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An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority



**HEA Education for Sustainable
Development (ESD)
Self-Evaluation Tool**
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) Self-Evaluation Tool

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Position within the HEA ESD Framework for Higher Education

This document is part of the HEA ESD Framework and is a companion resource to the following:

- 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 Insights Series (September 2026 -)

Purpose of the ESD Self-Evaluation Tool

The Self-Evaluation Tool supports structured reflection on ESD strengths, gaps and progression over time, and can be used to review current practice, identify local priorities and plan next steps.

National ESD to 2030 progress reports provide a valuable account of ESD-related activity. As reporting tools, they offer an important snapshot of practice, while a complementary framework can help support deeper reflection on patterns of development, coherence and progression in ESD practice over time. Building on this, the HEA has developed an ESD Framework for Higher Education that provides shared resources and a structured approach to support reflection, enhancement, peer learning and greater coherence across the system, while respecting institutional diversity.

The ESD Framework Self-Evaluation Tool is intended as a voluntary, developmental self-evaluation and planning resource to support institutional reflection, dialogue and enhancement. It does not introduce any reporting requirements, benchmarks or performance measures beyond those already in place under the national ESD to 2030 strategy or the HEA Performance Framework Agreements. It is designed to support institutions make existing practice visible, identify priorities for enhancement and inform local planning in ways that are appropriate to institutional mission, context and capacity.

The Self-Evaluation Tool aims to:

- Help institutions take a structured, developmental approach to reviewing and strengthening ESD in teaching, learning and wider institutional practice.
- Provide a shared language for discussing ESD across a diverse higher education sector.
- Help institutions learn from each other through clear descriptors and practical examples of initiatives and evidence.
- Help institutions connect their ESD work with national ESD priorities, relevant HEA and sector policy agendas, including student success, recognition, Healthy Campus, inclusion and civic engagement, institutional performance agreements, institutional strategies and quality assurance and enhancement processes.
- Support reflective planning and ongoing improvement by helping institutions use existing evidence to inform ESD planning and reporting.

Development of the Self-Evaluation Tool

The Self-Evaluation Tool draws on the ESD Landscape Report (January 2026), including its review of institutional strategies, HEA Performance Framework Agreements, Climate Action Roadmaps, sustainability strategies, ESD to 2030 progress reports and examples of current ESD practice across the sector. It also draws on the ESD Spotlight Series (February–November 2025) and the ESD Spotlight Series Case Studies Compendium (November 2025).

The development process was informed by policy review, sector evidence, two sector workshops and public feedback on the HEA ESD Self-Evaluation Tool. An overview of stakeholder engagement and participation is provided in Appendix II.

Structure of Self-Evaluation Tool

The ESD Self-Evaluation Tool is structured around the five 'ESD to 2030' Priority Action Areas for Higher Education:

- Advancing Policy
- Transforming Learning Environments
- Building Capacities of Educators
- Empowering and Mobilising Students
- Accelerating Local Level Actions

For each Priority Action Area, the tool sets out developmental descriptors across three broad stages of practice¹:

- **Emerging**, indicating early-stage practice. There may be initial pilots, small pockets of activity, or conditions being put in place to support further development.
- **Established**, indicating more coordinated practice. There are processes or supports in place to help it grow, become more consistent and improve in quality.
- **Leading**, indicating embedded and sustained practice. There is evidence that it is integrated across the institution, having an impact, and supporting collaboration beyond the institution.

The Self-Evaluation Tool is intended to support institutional reflection and dialogue, aligned with existing planning and quality enhancement processes. It recognises that practice may be uneven across disciplines, campuses or organisational units, and is designed to support reflection and enhancement rather than assessment, benchmarking or comparison (see Appendix 1).

¹ <https://www.eauc.org.uk/EAUCDownloadController/Download?iType=1&iID=53&cGUID=d3552bd9-0b0f-4861-a2b7-82d7b7272221&cTempLocation=>

Roles and Responsibilities in the ESD Self-Evaluation Process

A self-review works best when it is cross-functional, with a clear lead and a small number of contributors who can access evidence and coordinate follow-up actions.

The recommended lead (choose one):

- Institutional ESD lead / sustainability education lead (where in place)
- Teaching and Learning Centre (or equivalent) in partnership with Sustainability/Climate Action function
- Quality Enhancement/Assurance office where ESD is embedded within review processes

Identify a senior sponsor (e.g., Registrar/Vice-President Academic Affairs/VP Sustainability) to receive the summary and support integration into planning and resourcing conversations.

