



European Education Area Strategic Framework Higher Education Working Group

Peer Learning Activity on the contribution of the higher
education sector to the green transition and sustainable
development

6-7 December 2022

Policy Conclusions



Contents

SETTING THE SCENE	3
Setting and participation.....	3
Aim and context	3
Status quo and progress.....	3
SUMMARY OF POLICY CONCLUSIONS: ten policies to enhance the contribution of the higher education sector to the green transition and sustainable development.....	5
MESSAGES ON POLICY MAKING	6
Developing national frameworks	6
Making a commitment to lifelong learning and aligning related sector policies	7
Providing resources and incentives	7
Empowering students	8
Building staff capacity	9
Greening the campus.....	10
Enhancing local and external engagement.....	11
Monitoring and evaluating	13
FURTHER ACTION AT THE EU LEVEL	14



SETTING THE SCENE

Setting and participation

The Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the contribution of the higher education sector to the green transition and sustainable development took place online from 6-7 December 2022. It was co-hosted by the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and the European Commission. Nine countries¹ participated, at both ministry and institutional levels, along with the European Student Union, European University Association, EURASHE, European Training Foundation and the EIT Climate-KIC.

The aim and the context

The aim of this PLA was to explore how the higher education sector is contributing to the green transition and sustainable development, and to discuss the effectiveness of the related policies and practices implemented by higher education authorities and institutions. The PLA also provided an opportunity to discuss the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on Learning for the Green Transition and Sustainable Development](#) and the green elements of the [European Strategy for Universities](#), both adopted earlier in 2022.

The PLA highlighted the leading role of the higher education sector in managing the across all of their missions of teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement, as well as operations and infrastructure. At the same time, the discussions underscored the importance of adequate funding and resources to tackle challenges, as well as the urgency of action in this area.

Status quo and progress

The PLA confirmed the results of the EUA survey (2021), which showed that sustainable development is on the agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs), with most addressing the topic strategically, or planning to do so. HEIs consider the topic as part of their values, reflecting the engagement of their students, staff and wider community. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are increasingly influencing HEIs. For instance, in curricular reform, three out of five institutions address the SDGs.

While pioneering HEIs are often driving developments, a systematic approach is essential to drive change. The PLA showed that many systems are at an early stage of developing their policy approaches. While the majority of the systems have in place **some** strategies and/or plans in this domain, the design of effective policies to mobilise autonomous institutions is challenging, as evidenced in the uneven results among HEIs in anchoring sustainability in their activities, including curricula and programmes. More than half of the countries participating in the PLA have mobilised new, or adapted existing, incentives to promote the contribution of the higher education sector, typically in the form of funding for collaborative efforts and projects, often taking advantage of European funding. At the same time, there is scope to build on student activism through policy levers, such as quality assurance, capacity building of staff, or rewards and prizes. Challenges remain in achieving

¹ Albania, Austria, Denmark, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and Sweden.

policy coherence and shared understanding of the breadth of learning, encompassing environmental, social and economic dimensions and knowledge, skills, values and attitudes.

While devising their strategies and policies, authorities and institutions can build on the assurance that **the commitment to the green transition and sustainable development can provide a useful focus through which many other policy objectives can be delivered.** These include: inclusion; higher quality teaching and learning; improved employability and the acquisition of relevant skills and competencies; community and regional engagement; active citizenship; global outreach; and efficiency gains. The green transition in campus operations can have a positive effect on student and staff wellbeing, and can make institutions more attractive places to study and work.

Policies should drive whole-of-institution approaches, embedding greening and sustainability across all missions, leadership, infrastructure and operations, and making greening and sustainable development a collective responsibility. At institutional level, typical elements of such approaches include: leadership commitment to sustainable development; structures, resources and communication; empowerment and mobilisation of students and staff; and monitoring and evaluation.

A practical step for authorities to encourage HEIs to address the green transition and sustainable development is to support dialogue between government and the higher education community. There is room for improvement in this respect, as the results of the PLA survey indicate that only in six countries are all internal stakeholders – HEIs, students and staff – included in the development of related strategies and plans, while even fewer involve external stakeholders.

