

## **UNESCO Chair, Munster Technological University, submission to the Joint Public Consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030.**

This contribution comes from the UNESCO Chair "Transforming the Lives of People with Disabilities their Families and Communities Through Physical Education, Sport, Recreation and Fitness". UNESCO established the UNESCO Chair in 2013 in the Institute of Technology Tralee, which became Munster Technological University in January 2021.

This document contains the UNESCO Chair's responses to section 5 of the online survey. The short form responses have been submitted online.

### **Question 5(a): What action can we take in respect of advancing and further developing these 5 Key Priority Areas?**

ESD is a powerful vehicle to deliver transformative results. The SDGs call for **bold transformative steps** and the education sector more than any other can deliver professionals to the workforce to embrace this challenge and accelerate actions towards sustainable development. Alternative efforts to retrofit knowledge through CPD and lifelong learning are also needed. As a priority we must ensure that the Education Sector embraces its responsibility as a matter of urgency. The education sector currently needs to rapidly be socialised on the concept and its underpinning principles. The education sector needs to understand its scope and most importantly its responsibility to achieve meaningful change. The UNESCO Chair in Munster Technological University is happy to support Irish Government efforts, most especially in areas connected with our Chair responsibility.

Progress on all 5 priority areas can be made through a focus on SDG target 4.7: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development".

In particular, the mainstreaming of ESD throughout higher and further education and training has great potential to galvanise all of society action towards progress on sustainable development. This mainstreaming can be achieved through a broader campaign to raise awareness across all higher education institutions and further training bodies of their public sector duty as it relates to human rights and sustainable development. Due to the rights-based nature of the SDGs, an integrated approach to human rights education and ESD should be taken. Such an integrated approach could make clear the mutually reinforcing nature of rights and sustainable development, as well as harnessing public sector duty to move human rights education and ESD away from being viewed as an optional add on towards being regarded as a duty of education providers.

The consultation paper makes clear that progress has been made on integrating ESD into new curricular developments at primary and secondary education levels since 2014. It also notes the

number of courses dedicated to green economy and a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses including a module on or an element of Sustainable Development. While an increase in the number of courses dedicated to areas such as the green economy is welcome, the new strategy should go further and look at ways to ensure holistic ESD encompassing all aspects of sustainable development is embedded across all disciplines at higher and further education levels, not just those courses specifically dedicated to sustainability and development.

The SDGs have relevance to all sectors of life and the economy and therefore higher education and further training should be equipping all graduates to carry out their future work in line with, and in promotion of, sustainable development and aligned human rights.

The integration of ESD and human rights education as a core component of all higher education and training could result in a cohort graduates across all disciplines who are knowledgeable about human rights and the SDGs and will bring this knowledge into their careers, ultimately creating a sea-change across policy makers, service providers, educators, etc., on the importance of mainstreaming SDGs and rights.

A twofold approach to making such an action possible is required. Firstly, all teaching and training staff would themselves need to receive ESD and public sector duty instruction which would provide a firm foundation in the topic and encourage reflection on the linkages with their sector of expertise. Secondly, course design and modules across all disciplines would need to be developed to integrate ESD and this content delivered to students.

Action in this regard will contribute directly to all five priority areas:

- **Advancing Policy/Policy Coherence:** Through the integration of ESD throughout higher and further education, policy professionals regardless of area will have a common grounding of knowledge relating to sustainable development. Over time this can lead to a cultural shift with an increased focus on sustainable development in policy development leading to greater policy coherence. Furthermore, the first step in this approach of increasing capacity of the higher and further education staff who are often called on as experts by policy makers and participate in policy advocacy will also increase the cross sectoral focus on sustainable development in policy.
- **Transforming learning environments:** The integration of ESD across all disciplines would result in the transformation of learning environments due to reorientation of all disciplines to include an ESD focus. This priority area is central to the proposed approach.
- **Capacity building for educators and trainers.** All higher level and further education providers will need to be able to deliver on ESD. Therefore, a national campaign of capacity building to provide ESD will be required.
- **Empowering and mobilising youth.** Learners at higher and further education institutions are not limited to any specific age group and not all youth will engage with higher and further education. However, the largest cohort of learners do fall within the youth category and many youth are engaged, or have recently engaged, with higher and further education. Integrating ESD throughout higher and further education will give youth a marketable skill when entering the workforce as sustainability grows as an area of corporate and policy concern. It will also create a facilitating environment in educational institutions for young people to explore sustainability and create networks in this area for themselves.
- **Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level and engaging with the wider community.** Higher and further education institutions do not exist in isolation, rather they are embedded in their local communities, providing space for community learning and exchange of ideas.

