



Higher Education Colleges Association

Submission to the

**Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation, & Science**

&

Department of Education

On the

**Second National Strategy on Education for
Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030**

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About Us

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) is the representative body for private higher education institutions in Ireland. Currently it has thirteen established, mature¹ and privately funded higher education institutions (HEIs)², providing quality assured, flexible, cost effective and focused programmes at higher education levels (between Levels 6-9 on the National framework of Qualifications) which are both accredited and awarded by Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

In the last academic year, HECA member HEIs had 27,000 enrolled students representing approximately 12% of the total higher education student population in Ireland. HECA member HEIs have made and can continue to make valuable contributions to both provision and the development and implementation of Government policy responses to the challenges facing higher education, sustainable development and skills needs.

The private education sector plays a vital role:

- with their graduates meeting economic and societal needs,
- with private HEIs engendering a responsive approach to the scale and depth of changes in the higher education sector, including the ever-increasing share of the population participating in higher education and education for sustainable development.

Introduction

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030. The

¹ Some HECA members have been in existence for 40 to 50 years with a well-established and credible tradition of responding to third-level educational needs of full and part time students over this period.

² HECA HEIs: CCT College Dublin, Dorset College, Dublin Business School, Galway Business School, Griffith College, Hibernia College, IICP Education and Training, Irish College of Humanities & Applied Sciences, SQT Training Ltd., National College of Ireland, Open Training College, Setanta College, St. Nicholas Montessori College Ireland.

key priority areas and suggested actions in the consultation paper are very important and, in the majority, offer a good focus for ESD. Notably, there are two important resolutions:

1. Ireland has signed up and agreed that Education is one of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. The government's second plan which will be aligned to UNESCO's Framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for 2030 sets out the five key important priority areas:
 - Advancing Policy and Policy Coherence
 - Education and Training: Transforming Learning Environments
 - Capacity Building for Educators and Trainers
 - Empowering and mobilising Youth and
 - Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level and engaging with the wider community

Key Points

Undoubtedly, the integration of sustainable development into all aspects of life, including education, is essential, especially if we are to successfully confront the challenges of climate change, decreasing biodiversity, resource scarcities and an array of adverse human impacts on land, water, and air. With respect to climate change alone, the world can no longer ignore the socio-ecological challenges and the rise of atmospheric carbon dioxide which has contributed to a warming climate, rising sea levels, higher temperatures, droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and stronger, more frequent tropical storms. According to UNESCO, Education is a vital component of the international response to climate change. Education supports people's understanding and addresses the impact of global warming, increases climate literacy among young people, encourages changes in their attitudes and behaviour, and supports the ability to adapt to climate change related trends ³. The importance of climate education can be seen from the success of UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (2015-2019) in which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was recognised as a crucial element of quality education and a vital enabler for sustainable development globally. ⁴

However, the SDGs are not just about dealing with climate change or the environment but also about ending hunger and poverty, inequality, discrimination, providing access to clean water and electricity for all, etc. The UN acknowledges that achieving the SDGs requires the partnership of governments, the private sector, civil society and citizens alike to make sure we leave a better planet for future generations. These complex socio-ecological challenges

³ UNESCO, [Education for Climate Action](#), 2021

⁴ UNESCO, [Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development \(2015-2019\)](#)

require innovative and discerning forms of teaching, learning, and engagement with the world that are truly transformative and transgressive. Higher Education Institutions in Ireland, both public and private are well-placed to explore concepts relating to this issue, disseminate them on a large scale and involve a broad range of disciplines. Moreover, there appears to be a strong student call for ESD with recent research by *Students Organising for Sustainability* indicating there is significant demand for:

- ESD to be universally taught and promoted by HEIs across the globe.
- Students to learn more about sustainable development,
- Sustainable development to be actively incorporated into and promoted by all courses.⁵

In Ireland, EDS is being given serious consideration at second level and many of the goals and themes are dealt with in various courses in second level schools such as Civic, Social and Political Education which is an important part of the well-being programme at Junior cycle level. It is built around three strands:

- rights and responsibilities,
- global citizenship and
- exploring democracy.

Indeed, some notable progress in the curriculum of both the primary and post primary level schools in Ireland is praiseworthy.

However, as Ireland's first national strategy for ESD 2014-2020 pointed out, other levels of education have important roles to play as well and EDS warrants continued consideration and improvement at third level.

