![HEA | AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY]

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Higher Education Consultation | Thursday 10th December | Zoom

Event Summary

On 10th December 2020, the Higher Education Authority hosted a successful and lively virtual consultation on the topic of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Higher Education.

This event was a precursor to raise awareness of the wider consultation that will be led by the Department of Education (DoE) in 2021 as part of the process of developing a new National Strategy for ESD. The previous National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland ran from 2014-2020. The event provided higher education institutions (HEIs) and other stakeholders with a valuable opportunity to reflect on and discuss progress and to consider future priorities. This report presents the key themes and issues that emerged during the consultation event, which were also beautifully captured in a graphic by Maia Thomas (see page 6).

Over 70 participants from across the sector participated, including representatives from a broad range of higher education institutions; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the Department of Education; the Department of Foreign Affairs; the Irish Universities Association; the Union of Students in Ireland; the Irish Development Education Association, and an Taisce.

Keynote addresses were given by Alexander Leicht, Chief of Section for ESD at UNESCO, who introduced UNESCO's new Framework 'ESDfor2030', and Leona De Khors, DoE, who outlined plans for the National Strategy consultation process. These inputs were followed by a panel discussion on experiences of implementing ESD in higher education curricula and the wider campus environment, from the perspective of students and HEI representatives. Participants were then divided into breakout groups to further discuss the emerging issues, and to document key points of feedback.

Figure 1: Word cloud capturing participants' key learning and take-aways from the event

Keynote Addresses

Alexander Leicht, UNESCO:

Alexander introduced the new global framework ESD for 2030, spearheaded by UNESCO and developed in consultation with stakeholders, including member states and civil society. It draws its mandate from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular target 4.7 on ESD[1].

In providing an overview of the goal and objectives of the framework, Alexander noted improved global awareness of the urgency for action. He highlighted three key features of the new framework:

1. An emphasis on the role of education in achieving all 17 SDGs, and the potential of ESD to not only raise awareness, but also mobilise action and promote critical understanding;
2. A focus on the significant transformation required at individual and structural levels;
3. An emphasis on EU member state's leadership.

The 5 priority action areas in ESD for 2030 were briefly introduced:

1. Advancing policy
2. Building the capacity of educators
3. Transforming learning environments
4. Empowering and mobilising youth
5. Accelerating local level actions

In relation to implementation and monitoring of ESD for 2030, Alexander highlighted that UNESCO is encouraging member states to implement ESD for 2030 through a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach. While the education sector is core, the framework will only be successful if other sectors and relevant stakeholders are brought into the fold. It was noted that UNESCO is available to provide technical support to member states to hold multi-sector workshops from early 2021.

The UNESCO World Conference on ESD will be held online from 17-19 May 2021. It was originally planned for June 2020 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The ESD for 2030 framework will be officially launched at the conference, and examples of good practice from member states will be showcased. Information about the conference can be found here, in addition to the link to sign up for the UNESCO ESD newsletter. UNESCO have also developed a Roadmap for ESD for 2030, which can be found here.

Alexander's presentation can be found on the Slack platform (see below) or the HEA website.

Leona DeKhors, Department of Education:

Leona began by introducing the National Strategy on ESD in Ireland 2014-2020, noting its wide remit. Higher Education is included as one of the eight action areas. The strategy underwent an interim-

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[1] SDG Target 4.7: By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

TARGET 4.7

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

review in 2018. The review highlights achievements to date and details an action plan to 2020. The report is available here on the Department's website.

Leona drew our attention to a number of other relevant policy documents, including the Programme for Government, the SDG National Implementation Plan 2018 – 2020 and the Climate Action Plan. Each of these are led by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, and have inter-departmental working groups. Leona highlighted that the SDG Implementation Plan encompasses target 4.7 on ESD, which is a key target for the DoE.

The DoE is planning a wide consultation to inform the new National Strategy for ESD, which will incorporate consultation with the Higher Education sector. The public consultation was originally planned for April 2020 but has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped to launch the consultation in April 2021.

The new National Strategy will aim to align with the 2030 Agenda and contribute towards the achievement of SDG target 4.7. Leona welcomed the UNESCO framework and noted that Alexander's presentation sets the scene very well for the process in Ireland. The Irish framework may include further pillars in addition to those outlined in the UNESCO framework. This will be informed by the consultation.