Students and teaching staff alike are members of their communities. By making ESD a core aspect of higher education and further training, students and teachers will be empowered to speak with others in their community on topics of sustainable development. They can also participate in, lead or advise local community groups working on sustainable development.

**Question 5(b): What other priority areas, if any, do you feel can be identified?**

An area of interest is the potential role of sport, physical education, and physical activity as a vehicle for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), in particular given the addition of culture as a fourth pillar of ESD in the new strategy.

As an overarching driving and unifying instrument, the 2030 Agenda has provided a focal point for the sport sector globally to unify and advance its alignment with sustainable development and human rights. The preamble to Agenda 2030 recognises that:

“Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives (United Nations, 2015).”

In article 37 the term ‘sport’ is taken as a broad construct that encompasses the areas of physical education, physical activity and sport as is typical in UN dialogues and publications on ‘sport’ (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations General Assembly, 2004). Three action plans solidified the position of sport in this regard while setting out priority policy areas and mechanisms to advance practice; the Kazan Action Plan (UNESCO, 2017) the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (World Health Organisation, 2018) and the United Nations Secretary General Report on Strengthening the global framework for leveraging sport for development and peace (United Nations General Assembly, 2018).

The ‘action’ focus reflects a deliberate shift from the rhetoric often aligned with policy intent to meaningful and measurable action. Thus since 2017 we have seen the development of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress of these action plans all of which align with SDGs, underpinned by a human rights approach.

Sport has often been referred to as a universal language, capable of bridging divisions, able to cross linguistic and cultural divides and bring people from many varied backgrounds together for a common purpose. UNESCO has recognized that sport promotes values including fairness, teambuilding, equality, discipline, inclusion, perseverance, and respect and provides a universal framework for learning these values which contribute towards a democratic and inclusive culture. The EU also recognizes social inclusion as a key priority of the EU sport policy. The sporting values of teamwork, inclusion and respect in particular can be used to create welcoming environment which embraces minorities, including migrants and refugees. Sport therefore has significant potential to be used as a vehicle for promoting inclusion and ESD and human rights education both in schools and the wider community in an innovative manner outside of traditional classroom settings.

Sport offers many opportunities as a vehicle of learning. It enables people to acquire skills through less formal methods and in a more relaxed environment. It can attract audiences who maybe disengaged from formal education and can reinforce lessons in a fun and engaging way. Sport can

facilitate a number of learning methods such as learning by doing, peer to peer learning, group discussions, icebreakers and games.

Physical inactivity, mental health, and inequality three urgent, intersecting crises which have been magnified and accelerated by COVID-19. Sport education can mitigate the impact of these intersecting crises by equipping citizens for life, encouraging critical thinking, and building socio-emotional, mental and physical capital. The “Fit for Life” change programme unites public and private stakeholder ecosystems to provide international and national pathways to “build back better” through the delivery of integrated, sport-education in schools, in communities and in policy frameworks. **Ireland could be a champion country in UNESCO’s Fit for Life** initiative that launches later this year at the General Assembly. Fit for life proposes integrated sport education interventions. Sport education equips citizens for life by building socio-emotional, mental and physical resilience. It is a high yield investment which can be used to transform unhealthy behaviours; deliver the values-based learning critical to the rounded and inclusive development called for by the SDGs; build skills and empower youth to navigate delicate life transitions; and extend educational outcomes. However, the full potential of sport education is not being realised. “Fit for Life” draws on the combined power of its public/private partnership coalition, alongside decades of impact data on effective sport education delivery, to reverse identified negative trends in inactivity, mental health and inequality. This will be achieved by improving the quality of delivery and increasing the time spent on sport education in curricula. Trainings designed to equip educators (school-, university-, and community-based) to deliver quality, values-driven sport education interventions both via digital platforms and in person will be developed and delivered. National curricula will also be reviewed and revised (UNESCO Fit for Life).

With funding from the Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation (DISCO) program of the EU and Council of Europe, the UNESCO Chair and key partners are developing an online training module, for use in schools, colleges, clubs and the wider community, providing resources for teaching human rights and sustainable development in and through sport and for embracing a human rights approach to sport education. This resource is called TRUST (The Rights Understanding in Sport Toolkit) – Sport as it Should Be. It includes theoretical and practical resources, to help foster effective rights-based sport education and delivery practices. It is fully aligned with and promotes the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, one of the international strategies to inform the new National ESD strategy. TRUST provides information on how the power of sport can be leveraged for educating in area such as ESD. The modules are currently being piloted and can be accessed here: [Module 1](#) and [Module 2](#).

TRUST serves as an example of the innovative approaches it is possible to take around ESD. Such innovative approaches correlate closely to the decision to include “culture” as a new fourth pillar of ESD in the context of this consultation. Sport is an important aspect of culture and the potential role for sport in ESD should be considered during the development of the new ESD strategy.