Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Maturity Framework for Higher Education

Sector Engagement Document

Introduction

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is engaging with stakeholders across the higher education sector to inform the development of a new Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Maturity Framework for higher education in Ireland.

The Framework is intended as a developmental resource to support institutions in reflecting on their progress and identifying opportunities to enhance ESD in alignment with the national _ESD to 2030_ Strategy. It will provide a structured way to consider how ESD principles are integrated across teaching and learning, and wider institutional practice, while recognising the diversity of contexts, missions and levels of development across the sector. Feedback is welcome using the feedback form provided.

The closing date for submissions is 13 February 2026 at 5.00pm.

1. Background

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is recognised nationally and internationally as essential in preparing learners to respond to environmental, societal and economic challenges. Higher education plays a central role in equipping students with the knowledge, skills and values needed to contribute to a sustainable and just society.

Under the HEA Act 2022, the HEA is mandated to promote and support the contribution of higher education institutions to environmental development and sustainability. Sustainability is identified as an object of the Authority and institutions are encouraged to reflect these priorities within their missions, strategies and educational practice.

The HEA also holds statutory and strategic responsibility for promoting excellence in teaching and learning. ESD sits at the intersection of these responsibilities, linking sustainability with teaching and learning, research and innovation, governance and campus operations, and community engagement.

Since 2022, the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) fund has supported institutions to advance ESD-related initiatives, from curriculum innovation and interdisciplinary modules to staff development and institution-wide sustainability projects. This activity contributes directly to Ireland's progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ireland's work is guided by the Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 (DFHERIS/DoE/DCEDIY), which aligns with the UNESCO ESD for 2030 Framework. The national strategy emphasises the need to:

- transform learning environments so they are inclusive and sustainable

- promote collaboration and peer learning

- support interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches

- embed transformative pedagogies and meaningful ESD learning experiences

Within this policy context, Dr Mark Kelly, HEA Teaching & Learning Policy Advisor for ESD, has led the development the national ESD Spotlight Series and of a forthcoming ESD Landscape Report, providing an overview of ESD activity across the higher education system and identifying opportunities for future capacity-building and coordination.

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2. The ESD Landscape Report and Spotlight Series

The [Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Landscape Report](#) offers an integrated national overview of how ESD is being embedded across Irish higher education. Developed in collaboration with institutions and supported by the HEA ESD Community of Practice (CoP), the report:

- maps ESD activity nationally, including institutional commitments, strategies and initiatives

- provides case studies that highlight innovative practice and strategic approaches

- links to institutional strategies and resources to support transparency and peer learning

The evidence base includes [HEA Performance Framework Agreements 2024–2028](#), institutional strategic plans, sustainability strategies, climate action roadmaps and progress reports submitted under the national ESD to 2030 strategy.

Alongside the Landscape Report, the [HEA ESD Spotlight Series 2025](#) showcased examples of best practice across the sector. Institutions, staff and students shared ESD-related initiatives spanning teaching and learning, research and innovation, campus governance and operations, and community engagement. The accompanying [ESD Spotlight Series 2025: Case Studies Compendium](#) collates these contributions, including case studies and open educational resources (OERs), demonstrating the breadth and diversity of ESD work across disciplines and institutional types.

The ESD Landscape Report and Spotlight Series provide a strong evidence base and shared set of examples that inform the development of the ESD Maturity Framework, offering examples of practice, models of collaboration and points of reference for institutions as they reflect on their own progress.

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3. Towards an ESD Maturity Framework

Building on this national evidence base, the HEA is developing an ESD Maturity Framework for Higher Education. The Framework will support institutions in reflecting on their progress across five priority actions identified in the national ESD to 2030 strategy:

1. **Advancing Policy**

2. **Transforming Learning Environments**

3. **Building Capacities of Educators**

4. **Empowering and Mobilizing Students**

5. **Accelerating Local Level Actions**

Within each priority action, the Framework will describe practice at three broad stages of development:

- **Emerging**

- **Established**

- **Leading**

The Framework is intended for use by institutional leaders, ESD coordinators, academic and professional staff, and others involved in planning, supporting, or reviewing ESD activity. It is designed to inform internal reflection and discussion, guide enhancement planning, and support institutions in identifying strengths and areas for further development within their own context.

The Framework is designed as a developmental resource to support reflection, planning and enhancement, providing a shared language for discussing ESD progress across the sector. In doing so, it complements existing national commitments under the *ESD to 2030* Strategy by enabling institutions to consider their progress and identify opportunities for further development, helping to strengthen coherence and alignment across the system.