SUMMARY OF POLICY CONCLUSIONS: ten policies to enhance the contribution of the higher education sector to the green transition and sustainable development

- A clearly articulated **policy framework**, along with the alignment of sector policies, can help develop effective approaches to the green transition and sustainable development in higher education.
- Adequate **core funding and incentives**: authorities can build on the existing financial frameworks and/or inject fresh funds to develop incentives in the form of direct budget support, specific grants for initiatives, and an annual budget for greening. Additional time-limited project funds can generate rapid changes in the behaviour of institutions, but require careful design and monitoring to ensure sustainability beyond the project end. Embedding greening and sustainable development through performance contracts is a useful approach as it enables adaptation to institutional differences, and creates a secure base for the promotion of the green transition. Funding schemes can draw on various EU funding sources, and drive the overall reform of the sector.
- **Spreading good practice** and innovation in the green transition and sustainable development across the HE system is a challenge in many HE systems, which points to the need for knowledge sharing. Authorities can support collaborative projects and national scale-up of isolated or institution-specific innovations. National and EU-level centres, platforms, agencies and organisations can drive the transformation, as they allow accumulation of expertise. Awards and prizes for innovation and achievement in the green transition and sustainable development are effective and cost-efficient tools to mobilise the HE community; with competitive mechanisms and a rigorous evaluation, they can oblige applicants to align their actions with the national and EU policy goals.
- **Students and young people** are the driving force for the green transition and sustainable development, pushing for transformation in strategies, teaching, research and community engagement, and management and campus operations. As the largest single group within higher education institutions, their behavioural changes can generate positive impact, as well as important cost savings. At the national and institutional level, efforts should be stepped up to include students in the design and implementation of sustainability strategies. Student volunteering and extracurricular activities would also merit stronger support, given their many benefits in developing skills and competences, and alleviating climate- and eco-anxiety.
- **All staff**, academic and non-academic, will need support to embed the green transition and sustainable development in their activities and duties – whether teaching, research, management and administration or institutional leadership. Policy frameworks and incentives should ensure that the staff in all HE institutions have access to training and support. This may call for reforms in professional development covering initial and in-service training as well as reward systems, time allocation and career frameworks. Peer learning and cooperation are useful, for instance in the form of leadership development programmes, which are lacking in many countries or do not cover the green transition and sustainability.
- HEIs can lead by example in enhancing sustainability and the green transition, starting with their own **facilities and infrastructure**. Tax incentives, low-interest loans for green investment and EU funding can help offset the high upfront costs of green building. Authorities can provide technical assistance in the development and implementation of campus management systems, encourage staff training and knowledge sharing through a platform, agency or networks and initiatives that provide

Directorate-General for Education and Culture

Working Group on Higher Education

high-quality materials, tools and assessment. They can also encourage the use of labelling and management tools that enable institutions to develop and highlight their approaches to the green transition.

- The natural setting for most HEIs to drive the green transition and sustainable development is their **local and regional setting** by building long-term partnerships. Authorities can enhance local engagement through institutional autonomy. Authorities can support collaborative efforts between HEIs and schools to improve the relevance and quality of teaching and learning. HEIs should also strengthen the capacity within the local industry and equip the local population with lifelong learning skills to help them adjust to the green and digital transitions and the changes in the labour market that are likely to hit some regions harder than others.
- Investments in **lifelong learning**, including financial support for employees for study, is important because many will need upskilling or retraining. System-level dialogue with the trade unions and employers can help develop an inclusive and flexible model for the retraining system. Support for the development and take-up of small volume learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials can also enhance the green transition.
- **Monitoring progress:** initiatives in sustainability merit careful monitoring and evaluation as they can inform further policy development and implementation. Embedding sustainability in performance management and quality assurance regulations and policies would enable monitoring whether institutions are making progress in this domain. Whatever systems are used, authorities need to balance between accountability and institutional autonomy, by keeping HEIs' reporting duties to the minimum, and using new data-driven solutions that take account of the evolving needs of institutions for sustainability and efficiency measures. European level efforts focus on inclusion in the graduate tracking system and the HE observatory, as well as continuing efforts at the EU level, together with the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB), on the development of possible indicators or EU-level targets in the area of sustainability, including greening of education and training systems.
- Further **European efforts** could focus on the further development of data and monitoring through the planned European Higher Education Sector Observatory; continued prioritisation of the green transition in Erasmus+ calls; and more evidence gathering and peer learning.

