



A Qualitative Study to Identify Barriers and Enablers to Integrating Sustainable Food Systems on Nutrition and Dietetics Curricula in Higher Education in Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable food systems (SFS) are essential to addressing global challenges in health, environmental protection, and societal well-being^{1,2}. Dietitians and nutritionists play a key role in shaping sustainable diets, which support food and nutrition security, environmental protection, economic fairness, and cultural relevance³. Although there is growing awareness of the need to embed sustainability into dietetics education, integration remains inconsistent^{2,4}. Recent research on nutrition and dietetic programmes at higher education in Ireland showed low coverage of SFS-related topics.

This study explores barriers and enablers to integrating SFS into nutrition and dietetics curricula in higher education in the Republic of Ireland (ROI).

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

- 1.To engage with academic faculty working with CORU-accredited dietetic programmes in the ROI and identify perceived barriers and enablers to incorporating SFS concepts in the curriculum
- 2.To identify opportunities for SFS integration in dietetics education in the short to medium term

METHODS

A qualitative study design was used to explore perspectives of programme directors and academic educators in four Irish universities (UCD, UCC, UL, TU Dublin/TCD).

A semi-structured topic guide informed one-to-one 30-40 minutes interviews on Zoom (Oct–Nov 2024). Participants viewed a short video in advance, which outlined the definition of SFS adopted by the researchers to incorporate environmental, economic, nutrition and health and social and cultural capital pillars. Interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and analysed using conventional content analysis⁵.

RESULTS

Of 13 invited participants, 9 provided consent to participate. Three themes were identified.

Current Integration/Application of SFS in the Curriculum

SFS are addressed across various modules, but their integration lacks consistency/clarity, often being discussed under different terms and without explicit labelling.

“sustainable food systems or food systems in general, is spoken about in different guises within different modules.”

“...it may not be labelled as sustainable food systems there. It's inherently there... we probably need to be more explicit...”

“...it touches on many of the areas where dieticians are more frequently now employed...within the community...”

Implementing SFS into the Academic Curriculum

SFS requires a more standardised approach and greater institutional support, including embedding sustainability into core competencies and providing protected time for educators.

“So why don't we all teach sustainability the same way?”

“... if sustainability was more embedded or more obvious in those core competencies, ... it would push the higher education institutes.”

“It's having the time actually to be able to develop your module to incorporate it...it's just having protected time.”

Uniting Expertise to Transform Dietetic Education

Uniting expertise from various organisations and having champions is crucial to transforming dietetic education and must be supported by initiatives from the INDI, Climate & Health Alliance, and HSE

“We all have a responsibility to planetary health...it is important that that is taught, it can't be assumed.”

“It's good to have a champion...they're driving and pushing it forward.”

“...the INDI, the Climate & Health Alliance and the HSE are putting a massive focus on this as well...”

SHORT-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

- Explicitly name, label and refer to existing SFS related content and concepts within the curriculum.
- Collaborate/share educational practices across universities will accelerate curriculum integration.
- Advocate for curriculum reform by engaging with key stakeholders (academic institutions, dietetic associations and professional organisations) to promote the explicit integration of SFS
- Utilise existing university and external expertise.

CONCLUSION

- SFS in Irish dietetic programmes is at an early stage of development.
- Furthering planetary health and SFS education requires a shared vision and coordinated approach from all stakeholders including universities, INDI, CORU, HSE and other health-focused organisations, and dietitians in practice.

REFERENCES

1) Muñoz-Martínez et al., (2023), 2) Bergquist et al., (2024), 3) Higgins et al., (2023), 4) O’Hehir & Keaver, (2024), 5)Hsieh & Shannon, (2005)