

Submission to the Irish Aid consultations for building an Irish Aid GCE Strategy for 2027-2031

About this submission:

This submission was compiled by the IDEA Higher Education GCE Forum co-convenors following consultation with Forum members in 2026 and the IDEA 2024 consultation with higher education stakeholders that informed the HE section of Vision 2030: Towards a Society of Active Global Citizens.

Forum members are engaged in GCE in Higher Education (HE) as academics, policy makers, researchers, teaching and learning specialists, non-formal and NGO educators, and in this submission, we recommend that the next Irish Aid GCE strategy include a strong, dedicated priority for the advancement of GCE in HE in Ireland. This would build on, and advance, existing support for HE student engagement, teacher education, youth work and adult/community education.

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Key areas of progress

- Progress was made across academic research and publications; integration into disciplines in HE; integration into student leadership structures; Initial Teacher Education; new educational modules and qualifications; Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for HE staff; non-formal programmes for students.
- Examples include: DICE & UBUNTU; STAND's work across campuses on the island of Ireland; research and curriculum integration projects such as the Praxis Project in UCC; Proudly Made in Africa at UCD; UCDVO work at UCD; Creativity and Change at Munster Technological University; GCE in the Department of Humanities SETU; Higher Education Authority (HEA) national digital badge in GCE led by Maynooth University, STAND, Mary Immaculate College, UCC; Mary Immaculate College's M.Ed. in Education for Sustainability & Global Citizenship; Maynooth University's Certificate in GCE; studies offered by the Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education at DCU; Centre for Global Education's *Policy and Practice: Development Education Review*; Research Ireland's New Foundations and Coalesce schemes; Global Health e-modules; the new HE GCE Forum; Student Volunteer Ireland & Gaisce collaboration.

External context

- Rising polarisation, anti-immigrant sentiment & violence, and declining trust in democratic institutions are increasingly affecting social cohesion across Europe and Ireland. The global context has become significantly more unstable since 2021, shaped by climate crisis, war, genocide, weakening of the rules-based order, inequality, displacement and geopolitical instability.
- The urgency of these challenges, and the approaching 2030 SDG deadline, create a need for GCE approaches that strengthen critical thinking, democratic resilience, inclusion, dialogue and active citizenship.
- The cost-of-living and housing crises result in commuting pressures and financial hardship and are reducing opportunities for participation in HE, highlighting the need for flexible, hybrid and accessible learning models.
- Irish society and HE are becoming increasingly diverse, presenting valuable opportunities for inclusive, anti-racist and decolonial approaches to GCE.
- ESD has gained significant traction within HE, while GCE remains less institutionally embedded. This presents opportunities for stronger collaboration and integration. However, lack of clarity around the relationship between GCE and ESD continues to create confusion for educators and institutions, highlighting the need for greater policy coherence, stakeholder coordination, CPD opportunities and further postgraduate research.
- There is growing demand for accredited GCE learning opportunities, curriculum integration and professional development across disciplines, largely driven by committed individuals. A UCC study of 748 students found that 71% expressed definite or possible interest in an accredited GCE module, suggesting demand is outstripping institutional provision.

- At the same time, HEIs are increasingly shaped by commercial, skills-focused and performance-driven pressures. Competing priorities, institutional silos and an emphasis on research outputs make it difficult to create space for transformative and justice-oriented education. This reinforces the need for tailored support and long-term investment rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Civil society organisations working across HE are also operating in an increasingly difficult environment, including funding pressures and inflation.
- From a global health perspective, pandemic-era experience has outpaced curriculum response. COVID-19 and recurrent Ebola/Mpox outbreaks demonstrated the need for knowledge of cross-border disease transmission, outbreak response and global health security, yet these competencies remain largely absent from health curricula.
- AI and digital platforms create an urgent GCE agenda encompassing disinformation, algorithmic bias, the concentration of technological power, data and labour exploitation, environmental and supply-chain impacts, and critical media and AI literacy. Issues that need to be addressed across disciplines rather than confined to technical competence or academic integrity.

Key priorities for 2027–2031

The societal challenges facing Ireland and globally clearly indicate the need to scale GCE and continue investing in the development of critical thinkers across communities. **Higher education needs to be recognised as a key strategic space for GCE, given the scale and diversity of people moving through the sector across Ireland.** With approximately 275,000 students in HE, this is a crucial space for embedding GCE and reaching diverse communities of learners, and commitment from Irish Aid to increasing investment in GCE in HE will be essential - bringing it to similar levels of Irish Aid GCE investment into the school system (which includes ITE).

