital Innovation,** bringing together insights from the webinars, community input, good practices and study visit exchanges (to be published soon).