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4. About this survey

This survey seeks input from individuals and groups across the higher education sector on how Emerging, Established and Leading practice may be understood across the five priority actions of the proposed ESD Maturity Framework.

This survey contains brief contextual questions relating to your organisation, role and response type, followed by 15 core questions. It should take approximately 20–30 minutes to complete, depending on the level of detail provided.

You are encouraged to draw on your institutional experience, strategic role, disciplinary perspective and/or professional expertise when responding.

Your name and email are optional. Information on your organisation, role and response type is requested solely to help the HEA understand the context of responses and to ensure that a broad range of perspectives is represented. These data may be summarised to provide an overview of participation but will not identify individual respondents. Any results shared will be presented in an anonymised form.

The data collected will be used to inform the design and development of the ESD Maturity Framework and to support future sectoral engagement as the Framework evolves.

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5. Share your Feedback

Help inform the next phase of this initiative by sharing your insights and feedback. For enquiries, email mkelly@hea.ie.

The closing date for submissions is 13 February 2026 at 5.00pm.

Respondent Information

Information on your organisation/institution, role and response type is collected to help the HEA understand the context of responses and the range of perspectives represented. These data may be summarised to provide an overview of participation but will not identify individual respondents. Your name and email are optional, and any results shared will be presented in an anonymised form.

Your Name (optional)

Email (optional)

Your Organisation/Institution(Required)

Your main role is: (Required)

Response Type (Required)

- Individual Response

- Group Response (incl. group name if applicable)

Priority 1: Advancing Policy

ESD is embedded in education and other relevant policies and frameworks as part of a lifelong learning approach.

1.1 Collaboration: Strengthen international, inter-departmental and multistakeholder coordination, to facilitate information sharing, accountability and engagement on ESD.

1.2 Policy alignment: Support policy alignment and coherence across government and among government agencies, in areas linked to ESD.

1.3 Communication: Raise awareness and understanding of ESD and its centrality to lifelong learning among key stakeholders.

1.4 Mapping and monitoring: Develop existing and new frameworks and tools to monitor and evaluate progress on ESD and enhance accountability.

1.5 Research: Create an enabling environment for research to inform effective policy and best practice for ESD.

1.6 Funding and incentives: Explore potential to align funding and incentive systems with substantive and structural sustainability and ESD.

1.7 Award standards: Progress inclusion of ESD in award standards.

Higher education context

Within higher education, advancing policy focuses on strengthening collaboration to facilitate information sharing, accountability and engagement on ESD, while supporting the integration of ESD across institutional Strategic Plans, HEA Performance Frameworks, Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies, Climate Action Roadmaps, Sustainability and Climate Action Strategies, and Quality Enhancement and Programme Review processes. It also includes raising awareness and understanding of ESD among staff, students, community stakeholders and business; developing frameworks and tools to monitor and evaluate progress on ESD; catalysing ESD research to inform effective policy and evidence-based practice; committing funding and resources to holistic ESD practice; and progressing the inclusion of ESD in award standards, in alignment with national policy objectives.

Emerging-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Advancing Policy", what would characterise Emerging-level activity within a higher education institution?

Established-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Advancing Policy", what would characterise Established-level activity within a higher education institution?

Leading-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Advancing Policy", what would characterise Leading-level activity within a higher education institution?

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Priority 2: Transforming learning environments

Learners have opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and dispositions needed to promote sustainable development and to experience sustainable development in action through a whole of institution approach to ESD.

2.1 Leadership: Develop and support leadership for ESD.

2.2 ESD Competencies / Transversal Skills: ESD competencies are core to learning outcomes.

2.3 ESD Pedagogies: Promote and support the use of ESD pedagogies among educators.

2.4 Embedding ESD: Further embed ESD in curricula and programmes at all levels to ensure learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and dispositions to promote, advance and take action for sustainable development.

2.5 Educational Resources: Enable access to high quality resources for ESD.

2.6 Whole institution approaches: Transform Early Learning and Care settings, Schools and Campus environments into places and educational spaces for sustainability.

Higher education context

In higher education, transforming learning environments involves developing leadership for ESD, embedding ESD competencies and transversal skills in learning outcomes, supporting ESD pedagogies, and integrating ESD across curricula and programmes at all levels. It also includes enabling access to high-quality ESD resources and transforming campus environments into places and educational spaces for sustainability through a whole-of-institution approach.

