



UNESCO Global Action Programme on  
Education for Sustainable Development



## Whole School/Institution Approaches to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) – A Backgrounder

From small pilot projects to national programmes and now an emerging global interest, many examples of whole school/institution approaches have emerged. Some have been adapted from others such as WWF-UK's Pathway project or the UK's Sustainable Schools Initiative. The adaptations were designed so that the approach could fit into the local educational contexts and needs.

It would be true to say that there are many interpretations and ways of approaching a whole school/institution approach and this backgrounder will help you sort through them.

The first conclusion then is that there is no one framework or model which suits all education settings around the world; that can be said of all education initiatives. However, there are similarities and some emerging evidence.

### What is a whole school or whole institution approach?

If you conduct an internet search on whole institution or whole school approaches, it will become immediately obvious that this phrase is applied to a range of interventions, practices or educational themes. Some examples include:

- School planning/improvement
- Well being
- Health
- Bullying
- Literacy
- Inclusion/participation
- Behaviour management
- Teaching and learning
- Sustainability/ESD
- Conflict
- Relevance
- Democracy
- Practicing what you are educating about

It doesn't take much to see how all of these can potentially be part of sustainability. However it is also clear, from an initial glance - even within the field of ESD - that these whole institution approaches fall into two types:



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- a. whole school **engagement** on a **topic or practice**
- b. whole school **approaches** categorised by an **ethos/vision** and or a **framework**

Both types can be seen within the practice of ESD and both may well be valid depending on the situation and context or need that the institution or education system has to fulfil. For example, a themed approach may only look at the campus e.g. gardening or energy. An approach embedded in the ethos of an educational establishment might be visible in its mission statement, its aim and objectives or the way staff are evaluated.

Understanding your context and the options available will help you choose an appropriate purpose and framework. It may be helpful to consider the following 3 models of quality education that are predominant currently (Laurie et al 2016):

1. The **economic model of education** deals with inputs and outputs and uses quantitative measurable outputs. In whole institution approaches to ESD this would show itself as measures such as: reduced energy use; water saved; number of girls attending school; retention rates of students and so on (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004).
2. The **humanist tradition** emphasizes education as a process, with the student at the centre of that process. It aims to develop the whole personality as well as creativity and problem-solving abilities; it is described in terms such as learner centered, participative and democratic (Barrett et al., 2006; Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004).
3. The **'learning as connection'** model of quality arose from sub-Saharan Africa in the past decade. It stresses the importance of connecting existing learner knowledge of local context to the process of learning abstract concepts (Lotz-Sisitka, 2013).

Once you understand which of these models you are operating under you can choose an appropriate whole institution approach. The following table shows how common domains, approaches and characteristics fit into our two main types. The learning as connection model can show itself in the way the curriculum is designed and developed or the way community engagement or working with partners manifests itself. These are asterisked \*. It is important to note that this table is not exhaustive but the chosen activities show the difference between the two main approaches.

Table 1: Comparison of types of whole institution approaches – some potential behavioural differences

Domain	Whole School/Institution Approaches	Whole School/Institution theme/topic/issue approaches
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Vision/ethos/ mission	Mission or vision statement related to purpose of the institution	Statement related to good practice or achievements
Governance	Senior leadership plus distributed leadership. Everyone in the school is responsible. Students may well be included in decision making. A plan usually accompanies this work, but builds on work and expertise in the institution. Follows an appreciative Inquiry approach – starting anywhere.	Champions identified. Coordinator or a team identified to carry out the work. Targets are often set, sometimes within a framework.
Curriculum, teaching and learning	Collaborative curriculum design*, participative, action research/ learning based. Values and actions linked. Goals will keep changing as understanding of sustainability and practice develops. Based on local issues.*	Topics/themes selected but not across whole curriculum. Often linked to facilities outcomes. Some links to local issues.
Facilities and Operations	Inquiry based projects* explore how to improve facilities and operations depending on perceived needs and interests. These could change every year.	Clear targets and goals are set with a responsible person usually designated. Can be linked with curriculum.
Building capacity	Professional development for all – less topic based, more process based including working with the local community.*	Training on the specific topics may be included. Training of lead person.
Assessment	Self assessment Assessment scales show progress and development (e.g. rubrics). Can be adjusted year on year. Formative.	Assessment framework used – sometimes designed outside of the institution. Assessment shows when targets are reached – summative.
Other institutional work – e.g. research	Linked to the plan.	Linked where it supports a theme or topic
Community and partnerships	Local sustainability issues and working with local community becomes the focus of the work.	Partners help to build, design or raise money for projects.



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It's important to note that neither way is presented here as right or wrong – but it is difficult to compare such varied approaches or even to compare evaluations of such

different approaches. So it is important to distinguish between the vision (desirable practice), the rationale (why a particular vision is desirable) and designs (how to journey to the visions) (Shallcross & Robinson 2008).

In fact starting with solutions or designs often leads to later frustrations as the next 'project' or task is not obvious. This is when the whole school approach has been a bolt-on rather than embedded throughout the whole institution as a learning process. However the theme/topic approach has been shown to help Institutions who don't know where to begin get started.

**How are whole school/institution approaches organised?**

There are two basic ways to organise the framework or rubric. Either it is a self-evaluating or developmental approach with domains and themes which can then be described by level or engagement, practice or expertise. Either the institution can design these including their actions in each cell of the framework, or it can be preset.

Here is what it might look like.

**Objective/mission – key core concept** e.g. care for oneself, care for others and care for the environment, citizenship or environmental stewardship etc

<b>Domain, topic, theme,</b>	<b>Curriculum (frame)</b>	<b>Campus (frame)</b>	<b>Community (frame)</b>
e.g. – governance, participation, curriculum, assessment, research etc		e.g. Environmental management	
Or: energy, food, water, etc (doorways)			
Eco schools 7 steps			



Or:



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Domain, topic, theme,	Outcome	Beginning	Some progress	Satisfactory progress	Sustained work
e.g. Governance	In Strategic plans	Descriptions of what this looks like in practice at each level			

The benefits of a whole institution approach have been researched and show that the work is more likely to be sustained even after changes in school/institution personnel. It also shows that the institution is trying to model and learn as well as teaching the students.

Partner Network 2 of UNESCO's Global Action programme has initially designed a generic framework to capture all the types of whole institution approaches being used so that we can learn from each other, compare and note what works, and where. Gathering evidence is crucial to this process.

The goal is to then track progress towards further embedding the best practice and scaling up globally.

Some examples of existing whole school/institution frameworks are included in the reference documents referred to below.

## References

A health example:

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