

**Embedding the Sustainable
Development Goals and Global
Citizenship Education in Gaisce – The
President’s Award**

Context, Issues and Options for Action

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Introduction and background

This report considers the work of Gaisce -The President's Award (hereafter Gaisce) in the areas of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate justice and Global Citizenship Education (GCE). It considers the policy and practice context for this work, identifies several thematic issues which arose from a short consultation process and makes a number of recommendations for how the organisation can strategically align itself to the SDGs.

This report and recommendations are based on a survey, two-hour workshop, 1-1 conversations with key staff and a review of key organisational documents. They are also informed by a review of relevant policy landscape and good practices in the youth sector.

For 35 years, Gaisce has been supporting young people to fulfil their potential as active citizens in their communities (Clarke MacMahon and O'Reilly, n.d.). The Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy (2021) recognises that today's global challenges call us to extend our sense of citizenship to the entire world and to act as responsible global citizens. Young people are increasingly stepping up to the challenge of global citizenship, as the youth climate strikes movement has demonstrated. The aim of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is to support people to be active global citizens through the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes, enabling them to contribute to collective solutions that respond to the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world (Irish Aid, 2021: 4).

In responding to complex challenges, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for co-ordinated action across the pillars of environment, society and economy. Regarding the climate crisis, the importance of climate justice is recognised by the Paris Agreement (2015) and the importance of youth involvement in climate governance has been emphasised by the KWON-GESH Climate Pledge (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Gaisce has taken steps over the last number of years to incorporate the SDGs and climate justice into its work on a project-by-project basis. This has been enabled by the Youth Climate Justice Fund and Irish Aid grant and is supported by the President's own concern and initiatives in this area. The organisation is now (January 2022) in the final stages of its strategic planning process as well as a new Irish Aid grant application. These provide an opportunity to consider how to mainstream Global Citizenship Education activities within the organisation and embed them as core values/principles.

A key question for Gaisce is *what role can and should the organisation play in supporting global citizenship, the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and youth climate justice activism?* This report presents the results of a simple exploratory audit of Gaisce's current work in this area which aims to:

- Clarify the **relevance** of the SDGs and GCE to the organisation's core work;

- Consider the **context and issues** for the organisation in seeking to embed the SDGs and GCE into its work in a sustainable manner;
- Provide several **recommendations** for action.

Relevant policy and practice context

United Nations, Youth and the SDGs

Young people are identified as key stakeholders whose participation is essential to the realisation of the SDGs. Launching Agenda 2030 in 2015, the United Nations (UN) declared that:

‘children and young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the [SDGs] a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world’ (UN, 2015).

Building on this declaration, the United Nations Development Programme (2017) established guiding principles to support young people as agents of change in the 2030 Agenda. These principles highlight the centrality of young people’s participation and empowerment to realisation of the SDGs. The 2019 World Youth Report further emphasises the importance of youth engagement that extends beyond SDG awareness raising to meaningful inclusion in decision making processes and collaboration to achieve the goals (UN, 2019: 100-3).

Global Citizenship Education¹

GCE has now been adopted by Irish Aid as the central concept of its domestic civil society education and outreach strategy. Despite the framing changing from development education to GCE, Irish Aid affirms its commitment to the Good of Good Practice for Development Education which all actors engaged in GCE should strive to align with.

The concept and framework of GCE evolved at a European and global scale, including through initiatives of the Council of Europe and UNESCO, which defines the aim of GCE as:

‘to empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world’ (UNESCO, 2014).

GCE recognises that contemporary people live and interact in an increasingly globalised world where a culture of individualism and dominance is increasingly overtaking a culture of partnership, dialogue and co-operation. In response, GCE seeks to foster a

¹ GCE is understood to encompass other educational approaches including Development Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Human Rights Education and Education for Peace and Conflict Prevention.

transformative process of education rooted in reflective learning ('praxis²'), appreciating difference and multiple perspectives, critical thinking and responsible global citizenship. Key to GCE is supporting people to imagine and realise a common vision for a just and sustainable world (Council of Europe, 2019). GCE is central to the realisation of SDG goal 4.7:

“By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UN, 2015).

