

A CALL TO ACTION: Overcoming Challenges & Seizing Opportunities to Integrate ESD into Third-Level Education

*Based on the report:
Education for Sustainable Development:
Co-Creating Common Areas of Need and Concern (2022)*

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FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

University College Cork was the first University in the world to receive a Green Flag.

UCC is currently ranked 8th globally in the 2021 UI Green Metric World University Ranking of sustainable universities.

The Green-Campus programme aims to:

- Encourage a collaborative approach to environmental education and management within and between third-level institutions in Ireland.
- Promote climate action across its member campuses.
- Ensure that staff and students within the Green-Campus community have the resources & skills to implement positive change.





ESD can be defined as equipping learners with:

- The relevant knowledge (the what).
- The key dispositions and skills (the how).
- The values (the why) of sustainability.

Its principal aim is to motivate and empower learners to integrate sustainability into their personal and professional lives and further enable the creation of a more sustainable and just society for all.

To accelerate the expressed needs for embedding of ESD into third-level education, UCC worked with Green-Campus Ireland to deliver 2 workshops focused on the transdisciplinary nature of sustainability as framed by the SDGs.



WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

01

To engage with a variety of institutions and build a **collective voice** to facilitate the integration of ESD into all areas of higher education.

02

To **explore the common needs, challenges, concerns, and opportunities** relevant to ESD amongst Irish HEIs with staff and students as co-creators in this process.

03

To **exchange and share experience and lessons learned** whilst navigating issues of sustainability and to identify potential collaborative solutions.

04

To utilise the input received in the workshop sessions as a basis for **developing and integrating ESD into the curriculum** and HEIs across Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

Two 90-minute virtual workshop sessions were hosted by UCC and Green-Campus Ireland in November 2021.

The sessions included brief presentations by workshop facilitators on the following topics:

- The Higher Diploma in Sustainability in Enterprise.
- The SDG Toolkit.
- The student perspective on sustainability in the curricula.

15 different campuses were represented in the workshop registrations: *UCC, TUS, TUD, DCU, GMIT, UCD, DBS, Maynooth, IT Carlow, MTU, TCD, and 4 College's of Further Education.*



CHALLENGES

4 key themes emerged with regards to the challenges facing ESD in Ireland:



1. LACK OF SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE

- Many staff may have **insufficient skills and language to communicate issues of sustainability**.
- These skills are essential when empowering students to become positive agents of change in their professional, civic, and personal lives.
- Staff need **confidence** to incorporate sustainability into their teachings.

2. TIME CONSTRAINTS

- **The absence of free time** to dedicate to ESD is a common challenge that faces staff and students in every institution in Ireland.
- This greatly hinders people's ability to engage with existing sustainable initiatives in their respective institutions, develop new innovative sustainable projects, and explore how current teachings could be connected with ESD.

3. FUNDING & RESOURCES

- The **absence of sufficient financial, academic, administrative, and technical resources** is a significant obstacle to achieving ESD goals.
- There is **no ESD Officer** in any HEI.
- All HEIs must allocate staff and create specialised departments that are devoted to embedding sustainability across all operations, teaching, research, and outreach if substantial progress is to be made in this area.

4. ENGAGEMENT

- Education curriculum and programmes of study must be designed to successfully engage with all students and teaching staff and communicate the universal and inclusive values of ESD.
- **Student engagement** is integral to the development of ESD.

3 key themes emerged regarding the opportunities in ESD:

TRAINING

- **Comprehensive, accessible, and inclusive training sessions** for teaching staff.
- The training sessions must be delivered in a **flexible and non-prescriptive manner**.

STANDARDISATION & ASSESSMENT

- **Standardisation** is an essential requirement in the development of an inclusive, innovative, and interdisciplinary ESD.
- An **established strategy** will also provide more opportunity to apply for and receive funding and resources.

COLLABORATION

- The **Green-Campus Network** will **act as a national resource** & enable inter-institutional collaboration.
- **All Irish HEIs should be involved** in this process, not just Green-Campus Network members.
- Great opportunity to **collaborate with students** as equal co-creators.

Creation of ESD Curriculum & Staff Professional Development

Participants were asked to reflect on the strengths and challenges when establishing a multi-institutional approach to ESD.

3 main themes emerged from these discussions:



MAINSTREAMING SUSTAINABILITY

- Strategic communications should be devised.
- CPD must be tailored to deliver comprehensive training to all skill levels.
- A move needs to be made from voluntary sustainability training to mandatory for all staff to allow the effective delivery of ESD.

HEI PARTNERSHIP

- Fostering and maintaining open dialogue with all stakeholders.
- A non-hierarchical approach should be taken to ensure that every institution has equal input.
- The creation of student advisory boards to participate in meetings & decision-making processes.

STRUCTURE & ASSESSMENT

- A standard for sustainability will need to be established.
- The development of an ESD curriculum structure and assessment methods will be a complex process.
- All module changes will need to go through approval processes by professional accreditation boards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ESD must be developed in a collaborative partnership.
- The transdisciplinary nature of ESD will build and strengthen ties between disciplines and cultivate curiosity.
- An ESD standard is needed, one that can adapt and grow in response to the escalating climate crisis and sustainable development needs.
- The sustainable strategies utilised by HEIs and the guidance given to students and staff must be regularly reviewed and assessed.





By equipping our staff and students with this critical knowledge, they will be empowered to act as agents of change within their respective fields, institutions, and local communities.

Empowering individuals to become active citizens is the goal of ESD that can be achieved if the challenges and opportunities identified through these workshops are acted on.

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