PLA MESSAGES ON POLICY MAKING

Developing national frameworks underpin the contribution of the HE sector to the green transition and sustainable development.

While all PLA systems are likely to have pioneering institutions that will champion the green transition and sustainable development, a wider transformation of the higher education sector will require enabling policy frameworks that can drive a system-level transformation.

Evidence from the PLA suggests that systems that wish to make progress in this domain could benefit from a focus on the following aspects:

- making a commitment to incorporating the green transition and sustainable development into lifelong learning, and aligning related sector policies;
- providing resources and incentives;
- empowering students;
- building staff capacity;
- greening the campus;
- enhancing local engagement and engagement with social partners; and
- monitoring and evaluating.

Making a commitment to incorporating the green transition and sustainable development into lifelong learning, and aligning related sector policies

National systems with a commitment to lifelong learning and sustainable development have a strong basis to enhance the contribution of the HE sector to the green transition and sustainable development. In Ireland, the [Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development: ESD to 2030](#) underpins the approaches to sustainable development in the framework of SDGs and covers a coherent lifelong learning approach from early years to higher education and research, and youth and community development. The development of the National Plans on Education for Sustainable Development takes place within the context of the ESD Strategy, the Government Climate Action Plan and the National SDG Implementation Plan, with a wide and on-going consultation to ensure alignment with cross-sectoral policies. National high-level steering committee and advisory committees for schools and HEIs are also in place.

Alignment across sector policies helps develop effective approaches to the green transition and sustainable development. Policies are part of a broader framework of sectoral policies covering pre-tertiary education, research and innovation, employment, energy and industry, regional development etc. A clearly articulated framework with alignment and synergies of sector policies implies interministerial collaboration and inclusion of education and training in the green transition and sustainability strategies and plans of other sectors. In Slovenia, the reform of the HE sector "for a Green and Resilient Transition to Society 5.0" is interlinked with a broader whole-of-government reform towards a "[Circular, Regenerative and Low-Carbon Economy in Slovenia](#)" that Slovenian Government is undertaking in cooperation with Climate KIC.

Providing resources and incentives

National authorities can incentivise HEIs to develop their approaches to the green transition and sustainable development by developing new or building on existing financial frameworks and incentives. Lack of funding and resources is the main barrier preventing HEIs from engaging in the greening and sustainability activities. Institutions under financial pressure will need support for increasing the sustainability-focused teaching and research, engaging in outreach, and retrofitting their buildings. Adequate core funding for HEIs,

incentive funds to innovate, and encouragement to use the resources efficiently provide the basis for sustainable funding strategies for the green transition and environmental sustainability. Autonomous institutions need targeted incentives to actively engage in green transition and sustainable development. Long-term funding and ‘flexible’ funds are key to HEIs’ engagement. **effective and cost-efficient tools to mobilise the HE community. By using competitive mechanisms and a rigorous evaluation they can oblige applicants to align their actions with the national and EU strategies.** The biennial [Higher Education Sustainability Award](#) in Austria is a long-term joint initiative of the ministries in charge of HE and climate protection with the aim to promote, share and embed sustainability processes in the HE sector. Despite the lack of financial awards, the competition has become more popular over the years and is attracting an increasing number of collaborative projects between HEIs.

Authorities can also support collaborative projects of HEIs to drive the greening of the HE sector as they allow knowledge sharing and accumulation of experience. In Austria, the federal ministry is supporting the multi-annual, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary project [UniNEtZ \(“Universities and Sustainable Development Goals”\)](#), which has generated an options report for the implementation of the SDGs as a result of work of over 300 scientists, artists and students. The implementation of options is currently ongoing. The project is engaging 16 of the 22 public universities.

National or EU-level centres and organisations which serve the HE sector can drive the green transition and sustainable development as they allow accumulation of specialised expertise and knowledge sharing. New openings in this domain include Romania’s Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development and the Advisory Council for Sustainable Development (est. 2020) and Sweden’s “transition organisations” that will be run by the social partners to evaluate the labour market relevance of the new learning pathways for transition training and reskilling. The **European Universities initiative** can also be an important driver for the green transition and sustainable development in HE sector. It can inform and empower the efforts of a partner HE institution in such a transnational alliance on the road to sustainability, as is the case for the University of Ljubljana, one of the partners in the EUTOPIA transnational alliance which also focuses on sustainable development. At the European level, the European Institute for innovation and Technology ([EIT](#)) can build capacity among HEIs through their Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) such as the EIT Climate-KIC, and the [HEI Initiative](#).