Emerging-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Transforming learning environments", what would characterise Emerging-level activity within a higher education institution?

Established-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Transforming learning environments", what would characterise Established-level activity within a higher education institution?

Leading-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Transforming learning environments, what would characterise Leading-level activity within a higher education institution?

Priority 3: Building capacities of educators

Educators have the opportunities to develop capacities to foster societal transformation for a sustainable future, with ESD integrated into the offerings of education and training providers.

3.1 Capacity building: Systematic and comprehensive ESD capacity development in the education, professional development and assessment of educators at all levels of the formal and non--formal education system.

3.2 Peer learning: Provide opportunities for peer to peer learning and sharing of good practice in ESD.

3.3 Rewards: Develop initiatives to recognise and reward excellence and commitment to ESD.

Higher education context

Within higher education, building the capacities of educators focuses on providing systematic and comprehensive ESD capacity development in the education, professional development and assessment of educators, across formal and non-formal learning contexts, to support their role in fostering societal transformation for a sustainable future. This includes embedding ESD within institutional approaches to academic development and teaching enhancement, enabling peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of good practice in ESD, and developing initiatives to recognise and reward excellence and sustained commitment to ESD.

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Emerging-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Building capacities of educators", what would characterise Emerging-level activity within a higher education institution?

Established-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Building capacities of educators, what would characterise Established-level activity within a higher education institution?

Leading-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Building capacities of educators", what would characterise Leading-level activity within a higher education institution?

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Priority 4: Empowering and mobilising young people

Young people are supported to be agents of change for sustainable development.

4.1 Young People's role: Recognise young people as key contributors to our sustainable future and ensure that they are meaningfully included in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and programmes on ESD.

4.2 Training and development: Support relevant training and development opportunities and tools for empowering young people to engage at local, national and global levels by enhancing their knowledge, skills, confidence, values and dispositions to make themselves heard.

4.3 Youth-led initiatives: Create policy and participation opportunities for young people to engage, upskill and use their voice for sustainable development online and offline, through Youth--led and youth--focused groups, organisations and networks at local, national, and global levels. Encourage and support peer--to--peer learning, as part of this approach.

4.4 Volunteering: Increase awareness and uptake of ESD and SDG--related volunteering opportunities among young people, which take place at local, national and European levels.

Higher education context

In higher education, this priority focuses on supporting students as agents of change through meaningful participation in ESD-related policy and practice, access to training and development, support for youth-led initiatives and peer learning, and engagement in ESD- and SDG-related volunteering.

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Emerging-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Empowering and mobilising young people", what would characterise Emerging-level activity within a higher education institution?

Established-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Empowering and mobilising young people", what would characterise Established-level activity within a higher education institution?

Leading-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Empowering and mobilising young people", what would characterise Leading-level activity within a higher education institution?

Priority 5: Accelerating local level actions

Enhanced collaboration exists between education providers, local authorities, local communities, civil society organisations and enterprise in ESD as part of lifelong learning, towards achieving sustainability at a local level.

5.1 Community linking and collaboration: Foster, support and expand links and collaboration between education providers and their local communities, civil society organisations and local authorities to educate, raise awareness and understanding of the need for action and engagement on sustainable development.

5.2 Local authority engagement: Local authorities, in coordination with enterprise and all concerned stakeholders in the community, should consider and develop an action plan for how the whole community can become a learning laboratory for sustainable development and an important element of ESD for 2030 country initiatives, providing opportunities for all citizens and learners to become change agents.

Higher education context

Within higher education, accelerating local level actions focuses on strengthening collaboration with local authorities, local communities, civil society organisations and enterprise as part of lifelong learning for sustainability. This includes engaging with local authorities and community stakeholders to contribute to and support the development of local action plans through which communities can become learning laboratories for sustainable development, providing opportunities for all citizens and learners to develop knowledge, skills and agency as change agents.

Emerging-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Accelerating local level actions", what would characterise Emerging-level activity within a higher education institution?

Established-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Accelerating local level actions", what would characterise Established-level activity within a higher education institution?

Leading-level activity

Reflecting on the Priority Action "Accelerating local level actions", what would characterise Leading-level activity within a higher education institution?

Additional comments and feedback (optional)

Please use this space to share any additional comments or feedback on the framework, including:

- reflections on its relevance or clarity for your institution,

- contextual factors influencing your responses,

- perceived gaps, challenges or enablers,

- or suggestions to inform the next phase of this initiative.

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