Andreotti (2006) makes a distinction between ‘soft’ and ‘critical’ GCE. ‘Soft’ GCE takes a universal approach based on our common humanity to empower all citizens through awareness raising and campaigning for change. ‘Critical’ GCE is based on an understanding that despite our common humanity, we experience inequalities and injustice occurs as a result of a complex systems of power relations, cultural assumptions etc, which requires participants to become self-reflective about their own biases, assumptions and position in structures of power and domination *before* they act for change.

Principles of Global Citizenship Education

- Comprehensive and holistic
- Values based
- Carefully designed according to the needs of the context and related evaluation
- Practiced within a learner-centred pedagogy
- Designed to develop critical thinking and understanding of diversity
- Problem-orientated
- Participatory in the process and in the goals
- Intentionally directed towards transformative learning

(Council of Europe, 2019: 30)

European Youth Strategy

The European Youth Strategy 2019-27 is structured around the key themes of ‘engage’, ‘connect’ and ‘empower’. The strategy seeks to:

- Providing pathways for youth engagement in democratic life including through youth participation in youth work organisations.

² Praxis is the unity of action and reflection in order to bring about conscious and intentional change in the world.

- Support dialogue and solidarity of youth through intercultural exchange and mobility.
- Enable young people to take charge of their own lives and address social exclusion and inequality.

These three core themes are further addressed in the ten European Youth Goals which present a vision for a Europe where young people realise their potential and identifies cross-sectoral actions to achieve this vision. This strategy does not make direct reference to GCE, but informs EU programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps which are important initiatives in the youth field.

Greening the youth sector

Youth sector organisations and institutions are increasingly addressing the question of how to practically embed sustainability measures into day-to-day operations. The importance of work in this area was underscored in the final declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, which invites the sector to:

‘Encourage and prioritise practices and solutions that are environmentally friendly, aligned with the principles of sustainable development that youth work seeks to instil and young people expect.’

Several European bodies have developed useful sustainability guidelines for the sector. The *Greening the Youth Sector Sustainability Checklist* (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2021) offers an easy-to-follow checklist of actions covering a range of areas from venue hire and digital footprint to paper usage and promotional gifts. ERYICA and Eurodesk (2020) present a similar detailed checklist for youth information services which can be adapted for wider use in the youth sector. They also offer detailed advice on environmental product and service labelling (p. 40-1) which supports green office procurement.

Findings and Reflections

“The vastness of this area”

The SDGs are an all-encompassing agenda for transformative social, economic and environmental change. By their very nature, they are complex, multifaceted and multi-scaler. Gaisce staff understandably expressed concern about the ‘vastness of the area’ as one staff member described it. While there is an eagerness to address the SDGs, there is uncertainty about the role which Gaisce can realistically take in realising the goals. Furthermore, when supporting young people to undertake their award challenges, how can Gaisce support young people to take local actions that respond to global issues and contribute to the global goals. There is a need therefore for Gaisce to identify its entry

point and specific focus regarding Agenda 2030. As a youth sector organisation with a commitment to supporting young people's personal development and global citizenship, it would be appropriate for Gaisce to centre its engagement with the SDGs specifically on Goal 4.7 on GCE. This would enable the organisation to make a unique contribution to the SDGs which is complementary and additional to other organisations in the formal and non-formal education sectors. An organisational contribution grounded in SDG 4.7 would support education on and action to achieve the full range of SDGs by award participants. This, combined with a partnership approach (see 'networking and relationships, below), would amplify Gaisce's contribution to the realisation of Agenda 2030 in its entirety.

