

HEA

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority



Education for Sustainable Development in Higher Education in Ireland

Supporting whole-of-institution
implementation of ESD

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HEA ESD Framework for Higher Education

<https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/education-for-sustainable-development/hea-esd-framework-for-higher-education/>

HEA ESD Resource Portal

<https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/education-for-sustainable-development/>

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

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1. Purpose and audience

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Framework for Higher Education is the umbrella term for the HEA's suite of supports for whole-of-institution ESD in Irish higher education.

This document explains what the HEA ESD Framework for Higher Education is, why it matters, how its component parts relate to one another, and how institutions and partners can use it.

It is intended for institutional leaders and governing bodies, educators, professional staff, students and their representative bodies, ESD and sustainability leads, teaching and learning units, quality and enhancement teams, community partners, and policy stakeholders with an interest in higher education and sustainability.

2. Relationship to national and international context

Education for Sustainable Development is recognised internationally as a key enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is integral to Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7. UNESCO's ESD for 2030 framework sets the global direction while Ireland's Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, ESD to 2030, translates this into a national framework for action across the full education continuum. ESD to 2030 is structured around five priority action areas: Advancing Policy; Transforming Learning Environments; Building Capacities of Educators; Empowering and Mobilising Young People; and Accelerating Local Level Actions.

Within higher education, these commitments sit alongside a broader set of sectoral responsibilities. The HEA System Performance Framework 2023–2028 identifies climate and sustainable development as a transversal area of impact. Institutional performance agreements, climate action roadmaps, public sector climate obligations and Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) funding have further strengthened the imperative for whole-of-institution action.

The Framework does not create new policy structures or reporting obligations. It provides the connecting layer between these commitments and institutional practice, translating national and international priorities into shared language, sector evidence and practical tools that institutions can use through their own planning, quality and enhancement processes.

3. Components of the Framework

The Framework is best understood as a connected suite of complementary resources and activities. Each component has a distinct role, providing strategic direction, sector evidence, reflection tools, practice sharing and deeper thematic insight. Institutions may engage with the Framework at different points, depending on their needs and stage of development, but the resources are strongest when used in combination.

Table 1. Components of the HEA ESD Framework for Higher Education

	Stage	Component	Primary role within the framework	Typical use
1	Understand	HEA ESD Landscape Report	Provides the sector evidence base and shared picture of current ESD activity, strengths and opportunities.	Use to understand sector context and inform decision-making.
2	Set direction	HEA Enablers for Whole-of-Institution ESD in Higher Education	Sets out the strategic enablers that the HEA identifies as central to advancing whole-of-institution ESD across the higher education system.	Use to frame institutional direction, priorities and coordinated action.
3	Reflect and plan	HEA ESD Self-Evaluation Tool	Supports structured reflection on strengths, gaps and progression over time.	Use to review current practice, identify local priorities and plan next steps.
4	Deepen practice	HEA ESD Insights Series	Offers deeper exploration of key themes, concepts and practice perspectives relevant to whole-of-institution ESD.	Use to deepen understanding and support implementation.
5	Share and strengthen	HEA ESD Spotlight Series and Case Studies Compendium	Shares institutional initiatives, examples and peer learning across the sector.	Use to learn from practice and support collaboration.

Note: The sequence shown is only one way of moving through the Framework. Institutions may move between components in ways that suit local mission, context and capacity.

4. Using the Framework

The Framework is designed to support institutions in strengthening, connecting and making visible their approach to ESD across all areas of activity. The Framework supports institutions to build on and align existing work in a more coherent and integrated way.

In practice, institutions may use the Framework to:

- Strengthen coherence across institutional activity**
Connecting curriculum, campus, governance, research and community engagement within a whole-of-institution approach.
- Make ESD more visible and intentional**
Identifying where ESD is already taking place and embedding it more explicitly in strategies, processes and practice.
- Support cross-functional collaboration**
Creating shared language and points of connection across academic, professional and leadership roles.
- Inform decision-making and prioritisation**
Identifying areas for development that align with institutional mission, context and capacity.
- Build and demonstrate progress over time**
Linking strategic direction, practice development and reflection through existing planning, quality and performance processes.

The Framework is designed to support ongoing development. Institutions may use different components at different times and return to them as priorities evolve and practice matures.

Table 2. Examples of how different groups may engage with the HEA ESD Framework for Higher Education

Users	Illustrative use
Institutional leaders and governing bodies	Use the Framework to connect ESD with mission, strategy, governance, climate action, quality processes and performance dialogue, and to identify priorities for institution-wide coordination and resourcing.
Teaching and learning, quality and professional services	Use the suite to support curriculum enhancement, professional learning, communications, student success, accessibility, quality assurance and enhancement, data-informed review and evidence-building across the institution.
Programme teams, educators and students	Use the Enablers and Self-Evaluation Tool to explore how ESD can be embedded in learning outcomes, pedagogy, assessment, partnership and student leadership.
Sustainability, estates, campus and community teams	Use the Framework to connect operational priorities and place-based partnerships with learning, engagement, civic purpose and institutional culture.

5. Ongoing Development

The Framework is intended to evolve over time. As practice, evidence and collaboration develop across the sector, the HEA may add to or update the suite through further guidance, insight papers, case studies, tools and engagement activities.

This overview document should therefore be read as a live document. It will develop alongside the HEA's ESD work in higher education and support ongoing engagement across the sector.

The companion resources below provide further guidance, tools and supporting materials to help institutions use the Framework in practice.

Companion resources

- HEA ESD Spotlight Series and Case Studies Compendium (November 2025)
- HEA ESD Landscape Report (January 2026)
- HEA Enablers for Whole-of-Institution ESD in Higher Education (July 2026)
- HEA ESD Self-evaluation tool (July 2026)
- HEA ESD Insights Series (September 2026 -)

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