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GREEN TECHNOLOGY AS A CATALYST FOR SKILLS SUSTAINABILITY IN 21ST-CENTURY EDUCATION

David Gabriel Ekpobio*[1], Ekaette Etim Nyoho[2] and Udoro Usoro Daniel[3]

Department of Curriculum Studies, Educational Management and Planning, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria[1]

Department of Curriculum Studies, Educational Management and Planning, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria[2]

Department of Educational Technology, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria[3]

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***Corresponding Author: David Gabriel Ekpobio**
Department of Curriculum Studies, Educational Management and Planning, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

The growing convergence of environmental challenges and rapid digital transformation has intensified calls for education systems to cultivate sustainable, future-ready skills. In response, green technology has emerged as a critical catalyst for skills sustainability in 21st-century education. This article examines how sustainability-oriented technologies can enhance the relevance, adaptability, and longevity of learners' competencies in an era of ecological uncertainty and economic transition. Anchored in Education for Sustainable Development, human capital theory, and constructivist learning perspectives, the study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach informed by recent empirical research and international policy frameworks. The article explores how green technologies, such as renewable energy systems, digital simulations, environmental data platforms, and low-carbon digital infrastructure, reshape curricula and pedagogy by fostering experiential, interdisciplinary, and problem-based learning. These approaches support the development of transferable competencies, including critical thinking, systems analysis, digital and environmental literacy, collaboration, and ethical reasoning. The discussion further highlights the importance of coherent policy alignment, institutional leadership, teacher professional development, and equitable infrastructure investment in enabling effective implementation, particularly in developing contexts. The article concludes that integrating green technology into education represents a transformative strategy for advancing skills sustainability,

strengthening learners' adaptability, and positioning education as a central driver of sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

KEYWORDS: Green technology, skills sustainability, 21st-century education, education for sustainable development, green economy

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is defined by rapid technological advancement, escalating environmental challenges, and profound transformations in the nature of work and social organization. Climate change, biodiversity loss, energy insecurity, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption have emerged as pressing global concerns, compelling nations to rethink development trajectories. At the same time, the digital revolution, characterized by artificial intelligence, big data, automation, and networked systems, has reshaped how knowledge is created, disseminated, and applied. These dual transitions; the green transition and the digital transition, are not independent phenomena; rather, they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing (UNESCO, 2025; OECD, 2025).

Within this evolving landscape, education occupies a strategic position. Beyond its traditional role of transmitting disciplinary knowledge, education is increasingly expected to prepare learners for uncertain futures, complex problem-solving, and responsible participation in sustainable societies. This expectation has given rise to renewed emphasis on skills sustainability, the capacity of individuals to continuously acquire, adapt, and apply competencies that remain relevant across changing economic, technological, and environmental contexts (Karaca-Atik et al., 2024). Skills sustainability moves beyond short-term employability, focusing instead on lifelong learning, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and systems thinking.

Green technology has emerged as a critical enabler in this reorientation of education. Broadly defined, green technology encompasses innovations designed to minimize environmental harm, enhance resource efficiency, and support sustainable development. In educational contexts, green technology includes renewable energy systems, digital simulation tools, Internet of Things (IoT) devices for environmental monitoring, cloud-based learning platforms, and data-driven sustainability applications (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025). These technologies do not merely serve operational or infrastructural purposes; they create new pedagogical possibilities by embedding sustainability challenges directly into teaching and learning processes.

Recent scholarship underscores that education systems that fail to integrate sustainability-oriented technologies risk producing graduates whose skills are misaligned with emerging labor markets and societal needs. The expansion of green economies, spanning renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, circular manufacturing, and environmental services, has generated demand for competencies that combine technical expertise with environmental awareness and ethical judgment (OECD, 2025). Consequently, education must cultivate learners who are not only digitally literate but also environmentally conscious and capable of responsible innovation.

