# Climate and Education: *Imagining an alternative future*

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Imagine for a moment that we faced a different trajectory. In this alternative future, we meet our climate targets, our economic system benefits the global majority and we live in harmony with nature. What would this look like?

## We need to imagine a new future

We need to visualise an alternative future and act in accordance with our vision. Climate change is a complex challenge to solve[i]. It can be difficult to imagine a different future from the one we are presented with. However, educational institutions can play a powerful role in creating spaces for individuals and communities to imagine new possibilities.

In a world that increasingly values AI and profits over people and nature, we need to value creativity, authenticity, social connections and empathy. If we cannot imagine a new future, we will fail to adapt to the climate crisis.

## We need to take responsibility

The science is clear, human activity is causing and exacerbating climate change and nature loss[ii]. We therefore have a responsibility to act.

Education can play a role in creating new horizons. Learners can develop the competencies, skills and insights required to develop systemic change. Educational institutions can create spaces that truly value imagination.

## We need to design tailored educational programmes for diverse audiences

Education is a powerful tool and lever[iii]. It can play a role in changing mindsets, shaping how we think, what we value and how we act.

We need climate education for all levels, across business, finance, government and society. This requires a tailored educational approach, to truly connect with individuals and communities.

A *'one size fits all'* educational approach will be ineffective. We need to create engaging experiences that motivate and empower learners to act. Learners should be given the opportunity to direct their own learning experience; to discover the unique role they can play and truly take accountability.

## What does effective climate education look like?

- **Diverse learning experiences:** Effective climate education creates a space for learners to deeply listen, reflect, collaborate and act. This means creating an environment where learners can take a systems thinking approach, collaborate across disciplines, embrace creativity, diversity and think critically.

- **Define clear targets:** The economic system we are operating within is broken. The number of billionaires are rising, and we need to address global inequalities[iv]. This means that we need to collaborate with business, government and finance to set clear targets and impact metrics.

- **Diverse leadership:** We need leaders who can think critically, act authentically and take accountability. Education can create a space for people to question the systems we operate within. If we want to tackle climate change, incremental shifts will not be enough, we need radical change.

- **Increase outreach and scale up educational initiatives:** Digital education can play a powerful role in building diverse networks. We need to deliver climate education at scale, whilst also ensuring that the people who have the formal power and responsibility are also provided with the knowledge to act for the global majority.

- **Global collaboration:** We cannot continue to operate in the way we have been. We need to act urgently to reach global climate targets. This means that we need collaboration across society and to upskill people in all sectors, locally and globally.

## Imagining a better future

Education can play a powerful role in supporting learners to imagine an alternative future to the one we are currently presented with. Learners who can visualise the future they want and act in accordance with it can become powerful change agents. We therefore have a responsibility to create spaces for learners to visualise an alternative future that values people, nature and our planet.

## How can we achieve this?

- Embrace diverse perspectives and sources of knowledge.

- Prioritise community bottom-up educational initiatives.

- Value our partnerships with business, government and finance.

- Listen to all voices by establishing diverse networks.

- Develop leadership competencies across all educational levels.

- Scale up educational initiatives through digital education.

- Take accountability and act for the global majority.

## What has Trinity College Dublin done so far?

## Transformed education

- Appointed Education for Sustainable Development Fellows to support campus wide embedding of sustainability and learning.
- Provided climate literacy certification to staff members.
- Supported the development of new modules in areas not traditionally considered relevant to climate change such as 'Music and Climate Change', and 'Green computing'.
- Launched a mandatory 'Enacting Sustainable Development' module.
- Developed an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Framework and ESD hub website to support academic staff to embed ESD into existing curricula.
- Established universities as regional hubs for climate literacy, open learning, and public dialogue between voices from all corners of society.
- Expanded on projects such as Trinity's Climate Smart project in which activities and workshops are carried out to address real world climate challenges.

## Community Engagement

- Launched the Climate Gateway to build momentum for a resilient future.
- Developed a 'Sustainability Leadership Awards'.
- Certified Green Labs to reduce energy usage (at the time of writing 36 had been certified)
- Developed 'The Climate Smart Project' which has engaged over 3500 transition year students across 79 second level schools.
- Partnered with local authorities, and civil society organisations to form a collective understanding of climate challenges and solutions.
- Bridged Education and Policy.

## Justice in Climate Education

- Funded student delegations to participate at international climate forums, including UNFCCC COP.
- Prioritised women's leadership, youth engagement, and representation from marginalised communities.
- Embedded ESD across all programmes ensures climate literacy is not limited to environmental disciplines.

## Conclusion: Recommendations

We recommend that Trinity College Dublin develops the following:

- Establishes a National Climate Literacy Standard across Higher Education: Mandate climate and sustainability competencies for all graduates, regardless of discipline.
- Launches a "Climate Smart Communities" Programme: Scale models like TCD's Climate Smart Project nationwide.
- Creates Regional Hubs for a Just Transition: Fund universities to act as interdisciplinary centres for research, workforce reskilling, and community engagement in support of a low-carbon economy.
- Mandates Transparent Reporting on Education for Sustainable Development: Require higher education institutions to publish annual reports detailing climate-related education, operations, and community engagement.
- Empowers Student-Led Climate Innovation:  Establish a national fund for student-led projects, fostering entrepreneurial and grassroots solutions to climate challenges.

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[i] https://www.eea.europa.eu/articles/understanding-and-acting-on-the-complexity
[ii] https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/causes-effects-climate-change
[iii] https://doi.org/10.1080/13558000110102913

[iv] *https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/billionaire-wealth-surges-2-trillion-2024-three-times-faster-year-while-number*