

Education for Sustainable Development Consultation, 30th June Response from the Irish Universities Association (IUA)

Introduction

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) is the representative body for the seven universities in Ireland that are governed by the Universities Act (1997) and Technological University Dublin:

- Dublin City University (DCU)
- Maynooth University (MU)
- National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Limerick (UL)
- Technological University Dublin (TUD)

On behalf of our eight member institutions, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) warmly welcomes the request from DFHERIS to submit a response to the [ESD consultation](#) to ensure that DFHERIS can enable Ireland to achieve its targets for ESD towards 2030. As a sector, the Irish universities have demonstrated extraordinary efforts in sustainability, aiming to make Irish universities among the most sustainable campuses in world through various initiatives and collaborative efforts.

Most notably, the efforts of Irish Universities in progressing towards the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were highlighted in the Time Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings in April 2021¹. The following document sets out a response to the ESD consultation with reference to the IUA's collaborative and sectoral work in the areas of; Sustainability, Student Access, Teaching and Learning, Research and specific IUA programmes such as Campus Engage and the Multi-Campus Micro-credentials Project which hold relevant significance for ESD.

The IUA Sustainability Working Group

On 1st June 2021, DFHERIS held an online focus group session with the IUA Sustainability Working Group (SWG) to garner insights from sustainability practitioners in the universities for input into the ESD consultation. The invitation to attend the focus group session was warmly welcome by the SWG. Sustainability is a key priority for the 8 member institutions of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and most recently, this is reflected in the establishment of the SWG and the commencement of IUA's joint project with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) called the "*Campus Living Labs*"² Sustainability Project as part of their National Waste Prevention Programme. The 2-year project

¹ Times Higher Education, 2021. International Impact Rankings.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2021/overall#!page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/undefined

² IUA, April 2021. Campus Living Labs Sustainability Project.

<https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/sustainability/campus-living-labs-sustainability/>

which commenced in April 2021 aims to deliver evidence to inform campus sustainability programmes and foster and advance activities that will introduce systemic change in preventing waste and increasing recycling on campus. The promotion of sustainability in production and consumption can contribute significantly to waste prevention. Established in 2019, the Sustainability Working Group at IUA will act as the Steering Group for the project, with all IUA universities represented by key stakeholders in sustainability.

Campus Living Labs is aimed at introducing systemic change and delivering evidence-based research on waste and recycling through behavioural analysis, student and staff surveys, awareness raising, and communications campaigns. The project concept is centred on the fact that universities are unique ecosystems with populations like that of a small town or village and are therefore ideal testbeds or *living labs* to trial waste and recycling interventions.

It is intended that successful waste and recycling interventions trialled in our universities can be replicated in towns and villages across Ireland as part of the wider projects and initiatives under the National Waste Prevention Programme. The project will make an important contribution to Ireland's progress in improving the sustainability of organisations, and local and national communities under the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Campus Living Labs is particularly aligned to **Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities** and **Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production**.

THE Impact Rankings and IUA Universities

It was widely noted that Irish universities performed extremely well in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings published in April 2021. The rankings recognised Irish universities as among the “world's best for sustainability” with UCC achieving an overall top 10 placement in the world's best list. THE Impact Rankings assess the contributions made by universities worldwide to solving some of the greatest challenges of our time through progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In total, 1,240 universities from 98 countries and regions participated in 2021 across the 17 SDGs. In addition to University College Cork securing a top 10 spot in the overall international table, the fundamental importance of Irish universities in achieving a more sustainable world through their work on addressing the UN SDGs is made clear across the rankings.

Key points include:

- University College Cork finishing in the world's top three for **SDG12** (Responsible Consumption and Production) and **SDG15** (Life on Land)
- University of Limerick, University College Cork, and University College Dublin in the world's top 20 for **SDG11** (Sustainable Cities and Communities).
- Across the 18 rankings a total of four Irish universities achieved eight top 10 positions
- Irish universities perform exceptionally well under Sustainable Cities & Communities (**SDG 11**) and under Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (**SDG 16**) with 5 Irish universities ranked in the top 100 world-wide.
- Strong national performance is also seen under Gender Equality; Decent Work & Economic Growth; Reduced Inequalities; and Partnerships for the goals with 4 Irish universities ranked in the top 100 world-wide.

