



Reimagining Learning Development for sustainability: a call to action

Manuel O. Díaz Jr.

WPS Institute, Philippines

Abstract

The mission of Learning Development (LD) professionals extends beyond supporting individual academic success; it encompasses shaping a responsive, holistic higher education (HE) ecosystem capable of advancing global sustainability. This communication, drawing from a recent thematic synthesis of open access scholarship on sustainability in HE institutions (HEIs), argues for the pivotal role of LD in driving sustainable futures. The synthesis reveals key pedagogical shifts, the necessity of whole-institution approaches, and the ongoing tension between global frameworks and local contexts. I contend that LD is uniquely positioned to influence these transformations by advocating for pedagogical innovation, equitable institutional strategies, and culturally responsive learning environments. This commentary seeks to ignite reflection and inspire action within the LD community, illustrating how their work can transcend supporting green initiatives to cultivating green mindsets capable of championing systemic, enduring change.

Keywords: learning development (LD); sustainability; pedagogy; cultural responsiveness; higher education (HE); whole-institution approach.

Current scholarship

The role of Learning Development (LD) professionals in higher education (HE) is constantly evolving, moving well beyond the provision of immediate student support to encompass broader institutional and societal contributions. This communication draws directly from the thematic synthesis of open access scholarship on sustainability in HE, which I presented at the International Conference on Education, Environment, and

Agriculture (ICEEA 2025), hosted by Warmadewa University (UNWAR) in Bali, Indonesia, on 18–19 September 2025. That study systematically analysed 100 open access academic titles and abstracts from the ScienceDirect database to identify dominant themes and trends in the field. The synthesis offers a rich and timely collection of insights that directly inform and challenge the LD profession.

Notably, the study's commitment to open access resonates deeply with LD's own ethos: equitable knowledge dissemination and the removal of barriers to learning. It is through this shared lens of accessibility and inclusivity that I consider the study's findings.

The synthesis surfaced six overarching themes:

1. Curriculum and pedagogy for sustainability.
2. Institutional strategies and governance.
3. Technology and innovation.
4. Global and cultural contexts.
5. Interdisciplinary research and methodologies.
6. Social responsibility and community engagement.

Three insights from these themes are particularly pertinent to LD and compel LD professionals to reimagine their role in advancing sustainability within HE.

First, the analysis highlights a significant pedagogical shift toward competency-based, experiential learning, increasingly mediated by technology. Sustainability education is no longer confined to knowledge acquisition; it now emphasises the cultivation of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and applied problem-solving skills. These core competencies align precisely with LD's mission. For example, studies showcase the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes through andragogical principles to build leadership competencies (Schrage, Maheshwari and Velasquez, 2025) and demonstrate how project-based learning enhances SDG integration in engineering curricula (Requies et al., 2024). The reconceptualisation of business education via the 'heart, head, hand' model (Carbone, McCarthy and Touboulic, 2025) is a call to transformative learning, a space where LD already thrives.

The growing role of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality in sustainability education (Negi, 2024; Bagherimajd and Khajedad, 2025) offers immense opportunities, yet it also raises pressing ethical concerns about access, equity, and the responsible use of educational technologies. LD is uniquely positioned to guide institutions in navigating these challenges, ensuring that technological innovation supports, rather than undermines, inclusive and ethical learning environments.

Second, the study affirms the essential need for whole-institution approaches to sustainability. Sustainability is no longer an isolated initiative: it demands systemic integration across governance, operations, academic disciplines, and partnerships. Institutions that lead in this space are embedding sustainability within their strategic frameworks, operational planning, and leadership practices (Conceição da Costa Marques, 2025). However, the study also uncovers enduring disparities between the Global North and South regarding access to resources, institutional capacity, and participation in global sustainability rankings (Ankareddy et al., 2025).

LD professionals are well-situated to bridge these gaps. Their work routinely crosses institutional silos, connecting academic support with curriculum design, digital literacy, student engagement, and policy development. They can lead efforts to foster cross-disciplinary collaboration, advocate for equitable access to sustainability resources, and contribute to the development of inclusive frameworks that are sensitive to local and global disparities. LD, in this sense, is not just a support function but a critical connector and catalyst for whole-institution sustainability transformation.

