Towards a holistic sustainability policy

If you are about to write a sustainability policy for a school/college the questions of how and why must be in your mind. A sustainability policy must adapt a holistic approach, be inclusive, reflect the other policies, needs and ambitions of the institute and it must be realistic. As a starting point it may be wise to examine what is out there already.

At a national level in Ireland the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) provides a framework to support the contribution that the education sector is making and will continue to make towards a more sustainable future at several levels: individual, community, local, national, and international. ESD to 2030 is co-sponsored by the Department of Education, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

EU Policies: EU’s ambitious goal of Europe becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. As part of this strategy it might be useful to look at the GreenComp framework.

Greencomp - GreenComp is a policy action derived from the European Green Deal as a catalyst to promote learning on environmental sustainability in the European Union. GreenComp provides a common ground to learners and guidance to educators, specifying a consensual definition of what sustainability as a competence entails. The new European competence framework on sustainability (GreenComp): was published by the Joint Research Centre: which maps out the competences needed for the green transition.

Other Frameworks, initiatives or incentives can also be examined: For example in Ireland we have the Green Campus initiative. The Green Campus Programme has been in operation in Ireland since 2007. At present 40 Campuses are formally registered on the Programme, with nineteen awarded the Green Flag including two hospital sites. The Green-Campus Programme encourages a partnership approach to environmental education, management and action in third level institutions. The Programme primarily aims to ensure that members of a campus community can engage in a meaningful way to enhance sustainability on campus. It must be noted that the Green-Campus Programme does not reward specific environmental projects or implementation of a new technology. Rather it rewards long term commitment to continuous improvement from the campus community.

The seven steps of the programme are: establishing a Green-Campus committee incorporating student and staff representatives, undertaking an environmental review, implementing an action plan, monitoring, and evaluating actions carried out, linking the programme to curriculum work, informing, and involving the campus and wider community, and developing a green charter.

Green-Campus Committee seven steps

1. Green Campus Committee

The first step of the Green-Campus programme involves establishing a viable Green-Campus Committee, within the organisational structure of the Institution. The committee may be linked to the constitution of the Students Union and/or Environmental Society or become an official statutory committee within the campus. The chairperson and vice-chairperson should also have access to top level management within the Institution. The committee should be as representative of the whole organisation as possible. It should primarily be made up of students (making up most of the committee members whenever possible) and should also incorporate a combination of academic and teaching staff, a member of the executive board or governing authority, non-teaching staff particularly building managers and those responsible for the facilities management onsite, contractors, and any other interested members of the campus and local community.

1. Environmental Review

The aim of the review is to identify the initial state on campus regarding the environmental management of the theme(s) under investigation. The results of the review are used to derive the action plan. The review helps to establish whether change is necessary, urgent or not required. It also assists in setting realistic targets and monitoring implementation. By thoroughly checking all potential environmental impacts on campus for the theme under investigation, the environmental review should:

• Provide a clear view of the range of the campus’ impacts and establish a baseline.

• Ensure that significant areas are not overlooked.

• Identify areas where current practice is good or areas where current practices are lacking.

• Communicate the impacts to the campus community.

• Help to prioritise actions to be taken. The Green-Campus Office can aid the Green-Campus Committee in planning the environmental review.

1. Action Plan

Information gleaned from the environmental review is used to identify priority areas and create an action plan. Action planning involves setting achievable and realistic targets and deadlines to improve environmental performance on specific issues by listing several agreed environmental objectives, along with deadlines and clearly allocated responsibilities for each step. Where possible, action plans should be linked to learning on campus, show any cost implications, and specify arrangements for monitoring and evaluation. The action plan is continually amended to reflect the findings of subsequent monitoring and evaluation. The action plan can also include actions that reflect the Seven Steps of the Programme.

1. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are used to assess progress made towards achieving targets identified in the action plan and to identify areas that require further attention or modified actions. It also enhances whole college awareness by highlighting the successes of the actions undertaken. Monitoring and evaluation should be developed in tandem with the action plan.

1. Linking to Learning on Campus

Learning on campus as part of certificate, degree and postgraduate programmes should influence the way the whole college operates. Opportunities exist within Green-Campus to make learning links into a range of subjects at many levels. The Green-Campus Programme can involve the use of research findings, student projects, student and staff induction, and the use of art or media departments to produce posters, videos etc.

