



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Report from the Eighth National Forum on Education for Sustainable Development

1st December, 2023

Table of Contents

1: Introduction	3
2: Background	4
3: Highlights of the ESD Forum.....	5
Forum objectives and format	5
Agenda	6
Welcoming Remarks: Keith Moynes (DFHERIS)	8
Progress on ESD to 2030: Siobhán Sleeman (DFHERIS) and Leona de Khors (DoE)	8
Keynote Speaker: Mohammad Naeem	8
Keynote Speaker: Professor Arjen Wals	10
Forum Breakout Groups	11
Key Outputs from Breakout Sessions	11
Breakout 1: Transforming Learning	11
Breakout 2: Partnerships for ESD.....	14
Breakout 3: Sustainable and Inclusive Learning Environments	18
Breakout 4: Creative thinking for Climate Action and Sustainability.....	21
Keynote Speaker: Lord David Puttnam	21
First Five Garden of Wonder and Discovery	22
Panel Discussion on Policy Alignment for ESD	22
4. List of Exhibitors	25

1: Introduction

The Eighth National Forum on Education for Sustainable Development took place on 1st December, 2023 in Technological University Dublin, Grangegorman Campus.

The purpose of this event was to facilitate discourse on the implementation of *ESD to 2030*, Ireland's Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development. The event showcased and celebrated exemplars of quality, excellence and innovation in Education for Sustainable Development across all levels of the Irish Education System.

This was a joint event of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Education and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.



Photo: Keith Moynes, DFHERIS

2: Background

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a key element of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ESD promotes and supports the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions that help everyone to take action for a sustainable future and planet.

Ireland's Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development: *ESD to 2030*, was launched in June 2022, with co-sponsorship by three government departments, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It is accompanied by an Implementation Plan covering the period 2022 – 2026.

The strategy adopts a lifelong learning approach, from early learning and care to third level education and research, and extending beyond to engage with local communities and enterprise. At the heart of the strategy is a whole of institution approach to ESD, transforming educational spaces into places and spaces for sustainability, and embedding ESD across teaching and learning, research and operational environments.

As well as supporting the achievement of SDG Target 4.7, *ESD to 2030* will be an enabler for the achievement of all of the SDGs.

ESD to 2030 sets out five key priority areas:

1. **Advancing policy:** ESD is embedded in education and other relevant policies and frameworks as part of a lifelong learning approach.
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.
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.
4. **Empowering and mobilising young people:** Young people are supported to be agents of change for sustainable development.
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.

The strategy seeks to widen its focus beyond formal education to foster, support and expand links between education providers and their local communities, NGOs and local authorities to educate, raise awareness and understand the need for action and engagement on climate and sustainable development. It is anticipated that by working together in innovative ways, positive change can be achieved at the local, regional and national levels.

The Departments have established an *ESD Steering Group*, with representatives from key government departments and agencies to oversee and monitor implementation of *ESD to 2030* across government and to support policy alignment and coherence in areas linked to ESD. This meets twice per annum.

The first progress report on *ESD to 2030* covering the period January 2022-June 2023 was launched at the ESD Stakeholder Forum on 1 December 2023.

3: Highlights of the ESD Forum

Forum objectives and format

The Forum focused on facilitating discourse on the implementation of *ESD to 2030*, Ireland's Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development. The Forum was attended by over 200 participants and brought together a broad range of stakeholders who share an interest in the role education plays in sustainability, with expertise, experiences and exhibits being shared by students, educators, policy makers and representatives of civil society organisations.

The Forum had various engagement styles to allow for the diversity of attendees. There was a total of four interactive breakout room sessions, panel discussions, and three keynote speakers.

A selection of exhibition stands at the Forum showcased examples of quality, excellence and innovation in Education for Sustainable Development across all levels of the Irish education system.

A sustainability walking tour of TU Dublin's Grangegorman Campus took place over the lunch break.