Empowering HE students

Students and young people are the driving force for the green transition and sustainable development, pushing for transformation in HE strategies, teaching, research and community engagement, and management and campus operations. As the largest group of the HE community, students are important multipliers in the wider society, and can lead the sustainability action in many different ways, from advocacy and political organisation to supporting citizens in making sustainable choices, from greening the study programmes to redesigning HE services and campus management. The European Student Union stresses that **HEIs that welcome active student involvement are also more likely to develop and implement effective approaches to teaching and learning for the green transition and environmental sustainability. Evidence from the PLA points to under-utilised opportunities** in the co-creation of educational efforts and engaging students in the co-creation of teaching and curricula, in partnerships between HEIs and student unions, and in the support for student-led initiatives. Opportunities for student volunteering and extracurricular activities would also merit stronger support, given their many benefits in developing skills and competences, and alleviating climate- and eco-anxiety.

On national and institutional level, students should be included in the design and implementation of sustainability strategies as equal members of the academic community, and to bring added value. The current national measures tend to focus on supporting bottom-up initiatives driven by students. The best example in this respect is France, where the HE authorities are supporting several student- driven initiatives and projects which are greening HEIs and training students in sustainability and advocacy. These include the [Grenoble Agreement](#), signed by 86 HEIs, which lays out over 180 binding measures for HEIs and has been complemented with a useful for implementation, co-developed by students and staff; the annual [Student Week of Ecology and Solidarity](#), organized by a network of 150 student associations, and the “[Platform for Education and Ecological Transition](#)”, developed through collaboration of two students associations² that bring together 30 000 students in 60 associations. In Austria, a dedicated student association, [Forum n](#) represents the interests of students in the SDG committee and in the UniNEtZ council, overseeing the priority area in "Transformation in Teaching".

Proactive institutions that champion whole-of-institution approaches can make the most of the student activism, by involving students in redesigning HE services, campus operations and teaching and learning to meet the needs of green transition and sustainable development. University College Cork (UCC) is a prime example of a HEI where students are actively engaged in driving and shaping the green transition and sustainable development. Students were the driving force for the UCC to become a Green Flag campus and their activism has encouraged the university to deliver bigger, more impactful projects efforts such as becoming a single-use plastic free campus by 2023. The recent outputs of the students’ campus-wide Climate Assembly will inform the development of the UCC’s new Sustainability Strategy and Climate Action Plan.

Building staff capacity

All HE staff will need support for embedding green transition and sustainable development in their activities and duties – whether teaching, research, management and administration, or technical support. It is up to the authorities to develop policy frameworks and effective incentives to ensure that staff in all HEIs have access to training, support and encouragement. **This may imply support in the form of professional development and rewards, or reforms in time allocation and career frameworks. Authorities can also support progress through provision of competitive funding or pump priming for national units, platforms, associations or networks which provide advisory and support services for HEIs or their staff.**

Academic staff requires substantial support in order to embed sustainable development into teaching and curricula. Institutional leaders and national/regional authorities can ensure that incentives are available for the development and take-up of professional development through initial and in-service training, and for innovations in teaching and learning. Open courses and reward tools highlighted in the PLA include UCC’s [SDG Toolkit](#) for professional development of academic staff, with competitive funding from Ireland’s National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and the Higher Education Authority, and a [Digital Badge](#) for lecturers who complete a self-paced short course that helps them embed sustainability / SDGs into teaching. Similar efforts have been made by the [Alliance of Sustainable Universities](#) in Austria: their blended, [further education course](#) (4 ECTS, 100

² “Pour un réveil écologique” (For an Ecological Awakening) and “Together for earth”

working hours) leads to a Certificate for University Teachers' Education for Sustainable Development.

Management and administrative staff also need support and acknowledgement for meeting the challenges in sustainable development and greening. Those undertaking environmental management tasks require training and competences and access to relevant technologies and developments in sustainability³. In addition to such specialised staff positions, many other technical and administrative roles and positions need to consider sustainability requirements. University networks such as the [Alliance of Sustainable Universities in Austria](#)⁴ are bringing together working groups on diverse topics (e.g. climate neutrality, mobility, sustainable procurement etc.) for peer support and development of minimum standards, handbooks, and strategy concepts.

