"We believe that society and educators, in particular, have a moral duty and ethical responsibility to look for, and find, environmentally sustainable solutions. Thus, we believe that it is important to learn and teach pro-environmental skills and develop behaviours that support a green economy. We are the last generation that can actually do something."

**TACKLING WATER POLLUTION**

Another course aiming to lead the way towards a greener economy is the On-Site Wastewater Treatment and Disposal Springboard+ course at IT Carlow, which is beginning for the first time this year.

According to Eoin O'Brien, Lifelong Learning Manager within the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at IT Carlow, the objective of wastewater treatment is to collect the wastewater generated within communities and remove polluting material. Then, release the treated water safely back into the environment.

"Without such treatment, the wastewater we produce would pollute our waters and create a health risk. Untreated or poorly treated wastewater can be contaminated with harmful bacteria and viruses, and can pose a health risk to people who come into contact with infected water."

The National Inspection Plan for Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems (DWTS) requires local authorities to inspect a minimum at 1000 DWTS a year across Ireland, with the greatest proportion in areas at higher risk of contamination. There were 2,371 inspections in 2007-2008 and it was found that nearly half (41%) of systems didn't meet the necessary standards. Failures are due to construction defects or householders not maintaining the treatment system (downstreaming systems). "Defects, as a result, gave rise to levels of sewage from systems, ponding of sewage in the soil, discharges to ditches and streams and rainwater entering systems," says Eoin.

"These findings clearly demonstrate the importance that graduates can play in addressing these areas. They can ensure we continue to improve on the requirements for the efficient handling and treatment of our wastewater." Eoin continues, "The On-Site Wastewater Treatment and Disposal course aims to develop the right skills and competencies, and to ensure students are fully informed of the requirements to the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) code of practice and implementing those requirements in the field. They will be capable of establishing the suitability of any site for a treatment system, design solutions for difficult sites, and oversee the installation of a system in accordance with the design requirements. "Students will be able to bring a level of professionalism to this industry that is currently experiencing a higher level of regulation, in an attempt to ensure septic systems can function without causing an unacceptable environmental risk." The intention is to deliver the course online, but Eoin says there are some practical components to the course which may require attendance. "This is provided so we can do this in a safe manner, in line with current public health guidelines. We plan to deliver the course one evening a week over 13 weeks. The programme leads to an NFQ Level 7 award and a great opportunity for anyone working in this sector to engage in some practical professional development."

This year, IT Carlow had 21 programmes available for Springboard+, which Eoin says is vital for the skill supply of the south-east region, and the surrounding hinterland. "We also have a Level 7 BSc in Energy Management (Buildings) award that fits into the green agenda. This programme provides a range of energy-related skills and would suit any person working within this sector or looking to work in this area."

Eoin adds that the fact Springboard+ courses remove the financial barrier is of huge benefit. Springboard+ is an absolutely fabulous initiative, letting people explore affordable or free options for them to upskill and reskill within higher education. We need to continually invest in our skills to ensure we remain relevant to meet the future job needs of our economy. Springboard+ opens the door for people to invest in themselves and I highly encourage people to avail of the opportunity."

**INVESTING IN FUTURE GENERATIONS**

When we refer to a green economy, it is not just about taking care of our environment from issues like climate change and pollution, but our society as a whole.

Belinda G. O’Connor of UCC, says, "The Brundtland Report defines the word 'sustainable' as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. While, we associate the word with our environment, the same approach can be taken in terms of Springboard+ courses. "This initiative is investing and meeting the needs of society today by offering opportunities for upskilling and reskilling in growing sectors. This, in return, will enhance, rather than compromise future generations. It can be viewed as a sustainable investment in the future of our society with measurable outcomes."

Belinda says being given the opportunity to participate in Springboard+ offers a chance for students to learn and achieve professional goals, through courses offered in blended, distance and on an e-learning basis. "This is a really positive and flexible way to deliver educational opportunities, as it cuts down on carbon emissions in travelling to educational institutions. But Springboard+ also provides equal access and opportunities to those who wouldn't have been able to avail of these courses due to geographical or financial constraints."

*For more information on Green Economy Springboard+ courses, visit springboardcourses.ie*