Vision, mission, values alignment

The SDGs and GCE have a very clear value-set, explicitly aiming to realise a just, fair and sustainable world for all. This is coherent with Gaisce's mission to foster a sense of citizenship and the organisation's core values around inclusion and equality. Gaisce's vision is of 'an Ireland where young people dream big and fulfil their potential'. This is a vision of an individual's personal development and self-actualisation. While this is not necessarily incompatible with the SDGs and GCE, as staff noted there is potential for misalignment as the vision makes no reference to the ethical imperatives of responsible citizenship. In order to better align with GCE's focus on fostering a global culture of partnership, dialogue and co-operation, more emphasis could be placed in Gaisce's vision on the importance of interdependence, global citizenship and responsibility

Individual versus collective action

When seeking to address global challenges, an issue noted by staff is the danger of placing the burden of responsibility for societal and global challenges onto individual young people. Realising the SDGs requires collective action at a structural level and not simply individual behaviour change. This perspective is coherent with the IDEA Code of Good Practice and its emphasis on exploring root causes and building skills for informed, meaningful collective action. Consideration could be given to how young people are guided and supported with their community involvement challenge in ways that are coherent with the collective and structural vision of the SDGs and with GCE's commitment to collectively addressing root causes.

Role for direct engagement with youth

Gaisce is not a youth work organisation and its engagement with young people has been traditionally indirect and mediated by President Award Leaders who implement the programme through the Gaisce Award Partners. More recently, targeted programmes such as Gaisce Glas have seen more direct work with small numbers of young people and the organisation developed plans for a youth advisory council. Staff are very clear that Gaisce cannot realistically scale up its direct work with young people and instead the key is to focus on supporting and resourcing PALs. A structured practice development process for PALs would advance this work (see 'Supporting and engaging with PALS', below). The approach of working with PALs to work with youth feels appropriate given

that Gaisce works across the formal and non-formal educational sectors and enables the organisation to amplify its impact through the PALs. However, it may be appropriate to maintain and develop direct engagement with youth in two areas:

- (a) Targeted engagement of marginalised, minority and hard to reach youth in order to achieve Gaisce's aim of equality of outcome for young people. This would align with the commitment of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind'. The LikeMinded and Wavelength initiatives already demonstrate Gaisce's commitment in this area and further work could be done to consider how to engage such groups around the SDGs.
- (b) Engagement to facilitate meaningful and appropriate youth participation in decision-making around GCE in Gaisce. Youth participation is an important element of Agenda 2030. Similarly, IDEA (2021) identifies participatory and creative methodologies as integral to good practice in Development Education (GCE). Continuing to develop and implement a Gaisce Youth Advisory Council could be a first step in this area.

Engagement in these areas would also enable Gaisce to develop best-practice guidance and resources that can then be used for further training and capacity building of PALs and GAPs. In this way, Gaisce's targeted work with youth can support the organisation to realise its commitment to equality of outcome and also complement and enhance Gaisce's universal engagement, through the PALs, with young people.

Networking and relationships

Partnership and collaboration are recognised as central to the achievement of Agenda 2030 (Goal 17). Likewise, forging partnerships around the SDGs is a named element of Gaisce's new organisational strategy (in pillar 1). Indeed Gaisce's organisational model is already largely based on networking and, collaboration. The organisation works with the GAPs and PALs to deliver the award, with Challenge Partners and with other bodies on specific initiatives (e.g. Mountjoy Prison and the Maynooth University Access Programme). This partnerships approach is a real strength of Gaisce's which can be developed to further the organisation's contribution to achieve the SDGs and goal 4.7 in particular. Wittig-Ferguson and Fricke (2021: 37) highlight that sectoral and cross-sectoral partnerships to advance the SDGs can take a variety of forms:

- Informal to formal;
- Organic to strategic;
- Creative (exploratory) to transactional (sharing expertise);
- Local to global.

Mapping Gaisce's partnership work using this typology would enable the organisation to systematise its partnership work. Considering Gaisce's commitment to equality of outcome, it would be beneficial for the organisation to foster key partnerships which widen the participation and completion of the Gaisce programme amongst marginalised

and minority youth. This would align the organisation both with the SDGs and with Irish Aid's GCE goal of reaching hard to reach young people.

