

# Youth Voices For Sustainable Futures In Higher Education - Student Research Report

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## Abstract

The increasing need for individual and institutional action to address the looming climate crisis has called for a transformative shift in the way universities operate. The sustainability agenda and the climate emergency should be considered in all policy priorities and decision making in higher education (Sterling 2013; Latter & Capstick 2021). Climate change and sustainability education can train students to become active change makers and tackle the global challenges of today (Barr et al., 2021). To address the lack of engagement of young people in these policy-making processes, we conducted a research project co-led by two undergraduate students. We held a participatory workshop at University College London (UCL) with nine undergraduate students to find out their perspectives on climate change and sustainability education. Afterwards, we engaged eight students in producing a collaborative policy brief addressed to decision-makers across universities in the UK (Zaidi et al., 2023). In this paper, we share the student perspectives and recommendations for sustainable futures in higher education addressing three key areas of university curriculum, campus and community.

The findings will inform the development of a new BA programme in the UCL Institute of Education, ongoing collaboration and dialogue within UCL and implications for future youth-led research for sustainability in higher education.

# Introduction

The increasing awareness and impacts of the climate and ecological crises has called for a collective effort across all sectors of society to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, achieve sustainability and protect the future of our planet (IPCC 2023). Many experts have highlighted the importance of education to inspire and sustain the socio-political transformations needed for a sustainable future (Kopnina 2020; Latter & Capstick 2021; Bangay & Blum 2010). Universities are uniquely situated to respond to the climate crisis through their roles of education, academic research and community advocacy (Latter & Capstick 2021; Gardner et al., 2021).

Universities have the potential to develop climate change and sustainability education that motivates and equips students with the knowledge and skills to become active change makers and tackle the global challenges of today (Barr et al., 2021). Academic research can inform innovative educational approaches, sustainable campus practices and solutions-focused government policy (Sterling 2013). Higher education strategies focused on climate change and sustainability in the UK can act as a role model for institutions globally through the impact of the university's community of students, faculty and the general public (Gardner et al., 2021). To reach this potential, academics have emphasised that responding to the climate crisis and the sustainability agenda should foreground all higher education policy and decision making (Sterling 2013; Latter & Capstick 2021).

The Office for Students, which regulates higher education institutions in England, have made recommendations to reduce carbon emissions across universities (Office for Students 2020). Despite this, there has not been sufficient efforts by universities to reduce carbon emissions in accordance with government promises nor has there been a shift towards making climate change and sustainability education a strategic priority in universities (Latter & Capstick 2021).

Students are profoundly affected by university policies and have raised concerns as to the current education system's ability to prepare them for the uncertainty of the future. Despite this, their voice and impact is almost non-existent in climate change and sustainability education policy (Dunlop & Rushton 2022). Students have an insider perspective and are motivated to challenge the existing practices of an institution; as such, with proper engagement, they can make meaningful recommendations for sustainable futures in higher education (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017; Dunlop & Rushton 2022). For example, students from the UCL Climate Action Society lobbied for sustainable policies through the Student's Union which were later included in the launch of the UCL Sustainability Strategy 2019-2024 (UCL 2019).

In this paper, we share student perspectives and recommendations for sustainable futures in higher education addressing three key areas of university curriculum, campus and community. The following sections Methods, Research Findings and Next Steps are drawn from the collaborative policy brief (Zaidi et al., 2023).

## Methods

In order to address the issue of the lack of engagement of students in policy-making for sustainability in higher education, we conducted a research project co-led by two undergraduate students to better understand students' views on climate change and sustainability education at universities and engage them in co-producing a policy brief.

Ethical approval was provided by the IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC 1793). To include a range of youth voices we held an outdoor participatory workshop in Gordon Square Park, London, in June 2023, and undergraduate students co-authored a policy brief.