International organizations have increasingly emphasized this convergence of digitalization and sustainability in education. UNESCO's recent policy papers advocate for the development of "green-digital citizens" equipped with competencies that bridge technological fluency, environmental literacy, and civic responsibility (UNESCO, 2024b; UNESCO, 2025). These frameworks highlight education as a transformative force capable of shaping values, behaviors, and skills that support both planetary well-being and inclusive economic growth.

However, the integration of green technology into education is neither automatic nor without challenges. Issues of access, infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and policy coherence continue to shape how effectively green technologies are deployed, particularly in developing contexts. In many regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, education systems must navigate persistent inequalities, limited resources, and skills mismatches while simultaneously responding to global sustainability imperatives (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025). This tension underscores the need for deliberate, context-sensitive strategies that position green technology as a catalyst for sustainable skills rather than a superficial technological add-on.

Against this backdrop, this article examines green technology as a catalyst for skills sustainability in 21st-century education. It seeks to clarify key concepts, explore relevant theoretical foundations, and analyze how green technologies can reshape curricula, pedagogy, and institutional practices to support long-term skills development. By drawing on recent empirical research and international policy frameworks, the paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on how education can respond effectively to intertwined digital and environmental transitions. Ultimately, the article argues that integrating green technology thoughtfully and ethically into education is essential for cultivating learners capable of navigating complexity, driving sustainable innovation, and contributing meaningfully to resilient and equitable futures.

Conceptual Clarifications

Clear conceptual grounding is essential for understanding how green technology can function as a catalyst for skills sustainability in 21st-century education. The concepts of *green technology*, *skills sustainability*, and *21st-century education* are often used interchangeably with related terms in policy and scholarly discourse, yet each carries distinct implications for educational planning, pedagogy, and outcomes. Clarifying these concepts provides a foundation for meaningful analysis and avoids conceptual ambiguity.

Green Technology

Green technology refers to technological innovations and systems intentionally designed to reduce environmental impact, promote efficient resource use, and support sustainable development goals. Unlike conventional technologies that prioritize productivity and speed without regard for ecological consequences, green technologies emphasize environmental responsibility alongside functional efficiency. These technologies include renewable energy systems (such as solar and wind power), energy-efficient computing, smart environmental sensors, sustainable building technologies, and digital platforms that support environmental monitoring and decision-making (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025).

In educational contexts, green technology extends beyond physical infrastructure to encompass pedagogical and digital tools that enable sustainability-oriented learning. Examples include virtual laboratories that minimize material waste, simulation software for climate modeling, learning management systems optimized for low energy consumption, and data analytics platforms that allow students to analyze environmental trends. Importantly, green technology in education is not solely defined by the technology itself but by *how it is used* to foster environmental awareness, ethical reasoning, and responsible innovation (UNESCO, 2025).

Recent studies suggest that when green technologies are embedded into teaching and learning processes, they serve as *contextual learning environments* where students engage directly with sustainability challenges rather than treating them as abstract concepts (Hasibuan et al., 2025). Thus, green technology becomes both a tool and a learning context, shaping the values and competencies learners develop.

Skills Sustainability

Skills sustainability refers to the ability of individuals to acquire, maintain, and continuously adapt competencies that remain relevant across changing technological, economic, and environmental conditions. Unlike narrowly defined technical skills that may quickly become obsolete, sustainable skills are transferable, adaptable, and future-oriented. They include

higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and systems analysis, socio-emotional skills such as collaboration and ethical judgment, and technical competencies such as digital literacy and environmental data interpretation (Karaca-Atik et al., 2024).

The concept of skills sustainability is closely aligned with lifelong learning and resilience. As automation, artificial intelligence, and green economic transitions reshape labor markets, individuals must be capable of reskilling and upskilling throughout their lives. Education systems that emphasize skills sustainability prepare learners not only for their first jobs but for multiple career transitions and civic roles over time (OECD, 2025).

Green technology contributes directly to skills sustainability by providing learning environments that mirror real-world complexity. Through engagement with sustainability-focused technologies, learners develop the capacity to analyze interconnected systems, adapt to emerging tools, and apply knowledge ethically. Research indicates that exposure to sustainability-oriented digital environments strengthens learners' ability to transfer skills across domains, reinforcing long-term relevance (Chuang et al., 2025).

