SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Conceptualising and envisioning the 'sustainable teacher' within the contemporary university

Research report

February 2025

Dr Vily Papageorgiou

Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Table of Contents

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) for enabling me to conduct this research and for funding my project. I am also grateful to the SRHE team for their support throughout the project, particularly Rob Gresham for his flexibility, advice and efforts in ensuring a smooth process.

This research would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the study participants. I deeply appreciate their participation during turbulent and uncertain times in higher education and their generosity in sharing their precious insights and time.

I would like to thank Professor Sue Bennet (University of Wollongong, Australia), my mentor as part of this project who generously gave her time for online meetings despite the timezone differences. Her guidance, feedback, and experienced mentorship, especially with regards to approaches for conducting research as a time-poor academic in a primarily teaching-focused role have been vital.

I would also like to thank my colleagues within the Surrey Institute of Education and in particular, Professor Naomi Winstone and Emeritus Professor Ian Kinchin for their feedback.

Executive summary

This study investigated what it takes to be a teacher in today's fluid and complex higher education sector. It adopted 'sustainability' as a multidimensional lens to conceptualise the realistic and desirable characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher' for responsive educational futures. The central research question guiding this study was: How is the sustainable teacher conceptualised and envisioned within the contemporary university? To address this, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted with early-career, mid-career, and experienced university teachers, as well as leadership staff, across two UK universities. Data collection involved 17 one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Additionally, participants were invited to develop a reflective account (e.g., concept map, visual representation, written narratives), allowing for deeper reflection and creative expression on what it means to be a sustainable teacher.

Findings highlight key activities, characteristics and attributes that define a sustainable teacher in relation to their ways of acting, being and becoming, and relating. This study offers a range of recommendations for practice, policy, and research that can inform teacher professional development, sustainable educational practices and institutional strategies. By engaging with the concept of the sustainable teacher, universities can foster an educational environment that aligns with ecological perspectives and is adaptable, reflexive, and deeply rooted in the principles of sustainability and care.

1. Background

Education systems need rethinking to address global challenges including climate change, socio-economic inequalities and ecological and pandemic crises. Universities play a crucial role in building a sustainable society by enhancing the quality of education and equipping students, teaching and professional staff with knowledge, competences and values to navigate these global challenges (Cotton et al., 2020; Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2022). The terms *sustainability* and *sustainable* have been used in various contexts and ways, from education for sustainable development and curriculum design to the broader concept of the 'sustainable university' (Amaral et al., 2015). There is also growing discussion about creating healthier, more sustainable learning environments (Kinchin, 2024). However, less attention has been given to how the role of university teachers is changing in response to these complexities. How can teachers thrive in demanding academic environments while preparing students for uncertain 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. There is an ongoing effort to reimagine higher education's purpose and envision better futures (Ashwin, 2022; Goodyear, 2022) prompted by the necessity for a sustainable society. The COVID-19 pandemic also further highlighted both challenges and opportunities, exposing issues such as outdated pedagogies, excessive workloads, and insufficient educational infrastructures. Yet, 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.

While sustainability is often linked to environmental concerns, this study proposes using *sustainability* as a novel and multidimensional lens and metaphor to rethink the role of university teachers. Taking an ecological perspective (Barnett & Jackson, 2020; Kinchin, 2022), this research explores the 'sustainable teacher' as a not-yet-defined concept, to explore teachers' activities across different levels to support more sustainable futures in higher education.

This study was guided be the following research question:

- How is the 'sustainable teacher' conceptualised and envisioned within the contemporary university?

2. Methodology

This study took an exploratory qualitative research approach (Bryman, 2016) to capture the viewpoints, conceptualisations and experiences of early-career, mid-career and experienced university teachers, as well as leadership staff (e.g., directors of learning and teaching) across various disciplines. 17 participants were selected across two UK universities (one research-intensive and one dual-intensive) using purposive sampling techniques. Data collection involved *one-to-one semi-structured interviews* (in-person). Initially, participants shared background information, followed by discussions on their understanding of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' across teaching, professional work and personal life. Subsequently, they were asked to articulate the characteristics of the sustainable teacher and were provided with further prompts to scaffold their thinking.