Photo: Jamie Mac Giolla Bháin, ISSU; Leona De Khors, DoE; Desmond Cox, DCEDIY; Mohammad Naeem, UN Youth Delegate; Siobhán Sleeman, DFHERIS

Agenda

Registration	Tea and coffee, exhibition stands.
Opening	Keith Moynes, Assistant Secretary General at Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science delivered welcoming remarks.
Presentation	Siobhán Sleeman, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Leona De Khors, Department of Education, provided an overview of 'Progress on <i>ESD to 2030</i> '.
Keynote Speaker	Mohammad Naeem, UN Youth Delegate.
Keynote speaker	Arjen Wals (Online), Professor of Transformative Learning for Socio-Ecological Sustainability at Wageningen University and UNESCO Chair of Social Learning and Sustainable Development.
Break	Tea and coffee, networking and tour of exhibition stands.
Breakout 1: Transforming Learning	<p>Panel Chair: Dermot O'Donovan, Head of Department of Creative Education in the School of Design and Creative Arts, Atlantic Technological University</p> <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derek Grant, Director of Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA • Annmarie Ryan, Associate Professor in Marketing, Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick • Susan Hegarty, Head of School of History and Geography, DCU
Breakout 2: Partnerships for ESD	<p>Panel Chair: Elaine Nevin, Director of ECO-UNESCO</p> <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fergal McCarthy, Principal, Kinsale Community School • David Nyaluke, UCD Proudly Made in Africa Fellow in Business and Development • Sean McCabe, Climate Justice Officer, Bohemians Football club • Eimear Manning, Youth & Climate Justice Development Officer, National Youth Council of Ireland
Breakout 3: Sustainable and Inclusive Learning Environments	<p>Panel Chair: Dearbháil Lawless, CEO Aontas</p> <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dara Ryder, Chief Executive Officer, AHEAD • Anne Dolan, Lecturer, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick • Úna Fitzgerald, Chair of the Irish Green Lab Network and University of Galway

Breakout 4: Creative thinking for Climate Action and Sustainability	Workshop Chair: Eileen Leahy, Youth Reform Strategy & Participation, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Student Workshop facilitated by <i>The Big Idea</i>
Lunch	Lunch, networking, exhibition stands and sustainability walking tour.
Keynote Speaker	Lord David Puttnam, British film producer, educator and environmentalist
Video	<i>First 5 Garden of Wonder and Discovery</i> , Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.
Panel Discussion	Panel Chair: Jennifer Boyer, VP Sustainability, TU Dublin Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aoibheann Ní Shuilleabháin, Chair of Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and Associate Professor, Mathematics Education, UCD • Frank Geary, Director of Irish Development Education Association • Tania Banotti, Director of Creative Ireland programme • Aisha Ojuolape, TU Dublin student and N-TUTORR Student Champion
Closing Remarks	Siobhán Sleeman, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.



*Photo: Representatives of the Take 1 Programme from
Borrisokane Community College*

Welcoming Remarks: Keith Moynes (DFHERIS)

The Forum was opened by Keith Moynes, DFHERIS, who delivered welcoming remarks. Attention was drawn to the fact that we are currently at a critical juncture in human history, facing unprecedented environmental threats, global challenges, conflicts, and misinformation. The pivotal role that education can play in addressing these issues was emphasised - by equipping learners with essential problem-solving skills, integrating the latest research into education, and promoting sustainability competences for all ages, we can move towards a more tolerant, inclusive, and sustainable society. Moynes acknowledged the challenges ahead, particularly in achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions in the education sector by 2050. He highlighted ongoing efforts, including the Energy Efficiency Decarbonisation Pathfinder program, and stressed the important role that collaboration and lifelong learning will play in overcoming these challenges and future-proofing our society.

Progress on ESD to 2030: Siobhán Sleeman (DFHERIS) and Leona de Khors (DoE)

A presentation was delivered by Siobhán Sleeman, DFHERIS, and Leona de Khors, DoE, which introduced key findings from the first progress report on *ESD to 2030*, covering the period January 2022 – June 2023.

The presentation focused on progress that has been made during this timeframe under the five priority action areas of the Strategy, reflecting the wide range of ESD-activities and impacts across the sector.

The progress report can be found at the following link:

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Photo: Leona De Khors, Department of Education

Keynote Speaker: Mohammad Naeem

A central theme of Naeem's speech was self-empowerment to affect change. In clear, honest terms, he set out a roadmap for those wishing to create sustainable change in their communities. Using his own journey as a guide, he demonstrated that anyone, given the right supports and opportunities, can make a difference.

Naeem traced his journey from engaging in local action in his hometown of Claremorris in his early teens, to being named Mayo Young Environmentalist of the Year 2021, to his current position as Ireland’s youngest ever UN Youth Delegate.