Resourcing of Sustainability in HEIs

A key outcome identified from the focus group between DFHERIS and the IUA Sustainability Working Group, was the need to better resource sustainability post-holders across the university sector as opposed to having an ad-hoc approach from institution to institution. The focus group identified that in most universities where there is a designated sustainability manager or officer, too often the institution's sustainability responsibilities are borne by one member of staff. Sustainability needs further adequate resourcing in the universities, to comprehensively embed the sustainability agenda into the overall university structure, rather than a standalone role typically taking the form of a sustainability manager or officer.

As outlined in the ESD key priorities and goals, a whole of institution approach is needed to ensure that sustainability is embedded in the higher education institutions. Embedding the principles of ESD in higher education institutions requires both a top-down and bottom-up approach. Previous initiatives undertaken across the university sector have shown that engagement on sustainability issues among the academic and student populations is particularly strong.

However, the awareness and emphasis on sustainability may vary considerably among other university post-holders including operational and financial post-holders, and senior management teams within the HEIs. The SWG recommended that where possible training should be provided to senior stakeholders within the institutions to ensure embeddedness of ESD principles.

The embedding of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) agenda was highlighted as a positive model for ESD within the institutions, both in terms of resourcing and the embeddedness of principles throughout the institutional structure. For example, HEIs are awarded with Athena Swan for achievements in gender equality across the institution.³ The below are a set of recommended actions arising from the Sustainability Working Group in response to key priority areas outlined by DFHERIS.

Key Priority Area 5: Culture: Changing attitudes, values and behaviours/transformational action

- 1) Recommend additional resourcing for sustainability roles under best practice to ensure a whole of institution approach to sustainability.
- 2) Provide training on sustainability and operational management for senior management teams in HEIs.
- 3) Incentivise commitment to sustainability objectives and reward leadership in ESD through awards (similarly to Athena Swan Charter), agreements, and/or formal structures within HEIs.

Key Priority Area 1: Policy: Advancing policy/policy coherence

- 1) Align ESD Strategy with Government's Climate Action Plan and Action Plan on Green Public Procurement⁴ to ensure that HEIs are seeking to source goods, services or works with a reduced environmental impact.

³ Advance HE, 2005. Athena Swan Charter. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>

⁴ March 2021. Green Public Procurement. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/74075-green-tenders-an-action-plan-on-green-public-procurement/>

2) Align ESD Strategy with new legislation to promote a Circular Economy⁵. As centres of education within Ireland's cities and local communities, it is paramount that HEIs uphold the principles of a circular economy and promote circular economy practices to their campus populations.

3) Introduce mechanisms for HEIs to demonstrate leadership in sustainability to bring about cultural and attitudinal change towards sustainability, engaging Senior Management Teams (SMTs) in a top-down approach to effect systemic change.

Access to Higher Education and Sustainability

University student populations should reflect the diversity of the Irish general population. This is to ensure that the benefits of higher education (in terms of career opportunities, earnings, improved health, and other social outcomes are available to all and are not exclusive to the most advantaged cohorts of society, leading to more sustainable communities overall and improved levels of social cohesion. Equality of access to higher education is a core value and ethos emanating from higher education institutions and higher education policy in Ireland.

It is important that our institutions strive for equality of access to higher education and learning opportunities for all in society, as this is linked to achieving a greater degree of social cohesion and economic prosperity nationally. Social and economic disparities are harmful to societies often resulting in poorer levels of health, higher rates of crime, and lower levels of trust or social cohesion in communities⁶.

