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# Conceptualising the 'sustainable teacher' within the contemporary university

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**Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract**

This study aims to expand the discourse of what it takes to be a teacher in today's fluid and complex higher education sector. It adopts 'sustainability' as a multidimensional lens and metaphor to conceptualise the desirable characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher' as a not-yet-defined concept and the pedagogical practices conducive to responsive educational futures. The overarching research question guiding this study is: How is the 'sustainable teacher' conceptualised and envisioned within the contemporary university? An exploratory qualitative research design was employed to capture in-depth insights from early and mid-career university teachers, as well as leadership staff from various disciplines across two UK universities. Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Additionally, participants were invited to develop a reflective account (e.g., concept map, written narratives) of their conceptualisation of the sustainable teacher. Preliminary empirical findings will be presented centred on domains including 'practicing', 'knowing', 'relating', 'being' and getting support for 'developing'.

**Full paper**

Education systems need rethinking to address global changes and challenges such as climate change, socio-economic inequalities and ecological and pandemic crises. Universities can play a vital role in supporting the advancement of a sustainable society by developing high-quality learning opportunities and developing well-equipped students, teaching and professional staff with knowledge, competences and values to address these global challenges (Cotton et al., 2020). The notions of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' have been used in different ways and contexts, including education for sustainable development, the 'sustainable university' (Amaral et al., 2015), sustainability within the curriculum and to discuss what it takes to move towards healthier and sustainable learning environments (Kinchin, 2024). However, how teachers' role is redefined within the current complex landscape, needs to be understood further for achieving responsive educational futures.

Echoing sentiments expressed by scholars (Barnett, 2023; Markauskaite et al., 2023), there is a call to transcend simplistic and person-centric teacher conceptualisations and embrace a more multifaceted understanding of their role. Scholars are engaged in reimagining higher education's purpose and envisioning better futures (Goodyear, 2022; Ashwin, 2022), prompted by the necessity for a sustainable society and greater visibility of opportunities and issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., educational infrastructure, outdated pedagogies, teacher heavy workload and 'threatened' wellbeing). However, the existing literature on teachers' work and capabilities is not aligned with these

developments and is focused on relatively narrow knowledge domains and competences (e.g., digital, design, reflective) teachers should have to enable high-quality student learning experiences. This research posits that adopting sustainability as a novel framing to conceptualise the teacher's role can be a fruitful direction. To this end, it aims to conceptualise the 'sustainable teacher' as a not-yet-defined concept. It takes an ecological approach (Barnett & Jackson, 2020) to explore teachers' activities across different levels, considering their ways of knowing, acting and being. The overarching research question guiding this study is: How is the 'sustainable teacher' conceptualised and envisioned within the contemporary university?

Employing an exploratory qualitative research approach (Bryman, 2016), this study aimed to capture the experiences and viewpoints of early and mid-career university teachers, as well as leadership staff across two UK universities, allowing for a multi-actor perspective. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, with data collection conducted between January and May 2024, totalling 17 participants. Data collection involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol featuring open-ended questions. Initially, participants were asked to share background information, followed by discussions on their understanding of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' across teaching, professional work and personal life. Subsequently, participants were asked to articulate the characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher' and were provided with further prompts to scaffold their thinking. Following the interviews, participants were also invited to develop a reflective account (e.g., visual representation, concept map, narrative text) of their conceptualisation of the sustainable teacher. This activity aimed at deepening insights gained during the interview and encourage more reflective and creative expressions of the concept. Participants were given 3-4 weeks after the interview completion to submit their reflective account to the researcher. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) served as the primary data analysis method.

Preliminary empirical findings on the conceptualisation of the sustainable teacher, centred on domains such as 'practicing', 'knowing', 'relating', 'being' and getting support for 'developing' will be presented at the conference. This presentation will also provide reflections on the employment of creative object-mediated data collection methods. In conclusion, this study offers fresh perspectives and encourages a more transparent conversation about the explicit, implicit and aspirational expectations of teachers in contemporary universities which can be insightful for teachers, academic developers, educational researchers and university leadership.

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