Report on workshop

'What should Higher Education Institutions do about the Planetary Crisis?', Queen's University Belfast 15th March 2024

"I was taught how to see, not where to look"

Introduction

As a follow up meeting to the workshop held in Galway in November 2023, was held at Queen's University Belfast on 15th March 2024, attended by over 100 people from across the island and made up of students, administrative and academic staff members. The event, held in the Whitla Hall, was funded by the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, hosted by the Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, and facilitated by Hilary Bradbury and Chris Chapman.

General

Of the many general /context setting issues that was raised on the day, on was a question around where is the 'urgency' of sustainability in the curriculum within HEIs in particular, or more generally for how HEIs operate and are responding (or not) to the planetary emergency? However, others questioned this 'urgency' framing in terms of communicating and motivating people.

Another uncomfortable but vitally important issue that was raised was the following question: "Every discipline should address the elephant in the room: how are we contributing to the crises?", which was related to how some of what is needed is a matter of 'unlearning' as much as additional knowledge production or dissemination.

Sustainability and Climate Mandatory Module

There was support for a mandatory module on sustainability and the planetary crisis, though this was not unanimous. Issues that were discussed around a module included the following.

Interdisciplinary – that it should cover the scientific as well as social scientific aspects of the causes, consequences and solutions to the planetary crisis, including foregrounding issues of injustice and colonial legacies.

Systems and complexity thinking as well as scenario planning should be a key element of any such module

Co-created with students: that any module (mandatory of voluntary) should be co-designed with students.

Collaboratively developed between the different Higher Education Institutions in Ireland, and there was strong support for less competitive relations between the HEIs more generally. There was support that any module should be

specific to the island of Ireland e.g. a focus on 'just transitions' for rural/farming communities, given this sector accounts for the largest portion of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions.

Any module or learning and teaching in relation to the planetary crisis should be mindful of the emotional and psychological impacts of such learning, whether eco/climate anxiety or feelings of being overwhelmed. Compassion and care were themes mentioned that are important to consider explicitly integrating into any module.

Storytelling and narratives: using engaging stories and less preaching or didactic styles of teaching and learning, and crafting modules to inspire and enthuse as well as educate learners. Participants stressed the importance of 'future' and 'climate literacy', ideally getting to a point where people want to do a sustainability module rather than being obliged to take it, a stress on systems thinking and playing to the academic strengths of people and institutions.

Shift from outcome based forms of teaching and learning to competency based, perhaps following the UNESCO competency based learning model. Some participants expressed support for hand on/practical learning experiences for students in terms of using campuses as 'living labs'.

Peer to peer learning, training students and paying them to teach one another

There should be a focus on challenging 'fake news' within any such module.

The design of the content of any module should be aware of the danger of 'greenwashing' and the importance of trust from HEI management in discussing, p[planning and delivering any sustainability teaching and learning module.

There should be space for transformative and disruptive learning in any such module, including teaching about 'theories of change' and how students can be more politically active. This was connected to support for speaking

honestly and from one's personal positons, questioning dominant economic models, the importance of translation, the need for more transparency and to include the more than human world in terms of 'dethroning human exceptionalism'. However, there was also a question around 'value' competency – is it right to teach 'values' or 'civic literacy'?

Democratising universities

There was strong support for not just extending democratic decision-making to the co-designing of sustainability/climate modules with learners, but also for greater democracy more generally, in how HEIs are run and managed. Citizens' Assemblies/Juries –type open decision-making processes were mentioned by a lot of participants as a a necessary part of HEIs' journey to be 'fit for future purpose' in responding to the planetary emergency.

There was a recognition of resistance /opposition to either a mandatory module /greater teaching focus on the planetary crisis or demands for greater democratisation of HEIs. Here the identification of power within universities is a necessary step, including who to contact and collaborate with in terms of allies for HEIs to commit to co-designing, implementing and resourcing any sustainability/climate module. This was also expressed as the need to include oppositional voices in these discussions. There was acceptance of conflict as inevitable but distinction between agonism and antagonism, and seeing the productive aspects of the former, with suggestions for approaching conflict in terms of restorative justice, 'talking yourself out' (again and again), remembering we have two ears and one mouth. The 'they' identified included industry, politicians, trades unions, academics, organisational structures, and suggestions for the network included : democratising the university, citizens' assemblies, setting up climate cafe and councils of all beings in HEIs

The network should include the student voice, and one of the issues raised was the challenge for students reaching power holders/decision-makers within the university, and those with power should be mandated to attend meetings where students are talking about sustainability and climate,

importance of networking, pooling and sharing ideas, keeping connected and bringing in outside perspectives. Create an all island student based network on climate and ecological action, ensure there is a legacy in unions to ensure continuing of this network, engaging alumni in this conversation

All Ireland Network

There was an appreciation amongst participants for the opportunity to connect with others on these issues and a desire for this emerging network to grow and develop, including applying for resources/funding to continue its work. There was a strong desire for action from the network in terms of proposing a mandatory module for HEIs across Ireland via lobbying the Minister/Department for Education in the Republic and the Minister/Department for the Economy in the North. There was also support for meeting with senior management of HEIs across the island via the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (coordinated between UCC and QUB).

There as a desire for the network to be a space of collaboration, solidarity, sharing ideas and initiatives, resources and also to be a practical and supportive incubator of the type of leadership needed at this time within HEIs. This leadership function extended to the network and those within it to be 'brave', 'disruptive' and 'transformative' and for educators to 'practice what they teach'.

"Teach fast and fix things!"