Participants were also invited to develop a *reflective account*, such as a visual representation, concept map, model or narrative text, exploring their understanding of the sustainable teacher (see Appendix A). This approach aimed to deepen insights from the interviews while encouraging creative expression. Inspired by speculative methods (Ross, 2016, 2023) and story completion techniques (Clarke et al., 2018), this data collection approach added a unique dimension to the research.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020) served as the primary data analysis method for interview data and the text-based reflective accounts. A systematic visuo-textual analysis technique (Brown & Collins, 2021) was used to analyse visual representations produced by participants. The study received ethical approval from the University of Surrey, as well as gatekeeper approval from the participating universities.

This report focuses on the insights of early-career, mid-career, and experienced academic participants, who make up 12 of the 17 individuals included in the overall study. Table 1 below presents the characteristics of all study participants.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Discipline	Type of contract	HE teaching experience	Sustainability expertise	Teaching training (PGCert/MA)
Diana	Medicine	Teaching focused	4 years	No, personal interest	Yes
Kate	Medicine	Teaching focused	2 years	No, personal interest	Yes
Bianca	STEM (Sustainability)	Research & Teaching	1 year	Yes	Yes
Grace	Psychology	Teaching focused	3 years	c	Yes
Irene	Social Sciences & Sustainability	Research & Teaching	2.5 years	Yes	Yes

Robert	STEM (Chemistry)	Teaching focused	4.5 years	Yes (environmental pillar mostly)	Yes
Simon	Social Sciences (Transdisciplinary teaching)	Teaching focused	10 years	Yes, threads in his teaching	Yes
Vera	Medicine and Education	Teaching focused	12 years	Yes, threads in her teaching & research	Yes
Lana	Medicine	Teaching focused	9 years	No	Yes
Fiona	Social sciences (Education)	Teaching focused	12 years	No	Yes
Fred	Social sciences & Sustainability	Research & Teaching	20 years	Yes	Yes
Claire	STEM (Engineering)	Teaching focused	6 years	Yes (environmental pillar mostly)	Yes
Adam	STEM (Chemistry & Sustainability)	Mostly teaching focused	15 years	Yes	Yes
Sylvia	Medicine & Education	Research & Teaching	20 years	No	Yes
Serena	Social sciences (Law)	Teaching focused	23 years	No	Yes
Daisy	STEM (Engineering)	Teaching focused	17 years	Yes	Yes
Beth	Psychology	Research & Teaching	20 years	No, personal interest	Yes

3. Findings

Figure 1 provides a summary of the key themes and sub-themes constructed in this study regarding the characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher'. These themes are interconnected and interdependent and should not be viewed in isolation, as each influences the other in line with ecological thinking (e.g., themes 1 and 2 – being well and doing well in practice).