HECA supports the goals and priority areas in the consultation paper and endorses that they be brought to the attention of all teaching and lecturing staff in schools, further education and higher education institutions. The aim should be that ESD would infuse all courses to equip students with the knowledge, skills and values to motivate and empower them to live more sustainably. It is recognised that ESD offers a challenge for all HEIs because subjects tend to be taught in separate silos which can prevent a holistic and cross disciplinary approach.

HECA Recommendations

- Primary and Post Primary level.
 - Further reinforce primary and post primary level schools' links and relation with the outside world, particularly with their communities and sustainability.

⁵ Students Organising for Sustainability, [Students, Sustainability and Education](#), 2021

- Consider an examination system that rewards sustainability for the second level.
- HE Programmes.
 - With respect to higher education, the optimum time to introduce ESD is a programme design / review / validation / revalidation stage.
 - HECA HEIs / QQI could consider including this objective for consideration as part of the validation / review process (just as it might do for gender balance / learner protection / currency of material / mapping of learning outcomes to award standards).
 - A list of all accredited programmes in the field could be compiled to present a scaffolding for learners interested in pursuing careers in the area.
 - HECA colleges could work directly with FE colleges to ensure seamless progression from their programmes onto higher education programmes at degree, postgraduate diploma and master's level.
- A more targeted approach to ESD for educators is required.
 - With respect to scope, make the sustainable development links more explicit both in professional development and practice, to ensure that learner awareness, knowledge and competencies are realised.
 - Increase the overall capacity of educators and trainers to deliver and embed ESD in programmes more effectively e.g. The National Forum for Teaching and Learning could create a subgroup of interested HEIs / programmes involved in sustainability programmes to share best practice.
 - Teaching and learning research to inform ESD national policies could follow a similar research model to the current HE sector's National Forum *Next Steps Project*⁶ which is examining how higher-level education can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Increase ESD collaboration.
 - In addition to teaching, learning and research, HEIs can provide platforms where co-creation and collaboration between people and institutions from different backgrounds address the increasing complexity of ESD and real-life problems.
 - Provision of opportunities for dialogue between stakeholders would be of great benefit. The model of the cross sectoral COVID-19 TES Groups in response to the COVID-19 pandemic effects on TES have been very successful. A similar TES model for ESD would be beneficial.

⁶ <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2021/05/11/minister-harris-launches-project-to-examine-how-higher-level-education-can-learn-from-covid-19-pandemic/>

- Bodies like SFI, EPA and others could be engaged to actively direct collaborative developments in the sustainability area.
- HECA also suggests that the Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should review updates on ESD at least once a year with DFHERIS officials and interested groups.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion.
 - If one of the objectives of this paper, as well as government policy⁷, is to advance access to higher education whilst also promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education (SDG 4.3 and SDG 4.5 of Appendix D of Ireland's Education for Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030: Consultation Paper⁸ and listed below) then it must address Ireland's underrepresented citizens in higher education, including economically or socially disadvantaged persons, persons who have a disability and persons from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body.
 - SDG 4.3 '*By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*,'
 - SDG 4.5 '*By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational.*'
 - Therefore, HECA recommends that subject to a higher education programme being QQI approved, eligibility for a maintenance/SUSI grant/Student Assistant Fund, in accordance with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills recommendation of 2017⁹, should be based on the means of the student rather than on the choice of HEI and therefore be made available to all qualifying students regardless of HEI attended.
- Integration of Policies.
 - Finally, public authorities need to ensure that there is an integration of ESD across government policies and the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and partnerships arrangements as noted in 'Our Sustainable Future'¹⁰

⁷<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2857b-minister-harris-publishes-new-legislation-aimed-at-reforming-and-modernising-governance-of-the-higher-education-sector/>

⁸ Ireland's Education for Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030: Consultation Paper

⁹ Joint Committee on Education and Skills [Report on the eligibility of maintenance grants to students](#) Houses of the Oireachtas, September 2017

¹⁰ <https://developmenteeducation.ie/media/documents/Our%20sustainable%20future%20irish%20framework.pdf>

Conclusion

ESD must not be perceived as irrelevant or an add on to education. Confronting climate change and other detrimental aspects affecting sustainability is a global challenge that will extend long past the careers of higher education researchers and teaching and learning staff and their peers. Future generations of educators and researchers will be obliged to consider its effects in almost every part of their work and develop new skills to account for sustainability. It is important that Irish HEIs, both public and private, are empowered to think in a systemic and forward-looking way and to contribute to solving complex socio-ecological problems which are contributing factors of sustainable development. It is also important that HEIs are resourced for the development and implementation of ESD programmes as well as an increase in productive engagement, cooperation and convergence between relevant stakeholders, government departments and the education system, both public and private.

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