The SDG Accord

The University and College Sector's Collective Response to the Global Goals

Building the Foundations for ESD: Curriculum Mapping as a Driver for Institutional Change

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

SDG focus

☒ Goal 4 - Quality education
☒ Goal 13 - Climate action
☒ Goal 17 - Partnerships for the goals

What did you do?

In 2024, Queen's University Belfast undertook institution-wide curriculum mapping to support a strategic, whole-institution approach to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The project reviewed over 2,500 modules across fifteen Schools. While strong ESD practice already existed in many areas, it was often developed locally and lacked visibility across the institution. A survey-based approach engaged academic leads for 304 modules, while the remainder were reviewed using module information including module descriptions, learning outcomes and skills.

This process provided Queen's with its first comprehensive baseline of sustainability-related teaching. It brought together examples of good practice, highlighted variation in interpretation, and enabled the university to articulate a clear institutional position on ESD.

The findings directly informed revised module templates, the introduction of SDG tagging, and new visibility expectations, and contributed to the development of Queen's institutional ESD Framework, connecting curriculum, staff development, student engagement, and Living Labs.

What were the benefits and outcomes?

1. Established a strategic baseline

The mapping process provided Queen's with its first university-wide picture of where and how sustainability was being addressed in teaching. It helped surface good practice, highlighted opportunities, and supported the development of a more connected, strategic approach to ESD.

2. Enhanced institutional infrastructure

The project informed updates to QSIS, Queen's student information system, and Canvas, the university's learning management system. ESD and SDG prompts were embedded across module forms used for proposals, amendments, annual reviews, and periodic School reviews. These updates are helping to ensure that sustainability is visible both internally and externally, and embedded within core quality assurance processes.

Further developments include:

- A self-assessment tool for staff to reflect on their engagement with ESD
- Canvas integration to highlight sustainability in teaching and assessment
- Dashboards and audit trails to support internal review and external reporting

Together, these systems provide the foundation for a more consistent and accountable integration of sustainability across the curriculum.

3. Evidence base for strategy

The mapping exercise also informed the development of Queen's institutional ESD Framework. By connecting curriculum activity with Living Labs, student engagement, and staff development, the framework ensures ESD is embedded not only in modules but also in wider institutional culture and practice. Students benefit from clearer signposting and more meaningful opportunities to engage with sustainability throughout their studies.

What barriers or challenges did you encounter in embedding sustainability into your learning and teaching practice and how did you overcome them?

Variation in interpretation across disciplines

The mapping revealed that sustainability was described and documented differently across the institution. In response, Queen's developed a tiered classification system (sustainability-supportive, -inclusive, -focused), supported by shared definitions and examples. ESD is now embedded into the annual module review process, enabling more consistent, ongoing updates.

Disconnected systems and data limitations

Before 2025, there was no structured way to record or report sustainability information. QSIS (Queen's Student Information System) and Canvas LMS operated independently, and relevant data could not be easily tracked. Updates going live in October 2025 will enable this information to be captured, reviewed, and used to support curriculum development, staff training, and student choice.

Limited visibility and engagement

For some staff and students, sustainability was associated mainly with environmental issues, which limited its perceived relevance. Queen's is addressing this by providing clearer definitions, practical examples, and tailored guidance to show how ESD connects with different disciplines. This work is part of the wider ESD Framework, which aims to build confidence, clarity, and relevance across the university.

What are your conclusions and recommendations for others?

At Queen's, curriculum mapping offered a valuable opportunity to explore how sustainability was represented in module information. The process helped identify where greater consistency and visibility could be supported through updated systems and shared guidance.

Key recommendations:

- Where access to information is difficult, it may indicate an opportunity to align systems with evolving priorities like ESD.
- Integrate sustainability into existing approval and review processes, supported by system updates that allow for tracking and reporting.
- Use mapping as a platform for wider change. At Queen's, it informed an ESD Framework connecting curriculum, student engagement, staff development, and Living Labs.