Finally, the study underscores a crucial tension between the universal language of the SDGs and the need for localised, culturally responsive implementation. Effective sustainability education depends on recognising diverse knowledge systems, particularly Indigenous and intercultural perspectives. For example, the 'Two-Eyed Seeing' approach in engineering education (Habash, 2024) and efforts to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into African education frameworks (Manteaw and Enu, 2025) exemplify how sustainability must be both globally informed and locally grounded.

For LD, this represents both an opportunity and a responsibility, advocating for decolonisation of sustainability education, ensuring that pedagogical approaches, assessment strategies, and support systems are inclusive, contextually relevant, and

respectful of diverse epistemologies. Likewise, the emphasis on HEIs as civic actors (Lopes, 2024; Yan, Li and Arshad, 2025) is a reminder that learning should not be confined to the classroom, and must extend into communities, fostering civic engagement, service learning, and partnerships that produce tangible societal benefits.

This thematic synthesis serves as a call to action for the LD community, revealing that sustainability is a systemic imperative touching every aspect of institutional life. LD is uniquely equipped to lead in this space due to its expertise in pedagogical innovation, holistic student support, and institutional collaboration.

LD professionals can act as architects of sustainable learning ecosystems by embedding sustainability into academic skills support, digital literacy, and curriculum enhancement. The profession can champion collaborative and culturally responsive pedagogies that cultivate green mindsets capable of driving systemic change. As vigilant stewards of ethical digital transformation, LD can ensure emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) are harnessed responsibly to support equitable learning opportunities.

Ultimately, the role of LD is not merely about supporting student success—it is about shaping learning futures. By stepping into this leadership role, LD can be a transformative force, cultivating not just green initiatives, but the green minds capable of leading toward a more sustainable and equitable world.

Acknowledgement

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Ankareddy, S., Dorfleitner, G., Zhang, L., and Ok, Y. S. (2025) 'Embedding sustainability in higher education institutions: a review of practices and challenges', *Cleaner Environmental Systems*, 17, 100279. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cesys.2025.100279>

- Bagherimajd, K., and Khajedad, K. (2025) 'Designing a model of sustainable education based on artificial intelligence in higher education', *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 100439. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2025.100439>
- Carbone, V., McCarthy, L., and Touboulic, A. (2025) 'Practically re-imagining business education for sustainability', *European Management Journal*, 43(5), pp. 745–751. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2025.04.015>
- Conceição da Costa Marques, M. (2025) 'The management of higher education institutions in Portugal from a sustainable perspective', *Procedia Computer Science*, 256, pp. 706–717. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2025.02.170>
- Habash, R. (2024) 'Two-Eyed Seeing: an ethical space of engagement to shape engineering and computing education for sustainable development', *Sustainable Horizons*, 12, 100118. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.horiz.2024.100118>
- Lopes, H. S. (2024) 'Educational sustainability initiatives in higher education: an integrative approach to urban areas in northwestern Portugal', *Societal Impacts*, 4, 100093. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socimp.2024.100093>
- Manteaw, B. O., and Enu, K. B. (2025) 'Mindscapes and landscapes: framing planetary health education and pedagogy for sustainable development in Africa', *Global Transitions*, 7, pp. 136–143. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glt.2025.02.004>
- Negi, S. K. (2024) 'Exploring the impact of virtual reality and augmented reality technologies in sustainability education on green energy and sustainability behavioral change: a qualitative analysis', *Procedia Computer Science*, 236, pp. 550–557. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2024.05.065>
- Requies, J., Barrio, V. L., Acha, E., Agirre, I., Viar, N., and Gandarias, I. (2024) 'Integration of sustainable development goals in the field of process engineering through active learning methodologies', *Education for Chemical Engineers*, 49, pp. 26–34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ece.2024.08.001>

Schrage, B., Maheshwari, G., and Velasquez, S. (2025) 'Broadening the competencies of MBA students in Vietnam: integrating andragogical approaches with sustainable development goals', *The International Journal of Management Education*, 23(3), 101217. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2025.101217>

Yan, L., Li, Z., and Arshad, M. H. (2025) 'From responsibility to action: how CSR drives sustainability in higher education', *Acta Psychologica*, 254, 104831. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104831>

Author details

Manuel O. Diaz, Jr. was an invited lecturer at the Ateneo de Naga University and is a fellow at the West Philippine Sea Institute. He has worked in the higher education sector for more than a decade.

Licence

©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).