While commending the progress Ireland has made in recent years, he highlighted that there is more work to do, not only in environmental sustainability but tackling social issues as well. He spoke about the inequality in opportunities for young people to take sustainable action between urban and rural Ireland; how the move online during the pandemic allowed him to attend events and training he would have otherwise been unable to travel to Dublin for. He also gave examples of prejudice still present in Irish society, such as the racist abuse he has faced online since becoming a Youth Delegate, and the unconscious prejudice he encountered after speaking at a conference, when an attendee assumed he was a member of the catering staff because of his ethnicity.

Naeem was clear in his conclusion that, in spite of these challenges, he is determined to continue his work and help to create a fairer world for all and that education has a key role to play in equipping people with the requisite knowledge and skills to bring about this change.



Photo: Mohammad Naeem, UN Youth Delegate

Keynote Speaker: Professor Arjen Wals

In his keynote presentation, Arjen Wals discussed the importance of educating children to be sustainable citizens in a troubled world. He argued that we need to move away from traditional education models and embrace a more holistic approach that connects children to their communities and the natural world. To do this, Wals argued, we must move beyond a focus on individual behaviour change and instead focus on creating a more sustainable society.

Wals emphasised the interconnectedness of all living things and the need for critical thinking and resilience in the face of global challenges. He advocates for embodied forms of learning that allow children to experience the world through their senses and develop a deep understanding of their place in it and the creation of a "whole school" approach that integrates sustainability into all aspects of the school experience.

He concluded by emphasising the importance of hope and agency in addressing the challenges we face. He gave examples of projects that engaged young people in local sustainability projects to help them develop a sense of agency and to learn about the challenges and opportunities of sustainability. He suggested that by engaging young people in meaningful work and nurturing their sense of connection to the world, we could create a more sustainable and just future.



Photo: Arjen Wals (online), Professor of Transformative Learning for Socio-Ecological Sustainability at Wageningen University

Forum Breakout Groups

The breakout sessions represent a crucial part of the Forum experience, providing the opportunity for participants to engage with others, build relationships, and directly contribute towards the outputs of the day. Breakout sessions were divided into four groups of approximately 50 people, covering the following themes:

- o Breakout 1: Transforming Learning
- o Breakout 2: Partnerships for ESD
- o Breakout 3: Sustainable and Inclusive Learning Environments
- o Breakout 4: Creative thinking for Climate Action & Sustainability Workshop

The structure of breakout groups 1, 2 and 3 was a series of presentations by panel members, followed by Q&A sessions. Slido polls were also used at the end of these sessions to generate group discussion and gather feedback. Breakout group 4, aimed primarily at young people attending the Forum, consisted of a participatory workshop.

Key Outputs from Breakout Sessions

BREAKOUT 1: TRANSFORMING LEARNING

This breakout session, which was chaired by Dr Dermot O'Donovan, Head of the Department of Creative Education in Atlantic Technological University, focused on the theme of transforming learning. The speakers consisted of Dr Derek Grant, Director of Curriculum and Assessment at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Dr Annmarie Ryan, Associate Professor at University of Limerick's Kemmy Business School, and Dr Susan Hegarty, Associate Professor at Dublin City University's School of History and Geography.

Dr Derek Grant

Dr Derek Grant spoke about the NCCA's work in Curriculum and Assessment and its role in researching, networking, deliberating and consulting as part of the curriculum development process. The NCCA's passion for and commitment to ESD was highlighted, informed by research. A description was given of a survey undertaken by NCCA in six unique international jurisdictions to see how the UNESCO vision for ESD was being implemented. The NCCA's aim is to 'future-proof' the national curriculum, given the uncertain and unstable nature of the future. The voices of young people are of paramount importance, including NCCA's commitment to inclusivity and diversity, putting voices in conversation with each other, and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality of education and the promotion of life-long learning for all.

Examples of how ESD is being brought into the curriculum across all levels of education were highlighted. ESD in *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to 6

years, incorporates ESD into two of its thematic areas: 'wellbeing', by encouraging children to live sustainably as agentic, respectful, caring, compassionate global citizens, and 'exploring and thinking', by creating learning goals which focus on nature and the outdoors. Several of the key competencies which are included in the Primary School curriculum framework are related to ESD, such as 'being an active citizen'. The subject area of 'Social and Environmental Education' also addresses multiple aspects of ESD, by harnessing children's understanding of the interconnected historical, geographical, and societal dimensions and processes of life. At Senior Cycle, a new subject, 'Climate Action and Sustainability' is currently being developed, and will be rolled out from September 2025.

An area discussed in the Q&A was the positioning of ESD within the curriculum and the decision to explore the areas of Environment and Sustainability within Geography rather than the Sciences. The need to balance practicality with a strong emphasis on an integrated curriculum to avoid siloing of knowledge was highlighted.