Key activities included:

- An outdoor participatory workshop designed and facilitated by two first year undergraduate students from University College London (UCL).
- Workshop attendees included nine UCL undergraduate students - seven had just completed their first year of studies.
- Degree specialisms of students included Architecture, Biological Sciences, History, Politics and International Relations.
- During the workshop, students were asked about their views, experiences and ideas for the future of climate change and sustainability education in universities.
- The responses from the workshop were used to frame the recommendations made in this policy brief.
- A draft was shared with eight undergraduate students who contributed with their ideas and recommendations.
- This project was overseen and supported by an academic supervisor.



Figure 1. Gordon Square Park where the participatory workshop took place.

# Research Findings

## Part 1: What does sustainability mean to undergraduate students?

Participants' responses underline the various understandings of sustainability. To achieve sustainability, students expressed the need to change current consumer lifestyles and use resources responsibly so the lives of future generations are not compromised. Students also mentioned that there are elements of inclusivity, privilege and justice associated with pro-environmental behaviours. An effective education would thus develop awareness in students and the wider population of the different aspects of sustainability and enable them to make decisions to mitigate and adapt to challenges posed by climate change.



Figure 2. Participants' understandings of sustainability .

## Part 2: Youth Recommendations for the future of university-based climate change and sustainability education

A central theme across all recommendations was that the sustainability agenda and the futures that society face must set an overarching context for all policy priorities and decision making. All universities across the UK should have sustainability embedded in their vision and strategy by outlining the institution's role in mitigating climate change and promoting equitable long-term sustainable futures for all.

We categorised youth recommendations into three areas: Curriculum, Campus and Community.

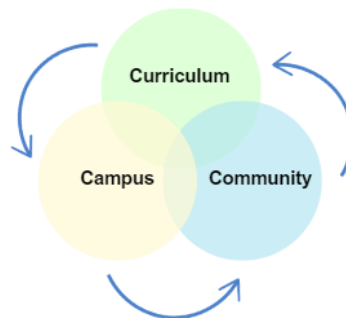


Figure 3: Recommendations identified across three key areas.

## 1. Curriculum-led transformational learning

### How do students want to learn about climate change and sustainability?

Students expressed a desire to learn about climate change and sustainability as part of their university degree. Universities have the potential to enable students to think sustainably in the long-term and prepare them to take informed decisions in their lives, community and career. Analysis highlighted key themes of hopefulness, diverse contexts, and critical thinking:

- **Hopefulness** - Students highlighted the negative emotions they feel due to alarmist framings of climate change in the media and emphasised that they want to understand the issue of climate change with a constructive hopefulness that identifies climate change solutions and foregrounds their agency and responsibility as a student leader within those solutions.
- **Diverse contexts** - International students are a vital part of the student body in UK higher education. Students expressed that a meaningful and relevant climate change and sustainability education considers the impacts and solutions from diverse regional and cultural contexts to enrich learning across the globe.
- **Critical thinking** – Students expressed a desire to critically investigate the notion of sustainability considering potential benefits and compromises of taking sustainable actions.

### Recommendations

1. Introduce compulsory learning outcomes, where applicable in degree curricula, focused on climate change and sustainability which are framed by hopefulness, focus on solutions, foster critical thinking in students and draw case studies from diverse contexts. Consider providing regular opportunities for students to learn in nature, for example, by having seminars outdoors.
2. Provide compulsory climate change and sustainability training, which is tailored to students' disciplinary expertise, develops awareness of climate change solutions and incorporates campus-wide sustainability initiatives and their impact (for example the MMU Carbon Literacy training scheme).
3. Introduce interdisciplinary learning opportunities, for example, by providing climate change or sustainability focused modules which are designed and taught by academics from more than one department or faculty.
4. Ensure there are opportunities for students to critically engage with climate change and sustainability within their degree with postgraduate students and academics who conduct related research. For example, through guest lectures, seminars and practice-based placements.