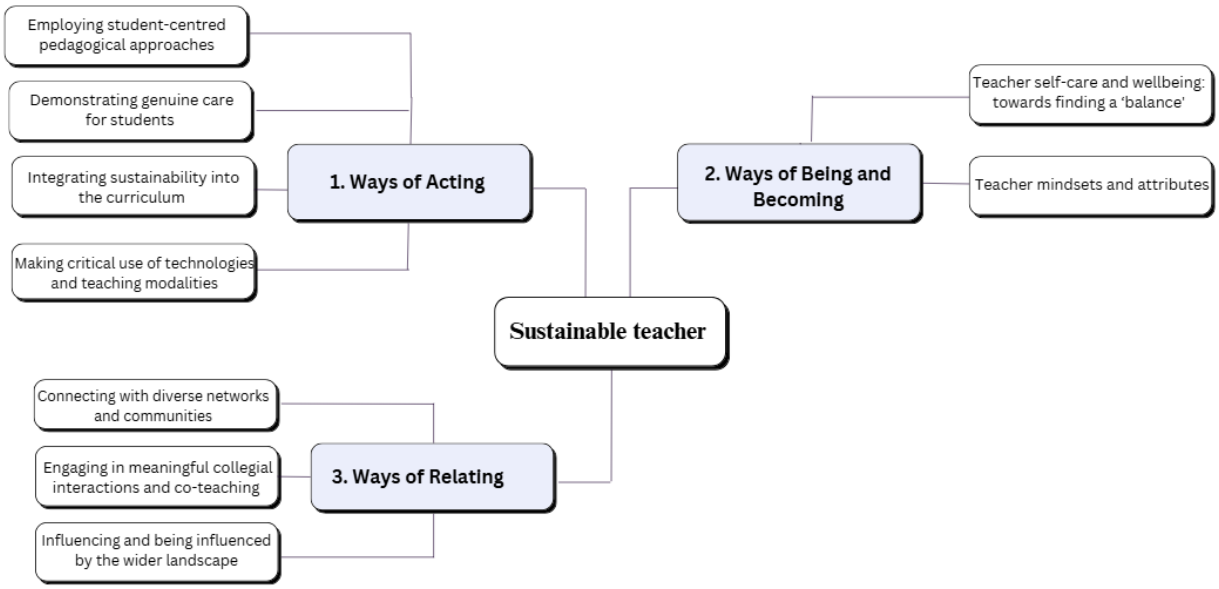


Figure 1. Overview of themes and sub-themes

3.1 Ways of acting

Employing student-centred pedagogical approaches

Most participants (eleven out of twelve) defined the sustainable teacher as one who employs student-centred approaches and works in partnership with students. This perspective, well-supported in the literature (e.g., Weimer, 2013; Bovill, 2020), may reflect a broader cultural shift in higher education or be influenced by participants' teaching training (PGCert and/or MA in higher education). Beyond simply engaging students, participants emphasised the sustainable teacher's role in designing and enacting learning activities and assessments that develop critical capabilities within their disciplines—reflexivity, problem-solving, creative and systems thinking skills, and shifting perspectives towards change as part of a social reform agenda.

> *'It's about understanding implications. In terms of pedagogical approaches, I would argue that it's about encouraging and empowering students to be reflexive about their impact on their careers and what that will mean for them going forward.'* (Irene)

Demonstrating genuine care for students

The sustainable teacher was seen as someone who genuinely cares for students, viewing teaching as an act of care. This includes valuing students, treating them with kindness and

respect, and actively listening to their needs and challenges. Participants also linked care to student wellbeing, through regularly reflecting on students' workloads and experiences to make decisions that do not overwhelm students.

> *'Make sure that you truly care about them, not artificially, just to try to give them the impression…student may forget what you teach, but they will never forget how you made them feel'.* (Bianca)

Integrating sustainability into the curriculum

Participants argued that it is a responsibility of the sustainable teacher to integrate sustainability as a theme in any discipline and module: *'increasing the embedding principles of sustainability into every single thing that we teach'.* (Fred) This aligns with current literature and many universities institutional strategies promoting sustainability into the curriculum (Vogel et al., 2023; Papageorgiou et al., 2024). However, this perspective may also reflect this study's participants own values and priorities, as the wide adoption of sustainability is varied and in some cases in its infancy. Interestingly, participants stressed the importance of aligning personal educator values associated with sustainability and their pedagogical practices and actions (embodied praxis). Participants also emphasised a sustainability-conscious approach to resource use, making deliberate choices about handouts, online versus in-person meetings, and teaching modalities while considering the trade-offs involved.

Making critical use of technologies and teaching modalities

Participants associated the sustainable teacher with a teacher's responsibility in being aware and a critical user of technologies for facilitating accessible, dynamic and responsive learning and teaching. They referenced key sector trends (Pelletier et al., 2024), such as the use of hybrid and online education models to enhance accessibility, artificial intelligence with a potential to enhance specific dimensions of professions while evaluating ethical concerns and learning analytics systems to make data-informed decisions.

3.2 Ways of being and becoming

Teacher wellbeing and self-care: towards finding a 'balance'

Teacher wellbeing and self-care were prominent areas among all participants, with some viewing them as the first areas that came to mind when engaged in this study. This insight reflects the multiple pressures the sector faces and the need to support teachers who are directly impacted by these to thrive, not just survive. Participants described how heavy workloads and hidden or unrecognised labour (e.g., marking, personal tutoring, uneven workload distribution across teams) impact teacher work quality, enjoyment, decision-making, and wellbeing. A recurring concern was overworking and its long-term consequences on teachers' physical and mental health. Mid-career and experienced academics had often developed coping mechanisms over the years, while early-career teachers were navigating ways to maintain balance.

Setting boundaries between teaching, research, administration, and personal life was seen as essential. Participants emphasised evaluating workloads and saying 'no' when necessary to prevent burnout. Self-management and time-management were identified as key to sustainability, with Lana noting, *'It's about self-management, knowing where the limits are, and realising when you need to step away*.' Proactive planning, task prioritisation, and the recognition of personally identified effective and efficient ways of working were also seen as crucial for maintaining balance across a semester or year.

