



## Submission from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The Board of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, including representatives of the HEA/DFHERIS, QQI, USI, IUA, THEA and HECA, welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Joint Public Consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030.

The realisation of ESD goals at primary and post-primary levels have progressed considerably during the lifetime of the current ESD national strategy. As reflected in discussions during the 2020 ESD higher education consultation event and the 2021 ESD town hall meeting, attention is now increasingly being directed towards how similar progress can be achieved within further and higher education.

As the national body responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education, the National Forum represents all those who teach, learn and shape related policy and practice across the sector. When we refer to teaching and learning, we include: teaching approaches, curriculum design and assessment across subject areas and in online, face-to-face, and blended contexts; the related professional development of all those who teach; student engagement, learning and success; and the local and national structures, processes and policies surrounding all of the above. As such, teaching and learning is, without question, central to the next ESD national strategy.

Having considered the UNESCO Action Areas suggested for consideration in the consultation document, we have framed our contribution around the three that most relate to our national remit: policy, education and training, and educators.

### Policy

Our experience has suggested that mainstreaming any ethos or approach across an institution or the wider sector requires a number of steps. These include building evidence, fostering understanding, building capacity across structures and processes, and building capabilities amongst those who learn, teach and lead. Underpinning all of these aspects of mainstreaming, however, is the need for strategic alignment between key actors and related policies, decisions and actions.

The National Forum is co-ordinating a national partnership project, throughout 2021, which involves key stakeholders working together to better understand the post-2020 teaching and learning context so that an informed vision for the future of teaching and learning in Ireland can be developed. This project, recently announced by Minister Simon Harris<sup>1</sup>, will connect with the development of a post-2021 national strategy for teaching and learning. Partners collaborating on the project include HECA, Ibec, ICOS, IUA, QQI, RCSI, THEA, TU Dublin, specialist colleges, USI, AHEAD, NStEP, StudentSurvey.ie and Student Affairs Ireland. The project also involves collaboration with the HEA and DFHERIS. Partners are contributing insights from their respective bodies and will

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<sup>1</sup> See more details here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2021/05/11/minister-launches-national-teaching-and-learning-partnership-project/>



collaboratively examine existing evidence and knowledge to determine what it means for how the sector might best move forward together.

As the next national teaching and learning strategy and the next ESD national strategy are being developed within the same year, we would welcome opportunities to meet to discuss alignment. If, as the consultation document suggests, the next ESD strategy is to leverage the potential of teaching and learning in higher education, collaboration with the National Forum and coherence across our strategies will be crucial.

### **Education and Training**

We commend the emphasis on whole-of-institution approaches to ESD highlighted in the consultation document. In our national role, we are in a position to fund large-scale institutional efforts towards teaching and learning enhancement and strongly emphasise holistic approaches rooted in shared responsibility for effecting positive change. In 2019 the National Forum, in partnership with the HEA, approved funding to support a connected curriculum approach to sustainable development established by UCC<sup>2</sup>. This approach was highlighted during the HEA's 2020 ESD higher education consultation event and has seen the adoption of a systematic and intentional approach to promote integration of SDGs from a transdisciplinary perspective which enables the linking of all aspects of teaching and learning through the common thread of sustainable development. It is an excellent model for other higher education institutions to follow.

While taking a whole-of-institution approach is essential, it is important to bear in mind that the embedding of any educational imperative throughout an institution's teaching and learning infrastructure requires time, space and adequate resourcing. As such, we urge that the next ESD national strategy explicitly articulate how any intended whole-of-institution approaches will be supported at national and local levels. Further, we echo the recommendations voiced at the 2020 ESD higher education consultation event that any developments related to embedding ESD across higher education curricula be supported by meaningful consultation with those who learn, those who teach, and those who shape related policy and practice at local level. This is important if we are to understand and support the related needs of institutional higher education communities.

It may be helpful to also consider the growing development of open education across Europe and internationally, which links directly with many of the underlying ambitions of ESD. Open education refers to resources, tools and practices for teaching and learning that seek to 'open up' education by increasing access to higher education and enabling learners and teachers to work across boundaries of all kinds, e.g., classroom (physical or online), discipline, institution, sector, geography, and legal/copyright restrictions. The National Forum has consistently placed a strong emphasis on open education principles, practices and policies in Irish higher education, recognising that this requires support for individual open practice as well as a commitment to openness at programme, institutional and national levels.<sup>3</sup> Open education supports inclusion, equity and enhanced pedagogy and we recommend that its importance, and related resources and supports developed by the National Forum, be emphasised within the next ESD national strategy.

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<sup>2</sup> See here: <https://greencampus.ucc.ie/developing-a-connected-curriculum-integrating-the-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals-within-uccs-curriculum/>

<sup>3</sup> See here for an overview of National Forum work on open: [www.teachingandlearning.ie/open](http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/open)



## Educators

As outlined in the summary report from the 2020 ESD higher education consultation event, the higher education community has identified building the capabilities of those who teach in higher education as the top priority for the next ESD national strategy<sup>4</sup>. If, as the consultation document suggests, we are to 'increase the overall capacity of educators and trainers to more effectively deliver and embed ESD in programmes' this will require a strong focus on the professional development of those who teach and related processes and structures.

With respect to the professional development of those who teach, teaching and learning units in institutions across the country are pivotal. If more is to be expected of these units in the coming years as a result of the new ESD national strategy, it is vital that they are meaningfully involved in related decision making and have sustained support and resources to meet emerging needs.

At national level, in collaboration with partners across the sector, the National Forum has developed a professional development platform which relies on both expert input and peer-to-peer learning, as advocated in the consultation document. Open Courses<sup>5</sup> provides flexible opportunities for those who teach in higher education in Ireland interested in progressing their professional development. To date, 21 Open Courses have been developed by collaborating groups of experts across higher education institutions and participant numbers have exceeded 1,500 staff who teach. Each Open Course has been designed to align with the National Professional Development Framework for all Staff who Teach in Higher Education<sup>6</sup>. This Framework provides guidance for individuals as they plan, develop and engage in professional development activities.

A number of Open Courses centre on topics directly related to ESD. For example, there are courses focused on developing intercultural awareness among those who teach, enabling student volunteering, and integrating community engaged learning into the curriculum. Discussions are currently underway regarding the development of a dedicated ESD Open Course, which is likely to be developed by the end of 2021 and which would be freely available to all staff who teach.

We recommend that the new ESD national strategy encourage continued engagement with related Open Courses by all those who teach across Irish higher education.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this essential work. We would also welcome an opportunity to discuss any aspect of this submission or indeed to explore how we can contribute to the achievement of the next ESD strategy. Further detail on the work of the National Forum can be accessed at [www.teachingandlearning.ie](http://www.teachingandlearning.ie).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/ESD-in-HE-December-Event-Summary-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See more here: <https://opencourses.ie/>

<sup>6</sup> See here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/national-professional-development-framework-for-all-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>