Finally, leaders play a key role in achieving sustainable results in the green transition and sustainable development. Evidence from the PLA suggests that support for strategic and distributed leadership helps build an environment for transformative change as it underpins the student and staff activism and enables the institution to take strategic decisions with important trade-offs such on [divestment of fossil fuels](#), and commitment to the [Principles of Responsible Investment](#). Cross-country collaborations through Erasmus+ are useful in capacity building, and particularly in leadership development for senior leaders.

Greening the campus

Greening campuses will allow HEIs to lead by example in enhancing sustainability and the green transition, starting with their own facilities and infrastructure. This will imply tackling a large number of aspects in the campus management: Reduction of the carbon footprint through durable / biodegradable materials; promotion of a circular economy and transition to renewable resources; action plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to achieve climate neutrality; mapping and reporting all the emissions of HEIs; embedding sustainability in ethical guidelines and climate neutral procurement; divesting from fossil fuels and alignment with the [UN Principles for Responsible Investment](#) and avoiding deals with oil, gas and coal companies that involve financing research incompatible with the commitments to reach the SDGs⁵.

A key effort by national/regional authorities is to encourage energy efficient greener campuses through building and renovation works. Progress in green buildings is important because buildings constitute the second biggest cost item for HEIs with rising costs, and they generate more than third of global greenhouse gas emissions⁶. Given the higher upfront costs of green buildings, HEIs will need access to loans with low interest rates for green investment, tax incentives and EU funds. Dissemination of HEI-level innovations such as [UCC's Saver Saves Scheme](#) that has led to 21% reduction in absolute energy consumption across the institution would merit wide dissemination at the HE system and European level.

In addition to funding incentives, authorities can provide technical assistance in the development and implementation of campus management systems, encourage staff

³ Specialised staff for the management of energy, water, waste, mobility and ICT.

⁴ Alliance was established in 2012 and currently brings together professionals with various sustainable development responsibilities from 19 of the 22 federal universities,

⁵ European Student Union. Executive Committee. Statement on Sustainability. BM77, <https://esu-online.org/policies/bm77-statement-on-sustainability/>

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/09/how-to-build-zero-carbon-buildings>

training and support knowledge sharing through platforms, dedicated agencies, networks etc. which target HEIs and their people and provide high-quality materials, tools and assessment. For instance, in Austria, [UniNEtZ](#) is working to embed the SDGs at a university management and operations. In France, the authorities are supporting a bottom-up initiative by researchers to develop sustainable approaches in laboratories ([Labos 1.5](#)). While the Labos 1.5 platform aims at reducing the environmental impact of research, its impact goes beyond the research community e.g. thanks to [videos for higher education](#) that are targeting HE lecturers and students.

Encouraging the use of management and labelling tools for sustainable development is another effective way to enhance the green transition in HEIs. Such tools allow institutions to promote their sustainable approaches and make them more attractive places to work and study⁷. In France, the 2009 environmental protection law underpinned the greening efforts in the HE sector, by prescribing tools such as the “[Green Plan](#)” (Plan Vert in French) for all HEIs, and the [DD&RS Label for sustainable development and social responsibility](#). In Ireland, the [Green Campus Programme](#)⁸, operated by the National Trust for Ireland, is engaging 40 campuses, including 19 that have been awarded the Green Flag that ensures a structured approach and engagement of the campus community, through [seven steps](#)⁹, aligned with the ‘plan-do-check-act’ management method used in Environmental Management System Standards.

Whole-of-institution approaches are exemplified by the University Politehnica Bucharest (UPB) which is using the sustainable development and digitalisation as levers for reforming its campus operations, buildings and processes making the university a more attractive place to study and work. In UPB, building operations, such as retrofitting, improving energy efficiency and creating alternative energy sources are used to provide hands-on training for students and in research and development activities. A campus-based school and kindergarten are providing opportunities to learn about green transition at an early age and benefit from on-campus outdoor learning, while improving the learning outcomes and providing a pipeline to student recruitment. Digitalisation of research reports, travel applications and exchange of information with the ministry is reducing not only the paper-based reporting, but also the overall administrative burden and work-related stress among staff. UPB’s influence goes beyond the campus as it is an active member of local, national and international clusters, networks, projects and initiatives that relate to green transition and sustainable development.