Core contributors (suggested):

- Academic leadership (e.g., Dean/Heads of School representatives)
- Curriculum design/learning design support
- Quality enhancement/QA leads (programme review, validation, graduate attributes)
- Sustainability/Climate Action and Estates/Operations (for campus-as-learning-environment)
- Research office (where ESD research/scholarship is in scope)
- Student representatives (and ideally student partners/champions)
- Appropriate representation from relevant committees e.g., Green Campus, Green Labs, institutional Green Teams.
- Community engagement/civic engagement function (where applicable)

How often it should be used

The recommended cycle is annual aligned to the institution's planning and quality enhancement rhythms (e.g., annual planning, school/faculty reviews, programmatic monitoring). A pragmatic alternative might be every 12–18 months where internal cycles or capacity make annual review difficult.

How to treat uneven maturity across areas

Uneven maturity is normal in higher education, especially where practice varies by discipline, campus, or unit. This tool should help institutions make that variation visible for reflection, discussion and planning. For each Priority Action Area, record confidence in the judgement: Low/Medium/High, and note what evidence would increase confidence in the next cycle. Where practice is mixed, select the maturity level that reflects the most common, repeatable, and evidenced approach across the institution (not the best single example). Note where specific schools, programmes, or initiatives are operating at a higher level and capture what enables that (e.g., leadership, support, resources, partnerships).

Advancing Policy			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Strengthening collaboration to facilitate information sharing, accountability, and engagement on ESD.	Put mechanisms in place for coordinating ESD e.g., a cross-functional institutional ESD working group or committee with representation from relevant functional units and academic areas.	Put mechanisms in place for coordinating collaborative work between ESD; sustainability/climate action campus operations and management; teaching and learning; research; and community engagement e.g., ESD working group or committee situated within the institutional Green Team and/or Sustainability/Climate Action Committee.	Participate in and/or convene cross-institutional mechanisms (e.g., sector networks/communities of practice) to share learning, align approaches, and contribute to national and international ESD development.
Supporting the integration of ESD into institutional Strategic Plans; institutional performance agreements; Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Strategies; Climate Action Roadmaps; Sustainability and Climate Action Strategies; Quality Enhancement and Review processes.	Reference ESD explicitly in relevant institutional strategies and plans e.g., Strategic Plan; Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy; Climate Action Roadmap; Sustainability and Climate Action Plans, creating a commitment to ESD.	Reference ESD explicitly in relevant institutional strategies and plans and embedded, where appropriate, in institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes, with responsibilities, resourcing considerations and monitoring mechanisms identified.	Establish a coherent institutional ESD approach, articulated through an ESD Policy and/or Implementation Plan aligned to national priorities, which cascades into operational practice with clear links to institutional strategy, planning, budgeting, quality enhancement, reporting, accountability, and impact.

Advancing Policy			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Raising awareness and understanding of ESD amongst staff, students, community stakeholders, and business.	Signpost ESD through regular communications, events listings and induction materials.	Establish regular and visible communications and engagement, such as an online hub or portal, communications plan and events programme, supporting wider staff and student awareness and participation, including external stakeholders where appropriate.	Host, coordinate or contribute to dedicated ESD events and engagement opportunities, such as annual symposia, spotlight events, open days, community forums or festivals.
Developing frameworks and tools to monitor and evaluate progress on ESD to enhance accountability.	Undertake a baseline curriculum mapping or review of ESD activity to develop an action plan.	Establish an annual review process to track progress and impact, for example using the HEA ESD Framework, supporting continuous improvement and evidence-informed decision-making.	Share progress and learning across the sector to support peer learning, collaborative reflection and more coherent approaches to monitoring and evaluation.
Catalysing ESD research to inform effective policy and best practice.	Establish an ESD Research Group to catalyse and support ESD-related research and scholarship including practice-based, pedagogic and/or disciplinary work that informs teaching, learning or institutional practice.	Allocate funding and resources to support ESD research that addresses institutional needs, gaps, and scholarship, spotlighting impact where appropriate.	Participate in and/or lead collaborative ESD research and scholarship initiatives nationally and/or internationally, that translate insights into policy, curriculum, professional practice and scholarship.

Advancing Policy			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Identifying and aligning resources to support holistic ESD practice	Allocate resources e.g., seed funding, time allocation, or leveraging external programmes where available, to support ESD project-based initiatives that are time-bound.	Allocate resources e.g., recurring funding calls, supported roles/champions, cross-functional support, to enable strategic scaling, consistency and drive impact e.g., appointment of ESD or Sustainability Education Lead.	Demonstrate sustained, strategic investment in ESD capacity e.g., a coordinated support function/team and resourcing aligned to the ESD approach, enabling long-term implementation and enhancement.

