

Routledge Handbook of Higher Education for Sustainable Development

Edited by Matthias Barth, Gerd Michelsen, Marco Rieckmann, and Ian Thomas,
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The introduction to this handbook states that the editors' aim was to collate 'a systematic and comprehensive overview of existing and upcoming approaches for higher education for sustainable development and provide a unique resource for researchers engaged in the field'. They have done a difficult task reasonably well. The handbook contains 31 chapters from a variety of voices across the globe, and it provides readers with a variety of approaches, ideas, and examples of Education for Sustainability (EfS) at universities. Many of the chapters are valuable and insightful contributions. So much so that I think the handbook somewhat undersells itself by saying it is for 'researchers in the field'. The book will also be of interest to course designers and academics teaching related areas such as global citizenship, social justice, lifelong learning, and ethics.

This is not a handbook in the sense that it is a book of instructions. Its chapters are clustered into four broad themes:

- Part 1 — Education for sustainable development in higher education;
- Part 2 — Paradigms and methodologies of research on higher education for sustainable development;
- Part 3 — Issues and themes on higher education for sustainable development;
- Part 4 — Examples of research on higher education for sustainable development.

So, in terms of those who might be seeking 'instruction', there are nine examples of existing approaches that could be mimicked, and a number of insightful chapters on particular research methodologies, such as conducting case studies or undertaking action research.

Part 1 is meant to provide a background. For those not connected with EfS in universities, the case for EfS in higher education is much better conceptualised than it was 20 years ago. Universities play a key role in fostering sustainable practices through education, research, their own operations, and outreach. Yet the sector as a whole is at a crossroad because of a wide range of change forces bearing down upon it. These include a number of complex and rapidly unfolding challenges such as disruptive technologies and increased accountability and competition. The handbook did not give me a real sense of the distinctive nature of EfS in higher education. Chapter 2, by Ajen Wals, Valentina Tassone, Gary Hampson, and Jonathan Reams, covers some underpinning ideas about EfS, such as transformative learning, complexity, and social change; and Chapter 4, by Ian Thomas, covers university structures, practices, disciplinary compartments, and so forth. However, there is too much discussion about the historical connection between EfS and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) or Environmental Education. I would have liked more thought about the future, particularly critical analysis on the changing role of universities in society, the pace of institutional reform, and the impact of increasing levels of accountability and disruptive technologies on EfS in higher education.

Part 2 focuses on paradigms and methodologies. In this part of the handbook, Chapter 6, by Steven Sterling, Paul Warwick and Lynne Wyness, provides the most insightful chapter in the entire collection. It focuses on the paradigms that underpin EfS and concludes there is a need to develop partnerships with a myriad of groups when conducting any research. Part 2 also has chapters that provide an overview of publications to date and some overall impressions about EfS research. The other chapters in Part 2 focus on particular approaches to research, such as critical theory, feminist approaches, and action research.

Part 3 contains seven chapters under a grouping called 'Issues and themes'. This part of the book seems to be a cluster of chapters from a broad and diverse range of sources rather than any systematic and comprehensive collection of ideas around the issues associated with EfS. For example, Chapter 16 seeks to define and operationalise the competencies for sustainable development. Chapter 17 explores the use of the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) to measure educational outcomes. Chapter 18 provides an example of engagement with the National Union of Students in the United Kingdom. The standout chapter in Part 3 is Chapter 21, by Debra Rowe and Krista Hiser, which focuses on EfS and community partnerships. It provides some insightful logic that starts with EfS being fundamentally transformational. They then discuss if people are to act as agents of change in society, what this mean in terms of teaching active citizenship to students, and the underpinning abilities and capabilities that students need to do this.

Part 4 contains nine examples of research. It is a broad collection of chapters ranging from academic surveys to students surveys, and from document analysis to semi-structured interviews. Given the scope of coverage needed to comprehensively cover the theme in this part, this section was always going to be a bit 'hit-and-miss' for any reader. However, I think the key strength of this section is that the editors foreshadowed there would always be gaps and made sure that each chapter was structured the same way. By having (1) an introduction to the problem, (2) an outline of the relevant theory or paradigm, (3) research methodology, (4) the findings, (5) some reflections and lessons on conducting the research, and (6) conclusion, there is a lot of fertile ground for any person to learn about EfS research in higher education.

To summarise, the handbook has many strengths including: (1) it covers a broad range of topics and approaches from across the globe, (2) it has many of the contributions that are insightful perspectives, and (3) the editors have structured different parts so that it is well suited to the handbook's stated target audience. Indeed, some of the contributions provide some of the most thoughtful considerations in the field and have application beyond the stated target audience. The handbook's weaknesses are: (1) a lack of perspectives from Asia, India, and Africa; (2) a lack of contextual considerations about the complex array of societal, technological, and economic challenges that are occurring in the sector and the associated curriculum reform and innovations required; and (3) a lack of overall narrative or signposting between chapters.

EfS initiatives are still relatively new in higher education and it remains a largely under-researched and evaluated field. Given the stated aim of the handbook, a considerable diversity of approaches and research could have been covered. Thus, given the scale of the task, the editors have tackled a difficult job well. The result is an insightful and timely contribution to EfS in higher education.

Reviewer Biography

Jonathon Howard is an academic at Charles Sturt University in the School of Environmental Sciences. He currently leads efforts to embed the 'sustainable practices' graduate learning outcome across all degrees at Charles Sturt University.