Enhancing HEIs’ local and external engagement

HEIs are increasingly expected to take an active role in green transition and sustainable development through local and external engagement. A wide portfolio of activities could be used, such as connecting education and research to the authentic challenges in the local community, engagement with the local actors – authorities, school and other education and research institutions, business and industry, and civil society – in the green and digital skills

⁷ Several tools are available for HEIs, see: https://www.eauc.org.uk/theplatform/getting_started

⁸ Green Campus is run by FEE (the Foundation for Environmental Education). Green-Schools and Green-Campus are operated by the NGOs that are the FEE members in each of the participating countries. The Green-Campus Programme cover themes such as: Litter and Waste, Energy, Water, Transport, Climate Change, and Biodiversity, Green ICT. Other areas that can be examined in parallel with the themes include: Procurement, Air Quality, Climate Change and Climate Justice.

⁹ Green-Campus Committee, environmental review, action plan, monitoring and evaluation, linking to learning on campus, and informing and involving the campus and wider community

development, corporate social responsibility and sustainable development, participating in relevant local and thematic networks and working groups, and supporting local action for biodiversity.

Authorities can enhance the local engagement of HEIs in the green transition and sustainable development (and in general) by removing the barriers in governance and improving incentive structures. Governance arrangements which offer sufficient autonomy and appropriate accountability mechanisms are key enablers for HEIs' local and regional engagement in general and for the green transition and sustainable development. Institutional autonomy over human and financial resources, real estate and curriculum allows HEIs to respond to the challenges and opportunities arising from the local and regional level. Appropriate public accountability mechanisms include local representation in the institution's governance and performance evaluations as well as performance management and contracts which enable adaptation to institutional differences and the local context. Appropriate incentives build on adequate core funding, incentive funds for HEIs to innovate, and encouraging them to use their resources efficiently.

Cooperation with local actors on the green transition and sustainable development would benefit from a wide engagement agenda with the local government and industry, civil society and the community. Such engagement would mobilise the entire HEI and its knowledge fields to address the local challenges and opportunities arising from the green transition and sustainable development. It mainstreams engagement in the green transition and sustainable development in teaching and research, and balances the ad hoc, consultancy-type collaborations with long-term local partnerships.

HEIs can use the city and the region where they are based as a 'laboratory' for student learning, research and community development through education projects, internships and volunteering, collaborative research activities, cluster development, new business formation, and support for the existing industries in various ways to adapt to the green transition and sustainable development needs. For instance, La Rochelle University in France is working towards the first zero-carbon coastal urban area, building on its multidisciplinary strengths, a dedicated institute (LUDI intelligent sustainable urban coastline institute) and projects such as wetland restoration to preserve biodiversity and improve the living environment. The University Politehnica of Bucharest is active in local and national hubs, projects and cluster development, for instance in smart cities network.

Given the importance of education and training in this domain, authorities can support collaborative efforts between HEIs and schools to improve the relevance and quality of teaching and learning at schools, and learning outcomes, through support for projects that develop knowledge, attitudes and competences in sustainable development among children and youth and their teachers. PLA case studies from Austria show how the federal ministry is supporting a range of interconnected projects that combine innovative teaching and learning for children and youth with teacher training opportunities (Teacher-Training k.i.d.Z.21; course "Students as climate change educators" and the project "makingAchange"). The University College Cork is also using collaborative creative projects for schools and community groups to explore environmental and sustainability issues. Such projects have reached out to children in rural schools and trained their teachers through a masterclass accredited in the Centre for Continuing Professional Development. The final product will be a toolkit for schools throughout Ireland¹⁰.

HEIs' efforts in education and training can strengthen the capacity within the local industry and equip the local population with lifelong learning skills to help them adjust to the green and digital transitions and changes in the labour market. Such training is

¹⁰ <https://www.ucc.ie/en/greencampus/practice/teaching-and-learning/the-glucksman-gallery/>

important in all countries and can be adapted to respond to the local and regional needs. For instance, UCC, in collaboration with two other HEIs, has developed a joint Post Graduate Certificate and MSc in Sustainability in Enterprise, to respond to the growing need for graduates in sustainability. The part-time and online programmes are open to recent graduates and those in employment. UCC also offers an award-winning, regularly oversubscribed university-wide module on sustainability with almost even distribution among students, staff and the general public for additional credit, CPD, or a digital badge. It has also reached out to local rural towns via streaming, and led to a group demonstration project in their towns.