The consultation process itself will consist of the publication of a background paper and a survey, and there will be an opportunity to make more substantial submissions. Focus groups will be established with specific stakeholder groups. Information will be available on the Department of Education's website in due course.

The Department of Education compiles and publishes a quarterly ESD newsletter, which can be found here, and requests to be added to the mailing list can be emailed to newsletters@education.gov.ie. Leona's presentation can be viewed on Slack (see below) or the HEA website.

After the keynote addresses, participants were invited to rank the UNESCO ESD for 2030 priorities outlined in Alexander's presentation, in order of importance to them. Figure 2 presents the responses of 48 participants, indicating that 'Building the Capacity of Educators' was considered the most important, closely followed by 'Transforming Learning Environments'.
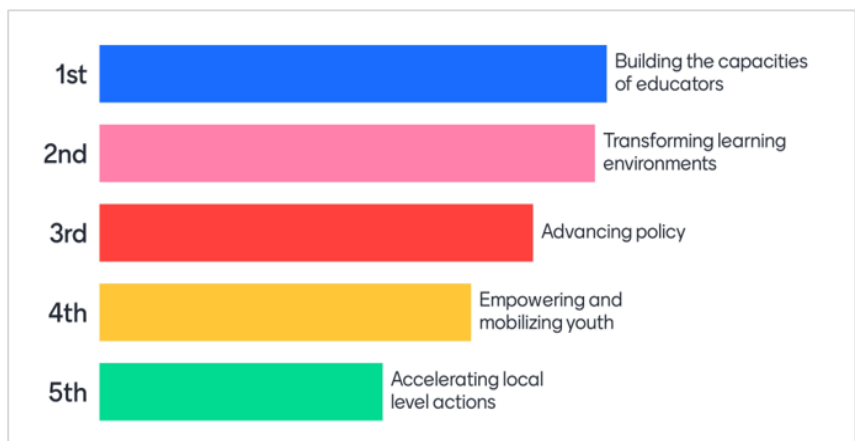

Figure 2: Results of 48 responses when participants were asked to 'Rank the UNESCO ESD for 2030 priorities in order of importance to you, where 1st is the most important'

Panel Discussion and Breakout Sessions:

A highly informative and thought-provoking panel discussion was chaired by **Eilish Dillon**, Head of Department of International Development, Maynooth University.

The Panel consisted of:

John Barimo, UCC - Developing a Connected Curriculum: Integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within UCC's Curriculum'
Dermot O'Donovan, GMIT - Project Manager, Education and Work Integrated Learning Project (eWIL), GMIT, currently completing doctoral research on ESD in HE.
Lorna Fitzpatrick, Union of Students in Ireland – President of USI
Ciara Rooney, DCU - Student in Bachelor of Education (Primary), undertaking a 3rd year Specialism in Children's Rights and Global Citizenship Education.

The Panel discussion was immediately followed by lively breakout sessions, in which participants shared their reflections and experiences on ESD in Higher Education to date and discussed future priorities. A number of core themes emerged repeatedly throughout the speaker and panel inputs and in the breakout sessions, which are detailed below.

Key Themes emerging:

Partnership and a multi-stakeholder, holistic approach:

The importance of a joined-up approach and the **meaningful involvement of all key stakeholders** in developing and implementing a new strategy was a point that emerged repeatedly throughout the event. There were several recommendations made for a **National Forum**, where relevant stakeholders could engage and exchange.

A good example of a **multi-stakeholder approach** is the National Platform for ESD in Germany. This example was shared at the [UNESCO Regional Launch of the ESD for 2030 Roadmap - Europe and North America](), December 2020 (@ approximately 44 minutes). The German National Platform for ESD is composed of decision-makers from policy-making, the scientific community, the private sector and civil society. It developed and monitors implementation of the German National Action Plan for ESD. The National Platform is informed by 6 Expert Forums and 10 Partner Networks, including a specific Expert Forum and Partner Network focused on Higher Education. Youth Participation is central and is supported by a dedicated Youth Forum.