Dr Annmarie Ryan

Dr Annmarie Ryan shared insights from the EULab project in the University of Limerick, which has been ongoing since 2020. This Erasmus+ funded interdisciplinary initiative enables students to work across universities using a challenge-based approach and online studio-based model. This approach is somewhat unusual for a Business School, and introduces students to systems thinking via visual tools and design-thinking approaches to equip them with the skills to design future economic systems and models. Extremely positive student feedback was noted, with students expressing positivity about the sense of agency they experienced within this model. Students highlighted the ability to shape the system and the space to design a future higher education system as one challenge, as well as to make connections and engage directly with stakeholders.

Areas discussed in the Q&A session, included the potential to apply this model in primary and post-primary education to end 'siloing' in education and challenges faced by educators in adopting this model. The benefits of empowering students with the tools and space to drive their own learning and engagement with Sustainability topics was highlighted, with a learning curve for educators to move from being the 'expert' to familiarising with the tools and facilitating a learning process for students.

Dr Susan Hegarty

Dr Susan Hegarty presented on the DCU Futures initiative, a €19.9 million project funded under the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3, which aims to re-imagine DCU's undergraduate education to empower students in a world defined by unprecedented technological and social change. The initiative aims to create capacity for over 1,000 additional students.

Areas of study prioritised within the new Programmes include:

- Data/Technology Infused World
- Zero Carbon Economy

- Sustainable Society
- Employable Graduates with Human-Centric Discipline Skills

A total of ten new undergraduate programmes have been launched through DCU Futures, informed by consultation with enterprise partners. All of these new courses include Data Analytics modules. New programmes include a BA in Climate & Environmental Sustainability and a BSc in Global Challenges.

The new programmes place a strong focus on innovative pedagogy and assessment. Approaches that are being used include: making core content available online; challenge-based learning; virtual labs; opportunities for students to create their own learning pathways and take responsibility for their own learning; embedding cross-module assessments to support an end to 'silos'; and use of pass/fail assessments to encourage student experimentation.

Discussion

Following presentations, participants were invited to consider four questions for discussion:

- We've heard today about some innovative approaches to ESD and developing sustainability competencies among learners – are there other examples of innovative approaches to highlight and how do we know they are working?
- What institutional level developments are required to support new innovative approaches?
- What role can digital technologies play in ESD?
- How can we enable and support young people's participation in learning and decision-making?

Participants discussed these questions in small groups and provided individual feedback via Slido. Key feedback is captured in the Table overleaf.

Breakout 1 - Discussion Topics & Slido Feedback	
<p>Innovative Approaches to ESD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of National Forum SATLE funding to support ESD • Student empowerment & reflection on learning • Transdisciplinary approaches • Inter-institutional collaboration • Mydigitalbackpack.ie • NTUTORR project in the TU sector • Walking debates in class • Agile development & Design sprints • Gamification • Outdoor education and community gardens • Democratic approaches 	<p>Institutional level developments required to support innovative approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less emphasis on exams, more creative freedom • Smaller class sizes at primary and secondary level • Funding & Resources • Support from accrediting bodies • Supportive policy and governance • Vision and Mission that includes GCE in ESD • Teacher CPD • Academic buy-in to teaching assessment/innovation • Training teachers to be comfortable with complexity • Time for staff to do curriculum development with students • Top down and bottom up engagement
<p>The role of digital technologies can play in ESD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Increases accessibility • Enables innovation • Model outcomes more easily • Asynchronous learning • Virtual mobilities • Open access resources • Student research • Virtual reality: visualise solutions • Reduce carbon footprint • Enable real-time collaboration 	<p>How to enable and support young people's participation in decision-making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic dialogue • Trust students to lead • Pedagogical partners • Co-create • Give responsibility • Creative projects • Stop 'lecturing', start facilitating • Social media content • Listen to and trust them • Make space and reward them

BREAKOUT 2: PARTNERSHIPS FOR ESD

This breakout session, which was chaired by Elaine Nevin, Director of ECO-UNESCO, looked at partnerships for ESD. The speakers were: Fergal McCarthy, Principal of Kinsale Community School, David Nyaluke, the Proudly Made in Africa Fellow in Business and Development, based at University College Dublin College of Business, Seán McCabe, Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability at Bohemian FC, and Eimear Manning, Youth & Climate Justice Development Officer in the National

Youth Council of Ireland. The chair highlighted that the speaker's different insights, coming from the formal, non-formal and community-based experience, would provide rich and interesting learnings.