Economic prosperity is synonymous with stronger social bonds in society and thereby makes health and social problems less likely. Empirical sociological and epidemiological research⁷ has demonstrated that societies with large income disparities are more likely to have a range of health and social problems namely factors such as low life expectancy, infant mortality, and obesity as health issues, and intentional homicides, teenage pregnancy, and imprisonment rate as social problems.

Particularly, through their range of access, outreach and community engagement programmes, the universities aim to ensure that disadvantaged students and communities have improved opportunities to benefit from higher education, leading to systemic reductions in inequality in Irish society. In a study by Indecon, an *Independent Assessment of the Social and Economic Impacts of the Irish University Sector*⁸, the success of access interventions was highlighted in respect of their impact on the Irish economy and society.

⁵June 2021. New Legislation to implement a Circular Economy. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/65f5e-new-legislation-to-implement-a-circular-economy/>

⁶ Keeley, Brian (2015), "How does income inequality affect our lives?", in *Income Inequality: The Gap between Rich and Poor*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁷ Delhey, Jan and Steckermeier, Leonie C. (2019) 'Social Ills in Rich Countries: New Evidence on Levels, Causes, and Mediators', *Social Indicators Research*, Online First.

⁸ IUA, 2019. Indecon Independent Assessment of the Economic and Social Impact of the Irish Universities. https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Indecon-Independent-Assessment-of-the-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-the-Irish-Universities_full-report-4.4.19-3.pdf

For example, in the 2017/18 academic year, some 15% of new entrants were socio-economically disadvantaged, while 10% of new entrants had some form of disability. According to the study, the 2017/18 student cohort contributed a net graduate income benefit of €2.5m to the Irish economy. This amounted to a net Exchequer benefit of €1.6m.

Given the significant economic returns arising from university education identified in the report, Indecon recommended that continued priority should be given by the universities to providing accessible study opportunities for students.

Equality of access to higher education also ensures the sustainability of the universities themselves, ensuring that the academic and research community benefits from a diverse range of talents, potential, and perspectives reflective of Irish society as whole. Below are several recommended actions corresponding to key priority areas outlined by DFHERIS.

Key Priority Area 1: Policy: Advancing policy/policy coherence

- 1) Align DFHERIS ESD strategy with National Access Plan (NAP) to ensure alignment on equality and access objectives related to ESD.
- 2) Align DFHERIS ESD strategy with the principles of inclusive design and human design⁹ to better target a range of different socio-economic groups in education.

Key Priority Area 2: Education & Training: Transforming learning and training environments

- 1) Integrate ESD with the principles of flexible and lifelong learning to improve equity of access to wider socio-economic groups in Irish society.

Teaching and Learning

In recent years, the topic of sustainability has been embedded into a very broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses across the sciences, engineering and technology, social sciences, and business. Most of these courses do not include the word “sustainable” in their title, however they include a broad range of sustainability subjects in the academic course structure and content. Furthermore, student work placements and volunteering opportunities play a major role in embedding “real-life” experiences and learning regarding sustainability, across all fields of academic study.

However, it must be noted that including the term *sustainability* or *sustainable* alone does not suffice in embedding ESD principles in the higher education system. Course curricula through its academic content and voluntary or work placement opportunities including its equity of access for students, should endeavour to work towards the UN SDGs and promote sustainability principles throughout. The principles of sustainability should be embedded across all disciplines, as opposed to the natural sciences or engineering fields whereby sustainability issues are naturally present in core curricula.

⁹ AHEAD Journal, 2017. Dr. Anna M. Kelly. Inclusive Design. <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/An-Analysis-of-the-Implementation-of-National-Access-Policy-to-Integrate-and-Mainstream-Equality-of-Access-in-Irish-Universities-through-the-Lens-of-Inclusive-Design>

Educators should seek to improve and expand upon the awareness of sustainability issues for learners as sustainability has individual and real-life implications for cohorts of learners. In addition to a knowledge exchange, learners should be provided with an increasing awareness of how their daily activities and future work-related activities may impact the natural environments, socio-economic environments, and communities in which they operate. The following are a set of actions that could be considered to better align teaching and learning with key priorities in ESD.