Participants acknowledged that sustainability in academia extends beyond workload management to personal habits that support wellbeing, such as physical activity, relaxation, socialising, and self-care. Some also emphasised the need to balance high standards with pragmatism, embracing a 'good enough' approach instead of striving for perfection in every task to maintain wellbeing.

Teacher mindsets and attributes

Eleven out of twelve participants identified key mindsets and attributes that teachers should have or develop to flourish in their roles. They described a sustainable teacher as embodying a growth-oriented mindset, characterised by adaptability, openness to change, and engagement in lifelong learning to stay relevant and respond to shifts in their discipline, profession, and global trends. Equally important was seen developing self-awareness and critical reflection. Sustainable teachers engage in ongoing reassessment of their practice, acknowledging personal limitations and a willingness to learn from mistakes. This requires a certain humility to admit when change is necessary, as well as a critical perspective on their impact on students and the broader educational environment. Finally, five participants shared that having or developing a hopeful and future-looking mindset links with being a sustainable teacher. Rather than being driven by fear or pessimism on presented challenges, teachers should remain hopeful and solution-focused, approaching new developments—such as AI or sustainability issues as opportunities for development, ensuring that their teaching remains meaningful and responsive to the future.

3.3 Ways of relating

Connecting with diverse networks and communities

The sustainable teacher was described as one who has the responsibility to proactively engage with diverse networks and communities both within and beyond their institution. They participate in academic and professional conversations through conferences, publications, and professional networks, ensuring that they remain connected to evolving pedagogical, societal and disciplinary developments. This helps prevent the tendency to become confined within a single institutional culture and enable them to be exposed to fresh perspectives and innovative teaching approaches.

Beyond academic circles, some participants argued that sustainable teachers actively collaborate with industry professionals, external organisations, communities and interdisciplinary stakeholders. These relationships have the potential to provide access to guest speakers, field visits, and placement opportunities, enriching students' learning experiences with real-world insights. Developing and maintaining strong professional relationships was also seen as potentially contributing to long-term career sustainability. These partnerships can support ongoing professional development, interdisciplinary work, and strengthen opportunities for funding and resource-sharing. Most participants acknowledged the abundance of relevant communities and networks (e.g., educational events, disciplinary societies). While eager to engage more such opportunities, they noted that current workloads often hinder meaningful involvement. This challenge highlights an area for managerial consideration through institutional recognition mechanisms (e.g., promotion criteria) and future adjustments in workload allocation models.

Engaging in meaningful collegial interactions and co-teaching

Eight participants stated that a sustainable teacher recognises the importance of collegiality within their department/team, valuing shared expertise and collaboration over individualism. Instead of trying to manage everything alone, they build strong relationships, exchange ideas, and contribute to a culture of mutual support and shared responsibility. This can enhance their own practice, benefit their colleagues' and improve the student experience.

Four participants viewed co-teaching as a valuable way to promote sustainability, enabling educators to learn from one another, share workloads, and enhance student learning through diverse perspectives. Additionally, participants emphasised that collegial, transparent interactions provide emotional and professional support, reducing isolation and fostering resilience. This is achieved through honest conversations with colleagues, openly sharing struggles and successes, and actively listening to one another—creating a caring environment where educators can learn together and develop sustainable working strategies.

> *'The idea of having someone to hear you and either validate how you're feeling or give you advice. Sometimes you don't want advice, you just want someone to listen to you and to say, yeah, you're right, that's okay to feel like this.'* (Fiona)

Influencing and being influenced by the wider landscape

Seven participants shared that sustainable teachers are deeply engaged with the broader world and extend their influence through teaching, research and community engagement, focusing on projects that address global challenges such as sustainability, healthcare, quality education and social equity. Their role involves creating and sharing knowledge that transcends the classroom and academic settings, influencing policy, participating in professional communities, and engaging in scholarly discussions that shape educational standards and societal norms. Lastly, sustainable teachers are portrayed as bridges between the classroom and the wider world, integrating real-world contemporary issues, innovations, and global perspectives into their teaching.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This qualitative research project, drawing on diverse university teachers' perspectives, developed a novel conceptualisation; this of the 'sustainable teacher'. This multifaceted concept, encompassing teachers' ways of acting, being and becoming, and relating, not only enriches the pedagogical discourse but also encourages a more transparent dialogue about the explicit, implicit, and aspirational expectations of teachers in the contemporary universities. It can be integrated in teacher professional development programmes and considered when designing institutional educational strategies. Additionally, this research developed a portrayal of the 'unsustainable teacher' (see Appendix C) as a provocation to facilitate critical reflection among university teachers, academic developers, and university leadership staff.