Fergal McCarthy:

Fergal McCarthy, Principal of Kinsale Community School, a post-primary school in Co. Cork, began by emphasising that the most important collaboration for ESD must be with children and young people. Young people today can suffer tremendous eco-anxiety and eco-depression, due to the news they are exposed to daily and a sense of lack of urgency in response. There is a need and onus on schools to respond in a particular way and to prioritise climate and sustainability in the school environment and support young people in their learning.

Kinsale Community School hosted a Peer Learning Activity of the European Commissions' Schools Working Group for ESD in May. This provided students a key opportunity to present their work and views to high level policy officials.

Working in partnership has been key to the School's approach. The school has developed positive associations with UCC and with the Local College of Permaculture. Kinsale, as the 'Food Capital of Ireland' has also offered opportunities to create links with local restaurants, who have been invited to visit the school and see their MyGug anaerobic digester in action. Kinsale Community School also host their own COP (Climate meeting), which brings all local feeder primary schools together resulting in a great cross pollination of ideas.

The importance of inclusion was emphasised. Kinsale Community School caters for a diverse group of students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By creating internal micro-partnerships, students are exposed to different perspectives and are able to arrive at a joint understanding of issues. Through ESD, children are supported to develop global citizenship – their views on what is necessary for us to share a planet and ensure that all people can feel included are essential.

The role of a Sustainability Champion in driving activities and bringing everyone on board was also seen as very beneficial.

David Nyaluke

David Nyaluke, the Proudly Made in Africa Fellow in Business and Development, based at University College Dublin School of Business, gave an overview of the work carried out by Proudly Made in Africa (PMIA). This global citizenship education and trade justice social enterprise works with colleges, lecturers and business schools to bring African perspectives, scholars and voices into universities, in order to mainstream a responsible approach to business with and in Africa.

PMIA has established a great network of partnerships, with its development education programme currently collaborating with students and educators in 18 business schools and universities across Ireland. As of 2023, the programme reached 40,000 students and 120 lecturers, encouraging them

to reimagine their relationship with Africa by showcasing examples of good practice and creating direct links with producers. This encourages future and current business leaders to see the partnership opportunities available with producers in Africa.

Regarding the challenges that these partnerships have encountered, an absence of funding posed difficulties for certain universities. Furthermore, not all businesses have a need or desire to scale up by collaborating across the border with African countries.

The importance of partnerships being mutually beneficial was emphasised, as this is crucial to achieving sustainable collaboration.

Seán McCabe

Seán McCabe, Head of Climate Justice and Sustainability at Bohemians FC, began by emphasising that good partnerships are those that facilitate the rediscovery of agency among its members. An example of this can be seen in 'The Spark', a new programme established by Bohemian FC using the Community Climate Action Fund from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. Based in Dublin 7, The Spark serves as the capacity-building strand of the Bohemian Climate Cooperative - a place-based and community-led initiative to enable ambitious climate action and local wealth building. Named after its intent to spark change and ignite climate consciousness, The Spark aims to enhance social cohesion and to allow its members to rediscover their agency in tackling climate change.

The ethos that cultural shifts require educational shifts has been central to The Spark's approach. Through education, the challenges posed by global conflicts, environmental threats and misinformation can be better navigated. Moreover, education strengthens inclusivity in our societies.

In order to build and develop strong partnerships, every perceived complexity should be simplified. This, in turn, will yield positive results through lasting partnerships.

Eimear Manning

Joining the Forum remotely, Eimear Manning, Youth & Climate Justice Development Officer in the National Youth Council of Ireland, presented on the climate justice project entitled 'Future Generations'. Funded through the Youth Climate Justice Fund, an initiative run by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the project seeks to explore and highlight the systemic and human rights issues related to the climate crisis. Central to this project is also its ambition to represent the voices of young people, particularly those from marginalised, disadvantaged, and rural backgrounds, who are often missing from the climate discourse.

Founded in 2020, the project connects with young people across Ireland through a range of partnerships. These include urban, rural, and formal education system partnerships in Ireland, and communities of young people in the Global South.

The benefits of these partnerships include the diversity of experiences and knowledge-sharing between young people and youth workers, an appreciation and knowledge of what it means to be a global citizen, growing confidence and critical thinking among young people through this youth-led project, and showcasing to the next generation that working together in partnerships can bring about solidarity and connection.

