

RCSI Response to the Government consultation on Education for Sustainable Development

Introduction

RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences has a keen interest in sustainable development. As an institution, we seek to align our activities with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in teaching, research, estate management and planning. We are extremely supportive of government action that encourages a focus on sustainable development in educational institutions across Ireland and further afield.

We recognise that the key priority areas proposed in the consultation document are based on those used by UNESCO and offer a useful framework for the strategy. However we propose some adjustments to these priority areas as discussed in more detail below.

We agree it is crucial to ensure alignment between all government policies, and that these policies need to be mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, many concepts within the strategy are complex and sit outside of the remit of education alone, requiring significant joined-up thinking between government departments to be tackled effectively. Some suggestions to promote a joined-up strategy are provided in Section 5.

In terms of suggested actions, we advocate for more detailed information, which provides clearer guidance and a stronger emphasis on *how to apply* the principles in practice. Practical suggestions are provided in a number of sections.

In summary, while the key priority areas capture many important aspects of the strategy, a clearer plan for joined-up policy approaches and stronger emphasis on application is needed. There also needs to be a proposal for evaluating progress and success.

1) Key priority areas

Policy

We support the need to leverage research capabilities in the Higher Education (HE) sector. However, this should be not only to inform policy but should also be an opportunity to embed an SDG-informed approach within the research process.

Education

There appears to have been a stronger focus on primary and post-primary education in Ireland's first National Strategy on ESD 2014-2020. Greater balance could be given to the Higher Education system and the needs of adult students in the new strategy being developed.

Stronger links with student bodies in HE, and the inclusion of applied examples which provide ways through which this might be achieved, would harness student-led activities more effectively. It is also a means of grounding the strategy in day to day educational practice. For example the strategy could leverage students' interests through student societies throughout HE institutions across Ireland, putting student-led activities at the centre. Success could be measured, not only through audit of educational approaches, but also through partnership relationships with student unions and student groups as well as school councils.

Such an approach could also be harnessed through the consultation process. HE students may be best placed to identify and develop activities most likely to engage students in sustainable development. With such a high proportion of young adults in Ireland in higher and further education, and with many international students, the influence of the sector on the next generation of workers and leaders in Ireland and beyond can be substantial.

A further means of integrating practices into day to day educational activities is for the government to support the inclusion of mandatory planetary health content for students, as appropriate to their courses and curricula. At RCSI, we are leading a national project to develop minimum planetary health curriculum content for undergraduate medical students, and we plan to extend this to all health professional programmes later this year. Such a commitment would allow all students to learn the basic principles of planetary health and demonstrate how those principles could be incorporated into their chosen subject areas.

We suggest that the educational approach be developed locally, rather than mandating a national curriculum, as each institution and sector can bring creativity and relevance to their areas. This includes the active engagement of students in co-developing content and activities. Among assets, the Irish HE system has a significant portion of international students who bring uniquely valuable perspectives to the development, acceptance and translatability of initiatives considered in new curricular content. There is an opportunity here to provide a global reach for the strategy, as our Irish and international graduates will work internationally, as well as providing exemplars of diversity in action.

Educators

Sharing of learning would be beneficial for education communities. The formation of a national HEI/education partner SDG network and creation of a single source hub with accessible resources, targets, guidance, sharing of best practice, progress etc would be invaluable. This could advance and facilitate partnership opportunities and help create a national community of practice. Many Irish HEIs are already internationally recognised for ESD work. RCSI is an international leader in Times Higher SDG rankings - for SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing – Number 1 in the world in 2020; joint Number 2 in 2021 (of over 700 institutions). Others have similarly achieved international awards, e.g. UCC for

green campus initiatives. We can all learn by better showcasing examples of success within the strategy framework.

In addition, whilst it is broadly accepted that there is a need to add extra content to curricula, there may be a need to provide guidance on how institutions might achieve this. One option is to support ‘showcasing’ – a series of seminars where Irish (and some international) institutions are invited to highlight their initiatives.

Youth

The benefit of singling out ‘youth’ over other age groups is unclear. Whilst it is crucial to engage young people, the goal of empowerment and mobilisation should be applied across all age groups. Student bodies include mature students, return to education students, and third age students. A wider focus also allows inclusion of community groups who are already actively engaged in activities to address sustainable development.

In tandem with this, one priority not sufficiently outlined, is the concept of lifelong learning as an integral part of quality education. ESD should empower people of all genders, ages and cultural diversities to actively contribute to positive societal change.