Transforming Learning Environments			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Developing and supporting ESD leadership.	Support ESD leadership at local scales, such as individual, module or programme-level initiatives, supported through available institutional or external mechanisms.	Allocate resources to support clear distributed leadership capacity e.g., named ESD leads/champions within faculties/schools/departments with opportunities to coordinate, share practice, and access support and recognition.	Establish structured governance and leadership arrangements for ESD, such as designated senior leadership oversight and accountability, dedicated ESD or Sustainability Education Lead(s) and/or Teams with defined reporting lines to Academic Council, Governing Authority, or equivalent appropriate reporting lines.
Ensuring ESD competences are core to learning outcomes.	Undertake a baseline curriculum assessment of the presence of ESD Competences (UNESCO and/or GreenComp), to inform an action plan.	Develop institution-wide frameworks for embedding ESD competences, with clearly articulated graduate attributes and transversal skills incorporated into programme and module learning outcomes across faculties and levels of study.	Embed ESD competences across all programme learning outcomes in coherent ways, with vertical and horizontal alignment and evidence of progression through the learner journey (institutions may evidence this in ways appropriate to their context).

Transforming Learning Environments			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Promoting and supporting the use of ESD pedagogies among educators.	Undertake a baseline curriculum assessment of the presence of ESD-aligned pedagogies e.g., student-centred, inquiry-based, problem/challenge-based, place-based, experiential, participatory and action-oriented approaches, including small-scale pilots and peer-to-peer sharing.	Coordinate and support the uptake of ESD-aligned pedagogies through professional development, communities of practice, learning design supports, with such approaches reflected in teaching and learning principles and/or graduate attributes/outcomes.	Embed ESD-aligned pedagogies across disciplines, including transdisciplinary and partnership-based approaches that engage with complex real-world sustainability challenges in ways appropriate to the institution's context, its local communities, and across its region.
Embedding ESD in curricula and programmes at all levels to ensure learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and dispositions to promote, advance, and act for sustainable development.	Integrate ESD into curriculum design guidance for all programmes and modules e.g., aligning learning outcomes, assessment, content and pedagogy with relevant SDGs and ESD competency frameworks.	Systematically embed ESD in curriculum design and review processes across new and existing provision, supported by institutional guidance, exemplars and quality enhancement processes.	Embed ESD within graduate outcomes/attributes and learner experience, with sustainability literacy and leadership increasingly reflected in institutional approaches to student success and graduate development.
Enabling access to high quality resources for ESD.	Curate and signpost ESD-related resources through existing institutional channels e.g., teaching and learning resources, library supports, and sustainability communications.	Create a visible and structured mechanism to support access to resources e.g., a dedicated ESD hub/portal, curated collections, regular communications and events.	Coordinate access to ESD resources across relevant units e.g., library; teaching, learning, and assessment; quality assurance and enhancement; sustainability, research; with mechanisms to create, share and sustain resources amongst staff and students.

Transforming Learning Environments			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Transforming campus environments into places and educational spaces for sustainability.	Map existing curriculum–campus connections, often through existing sustainability structures and initiatives (e.g., Green Campus, Green Labs, estates and sustainability teams), including 'Living Lab' projects.	Develop a Campus-as-Learning Environment or Living Lab Framework in place to connect ESD to teaching and learning, research, campus operations and management, and community engagement, that will support the achievement of institutional decarbonisation targets.	Demonstrate a holistic campus-as-learning-environment approach that is embedded across all functions and extends beyond decarbonisation to wider regenerative and sustainability themes related to biodiversity, circularity, food, transport, water, resources, energy, built environment, with staff, students and partners engaged as co-creators.

Building Capacities of HE Staff			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Providing systematic and comprehensive ESD capacity development in the education, professional development and evaluation of educators at all levels of the formal and non-formal education system.	Signpost and support staff in accessing existing ESD-related professional development opportunities (institutional, national and international), tracking participation, and engagement.	Provide dedicated ESD professional development and training (accredited and/or non-accredited) which is embedded in staff development mechanisms, tracking subsequent impact and implementation.	Collaborate with other HEIs and partners to co-design, deliver and continuously improve research-informed and evidence-based approach to ESD capacity development (including accredited routes where appropriate), to support sector-wide learning
Providing opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and sharing of good practice in ESD.	Establish peer-to-peer learning mechanisms e.g., communities of practice, networks, showcase events to share ESD practice and build confidence.	Structure and coordinate peer learning through regular events and enabling supports e.g., symposia, spotlights, seed funding for collaboration, to strengthen practice and community.	Participate actively in national and international ESD peer networks contributing to shared initiatives, resources and collaborative learning.
Developing initiatives to recognise and reward excellence and commitment to ESD.	Recognise ESD within existing institutional mechanisms e.g., teaching and learning award themes, workload models, internal communications and recognition of practice.	Establish dedicated mechanisms to recognise ESD leadership and contribution by staff and students e.g., awards, recognition schemes, professional development recognition and/or promotion criteria where appropriate.	Support staff to gain recognition beyond the institution e.g., national or international awards, with learning from these recognitions shared across the institution and sector to strengthen practice.