Discussion

Following presentations, participants were invited to consider four questions for discussion:

- What are the key benefits of creating partnerships for ESD?
- What are the challenges of working in partnership and how can we address them?
- How can we encourage and create more linkages between education settings and their local communities to work collaboratively to advance climate justice and sustainable development?
- Name one thing or action that you will take home from today’s discussion.

Participants discussed these questions in small groups and provided individual feedback via Slido. Key feedback is captured in the Table below.

Breakout 2 - Discussion Topics & Slido Feedback	
<p>Benefits of creating partnerships for ESD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to funding streams • Wider networks and diverse opinions • Strength in numbers • Speed and scale • Connection to community • Mutual benefit • Inclusivity • Culture changes • Reduced anxiety 	<p>Challenges of working in partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time it takes to collaborate and reach final goal • Partners having different agendas • Tokenism • Siloed reporting mechanisms • Ego • Competition <p>How these challenges can be addressed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership to ensure a shared vision • Reporting and monitoring progress
<p>How to encourage more linkages between education settings and local communities to work collaboratively to advance climate justice and sustainable development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic funding opportunities • Place value on these collaborations 	<p>Key takeaways from discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for increased networking opportunities • Value of connections and collaboration • Importance of lifelong learning

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver collaborations in community settings • Listen • Educate principals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for increased funding and incentives to form partnerships • Creativity of partnerships • Linkages with the community are essential • Existing partnerships should be showcased
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BREAKOUT 3: SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

This breakout session, which was chaired by Dearbhail Lawless, the CEO of AONTAS, focused on sustainable and inclusive learning environments. The speakers were: Dara Ryder, CEO, of AHEAD (inclusive education for students with disabilities), Dr Anne Dolan, Lecturer in primary geography with the Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education in Mary Immaculate College, and Associate Professor of Biomedical Engineering Professor and inaugural recipient of Science Foundation Ireland’s ‘Green Transition’ award, Una FitzGerald, who has been researching multiple sclerosis since 1997 at the University of Galway, and is co-founder and Chair of Irish Green Labs.

Dara Ryder

Dara Ryder discussed the meaning and importance of Universal Design principles in Tertiary Education.

Universal Design ‘means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design’ – UNCRPD Article 2.

This concept recognises that nobody is average, so if you design for the average person, you design for nobody. Conversely, if you design to the edges, you design for everybody. There is also a strong relationship between sustainability and Universal Design. UDL is already a part of tertiary education policy featuring in both the National Access Plan and the Further Education and Training Strategy.

ALTITUDE is the National Charter for Universal Design in tertiary education. ALTITUDE’s mission is ‘to support HEIs and ETBs to make sustainable progress towards systemically embedding a Universal Design approach, which places human diversity at the heart of tertiary education design and fosters student success for all.’

Regarding where we are at currently, large scale consultation with staff, learners and national stakeholders has almost been completed. An advanced draft has been completed and the Charter and National Discussion Paper is to be launched in March 2024. It is hoped that formal adoption will begin in late 2024/early 2025.

Dr Anne Dolan

Dr Anne Dolan presented her experiences as both a Teacher of Primary Geography and a Lecturer of Initial Teacher Education at Mary Immaculate College. The focus was on outdoor education, inspiring children to interact with nature in the outdoors, as a multisensory experience. There are many benefits, including the physical benefits of walking in nature, as well as the benefits to children's wellbeing. This, in turn, will foster a positive attitude to our natural environment, as well as developing knowledge and curiosity for living plants and animals.

Anne spoke about how children can be inspired creatively by narratives around nature and the outdoors, such as the tale of Winnie the Pooh, and also by using nature as a canvas to create art projects from leaves, twigs, moss and flowers.

The reluctance to let children loose outside for safety reasons or bad weather was discussed, along with the threat of the digital world taking over from the natural world in children's free time.

Professor Úna FitzGerald

Professor Úna FitzGerald has a background in Biochemical Engineering and is a strong advocate for the Green Labs initiative, making laboratories more sustainable, reducing single use plastics, and conserving water and improving energy efficiency.

The mission of Green Labs is to build a global culture of sustainability in science to transform the industry into a global leader on environmental sustainability. Through education, community engagement, and market-leading certification tools, Green Labs is inspiring the scientific community to integrate sustainability into everything they do.