Structural and systemic change:

Participants and speakers frequently emphasised the need for structural and systemic change. It was felt that, to date, there has been too much reliance on motivated individuals. The urgent need for **strengthened policy at both national and institutional level** and **supportive systems and structures** to enable the required transformative change was expressed.

The **need for a sense of urgency** in relation to action and **greater prioritisation and resourcing of ESD** was strongly communicated. Many felt that a radical and creative approach is required to bring about transformative impact.

Limited awareness and resourcing of the previous National Strategy were noted as weaknesses in its implementation. Introducing a monitoring framework for the new strategy was proposed, so that progress and impact can be consistently tracked and evidenced.

A transdisciplinary approach and integration of ESD across the HE curriculum:

The value in a transdisciplinary approach and the importance of integration of ESD across the Higher Education curriculum were issues that were referenced multiple times throughout the event.

It was noted that much of the focus to date has been on campus operations and carbon efficiency, but a greater focus on **curriculum reform** is important going forward.

In reflecting on how best to do this, it was suggested that consultation with key stakeholders, such as lecturers and students from a broad range of disciplines, to better understand their support needs would be beneficial. It is important to recognise that not everyone can be an expert on sustainability issues, however it is possible to support an enhanced **understanding of the effects** of specific activities and industries, and the **inter-connections and linkages** between specific areas of study or research with external issues such as climate change.

Several contributors emphasised that **institutional leadership and academic staff need greater support and strengthened capacity** to integrate ESD into institutional policy and the academic curriculum.

The **way in which ESD is taught is important**. Teaching through rights is more effective than teaching about rights, practicing what we preach by giving students choices and voice. Active learning motivates and leads to action. It was also highlighted that there can be a tendency to focus on 'teaching for the future', but radical transformation is needed now in the present, and students are interested to act now.

UCC is developing a **toolkit for integrating the SDGs across the curriculum** which will be open source. More information on UCC's work in this area (shared by Panel Member John Barimo) can be found here and on the event's Slack Platform (see below).

Empowering students:

The **importance and value of student voice** and offering students choices was stressed by several speakers. The immense opportunity that is provided by an enthusiastic and committed student cohort was highlighted, in particular the potential of **active student societies** and the opportunity to build on the momentum of the climate change movement.

It was reported by some contributors that students' ideas and proposed actions are often curtailed by restrictive structures in HEIs. A **meaningful space or forum for students** to engage collectively would be hugely valuable.

Resourcing:

It is essential that ESD is adequately resourced, including **dedicated human resources**, to make substantial and systemic progress. It was noted that what is resourced is prioritised.

It was highlighted that many initiatives that have been most successful to date were those which were adequately resourced (such as DICE and Ubuntu).

The Green Campus model:

The Green Campus model was repeatedly recognised as a successful and promising initiative and a **great enabler for further progress**. More information can be found on the Green Campus website.
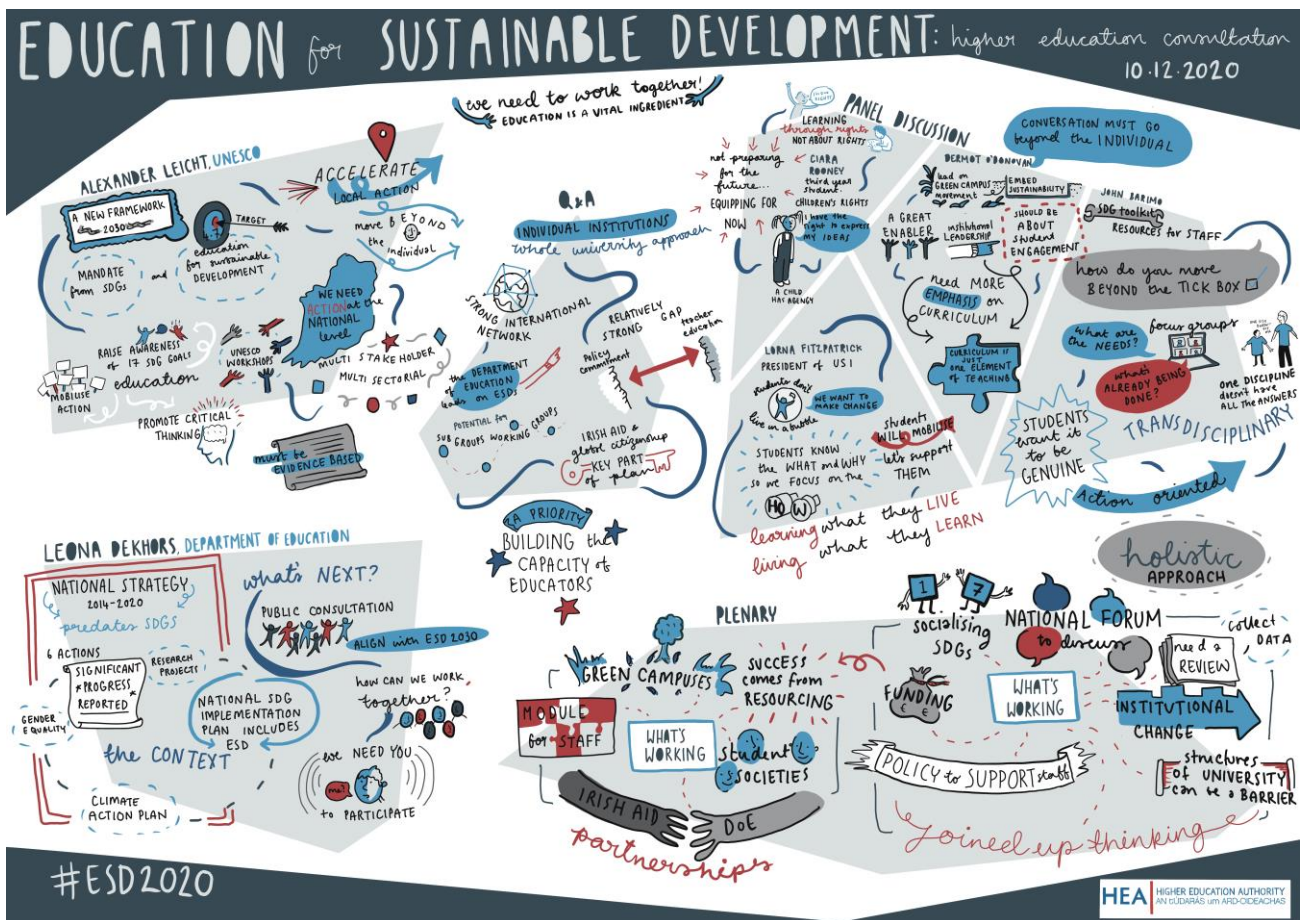
Figure 3: Graphic harvest by Maia Thomas, capturing the key messages of the event

ESD in Higher Education Slack platform: An 'ESD in Higher Education' page has been set up on Slack and all registered attendees were invited to join. The Slack platform provides a space to share information and resources, and to connect. Information about the event, including the speaker's presentations, have been uploaded there and many participants have uploaded useful resources.

This space is still available and can be used to promote sharing of information and collaboration on ESD in Higher Education in Ireland. Please email systemperformance@hea.ie for an invite link.

Annex 1: Event Programme

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Event Programme

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

2. **Setting the scene: International and Irish Policy context**
   - **Alexander Leicht**, Chief of Section for ESD, UNESCO, ESD for 2030
   - **Leona DeKhors**, Department of Education, National Strategy on ESD

3. **Panel Discussion**
   Panel Chair, Eilish Dillon, Head of Department of International Development, Maynooth University.
   - **John Barimo, UCC** – 'Developing a Connected Curriculum: Integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within UCC's Curriculum'
   - **Dermot O'Donovan, GMIT** – Project Manager, Education and Work Integrated Learning Project (eWIL), GMIT, currently completing doctoral research on ESD in HE.
   - **Lorna Fitzpatrick, Union of Students in Ireland** - President
   - **Ciara Rooney, DCU** –Student in Bachelor of Education (Primary), undertaking a 3rd year Specialism in Children's Rights and Global Citizenship Education.

4. **Break-out Session**
   - This session will provide an opportunity for attendees to give their feedback and input regarding ESD in HE, in small break-out groups.

5. **Feedback session**
   - Short feedback session in plenary facilitated by the Chair.

6. **Close out and next steps**