Recommendations for practice, policy and research:

- Recognising care as a multi-dimensional concept and core value: A sustainable teacher practices care at multiple levels: towards students, colleagues, society, and themselves. Universities should integrate care practices into teaching and institutional activities.
- Universities should integrate wellbeing into professional development, workload planning, and department culture, rather than relying solely on external support services.
- Sustainability should be woven into all disciplines and (professional development) programmes, with recognition through promotions and teaching awards.
- During recruitment, selection, and professional development of teachers, universities and key stakeholders can pay attention to cultivating attributes and mindsets (see section 3.2 of Findings) that support sustainable teaching practices.
- Universities should actively support networking, knowledge-sharing among teaching teams, cross-institutional collaborations, and community-building initiatives to break down silos and strengthen teaching practices.
- Defining the sustainable teacher: The sustainable teacher is an emerging concept and should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all construct. This research revealed that it is shaped by an individual's disciplinary background, values, and context. While participants overall shared common views, those without sustainability expertise focused more on relational, wellbeing, and individual capabilities, whereas participants with sustainability expertise provided deeper insights into sustainability in pedagogy. Further research is needed to refine this concept by exploring perspectives across universities, geographical regions, educational systems, and cultures.

5. Dissemination activities

Dissemination activities completed to date:

- Papageorgiou, V. (2024). Co-constructing and envisioning sustainable teaching and learning, European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) SIG 10, 21 & 25 Conference: *Walking the Talk: Co-constructing the politics of meaning, diversity and learning*, 11-13 September, Bari, Italy.
    - *Received the best 'walk the talk' conference contribution award*.

- Papageorgiou, V. (2024). Conceptualising the 'sustainable teacher' within the contemporary university. SRHE International Research Conference: *Higher Education: A place for Activism and Resistance?* 2-6 December, Nottingham, United Kingdom.

Future activities:

- Presentation of project findings at Imperial College London's annual educational conference (25 March 2025). Presentation title: Conceptualising the 'sustainable teacher': Insights from early-career, mid-career and experienced academics. (Invited talk)
- Preparation of two research articles presenting the main empirical findings of the project: one based on the findings presented in this report, and another based on the findings that address the question: "How can universities support teachers to develop and enact the desirable characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher'?"—a research question that formed part of the larger study to which this report contributes.
- Preparation of a blogpost.
- Presentation of project findings in institutional educational research seminars and via CPD provision to teaching staff.

References

Amaral, L.P., Martins, N., & Gouveia, J.B. (2015). Quest for a sustainable university: a review. International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 16(2), 155-172.

Ashwin, P. (2022) The educational purposes of higher education: changing discussions of the societal outcomes of educating students. *Higher Education*, *84*(6), 1227-1244.
Barnett, R. & Jackson, N. (2020). Ecologies for learning and practice: Emerging ideas, sightings, and possibilities. Abingdon, Routledge.

Barnett, R. (2023). The Very Idea of Academic Professionalism: At an End or Beginning Anew with an Eco-professionalism? In: Lybeck, E. & O'Connell, C. (eds.) Universities in Crisis: Academic Professionalism in Uncertain Times. London, Bloomsbury, pp.23-40.

Bovill, C. (2020). *Co-creating learning and teaching: Towards relational pedagogy in higher education*. Critical publishing.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*. 3 (2), 77–101.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 18 (3), 328–352.

Brown, N., & Collins, J. (2021). Systematic visuo-textual analysis-A framework for analysing visual and textual data. *The Qualitative Report*, *26*(4), 1275-1290.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. 5th ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Cotton, D., Bailey, J., & Tosdevin, M. (2020) Higher education and the climate emergency: exploring the hidden curriculum of the campus. *The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*, 29-40.

Cotton, D., Bailey, J., & Tosdevin, M. (2020). Higher education and the climate emergency: exploring the hidden curriculum of the campus. The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education, 29-40.