Communities

All HEIs have strong links with local communities. However, this aspect of the strategy is very broad and may benefit from more focus. HEI’s need to work alongside not only local communities, but also local councils to promote place based projects for sustainable development. Clear evidence of joined-up thinking between local government policy and the aims of the strategy is also required. For example local planning decisions, and policy on waste removal etc. which are key issues for local communities, would need to reflect the strategic aims of sustainable development to demonstrate coherence and to provide a clear example of democratic principles in action.

2) What other priority areas, if any, do you think should be included?

We advocate for an additional priority area for research as discussed above. This includes not only the use of research to ensure an evidence based strategy, but also introducing students to relevant research in the field.

3) Should any of the priority areas proposed be excluded?

As per the section on ‘youth’, we see the value of promoting the role of youth, but advocate for a more inclusive lifelong learning approach.

4) What do you feel we should aim to achieve in respect of the above?

The listed achievements from the 2018 Interim Review (Appendix A) are difficult to quantify. ESD needs to be part of an institution's day to day business, not only a set of actions. We therefore advocate developing a framework which embeds ESD values, that institutions can adapt to their own needs, and includes suggested goals that they can strive to achieve. Such goals would provide useful guidance to enable institutions to apply the concepts in the strategy, to specific actions.

Institutions could also develop their own evaluation templates, based on the framework in order to measure progress. Specific goals might vary by institution and could be as diverse as standards for building infrastructure, curricula content on SDG's, and measurements of empowerment and participatory decision making among students and educators. Evaluation could be based on locally identified quantitative and qualitative outcome measures to provide feedback on the success of interventions; and opportunities to share approaches to evaluating success across institutions would identify models of good practice which could subsequently be shared more widely.

In respect of HE institutions, this process could be enhanced by linking it to SDG performance global rankings for HE institutions.

5) What, in your view, are the main challenges you/we face in delivering on ESD goals/targets?

The concepts covered in the strategy are very broad (e.g. sustainable development, equity, social justice) and link with a number of areas of policy and a number of different government departments. It is difficult to see how this work will be joined up across government departments and how it might connect with local government policy, such as Department of Health, transport, planning etc.

One government dept that co-ordinates the work across all other departments would be useful. The consultation document does explicitly mention a number of relevant policies that will contextualise and inform the development of the strategy but it isn't clear whether it will go far enough in integrating the goals of the different strategies involved. Individual strategies for issues such as inequalities and social justice which link clearly to the ESD strategy may be required.

Awareness raising could be prioritised within the strategy. A lack of awareness persists around SDGs in general and there is a general perception that SDGs relate to green issues only, not the broad scope of all SDGs.

Finally, such far reaching goals, require financing. A realistic estimate of the costs of different activities accompanied by access to government funding would help to support educational institutions in their sustainable development activities. We would like to draw attention to HEA funding being linked to the System Performance Framework. To ensure all universities are eligible for any funding connected to the

EDS it would be beneficial to have support available to educational institutions outside of the HEA funding system.

6) Are you or your organisation involved in research linked to ESD or the UN SDGs? If so, what is the main focus of your research?

As a university focused on medicine and health sciences, the majority of our research is linked to SDG 3; Good Health and Wellbeing. However with years of experience working across the globe, we have found that in improving patient and population health, be that via enhancements in health systems, disease prevention and management or surgical intervention, this in turn improves overall quality of life and therefore our research outputs contribute to the achievement of other SDGs as well

Through our research, collaborations and partnerships, RCSI is continually contributing to achieving the SDGs. We have contributed to 3,674 research publications across all 17 SDGs in the last five years, over 50% of which involved working collaboratively with an international partner.

Examples of RCSI led research that contribute to achieving the SDGs:

SDG 3, 10, 17: Scaling up Safe Surgery for District and Rural Populations in Africa (SURG-Africa) is a four-year implementation research project to improve access to safe and quality-assured surgical care for district and rural populations in Africa.

SDG 1, 3, 6, 17: RCSI is leading a project that will remove contaminants from wastewater and drinking water in India. PANIWATER is a programme that aims to increase access to clean drinking water for those without access to this fundamental resource.

SDG 3, 7, 10 : RCSI is leading a project to reduce household air pollution among the poorest communities in Malawi, and is contributing to an EU wide consortium (ENBEL) aimed at ensuring that climate change research translates into public health policy and action.

SDG 3, 10: The Global Surgical Training Challenge is a funding initiative which aims to stimulate the creation of low-cost training modules to help educate and train surgical practitioners in low- and middle-income countries.

End

[Consultation document response to the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2030 from RCSI, June 2021: contact for queries - Dr Debbi Stanistreet, Interim Head of Department of Public Health and Epidemiology, RCSI (debbistanistreet@rcsi.ie)]