Empowering and Mobilising Students			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Recognising the student's role as key contributors who are meaningfully included in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and programmes on ESD.	Put mechanisms in place to support the student voice in ESD practice, planning and governance e.g., student rep training, student orientations, student representation within relevant groups, consultation processes.	Establish student-as-partners opportunities working with staff and communities e.g. representation on committees, curriculum development, Living Labs, supported with appropriate resources and recognition.	Establish students-as-co-creators opportunities in institution-wide sustainability learning structures, in monitoring and shaping ESD practice.
Supporting students through relevant training and development opportunities.	Signpost and support extra-curricular training and development opportunities related to sustainability and ESD.	Integrate accredited sustainability-related training and development into programmes that will provide additional qualifications.	Support, resource, and track student leadership and facilitation capacity-building (including train-the-trainer models where appropriate) that will contribute to peer, staff, and community learning.
Creating participation opportunities to use their voice for sustainable development.	Support student participation in engagement activities during national events e.g., Green Week, SDGs Week, Climate Action Week, Biodiversity Week etc., and institutional activities e.g., student orientation, Open Days etc.	Support student participation in sector-wide or national sustainability initiatives and events, including opportunities to co-design and lead activities beyond the institution.	Support student participation in international sustainability fora and networks, sharing learning back into institutional practice.

Empowering and Mobilising Students			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Supporting peer-to-peer learning.	Support student-led peer learning mechanisms e.g., clubs and societies, Green Campus/Green Labs engagement, student communities of practice.	Support students to co-design and contribute to cross-institutional peer learning opportunities e.g., student-led conferences, assemblies, summits, focusing on student-relevant sustainability themes.	Support students to participate in international peer networks and to bring insights and collaborations back to the institution.
Increasing the awareness and uptake of ESD and SDG-related volunteering opportunities at local, national, and European levels.	Signpost and support students to participate in ESD and SDG-related volunteering opportunities within the institution highlighting recognition and award pathways.	Support students to take up relevant national and European opportunities e.g., volunteering programmes, climate/sustainability ambassador roles.	Connect volunteering, service learning and/or community engagement opportunities to the curriculum and assessment through structured modules, placements or project-based learning aligned to learning outcomes.

Accelerating Local Level Actions			
	Emerging At this level your institution will	Established At this level your institution will	Leading At this level your institution will
Fostering, supporting and expanding links and collaboration between learning institutions, local communities, civil society organisations, and local authorities.	Benchmark existing project-based community engagement developed through individual relationships.	Establish mechanisms to support more coordinated and resourced engagement e.g., institutional frameworks, partnership agreements, central support, enabling broader and more consistent collaboration.	Establish dedicated roles and/or institutional structures to support long-term partnerships and collaborative programmes with communities, civil society and local authorities, with mutual benefit and shared learning.
Engagement to develop action plans on how communities can become learning laboratories for sustainable development providing opportunities for all citizens and learners to become change agents.	Map existing engagement with local stakeholders and community partners relevant to sustainability themes e.g., mapping projects, partnerships, living-lab activity.	Create participatory mechanisms to support co-design of a community learning lab approach (or equivalent), grounded in principles of learning with, from and as communities.	Establish structures and resourcing support for implementation and continuous improvement of community learning lab mechanisms, catalysing and enabling communities and learners to act as change agents.

Appendix I: Examples of ESD-Related Initiatives, mechanisms and evidence for self-evaluation

This appendix provides non-exhaustive, illustrative examples of initiatives, programmes, funding mechanisms, events and structures that may support ESD in the higher education context. These examples are provided for illustration only and are based on examples provided through the ESD Landscape Report, ESD Spotlight and Case Studies Series. They are not requirements, and inclusion or exclusion of any named example should not be interpreted as an expectation, endorsement, or measure of performance. Institutions are encouraged to draw on initiatives and mechanisms that are appropriate to their mission, scale, context and stage of development. The examples listed reflect current or recent practice at national, European and international levels and may change over time. Institutions may reference examples from this appendix when reflecting on their practice but are not expected to engage with any specific initiative listed. Equivalent or alternative mechanisms that achieve similar developmental outcomes are equally valid.