Key Priority Area 1: Policy: Advancing policy/policy coherence

- 1) The revised Higher Education System Performance Framework¹⁰ should capture high level data which will help benchmark Ireland's performance against SDG indicators.
- 2) There are significant opportunities to stimulate demand for learning regarding sustainable development across a range of professional and business areas, through part-time and flexible courses for those in employment and those seeking to upskill. These could be funded through the National Training Fund.

Key Priority Area 2: Education & Training: Transforming learning and training environments

- 1) Collaboration with community organisations and NGOs at local level to expand on voluntary work and placements to improve "real-life" experiences in teaching and learning.
- 2) Promote the inclusion of socioeconomic ESD subjects in broader disciplines to improve the understanding and awareness of poverty and inequalities for local communities.

Campus Engage

Led by the Irish Universities Association, Campus Engage is dedicated to supporting Irish higher education institutions to embed, scale and promote societal engagement to address complex societal challenges, including the UN SDGs, across teaching, learning, research, innovation. We also welcome the DFHERIS 5 Key Priority Areas below; and as requested, we provide recommended actions to enable the Department to create and implement a new ESD Strategy for success.

Below are several recommended actions corresponding to key priority areas outlined by DFHERIS.

Key Priority Area 1: Policy: Advancing policy/policy coherence

- 1) Advance HEA System Performance Framework to better capture data to evidence how higher education is working with civic, civil society, industry partners to implement UN SDGs across research, innovation, teaching & learning;
- 2) Invest in updating HEIs institutional data collection systems across research, innovation, teaching and learning to better align with Systems Performance Framework; prepare HEI to submit data for EU Commission Horizon Europe funding calls; international ranking tools, benchmark best practice; inform budget/ policy decisions;

¹⁰ Higher Education Authority, Higher Education System Performance Framework. 2018-2020
<https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/managing-performance/system-performance-framework/>

3) Align new DFHERIS ESD Strategy, Research & Innovation Strategy with the ambitions of Horizon Europe FP9 Impact Assessment Framework and Mission Based Calls – mapping impacts metric across implementation of UN SDGs and co-creation, with society for societal impact;

4) Launch new Engaged Research Challenge Based Funding Calls - researchers, policy makers, the public working together to address our most complex societal challenges, including UN SDGs.

5) All higher education staff promotional criteria to embed societal engagement across civic, civil society, industry partners to address the UN SDGs.

Key Priority Area 2: Education & Training: Transforming learning and training environments

1) Build capacity for engaged research & innovation to address societal challenges, including UN SDGs, with all early, intermediary, advanced research staff cohorts;

2) Align National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Strategic Objectives and funding calls to embed community engaged teaching and learning to address UN SDGs;

3) Ensure the National Skills Strategy incorporates work ready skills obtained through community engaged learning – problem solving; active citizenship; effective communication; teamwork.

Key Priority Area 3: Youth: Empowering and mobilising youth

1) Mainstream accredited community engaged learning, research within the curriculum, so that all students have the opportunity to engage with critical societal issues, including the UN SDGs, in their communities throughout their academic programme;

2) NFETL to award students for academic achievement in working with civic, civil society to address UN SDGs.

Key Priority Area 4: Communities: Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level and engaging with the wider community

1) Create funding mechanisms through the NFETL to support teaching and learning partnerships with government agencies, civic society organisations to address SDGs.

Key Priority Area 5: Culture: Changing attitudes, values and behaviours/transformational action

1) Designate marketing and communication budget to promote initiatives that deliver on education for UN SDGs, with and for society; across target markets – civic, civil society organisations, industry, campuses, international student marketing campaigns.

2) Invest in technology that can support HEIs students to partner with community partners to facilitate and accelerate change – including www.studentvolunteer.ie.