Goodyear, P. (2022). Realising the good university: Social innovation, care, design justice and educational infrastructure. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 4(1), 33-56.

Kinchin, I. M. (2022). The ecological root metaphor for higher education: Searching for evidence of conceptual emergence within university education strategies. *Education Sciences*, *12*(8), 528.

Kinchin, I. M. (2024). How to mend a university: Towards a sustainable learning environment in higher education. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kioupi, V., & Voulvoulis, N. (2022). The Contribution of Higher Education to Sustainability: The Development and Assessment of Sustainability Competences in a University Case Study. Education Sciences, 12(6), 406.

Markauskaite, L., Carvalho, L., & Fawns, T. (2023). The role of teachers in a sustainable university: from digital competencies to postdigital capabilities. *Educational technology research and development*, 1-18.

Papageorgiou, V., Druckman, A., Kioupi, V. & Pinilla-Roncancio, M. (2024). Empowering Integration of Sustainability in Higher Education Curricula. In McNamara, A., Mahon, D., Papageorgiou, V. and Ramdeo, J. (eds.). *Inspire: Learning for Teaching in Higher Education*, NOVA Science Publishers.

Pelletier, K., Robert, J., Muscanell, N., McCormack, M., Reeves, J., Arbino, N. & Grajek, S. (2023). 2023 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, Teaching and Learning Edition. Available at: https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2023/4/2023hrteachinglearning.pdf?la=en&hash=195420BF5A2F09991379CBE68858EF10D7088AF5 [Accessed 27 January 2025].

Ross, J. (2017). Speculative method in digital education research. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *42*(2), 214-229.

Ross, J. (2023). Digital futures for Learning: Speculative methods and pedagogies. Routledge.

Vogel, M., Parker, L., Porter, J., O'Hara, M., Tebbs, E., Gard, R. He, X & Gallimore, J. (2023). Education for Sustainable Development: a review of the literature 2015-2022. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/advancing-esd-call-strategic-approaches-and-robust-impact-evaluation [Accessed 27 January 2025].

Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Appendices

Appendix A: Instructions for the reflective account of the 'sustainable teacher' (data collection stage 2)

After completing the one-to-one interviews, I sent a follow-up email thanking participants for their valuable contributions and inviting them to take part in the second (and final) research stage. Only those participants who had expressed interest in this stage (as indicated in the consent form) were contacted. As with the interviews, participation remained entirely voluntary.

Participants were given three weeks (with some flexibility based on their availability) to complete this stage. They were asked to develop a reflective account to deepen their conceptualisation of the 'sustainable teacher.' They could choose a format that suited them—such as a concept map, diagram, collage, online artifact (with an explanation), or a written reflection. To support their work, they were also provided with the below scenario for some guidance.

Scenario: Imagine a university lecturer in 2030 fully embodying the characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher' enabling them to flourish in their role as university teachers. How would you define and envision the 'sustainable teacher'? What are their characteristics and what makes them 'sustainable'?

You could consider (*some of*) the following elements as you craft your response to the above scenario:

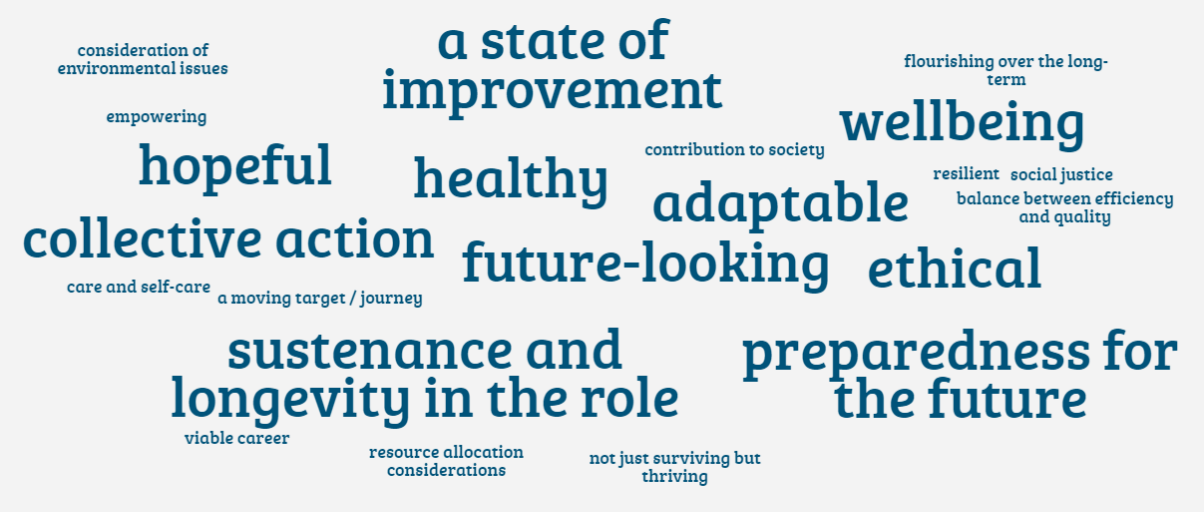
- What are the pedagogical approaches of the 'sustainable teacher'? How do they empower their students' learning?
- What is the knowledge and/or capabilities of the 'sustainable teacher'?
- What is the role, significance (or lack of) and desirable interactions of the 'sustainable teacher' with others, such as colleagues within and beyond the university?
- What are the mindsets, habits, qualities and behaviours of the 'sustainable teacher'? How does the 'sustainable teacher' maintain a sense of wellbeing and purpose in their academic journeys?
- What are the university support mechanisms (e.g., initiatives, resources, structures, activities, opportunities, culture) that can facilitate teachers' journeys towards becoming and embracing the key characteristics of the 'sustainable teacher'?

There is no right or wrong way to conceptualise the 'sustainable teacher', which is a term not defined yet in the literature. You can be as creative as you like – for example, you could write a few paragraphs and/or create a visual representation (i.e., concept map, diagram, collage, photograph, Lego model, playdough model, concept map or an online artefact). It is entirely up to you and your personal preference.

You do not need to spend much time on this (unless you want to). Because collecting reflections of this kind is important for my research, please write at least a paragraph or a visual representation with a short articulation of your thinking.

Thank you very much for your valuable time and contributions to my project! If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via email.

Appendix B: Key words and phrases associated with participants' use of the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable’ in the context of this study

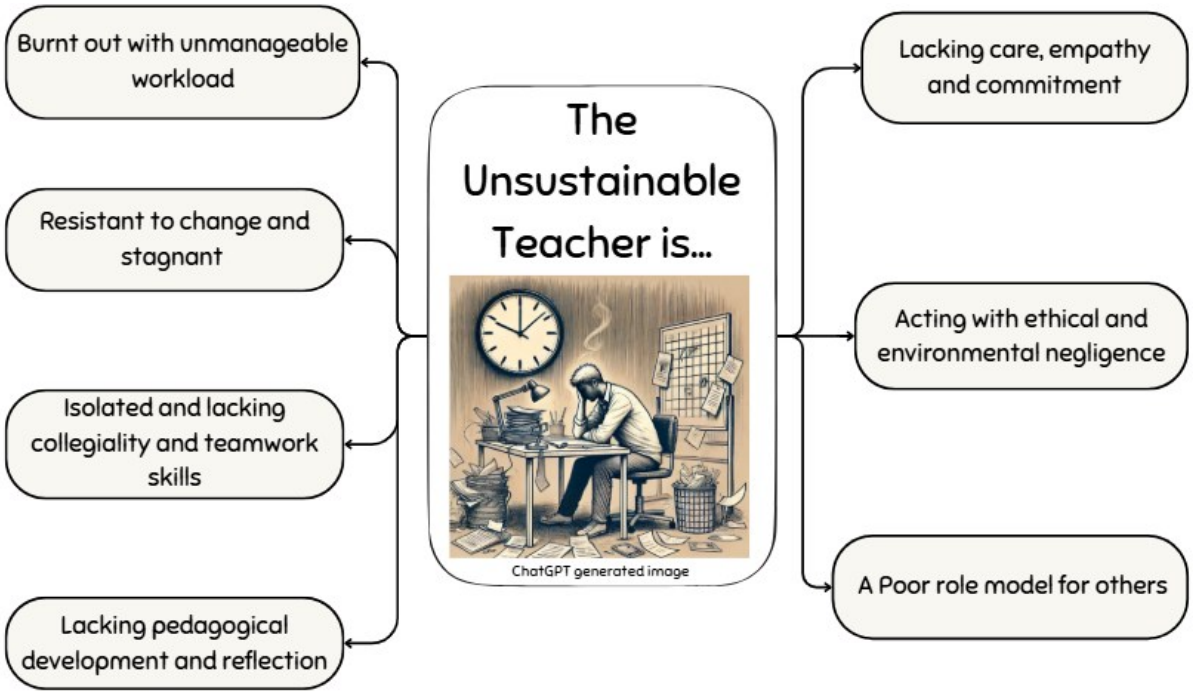


Appendix C: Who is the 'unsustainable teacher'?