Supporting and engaging with PALS

Gaisce engages with the majority of young people through PALS, who play an integral role in the deliver of the Gaisce programme. The organisation has developed a range of supports for PALS, including specific training to run the Gaisce Glas programme. Insights from this training could be drawn on by the organisation to further develop supports for PALS in the area of GCE. In order to implement the 'educational practice' principles of the IDEA Code of Good Practice, PALS may require professional development and training in GCE approaches. A structured practice development process for PALS could be developed to support PALS to consciously develop their abilities to implement the award with young people. The NUI Certificate in Global Youth Work and Development Education³ could be tailored to the needs of PALS, for example. Strategic partnership with IDEA and its members can support this, along with continued collaboration with the Professional Development Service for Teachers. In the spirit of GCE and in order to achieve sustainable culture change, it is important to consider how to create spaces for PALS to be consulted and involved in this process. This may go beyond the current aim (in the strategic plan) to create quality checking feedback loops with PALS. How can PALS be involved in the design and development as well as evaluation of GCE in Gaisce, for example?

Relevance across challenge areas

Gaisce staff raised the question of whether the SDGs are relevant across all challenge areas, for example the physical challenge. Of course, the element of choice and a young person's agency to shape their own award is key for the Gaisce. While this is an important principle to respect, it would be possible to map out how the Gaisce challenge areas relate to the SDGs and provide resources which support and encourage participants to consider how their challenge area choices might contribute to the realisation of the Global Goals. To take the physical challenge example, this area could map onto and contribute to:

- Target 3.4: Reduce mortality from non-communicable diseases and promote mental health;
- Target 12.8: Promote universal understanding of sustainable lifestyles.

Additionally, Gaisce could identify challenge partners who have a specific focus on environmental action, sustainability and biodiversity. For example, organisations involved in the conservation, rewilding, food production, wwoofing, peatland conservation etc...

³ This Special Purpose award is delivered by the National Youth Council of Ireland with support from Maynooth University: <https://www.youth.ie/training/nui-certificate-global-youth-work-and-development-education/>

Further work would be required to consider how to support young people to meaningfully integrate action on the goals into their challenge areas so that it is not simply an instrumental tick-box exercise.

Energy efficiency and practical sustainability measures

Gaisce staff spoke about the steps which the organisation has sought to make in energy efficiency at Ratra House and in other practical sustainability measures. These actions are intrinsically valuable and they also enable the organisation to demonstrate that it is leading by example. In order to value and advance this work, it would be beneficial to name energy management and green procurement in the strategy (e.g. as a strategic objective in the governance theme of pillar III). The resources discussed above ('Greening the youth sector', p. 6) can provide practical guidance and support in this area. Energy management is understandably a challenging area given the age of the organisation's headquarters. An initial first step could be to procure electricity from one of the several energy providers offering 100% renewable energy. A further step might be to engage directly with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland to identify retrofitting options and potential funding mechanisms for this work.

Principles of Gaisce's SDG and GCE work

Through this consultation with Gaisce's staff, several themes emerged as important to the organisation in approaching work on the SDGs and GCE. These themes are set out below as principles in order to support the organisation to make conscious and intentional its work in this area.

They may be most helpful as a basis of further discussion and refinement, involving all relevant staff to ensure collective buy-in. They are also intended to inform Gaisce's approach alongside other relevant documents including IDEA's guiding principles and the literature on GCE.

Principle	Description
Aligned	Gaisce's should ensure that its SDG and GCE work is fully aligned to the organisation's vision, mission and values.
Coherent	Gaisce's commitment to the SDGs/GCE should be part of a coherent package, led by governance mechanisms (strategy, policy) and integrated across programmes, communications, procurement practices and office management.
Complementary	Gaisce's SDG/GCE work should be complimentary to the work of the formal and non-formal educational sectors as well as Gaisce's other institutional partners.

Partnership-based	Gaisce's SDG/GCE work should be based on collaborative partnership work with PALs, GAPs, Challenge Partners and other organisations to engage in this area.
Voluntary	Participation in SDG/GCE should be voluntary for young people and their PALs, recognising young people's personal choice and agency.
Universal	All young people and PALs should have an opportunity to engage with the SDGs and to achieve a Gaisce award that incorporates GCE
Targeted	Gaisce should provide targeted support to support marginalised, minority and hard-to-reach young people to engage with the SDGs and to achieve a Gaisce award that incorporates GCE

Recommended next steps for Gaisce

The following ten recommendations are made based on this consultative process. In order to progress these actions, an initial first step would be for Gaisce staff to consider the organisation's priorities and develop an indicative timeline. There are actions that can be done now at the level of the staff with no/minimal cost and actions that may require funding, more time and Gaisce Council approval.