## 2. Campus-wide, modelling sustainable practice

### How do students think campus practice can become more sustainable?

Students expressed that university education and experience goes hand in hand with campus-wide initiatives to improve sustainable practice. They were concerned whether campus-wide initiatives reduced carbon emissions in the long-term or if they only had the appearance of being sustainable. Some long-standing university practices can perpetuate the legacy of ecological destruction. For institutions to take the necessary actions to address the climate crisis, a fundamental cultural shift in university leadership and operations is essential. Students felt that more stringent actions need to be taken to enforce key actors in the university decision-making system to reduce institutional carbon emissions and take long-term sustainable actions.

### Recommendations

1. Prioritise transparency, evidence-informed actions and long-term impact for campus-wide sustainability initiatives.
2. Elect leaders of the institution that have a clear and pragmatic agenda and goal to achieve sustainability and mitigate the effects of climate change.
3. Provide opportunities for students to become directly and regularly involved with university decision makers and facilitate discussions with peers to inform the implementation and evaluation of campus-wide sustainability actions. For example, by appointing a sustainability officer for university halls of residence.
4. In the case that the higher education institution or entities within the institution (for example, a university society) are affiliated and/or sponsored by mass polluting companies, an agreement must be made that holds the mass polluting company accountable and recommends a set of actions to become more sustainable and mitigate the effects of climate change.

### 3. Community, making connections for sustainability with the wider world

#### How can climate change and sustainability education involve everyone?

Students brought attention to some of the problems of studying at a huge university such as UCL. For example, the information overload by emails from different departments in the university, the lack of connection and community due to a massive student population, and the lack of resources dedicated to increasing engagement with the public. Universities have access to a global community of students, faculty and the general public. Taking steps to promote inclusivity, communication and learning can be an opportunity to form communities within the university and wider society so that people can work together to develop awareness and act responsibly for the future.

#### Recommendations

1. Prioritise improved communication between university administration, academic departments, students and students' groups such as the Student's Union. Consider utilising conventional social media to form integrated communication channels of a particular strand of university events, such as an Instagram page dedicated to broadcast all guest lectures and panel discussions on climate change and sustainability across the university.
2. Encourage extra-curricular opportunities on climate change and sustainability in departments and societies and through volunteering. For example, by introducing an online blog for students to share their perspectives on climate change and sustainability solutions across the world.
3. Promote accessibility, inclusivity and knowledge by providing free learning opportunities such as lectures, online courses and resources to members of the general public. Consider catering opportunities for individuals with disabilities, such as lectures translated into British Sign Language (BSL) or interactive exhibits.
4. Provide opportunities for students in collaboration with industries and businesses to work on multidisciplinary climate change and sustainability solutions for example through a hackathon with hypothetical scenarios in which students from different disciplines work together to make sustainable decisions.
5. Provide monetary incentive for students to conduct research projects to implement or evaluate climate change and sustainability solutions. For example, [UCL Grand Challenges](#).

## Reflections on the research process

Effective youth engagement in climate change education has called for affect-driven, participatory, interdisciplinary, innovative and creative approaches (Rousell & Mackenzie-Knowles 2019). The process of co-producing the policy brief by ten undergraduate students was an innovative way to engage a variety of students from different disciplinary backgrounds in climate change and sustainability policy-making in their university. We held an additional training workshop to present the initial draft of the policy brief and explain some ways that it can be improved upon. The students who attended this optional workshop made the most productive suggestions, deconstructing and critiquing specific recommendations, keeping in mind the key message of the policy brief and ensuring clarity and conciseness for the policy-maker audience. The students felt that this was an opportunity and experience to deeply reflect on their undergraduate studies, make meaningful recommendations for policy-makers in their university, act on a cause they feel passionate about and contribute to an academic document which is beneficial for their CVs.

## Next Steps

These findings will inform:

- Ongoing development of a new BA degree programme, 'Youth, Society and Sustainable Futures' which will be based in the [Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment](#), Institute of Education, UCL.
- Ongoing collaboration and dialogue with the UCL Students' Union, including the Sustainability Committee and the UCL Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education.
- Possible avenues for future research include further in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students from various universities across the UK to draw more detailed critical insights on how universities can achieve sustainability and combat the climate crises through curriculum transformation, campus-wide initiatives and engaging wider communities.

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