21st-Century Education

21st-century education represents a paradigm shift from traditional, teacher-centered models toward learner-centered, competency-based approaches that emphasize adaptability and relevance. It prioritizes skills such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, digital literacy, and global citizenship, competencies widely recognized as essential for navigating contemporary societal challenges (OECD, 2025).

A defining feature of 21st-century education is its responsiveness to global transformations, including digitalization and sustainability imperatives. Rather than treating technology as an auxiliary tool, contemporary education integrates technology into curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogy. Similarly, sustainability is increasingly viewed not as an optional subject but as a cross-cutting theme that informs learning across disciplines (UNESCO, 2024b).

Within this framework, green technology acts as a bridge between educational innovation and sustainability goals. It supports experiential learning, interdisciplinary inquiry, and problem-based approaches that reflect the realities learners will encounter beyond formal schooling. By aligning educational practices with ecological and technological realities, 21st-century education seeks to cultivate learners who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable, ethical, and socially responsible.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is grounded in the principle that education should empower learners to contribute meaningfully to environmental integrity, economic viability, and social equity. ESD extends beyond environmental education by emphasizing holistic learning that integrates knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for sustainable living (UNESCO, 2025). Central to ESD is the idea that sustainability challenges are complex and interconnected, requiring learners to develop systems thinking, ethical reasoning, and participatory problem-solving capacities.

Green technology plays a critical enabling role within the ESD framework. Digital tools such as climate simulation software, sustainability dashboards, and virtual field environments allow learners to explore real-world ecological problems in dynamic and interactive ways. These technologies transform sustainability from an abstract concept into an experiential learning process, fostering deeper understanding and long-term behavioral change (Hasibuan et al., 2025). For example, learners who engage with real-time environmental data through digital platforms develop not only technical competencies but also an appreciation of cause–effect relationships within ecological systems.

Recent UNESCO policy documents emphasize that ESD must evolve in tandem with digital innovation to remain relevant in contemporary education systems. The convergence of green and digital competencies is now seen as essential for preparing learners to navigate climate transitions and technological change simultaneously (UNESCO, 2024b; UNESCO, 2025). Within this context, green technology operationalizes ESD by embedding sustainability principles directly into learning environments, curricula, and institutional practices.

Human Capital and Green Economy Theory - Theodore William Schultz (1961)

Human capital theory posits that education enhances individuals' productivity and economic potential by developing relevant skills and competencies. Traditionally, this theory focused on cognitive and technical skills aligned with industrial and service economies. However, the global shift toward a green economy has redefined the types of skills considered economically valuable. Competencies related to renewable energy, sustainable resource management, environmental monitoring, and green innovation are increasingly central to labor market demands.

From a green economy perspective, skills sustainability is not merely an educational outcome but an economic necessity. Workers must possess adaptable competencies that allow them to transition across emerging green sectors as technologies and environmental regulations

evolve. Green technology in education supports this transition by aligning learning outcomes with real-world sustainability practices. For instance, exposure to energy-efficient systems, environmental data analytics, and sustainability modeling tools prepares learners for occupations that did not previously exist but are rapidly expanding (Karaca-Atik et al., 2024). Moreover, green technology-enhanced education contributes to reducing skills mismatch, a persistent challenge in many developing and developed economies. By integrating sustainability-oriented technologies into training and education, institutions can better align graduate competencies with evolving labor market needs, thereby strengthening both individual employability and national economic resilience (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025). Human capital theory thus explains how green technology enhances the long-term economic relevance of educational skills.

Constructivist - Jean Piaget (1952) and Experiential Learning Theory - David Allen Kolb (1984)

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment, rather than passively received from instructors. Learning is most effective when individuals engage in meaningful activities, reflect on experiences, and apply knowledge to authentic problems. Experiential learning theory further reinforces this view by highlighting the role of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation in skill development.

