



# Building Capacity for Undergraduate Education for Sustainable Development at Trinity College Dublin - A Qualitative Study

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## Context & Objectives

The aim of this study was to investigate and learn from the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of students and academics collaborating to map and embed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across undergraduate curricula at Trinity College Dublin, with particular focus on the efficacy of a project conducted in summer 2025 involving three student-academic dyads tasked with mapping ESD in their respective courses.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured online interviews, with questions based on a capacity-building framework <sup>1</sup>. The data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke <sup>2</sup>.

Experiences from the six participants (two students, four staff members) were coded under themes with reference to the five CFIR framework domains <sup>3</sup>.

“From what I saw, it does have to be a bit of a top-down approach where professors have it in their curricula first for students to care about it.”  
Student 2

“...discussion with people and making those connections between the economy, environment and society. That was important to highlight how they intersect and impact each other.”  
Student 1

“The idea that ESD can be embedded in different disciplines and look quite different is a surprise to some people.” Staff 1

## Key Outcomes & Impact

Overall results indicated that Trinity is building capacity in ESD and doing so through multiple methods. Enablers included interdisciplinary team work which encouraged broader perspectives and discussion, and a top-down institutional approach which was considered essential for funding allocation, and sustaining stakeholder interest. Challenges included time constraints, and varied motivations and levels of engagement with ESD.

Specific to the use of academic-student dyads as a means of building capacity, success depended on the structure of the course being mapped and quality of communication between team members. Communication emerged as a key area for improvement.

Perspectives on ESD Capacity Building at TCD from Students (in blue) and Staff (in orange).



## Reflections

Overall, the study concludes that meaningful ESD capacity can be built through multiple methods, however it requires interdisciplinary collaboration, supportive institutional policies, and continued efforts to motivate and engage staff and students. Effective communication is a key lever for success. Results would indicate that embedding ESD into curricula may help to create positive feedback cycles leading to further engagement with sustainability more broadly.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) and Evidence-Based System for Innovation Support (EBSIS).

<sup>2</sup> Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2008;3(2):77-101.

<sup>3</sup> Damschroder LJ, Aron DC, Keith RE, Kirsh SR, Alexander JA, Lowery JC. Fostering implementation of health services research findings into practice: a consolidated framework for advancing implementation science. *Implement Sci*. 2009;4:50. doi:10.1186/1748-5908-4-50.