The Multi-campus and Micro-credentials Programme

The IUA's proposal, *towards a Multi-Campus and Micro-Credentials system across the universities*, has been approved for funding of €12.3 million over 2020-2025 by Minister Simon Harris. This results from a competitive process under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) Human Capital Initiative, with the funding drawn from the National Training Fund.

Through the Multi-campus and Micro-credentials project¹¹, the IUA universities will lead the establishment of a national framework for ECTS-bearing, quality-assured micro-credentials, the first in Europe. This will facilitate the development of a programme of micro-credentials, each flexibly delivered and accredited by a university and included within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Multi-campus Micro-credentials programme are underpinned by the values of **Leadership in Lifelong Learning** and **Tackling Economic and Societal Challenges**.

Multi-Campus Micro-Credential universities are leading new ways of thinking in lifelong and life-wide learning, driving cultural change in how and when learners engage with university learning. Micro-credentials will be developed in close collaboration with Enterprise, Public Sector and Civil Society partners.

Furthermore, micro-credentials will be designed to address economic needs and will respond to societal and developmental challenges, and their impact on SDGs will be embedded at key stages of the programme. A dynamic suite of credit-bearing learning opportunities will be developed and designed to support alternative pathways to, progress through and journeys in higher education. Below are several recommended actions corresponding to key priority areas outlined by DFHERIS.

Key Priority Area 2: Education & Training: Transforming learning and training environments

- 1) Engage with educational stakeholders to introduce micro-credentials specifically related to ESD and addressing broad societal challenges, such as climate action, poverty, and gender inequality.
- 2) Promote micro-credentials as part of the approach to flexible, lifelong learning and the improved accessibility of education to broad societal groups.
- 3) Encourage micro-credentials to strengthen and improve the awareness of sustainability in local communities.

Research and Sustainability

The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings published in April 2021, highlighted the enormous efforts of Irish universities in the field of sustainability. Moreover, the rankings indicated that Irish universities were among the best regarded in the world for their sustainability efforts in helping Ireland achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Generally, Irish universities perform exceptionally well under **Sustainable Cities & Communities (SDG 11)** and under **Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)** with 5 Irish universities ranked in the top 100 world-wide. Strong national performance is also seen under *Gender Equality; Decent*

¹¹ IUA, 2021. Multi-Campus and Micro-Credentials Programme. <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/multi-campus-micro-credentials-project/>

Work & Economic Growth; Reduced Inequalities; and Partnerships for the goals with 4 Irish universities ranked in the top 100 world-wide.

While Irish universities perform especially well overall, it was noted that SDG4 "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*" is the only goal under which no Irish university / HEI ranks in the top 100. As outlined in the Access and Micro-credentials sections, embedding sustainability in higher education should encompass inclusive and equitable quality education in addition to lifelong learning opportunities for students from a myriad of socioeconomic backgrounds in Irish society. In terms of research, the European Union's Research and Innovation Programme, Horizon Europe¹² has incorporated research and innovation missions to increase the effectiveness of funding by pursuing clearly defined targets tackling economic and social challenges.

The missions include Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Cancer, Soil Health and Food, Adaptation to Climate Change including societal transformation, and Healthy Oceans. The European Commission evaluates and monitors its funding programmes to assess the progress towards achieving the programmes' objectives and build an evidence base to improve their implementation.

Moreover, funding calls under these areas must demonstrate clear action towards tackling societal challenges. These funding calls have proved extremely effective in encouraging research and innovation in the areas of environmental, health, social and economic challenges.

Key Priority Area 1: Policy: Advancing policy/policy coherence

1) Align ESD to Horizon Europe funding calls in a missions-based approach to tackling societal challenges.

Key Priority Area 5: Culture: Changing attitudes, values and behaviours/transformational action

1) Embed the principles of ESD in research funding opportunities for educational institutions to encourage solutions to sustainability challenges.

2) Align funding calls and research opportunities with the values of SDG4 promoting equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

¹² European Commission, 2020. Horizon Europe. https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en