The Green Labs certification process is simple and affordable, and there are now over 2000 labs in Ireland certified as Green Labs. From September 2024, Úna will be facilitating an online Micro-Credential course in Green Labs Principles and Practice. There is also a professional accreditation in Green Labs available.

FitzGerald stressed that Lab greening is a practical way to embed ESD within lab-associated disciplines across all HEIs. Students and staff can become 'green lab literate' by completing MGLA training and/or MGL AP. A key benefit to this training is that lab greening within research settings opens up opportunities for publication within the 'emerging discipline' of lab sustainability.

There was a discussion on rolling out the Green Labs to both third level and second level, for example Biology Labs in secondary schools.

Discussion

Following the presentations, participants were invited to discuss the following questions:

- How can we further integrate sustainability practices into learning environments?
- What are the main barriers that challenge the development of sustainable and inclusive learning environments?
- What is the role of leadership and governance in creating sustainable and inclusive learning cultures and environments?

There was a discussion around the positive benefits of outdoor education. There was a lot of support for the Green Labs initiative to be rolled out, in particular to secondary schools. The challenges of integrating ESD into the curriculum were highlighted. For example, the fact that some subjects are aligned more naturally with the subject matter than others, and also the additional workload that this places on teachers in the second level space, as State Exams are often deemed to be more important by parents.

The concept of 'Doughnut Economics', and the book of the same title by Kate Raworth, was recommended.

Breakout 3 - Discussion Topics & Slido Feedback

How sustainability practices can be further integrated into learning environments

- The outdoor classroom
- Curriculum changes to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach
- Sensory experiences
- Training staff; PME courses and CPD requirement
- Monthly outdoor activities
- Resource efficiency initiatives

BREAKOUT 4: CREATIVE THINKING FOR CLIMATE ACTION AND SUSTAINABILITY

This session was chaired by Eileen Leahy, from the Youth Reform Strategy and Participation unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The workshop was facilitated by The Big Idea and focused on how creative thinking skills can be used in relation to climate action and sustainability. There was a significant participation by students from second and third level institutions. Participants from other organisations were also present. The group was divided into several sub-groups, and partook in a series of creative activities.

There was a vibrant and enthusiastic atmosphere throughout the workshop, with a high level of participation and engagement. Creative solutions to climate-related problems were devised and shared, and the feedback at the end of the session was notably positive.

Keynote Speaker: Lord David Puttnam

Lord David Puttnam, a British film producer, educator and environmentalist, is also the CEO of Atticus Education, an online education company that delivers audiovisual seminars to students around the world, from his home in West Cork. His presentation, entitled 'Seeking a Plan B', focused on climate change and the fact that 'there is no Planet B'.

There is a wealth of evidence that climate change is having a significant effect on our planet and how these impacts will grow increasingly worse to catastrophic levels unless action is taken on a global scale. Puttnam was involved in the first climate change legislation in the UK, the Climate Change Act 2008.



Photo: Lord David Puttnam

Ireland has experience of how a lack of sustainable food supply can be devastating as a result of the famine. As such, Puttnam said that Ireland's farming industry should be a poster child for sustainable farming practices.

The film 'Tomorrow' was recommended viewing regarding sustainable food practices in communities around the world.

Finally, there was a call to action, not to simply be an observer, but to tackle climate change on both an individual and collective basis.

First Five Garden of Wonder and Discovery

The First Five Garden of Wonder and Discovery showcases an example of the meaningful participation of very young children.

In June this year the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth had a multi-award-winning garden at the Bord Bia Bloom Garden Festival.

The First 5, Garden of Wonder and Discovery was the culmination of a year-long project with the pre-schoolers from Creative Kids in Walkinstown. This project underpins the value in terms of the development of social sustainability in engaging with very young children.

The video highlights how you never know where participation with children will lead. The team who developed the project also held an Exhibition stand at the Forum.

The video can be accessed at: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/885191734/d904eab149/privacy>

Panel Discussion on Policy Alignment for ESD

The afternoon closing panel discussion, which focused on the topic of 'Policy Alignment for ESD' was chaired by Jennifer Boyer, the Vice-President of Sustainability at TU Dublin.

The panel consisted of Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and Associate Professor in the UCD School of Mathematics & Statistics, Frank Geary, the Director of the Irish Development Education Association, Tania Banotti, the Director of the Creative Ireland programme, and Aisha Ojuolape, a Climate Ambassador with TU Dublin's Green Campus, N-TUTORR Student Champion, and full-time Engineering student at TU Dublin.

Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin

Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin reflected on her learnings from her time as the Chair of the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. She noted the capacity that citizens have to address complex issues and overcome siloed ways of thinking. She drew attention to the fact that 85% of our protected habitats are currently in ‘unsatisfactory’ condition and that the ripple-effect of biodiversity loss will worsen the impact of climate change.

She informed the audience that education was a significant theme that came up multiple times throughout the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, and is mentioned in several of the group’s recommendations. Members of the group expressed disappointment at the fact that they had not been informed about biodiversity loss in formal education settings and emphasised that people need to be guided towards taking collective community actions to combat biodiversity loss and climate change issues.

Overall, Ní Shúilleabháin came away from the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss with a feeling of hope. She was heartened by conversations she has had with people who have read the recommendations and have informed her of how they are tackling biodiversity loss. This issue is now becoming more mainstream and being discussed in informal settings. She spoke about how people can improve biodiversity on a local level and how Ireland is doing this well in some places across the country.

In terms of resourcing, Ní Shúilleabháin would like to see more investment in local communities, and to increase awareness on a local level of the amenities already available to communities. She would also like to see the creation of more spaces and structures for young people to empower them to take action on climate change. Moreover, she would like to see a cross-curricular representation of ESD across every second-level subject. This has successfully been done at primary and third level.

As a final note, Ní Shúilleabháin expressed the need for the State to shift from a primary focus on the economy for growth, towards a cathedral-thinking perspective on the economy, as a subset of nature, operating for a thriving society.

Frank Geary

Frank Geary discussed the work carried out by the Irish Development Education Association. With over 100 members who work across the spectrum of lifelong learning in formal, non-formal, and



informal settings, he has learned that we need to think about ESD as a global and rights-based issue that relies on partnerships and interdependencies. Crucially, these partnerships must be equally weighted on both sides, and there also needs to be an equal balance between creativity and work.

Geary emphasised the importance of incorporating joy into what we do in the ESD space to maximise productivity. He also spoke about the importance of naming the issues at stake for them to be addressed, such as sustainability, inclusion and accessibility.

Echoing Ní Shúilleabháin's sentiment, he spoke about the need for Ireland to be leaders in transforming education to incorporate the SDGs across all levels of our education system.

Tania Banotti

Tania Banotti spoke about how Creative Ireland, an all-of-government programme for culture and wellbeing, has devised a €5.8 million Creative Climate Action Fund to support creative, cultural and artistic projects that build awareness around climate change and empower citizens to make meaningful behavioural changes. She said that through this, they have showed that the urgency of climate change can be communicated to the general public through engaging creative and artistic approaches. Banotti said that Irish people are aware of climate change, and now we must move from intent to action. This is our single greatest challenge now.

Like Ní Shúilleabháin and Geary, Banotti expressed the need for the curriculum to incorporate the SDGs across all levels of education, including the structures of our institutions. Although curriculum and system change is hard, we need to act with urgency to address this.

Regarding partnerships, she said that there are a plethora of brilliant initiatives taking place across the country to tackle climate change, however the issue is that citizens are not aware of these. We need to introduce people to all of the work that is going on in this space for the projects to grow and prosper.

As a final note, Banotti said that we should focus on how our quality of life will improve if we affect change through climate action, as there is a lot to be hopeful about in this space.

Aisha Ojuolape

Aisha Ojuolape spoke about her roles as a Climate Ambassador with TU Dublin Green Campus and as an N-TUTORR Student Champion. She spoke about how the best way to encourage more sustainable actions among citizens is to incorporate sustainability naturally across different aspects of our lives. Behavioural change will come about when people do not need to think about the behaviour because it is seamlessly incorporated into their daily lives. On this note, Ojuolape stressed the importance of incorporating the SDGs across all subjects at every stage of education.

She said that one of her key takeaways from attending the Forum was seeing the power of education in tackling climate change. She spoke about how we need education to teach the

importance of tolerance, empathy and nurture. Through this, we can learn to understand the perspective of the other, which is crucial to tackling climate change. We need to learn to look at climate issues on a case-by-case basis to see how it affects everyone not only on a broader general level, but also on an individual one.

4. List of Exhibitors

- Green Schools
- Take 1 Programme
- Wordwise/ Irish Aid
- EcoUNESCO
- Wild Child
- First 5 Bloom Garden of Wonder and Discovery
- DCU Futures initiative
- CDETB Climate Justice Education initiative
- TU Dublin – Resilient Design Curricula & Green strategy



Photo: EcoUNESCO Stand