In the final part of the main interview, participants were asked to reflect on who the *unsustainable teacher* is and what makes them unsustainable in their roles. Core themes and insights from this discussion are briefly outlined below. Additionally, a visual representation captures key insights from participants' responses (see below). This representation and key themes have the potential to serve as a counter-argument and a provocation for university teachers, academic developers, and university leadership staff. It may also be used in teacher training programmes and staff CPD sessions to stimulate discussion on the role of university teachers. However, it is crucial to view these themes through an ecological lens, recognising the influence of university systems, institutional structures, and global (sector-wide) challenges on teachers' ways of acting, being, becoming, and relating.

As part of this research, participants clearly voiced a range of issues affecting the work of university teachers that have not been discussed in depth in this report. These include, but are not limited to, precarious employment contracts, unmanageable and unreasonable workloads, supportive or non-supportive line managers, (lack of) time for professional development, (lack of) a culture of recognition and rewards, and constant university reorganisations and structural changes. Therefore, when discussing what makes a teacher unsustainable, the following characteristics should be explored and interpreted within their socio-cultural context rather than in isolation. This requires considering the agency (or lack thereof) and shared responsibility among individuals, teams, leaders, educational systems, and institutional structures, along with their interconnections, rather than placing sole responsibility on individual teachers, whose growth and sustainability are often highly dependent on and/or constrained by these broader systems.

The Unsustainable Teacher is…



The Unsustainable Teacher is…

- **Burnt out with unmanageable workload**
  - Overworked, burnt out, and exhausted.
  - Struggling with precarious contracts, heavy workloads, and institutional instabilities (e.g., restructuring, constant changes in priorities and/or expectations in their roles).
  - Finding it difficult to balance their multiple and complex responsibilities (e.g., research and teaching, work and life).
  - Experiencing inertia from doing too much without time for reflection.

- **Resistant to change and stagnant**
  - Displaying a fixed mindset, unwilling to update teaching methods, adapt ways of working, or embrace change.
  - Looking backward, reinforcing outdated practices rather than evolving.
  - Taking a linear, unreflective approach to teaching, failing to question the status quo or challenge norms.

- **Isolated and lacking collegiality and teamwork skills**
  - Working in silos, disconnected from colleagues and broader institutional efforts.
  - Failing to collaborate with colleagues, students, or professional networks to enhance practice.
  - Generating extra work for others by ignoring shared processes or responsibilities.
  - Prioritising personal goals over collective success, exhibiting individualistic or competitive behaviour that undermines teamwork.

- **Lacking pedagogical development and reflection**
  - Insufficiently trained or unqualified in key aspects of teaching and learning (e.g., assessment and marking, contemporary teaching methods, technology integration).
  - Lacking engagement with professional development or lifelong learning, neglecting opportunities to grow or update skills (often due to heavy workloads, or lack of opportunities).

- **Lacking care, empathy and commitment**
  - Treating teaching as just a job, showing little personal or professional commitment or passion.
  - Displaying a lack of care for students and the profession, blaming students for poor outcomes rather than adapting teaching methods to their diverse needs.
  - Lacking emotional intelligence and empathy in interactions with students and colleagues, failing to understand or address their challenges.

- Feeling disengaged, undervalued, and unsupported within the institution. Has unbalanced prioritisation of research over teaching (often due to what is rewarded in their institution).

- **Acting with ethical and environmental negligence**
  - Overusing outdated or unsustainable resources/materials.
  - Failing to align personal actions and teaching approaches with ethical and sustainability principles.
  - Ignoring the broader consequences of their teaching practices on the environment, students and the society.

- **A Poor role model for others**
  - Reinforcing poor professional and academic practices, including rigid, one-size-fits-all teaching approaches.
  - Training students to conform rather than fostering critical thinking. Promotes rote learning instead of holistic education.
  - Failing to act as a positive role model for students and peers, promoting a "just do as you're told" mentality.