Green technology aligns closely with constructivist and experiential learning principles by providing interactive, problem-centered learning environments. Digital simulations, virtual laboratories, serious games, and sensor-based monitoring systems allow learners to experiment with sustainability scenarios, test hypotheses, and observe outcomes without the constraints of physical resources or environmental risk (Chuang et al., 2025). Such environments encourage inquiry, creativity, and iterative learning, key elements of sustainable skills formation.

Research indicates that technology-enhanced experiential learning significantly improves learners' critical thinking, creativity, and environmental awareness when compared to traditional instructional methods (Hasibuan et al., 2025). By engaging learners in real-world sustainability challenges, such as energy efficiency analysis or waste management planning, green technologies foster transferable skills that extend beyond specific subject domains. This experiential engagement supports the development of adaptive expertise, enabling learners to apply knowledge flexibly across contexts.

Integrative Perspective

Individually, each of these theoretical frameworks offers valuable insights into the relationship between green technology and skills sustainability. Collectively, they provide a comprehensive explanation of how green technology functions as a catalyst within education. ESD emphasizes the normative and ethical dimensions of sustainability learning, human capital theory highlights economic relevance and workforce preparedness, and constructivist theories explain the cognitive processes underlying deep and transferable learning.

By integrating these perspectives, it becomes evident that green technology is not merely an instructional aid but a transformative element that reshapes learning objectives, pedagogical approaches, and skill outcomes. This integrative theoretical foundation sets the stage for examining how green technology concretely influences curriculum design, teaching strategies, and institutional practices, issues addressed in the subsequent section.

Green Technology and Sustainable Skills Development in Education

Curriculum Transformation

Green technologies support the integration of sustainability across disciplines. Instead of isolating sustainability as a standalone topic, educators can use interactive digital tools to embed climate action, environmental systems thinking, and digital competencies throughout the curriculum (OECD, 2025). For instance, IoT and Big Data systems allow students to monitor environmental variables and analyze trends, fostering both technical literacy and ecological understanding (Smart Education, 2025). This cross-disciplinary integration encourages learners to see sustainability not only as a scientific challenge but also as an economic, ethical, and technological one.

Problem-based and Experiential Learning

Green technologies make experiential learning possible at scale. Digital simulations and virtual labs allow students to engage with complex environmental systems, conduct experiments, and explore sustainability scenarios without the constraints of physical materials or field access. Studies indicate that such experiences strengthen problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, key components of sustainable competency frameworks (Chuang et al., 2025; Hasibuan et al., 2025). Furthermore, by situating learning in real-world contexts, such as energy monitoring in school buildings, students see the relevance of sustainability principles in everyday life, fostering motivation and deeper engagement.

Digital and Environmental Literacy

Green technologies bridge the divide between digital skills and environmental awareness. Digital ecoliteracy, a composite competency combining digital literacy with ecological

understanding, enables learners to access, assess, and apply environmental data responsibly (Hasibuan et al., 2025). Research shows that critical and creative thinking significantly predict digital ecoliteracy, highlighting the importance of nurturing higher-order cognitive skills alongside technology use. Digital platforms also support personalized, self-directed learning, allowing students to explore sustainability topics at their own pace while building confidence and adaptability.

Innovation and Green Entrepreneurship

Embedding green technology in education cultivates innovation and entrepreneurship. Students exposed to sustainability technologies are more likely to conceive solutions, such as eco-products or green service designs that respond to real environmental challenges. This aligns with broader socio-economic transitions toward sustainable business models and green jobs.

Implications for Developing Contexts

In developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, integrating green technology in education can address multiple challenges simultaneously, including limited energy access, skills mismatches, and environmental degradation. Virtual field trips, e-textbooks, and digital sustainability resources can broaden access and reduce dependency on physical infrastructure (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025). However, equitable access remains a concern; investments in basic digital infrastructure and teacher training are essential to avoid exacerbating inequality.

Policy and Institutional Strategies

The effective integration of green technology as a catalyst for skills sustainability in 21st-century education depends largely on coherent policy frameworks and responsive institutional practices. While technological tools provide the means for innovation, it is policy direction and institutional leadership that determine whether such innovations translate into meaningful and equitable educational outcomes. Without deliberate strategies, the adoption of green technology risks becoming fragmented, symbolic, or inaccessible to large segments of learners. This section examines key policy and institutional strategies necessary to harness green technology for sustainable skills development.