Investments in access to further education for people in employment, including financial support enabling them to invest time to study is increasingly important because many will need upskilling or retraining to move from unsustainable jobs to sustainable ones. System-level dialogue with social partners can help develop an inclusive, flexible and fit-for-purpose model for the retraining system. Targeting part of the efforts to local level may be called for the reasons of just transition. Sweden that relies on collective bargaining has introduced a transition package to future proof the Swedish labour market, improving its flexibility, adaptability and security. This package that was developed in collaboration with the trade unions and employer organisations covers: a labour law reform, a new financing scheme for transition and retraining, and transition and skills support. **Providing support for flexible learning opportunities for green transition and sustainable development that lead to micro-credentials can also support the change in the labour market.** Several PLA countries are offering such opportunities. For instance, in Slovenia, the majority of professional courses designed in the course of the higher education reform will lead to micro-credentials.

Monitoring and evaluating

Monitoring progress, developing key performance indicators and evaluating impacts remain challenges. **The ongoing national and institutional pilots and experimentations supporting the green transition and sustainable development merit careful monitoring and evaluation as they can inform further policy development and implementation at both national and institutional levels.** Case studies suggest that monitoring would benefit from an explicit theory of change to inform the approaches and decision making of these experimentations and initiatives by defining the long-term goals and identifying the necessary preconditions to reach them. Inspiration could be found from Slovenia's learning-by-doing approach through the use of short-cycle, interactive monitoring of ongoing reform which builds on frequent feedback loops to ensure progress towards the goals. At EU level, the graduate tracking system and the HE Observatory could be geared for the monitoring purposes, e.g. through situational surveys and close collaboration with national authorities such as statistical offices. New data-driven methods could be used to analyse the outcomes of multi-annual programmes that encompass a large number of projects, such as Austria's UniNETZ or higher education sustainability awards. In general, evaluations could focus on 'what works' in practice, underpinned by the systematic use of evidence to inform policy at national and institutional levels. **The results of evaluations should be widely communicated within the HE community as well as the larger audience to bring attention to the role that HEIs are playing in the green transition and sustainable development.**

Embedding sustainability in the performance management and quality assurance regulations and policies would allow national authorities and institutional leaders to monitor progress in the green transition and sustainable development. In countries such as Ireland monitoring is embedded in performance management with regular reporting by HEIs every 18 months, while Austria relies on discussions with the institutions. Quality assurance

remains an under-utilised tool in the current policy mixes for sustainable development. Authorities wishing to make progress in this area could take inspiration from Switzerland that has integrated sustainable development in its guidance on institutional accreditation¹¹. Where relevant, authorities should also enable the shift from programme to institutional evaluation in order to allow greater autonomy for institutions to design their study programmes.

Experience across PLA countries highlights the need to strike a balance between accountability and institutional autonomy, by keeping HEIs' reporting duties to the necessary minimum, and using new data-driven systems that take account of the evolving needs of institutions for sustainability and efficiency measures. Developing relevant key performance indicators and streamlining the data collection and reporting systems can reduce administrative effort in reporting duties for institutions and reduce their carbon footprint and paper-based reporting. The experience of institutions, such as the UPB in Romania, can help authorities and other institutions address the digital and green transition and reduce the administrative burden through digitalising administrative operations including data sharing with the education authorities.

FURTHER ACTION AT THE EU LEVEL

The European Commission contributes to the strengthening of the evidence-based policies in systems and institutions by commissioning comparative research, and fostering mobility, training opportunities and institutional collaboration. The upcoming European Higher Education Sector Observatory will contribute to improved data and monitoring in this area. The Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB) is going to continue its efforts on the development of possible indicators or EU-level targets in the area of sustainability.

The open method of coordination enhances peer learning, networking and cooperation between governments and HEIs. Further exchanges between policy makers, HEIs and their staff and students will be valuable as HE systems and institutions make progress in developing their approaches to the green transition and sustainable development. Topics could include monitoring and evaluation systems.

¹¹ QA Swiss institutional Accreditation Ordinance: <https://aaq.ch/en/accreditation/institutional-accreditation/>