A. Policy, Funding and Strategic Alignment (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of mechanisms that may support institutional ESD policy development and implementation include:

- National or sectoral teaching and learning funding initiatives (e.g. SATLE)
- Performance and planning frameworks that include sustainability or climate-related themes
- Institutional sustainability, climate action or ESD policies and implementation plans
- Dedicated roles, secondments or advisory positions related to ESD, sustainability or climate action
- Internal seed funding or innovation funding schemes supporting ESD-related projects

B. Teaching, Learning and Curriculum (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of initiatives that may support ESD in teaching and learning include:

- Integration of sustainability or ESD within institutional graduate attributes or learning principles
- Use of recognised sustainability competence frameworks (e.g. UNESCO- or EU-aligned competence models)
- Curriculum mapping exercises that identify sustainability-related learning outcomes
- Programme and module review processes that consider ESD as a quality enhancement lens
- Use of transformative, experiential or challenge-based pedagogies aligned with ESD principles

C. Professional Development and Educator Capacity (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of professional development and capacity-building approaches include:

- Institutionally delivered workshops, seminars or communities of practice focused on ESD
- Participation in national open courses related to sustainability or ESD
- Accredited or non-accredited professional development pathways focused on ESD
- Peer learning initiatives, teaching showcases or pedagogical innovation funding
- Cross-institutional collaborations to co-design professional development opportunities

D. Student Engagement and Leadership (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of student-focused ESD initiatives include:

- Student representation within ESD, sustainability or climate-related governance structures
- Student ambassador, champion or partnership models related to sustainability
- Student-led or co-designed sustainability events, assemblies or conferences
- Participation in themed engagement weeks or national awareness initiatives
- Student participation in national, European or international sustainability networks or fora (e.g. policy dialogues, youth climate events)
- Student sustainability research conferences / student-led showcases

E. Campus, Community and Place-Based Learning (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of place-based and partnership approaches include:

- Campus “living lab” or equivalent models linking teaching, research, operations and engagement
- Collaboration with estates, sustainability and operational teams on learning projects
- Partnerships with local authorities, community organisations or civil society groups
- Community-based learning, service learning or civic engagement initiatives
- Regional sustainability partnerships or community learning lab approaches

F. Volunteering, Civic Engagement and External Opportunities (Illustrative Examples)

Examples of opportunities that may support ESD-related civic engagement include:

- Sustainability or climate-related volunteering and ambassador programmes
- European or international sustainability initiatives and networks
- Recognition of volunteering or civic engagement through academic credit, micro-credentials or awards
- Institutional support for student and staff participation in external sustainability programmes

Appendix II: Stakeholder engagement and participation overview

The development of the HEA ESD Self-Evaluation Tool was informed by two sector workshops and public feedback. The first workshop took place at the ESD Spotlight Series Compendium launch event in November 2025 and had 31 participants. The second took place with the HEA ESD Community of Practice in February 2026 and had 23 participants, with all designated higher education institutions represented. The public feedback process received 23 individual and group responses. An overview of institutions and stakeholders involved is provided below.

Sector workshops

Table A1. Sector workshops informing the development process

Engagement strand	Timing	Participation
ESD Spotlight Series Compendium launch workshop	November 2025	31 participants
HEA ESD Community of Practice workshop	February 2026	23 participants, with representation across all designated higher education institutions

Public feedback process

Table A2. Public feedback process response types

Response type	Number of responses
Individual responses	16
Group responses	7
Total responses	23

The public feedback process on the HEA ESD Self-Evaluation Tool ran from November 2025 to February 2026 and received 23 responses. These included both individual and group responses.

Role profile of public feedback responses (Individual Responses)

Table A3. Role profile of public feedback responses

Main role	Number of responses
Academic staff	7
Senior management	3
Professional/administrative support staff	2
Education developer	2
Teaching and learning support staff	1
Learning technologist	1
Total	16

Institutional and stakeholder representation in public feedback

Public feedback responses included representation from higher education institutions and related stakeholder organisations.

Higher education institutions represented in public feedback

- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
- Mary Immaculate College
- Maynooth University
- Munster Technological University
- National College of Ireland
- South East Technological University
- Technological University of the Shannon
- Trinity College Dublin
- University College Cork
- University College Dublin
- University of Galway
- University of Limerick

Other stakeholder organisations represented in public feedback

- STAND
- Student Volunteer Ireland
- National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project

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