Policy Alignment and Strategic Vision

At the policy level, governments play a critical role in setting the direction for integrating green technology into education. National education policies must explicitly align with sustainability agendas, climate action plans, and digital transformation strategies. This alignment ensures that green technology adoption is not treated as an isolated initiative but as part of a broader development vision that links education, the economy, and environmental

stewardship (UNESCO, 2025; OECD, 2025). Policies should articulate clear sustainability competencies and learning outcomes across all levels of education, from basic to tertiary. These competencies may include environmental literacy, digital ecoliteracy, systems thinking, and ethical decision-making. Embedding such outcomes in curriculum standards and assessment frameworks helps institutionalize skills sustainability rather than leaving it to individual schools or educators' discretion. Research indicates that education systems with clearly defined sustainability goals are more likely to achieve consistent and scalable outcomes in green skills development (Karaca-Atik et al., 2024).

In addition, policy frameworks should promote flexibility and innovation, allowing institutions to adapt green technologies to local contexts. Particularly in developing regions, rigid policy prescriptions may hinder creative solutions that respond to community-specific environmental and socio-economic challenges (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025).

Institutional Leadership and Governance

Within educational institutions, leadership commitment is essential for translating policy intentions into practice. School leaders, university administrators, and governing councils shape organizational culture, resource allocation, and strategic priorities. Institutions that successfully integrate green technology often demonstrate leadership that views sustainability as a core institutional value rather than an external obligation. Effective governance structures should support interdisciplinary collaboration, encourage experimentation with green pedagogies, and establish accountability mechanisms for sustainability initiatives. For example, creating sustainability or green innovation units within institutions can coordinate curriculum reform, campus greening projects, and community engagement. Such structures help ensure coherence across teaching, research, and operational practices (UNESCO, 2024b).

Institutional leadership is also critical in managing change. The integration of green technology may challenge established teaching practices and require shifts in institutional routines. Leaders who foster participatory decision-making and provide clear communication are better positioned to build staff and student buy-in, thereby reducing resistance to innovation.

Teacher Capacity Building and Professional Development

Teachers are central to the successful implementation of green technology in education. Even the most advanced technologies cannot foster skills sustainability if educators lack the knowledge, confidence, or pedagogical strategies to use them effectively. Continuous professional development is therefore a cornerstone of institutional strategy. Professional

development programs should go beyond technical training to include pedagogical and ethical dimensions of green technology use. Educators need opportunities to explore how sustainability concepts can be embedded into subject content, how digital tools can support experiential learning, and how to assess sustainability-oriented competencies (Hasibuan et al., 2025). Research shows that teachers who receive sustained, practice-oriented training are more likely to integrate technology in ways that promote higher-order thinking and long-term skill development.

Institutions should also encourage communities of practice where educators share experiences, reflect on challenges, and collaboratively develop green teaching resources. Such collegial learning environments support innovation while reducing the isolation that often accompanies pedagogical change.

Infrastructure Development and Resource Allocation

The successful deployment of green technology requires adequate infrastructure and equitable resource distribution. This includes access to reliable electricity, internet connectivity, digital devices, and sustainability-oriented technologies such as renewable energy systems or environmental monitoring tools. In many developing contexts, infrastructural limitations remain a significant barrier to effective integration (Ddumba & Sahu, 2025). Policy and institutional strategies must therefore prioritize investment in sustainable infrastructure that supports both learning and environmental goals. For instance, solar-powered schools not only address energy challenges but also provide authentic learning contexts for teaching renewable energy concepts. Similarly, energy-efficient digital infrastructure reduces operational costs while modeling sustainable practices for learners.

Equity considerations are paramount. Without targeted investment, green technology initiatives may widen existing educational disparities by benefiting well-resourced institutions while excluding marginalized communities. Policies should include funding mechanisms, public–private partnerships, and donor support aimed at ensuring inclusive access to green learning technologies (OECD, 2025).

Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement

Collaboration beyond the education sector enhances the relevance and sustainability of green technology initiatives. Partnerships with industry, environmental agencies, research institutions, and local communities provide learners with exposure to real-world sustainability challenges and emerging green career pathways. Industry partnerships, for example, can support curriculum co-design, internships, and access to current technologies used in green sectors. Community engagement ensures that educational initiatives respond to

local environmental priorities, fostering social relevance and learner motivation. Studies suggest that multi-stakeholder collaboration strengthens the link between education and sustainable development outcomes by grounding learning in authentic contexts (UNESCO, 2025).

Institutions should also involve students as active stakeholders in sustainability initiatives. Student-led green projects, innovation hubs, and campus sustainability committees promote agency and reinforce the development of transferable skills such as leadership, collaboration, and problem solving.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

Finally, policy and institutional strategies must include mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of green technology on skills sustainability. Evaluation should extend beyond measuring technology adoption rates to assessing learning outcomes, skill transferability, and long-term relevance. This requires the development of assessment tools capable of capturing complex competencies such as systems thinking, innovation, and environmental responsibility. Continuous evaluation supports evidence-based decision-making and allows institutions to refine strategies in response to emerging challenges and opportunities. By embedding reflective practice into institutional culture, education systems can ensure that green technology initiatives remain responsive, ethical, and aligned with sustainability goals over time (OECD, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined green technology as a catalyst for skills sustainability in 21st-century education, situating the discussion within the intersecting realities of environmental urgency, digital transformation, and evolving labor market demands. As societies confront intensifying ecological challenges alongside rapid technological change, education systems are increasingly expected to prepare learners not only for immediate employment but for lifelong adaptability, ethical reasoning, and responsible citizenship. Within this context, green technology emerges as a powerful enabler of educational transformation rather than a peripheral innovation. Drawing on conceptual, theoretical, and practical perspectives, the study demonstrates that green technology enhances skills sustainability by embedding environmental consciousness, digital competence, and systems thinking into learning processes. Through curriculum transformation, experiential pedagogy, and technology-enhanced learning environments, learners are exposed to authentic sustainability challenges that mirror real-world complexity. These learning experiences foster transferable skills such

as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, competencies that remain relevant across changing socio-economic and technological contexts.

The theoretical frameworks discussed further illuminate the multifaceted role of green technology in education. Education for Sustainable Development underscores the ethical and normative dimensions of sustainability learning, emphasizing the development of values and attitudes alongside knowledge and skills. Human capital and green economy theories highlight the economic relevance of sustainability-oriented competencies in emerging labor markets, while constructivist and experiential learning theories explain how green technologies facilitate deep, contextualized, and durable learning. Together, these perspectives reinforce the argument that green technology supports both individual development and broader societal transformation. Policy and institutional strategies play a decisive role in determining the success of green technology integration. Coherent policy alignment, strong institutional leadership, sustained teacher professional development, and equitable infrastructure investment are essential conditions for meaningful implementation. Without such enabling environments, green technology risks being underutilized or reinforcing existing inequalities. Conversely, when supported by inclusive and forward-looking strategies, green technology can democratize access to quality education and empower learners to participate actively in sustainable development.

Importantly, the analysis also highlights the need for contextual sensitivity. Educational systems operate within diverse socio-economic realities, and strategies that are effective in one context may not translate seamlessly to another. In developing regions, where infrastructure and resource constraints persist, green technology initiatives must be designed with equity, local relevance, and scalability in mind. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among governments, educational institutions, industry, and communities to ensure that sustainability-oriented education does not become the privilege of a few. In conclusion, integrating green technology into 21st-century education is not merely a response to environmental and technological trends; it is a strategic investment in human capacity and societal resilience. By fostering skills sustainability, green technology equips learners with the competencies needed to navigate uncertainty, drive innovation, and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable and equitable world. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of green technology–enhanced education on learners' career trajectories, civic engagement, and environmental behavior. Such evidence will be crucial for refining policies and practices that position education as a central pillar of sustainable development in the decades ahead.

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