1. **Focus on SDG Target 4.7 on Global Citizenship Education**

Reference SDG Target 4.7 in organisation's strategy and frame Gaisce's primary engagement with the SDGs as a youth organisation contributing to GCE.

2. **Ensure strategic alignment**

Clarify how Gaisce's vision, mission and values are aligned with and complimentary to responsible global citizenship and the principles of GCE.

3. **Develop a Global Citizenship Education Policy**

This should identify the organisation's contributions to the realisation of SDG Target 4.7 and sets out steps to embed GCE across the organisation. This work could be driven by staff involvement in the NUI Certificate in Global Youth Work but should have broad collective ownership.

4. **Align the community involvement challenge with Global Citizenship Education**

Provide support to award participants with how their community involvement challenge can be informed by an analysis of the root causes of issues and foster collective rather than individual responsibility.

5. Focus on partnership work to engage hard-to-reach youth

Map Gaisce's current and potential partners and identify how partnership work can supported targeted engagement that contributes to Gaisce's aim of equality of outcome for young people.

6. Involve and upskill President Award Leaders

Consult with PALs and GAPs to identify their concerns and needs in this area. Include them in the process of developing GCE in Gaisce and provide them with training in GCE approaches.

7. Continue to develop youth participation mechanisms

Youth participation is central to the realisation of the SDGs and to GCE with young people. Gaisce should identify how to support meaningful and appropriate youth participation in Gaisce's GCE work.

8. Map the SDGs to the Gaisce Challenge areas

Conduct a mapping exercise of the SDGs to the Gaisce challenge areas and produce a resource guide for Gaisce participants to align their award to the SDGs. Consideration should be given to how this alignment qualitatively changes the nature of young people's activities in the challenge areas to avoid it being a tick-box exercise.

9. Develop a strategic focus on excellence in energy management and green procurement

Name these areas in the strategy (e.g. as a strategic objective in the governance theme of pillar III) and use the resources available for the youth sector to develop organisational policy in this area.

10. Show innovation and leadership in response to global challenges

Gaisce's commitment to excellence and to innovation is clear from the organisation's history and from the new strategic plan. Innovative leadership is urgently required to address global challenges and this is recognised by Irish Aid which is establishing a GCE Innovation Fund. Consider the possibility of a new 'Global Gaisce' award stream which builds on Gaisce Glas and emphasises global citizenship and the SDGs. For example, could a young person choose to 'do Gaisce Glas' as an alternative award stream with a focus on global citizenship themes across all their challenge areas? This could be akin to receiving an International Bachelors degree for completing the Erasmus exchange – or the green Blue Peter badge for environmental action! While recognising that Gaisce's relationship to the president is to the office rather than the incumbent, President Michael D. Higgins own interest in this area might facilitate innovative work in this area and a conversation with the President could be a fruitful exchange.

Conclusion

This report explores the question of what role Gaisce – The President’s Award can play in supporting global citizenship, the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and youth climate justice activism. It presents the results of a simple exploratory audit of Gaisce’s current work in this area in order to provide some guidance and support to staff on this topic.

Gaisce has a long history of innovative engagement with the young people of Ireland and is uniquely placed – through its association with the President – to support young people to develop resilience and take responsibility as active global citizens in response to the challenges we face today. Gaisce can make an innovative contribution to the realisation of the SDGs which compliments and amplifies the work of other organisations in this field by:

- Focusing the organisation’s SDG engagement and efforts on goal 4.7;
- Embedding Global Citizenship Education principles and approaches;
- Continuing to develop a partnership approach focused particularly on realising equality of outcome;
- Striving for sustainability in day-to-day practices;

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