1. Informing and Involving the Campus and Wider Community

The aim of the informing and involving step is to spread the Green-Campus Committee’s message throughout the campus and the wider community through ongoing publicity (website, Facebook, media interaction, posters etc.) and a ‘Day of Action’. The ‘Day of Action’ is an opportunity for students, staff, and the wider community to get together to work towards achieving some of the targets set out in the action plan. On some campuses the ‘Day of Action’ was carried out in conjunction with local or national projects (e.g., Tidy Towns, National Spring Clean, Energy Awareness Week, Tree Week, Bike Week, etc.). Green-Campus Committees can also link with existing Green Weeks on Campus to bring local management issues to a wider audience.

1. Green Charter

The Green Charter is essentially a “this is how we do things here” guide to environmental management on site. Most organisations will have a substantial Environmental Policy in existence with specific policy statements related to waste, energy, water, and other environmental issues. This is often a large document and not easily remembered by staff or students. The differences between an environmental policy and the green charter are the former is an expression of what the campus intends to do and aids at the strategic/management level; the latter is how the campus community can achieve the aims through specific advice and information. The Green Charter may contain an environmental policy but essentially it should be a guidance document on how environmental issues are handled on campus. It should include contact details for the Green-Campus Committee, targets from the action plans and best practice guidance specific to the campus. The Green Charter should be a space on the website accessible to those that use the campus, students, staff, and visitors, where environmental information can be published and, more importantly, updated. The Green Charter is designed to be compiled after the action plan has been implemented and the monitoring and evaluation steps have been carried out.

**School Sustainability Policy**

Whole-school approaches to sustainability lie at the heart of effective learning for sustainability.

A whole-school approach to sustainability involves:

* integrating environmental sustainability learning across the institution. – mindsets
* entrenching sustainability in governance, teaching and learning frameworks, and campus and facilities management, schools can provide learners with consistent opportunities to live what they learn.
* developing an inclusive whole-school plan by engaging all players – students, staff, parents, partners, and community stakeholders,
* drafting a future-oriented perspective to increase the impact of your plan and student motivation,
* shifting from a focus on environmental education to learning for sustainability, as the latter regards learners as active and engaged agents of change.
* Active Student Inclusion

As teachers we have the privilege to be able to engage directly with young people who: are passionate about the natural world, want to do their best to protect it, can influence their wider communities.

Through students learned and lived experiences from primary through secondary school to further and higher education, we will provide opportunities to develop a broad knowledge and understanding of the importance of nature, sustainability and the causes and impact of climate change and to translate this knowledge into positive action and solutions.

Connection with nature declines in childhood to an overall low in the mid-teens. Creating an environment from an early age where we can connect to nature is essential for self-enforcement in protecting and valuing nature’.

Through our policy we should increase opportunities for all to:

* spend time in nature and learn more about it.
* become actively involved in the improvement of their local environment.

We know that regular contact with **green spaces** can have a beneficial impact on physical and mental health. However, access to green space is not equal and we must do more to ensure that all have opportunities to benefit from access to green space and build connections with nature.

Climate adaptation and decarbonisation activity in nurseries, schools, colleges, and universities can provide powerful learning opportunities. Young people can:

* participate in the implementation of climate adaptation measures.
* learn in buildings designed for net zero.
* find out more about the impact of energy and water use.
* Seeing sustainability brought to life in the buildings around them will allow children and young people to gain experiences which will enhance and contextualise their learning.

By developing and delivering evidence-based solutions for decarbonisation and climate resilience we will:

* reduce energy demand.
* adapt to climate risks.
* drive innovation in construction.
* act as a catalyst for green jobs.
* deliver savings.

We will also drive a wide range of additional benefits that will contribute to a vibrant and resilient education community, including:

* health
* biodiversity
* the environment
* learning and play opportunities.

**Green jobs** will not be niche. It is anticipated that sustainability and climate change will touch every career. This is especially true in the VET sector. Schools through sustainability Initiatives open learners’ minds to opportunities in the Green Economy. Sustainability competences will be a key element of future qualifications. The is a clear need to incorporate sustainability within the vocational curriculum and responding to the needs of employers in this regard. Microcredential in this subject area may also play an important role.

In Conclusion there is a strong case for having a sustainability policy in your college. It can take inspiration from existing European, National, and local policies and initiatives, it needs to be holistic and inclusive, it needs to integrate into other school policies, it needs to recognise the learning that can be gained through whole school sustainability action, it can feed into the curriculum and future job market, and it can interact with other initiatives, such as Green Campus. There should be space for both staff and student initiatives. The policy should support greener choices in built environment, equipment, and day to day activities. But perhaps most importantly it needs a high level of buy in from all, both staff and students to ensure that the policy acts as a lived experience and genuinely brings about changes in both behaviour and mindsets.