Embedding GCE institutionally through formal and non-formal initiatives in HE is a long-term process which is why **continued multi-annual investment is important to maintain and scale** the reach to more third-level students. Funding also needs to reflect **inflationary pressures** and **provide greater flexibility** in educational programming to respond in a rapidly changing global context.

An institution-wide approach should encompass curriculum, research, governance, staff development, student leadership, community engagement and the civic and public mission of HEIs. Funding should support named institutional leads, recognised workload allocation and senior-level responsibility, reducing dependence on the unpaid or unrecognised labour of individual champions.

The strategy should pursue two linked but distinct goals: Integrating GCE across disciplines and institutional life; and developing GCE as an interdisciplinary academic field and discipline in its own right. Staff professional development and curriculum integration are important and need to be supported alongside a sustained intellectual development of the field.

We support IDEA's Vision 2030 call to increase investment in GCE progressively to 3% of Official Development Assistance by 2030. A dedicated, transparent and multiannual higher-education funding strand should be included in the new strategy.

1. Scale existing and support new formal and non-formal integration programmes:

- **Scale existing all successful HEI initiatives as listed above under ‘key areas of progress made’,** including the support of existing and initiation of new Strategic Partnerships as a delivery mechanism to achieve a systematic approach to strengthening capacity of HEIs to integrate GCE.
- **Support the integration of GCE within HE disciplines and policy areas** such as global health, climate justice, law, international development, EDI, anti-racism, business, and engineering. These disciplines provide natural entry points for GCE. Global health, for example, illustrates how pandemics, migration, climate change and health inequality intersect, while GCE approaches help learners examine the structural and colonial roots of health outcomes - essential for professionals in humanitarian and global health work who need cultural humility and equity-based practice.
- **Strengthen Global South perspectives in the curriculum through GCE.** For example, around 25,000 third-level students are of African heritage, making this the largest minority group in Irish HE.
- **Further scale non-formal cross-curricular GCE initiatives** across HE to reach diverse audiences of third level students.
- **Scale and initiate new national and campus-based professional development initiatives** for HE staff in association with Teaching and Learning structures. This would, for example, include working towards the integration of GCE into the Teaching Qualifications for HE staff; supporting communities of practice; and scaling the new national GCE HEA digital badge.
- **Undertake an all-island mapping of current GCE work across HE,** to identify existing GCE activity, gaps, opportunities and requirements for an institution-wide approach.
- **Introduce a new granting mechanism for HE stakeholders** across the island of Ireland to access and integrate GCE into their work (piloted by STAND during 2026) – for example to achieve more synergies between GCE and ESD within HEIs.
- **Fund the secondment of a GCE expert in the HEA National Forum to integrate GCE across HEIs,** like the initiative to integrate ESD across HEIs linking non-formal and formal efforts.

2. Invest in research and develop GCE as an academic field

- **Recognise GCE as an academic field and discipline in HE.** The strategy should support not only the integration of GCE as a policy priority across disciplines, but its urgent academic and disciplinary development through dedicated investment in research, academic posts, postgraduate study and accredited programmes.
- **Provide funding for research posts for faculty** to build expertise in GCE pedagogy, especially those outside development-related or global studies and in HEIs which may not traditionally have engaged with GCE.
- **Increase funding for research in GCE** and improve access to research funds for academics at mid and advanced career level to advance academic research in GCE. While the New Foundations

Research Grant is a welcome facility, its funding levels and eligibility criteria are too restrictive. Funding should be expanded and NGOs made eligible to apply directly.

- **Provide more open access practitioner research funding** to support production and dissemination of GCE publications by non-academics in the wider sector.
- **Provide funding for the establishment of long-term research clusters** that take a strategic approach to GCE themes and a more cohesive approach to research outputs.
- **Provide funding support for collaborative and cross-sector research partnerships.**
- **Ensure research funding is built into Irish Aid Strategic Partnerships programmes** as a mechanism.

3. Invest in national policy coherence

- The new strategy should respond to the 2026 GENE Peer Review by establishing structured strategic dialogue with the sector, stronger cross-government coordination and long-term leadership for GCE. Stronger coordination between Irish Aid, DFHERIS, the HEA, higher education institutions and civil society organisations delivering GCE in HE, would be important for the GCE integration in HE.
- Strengthen national policy coherence between GCE and ESD by improving coordination between DFHERIS, Irish Aid, the HEA and HE stakeholders. Collaboration with ESD and EDI should complement - not dilute - GCE's distinctive contribution, including its focus on power, colonial histories, structural inequality, participatory learning and global solidarity.