



Centre for Climate Change  
and Sustainability education



# Youth Voices for Sustainable Futures in Higher Education

July 2023

**A Youth-led Policy Brief**



## What problem does this policy brief seek to address?

Universities across the UK have a unique position in relation to the climate crisis. They have the autonomy and expertise to lead, develop and enhance climate change and sustainability research and education. Despite this, young people have found inadequacies in the current education system and their voice and impact is almost non-existent in climate change and sustainability policy (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022). Academic research in higher education institutions can inform innovative educational approaches, sustainable campus practices, and solution-focused government policy (Sterling, 2013). Effective and purposeful academic research focused on climate change and sustainability, coupled with young people's diverse, intuitive and innovative perspectives that inform higher education policy, can enable universities to reach their potential in leading a just response to the climate and ecological crises. Climate change and sustainability education can motivate and equip students with the knowledge and skills to become active change-makers and tackle the global challenges of today (Latter & Capstick, 2021; Barr et al., 2022). This policy brief shares youth perspectives on possible ways forward.

## Who is this policy brief for?

This policy brief is designed for policymakers and senior management teams in higher education institutions to inform decision making on undergraduate climate change and sustainability education and sustainable campus-wide practice.

## What did we do to produce this policy brief?

This policy brief has been developed as the result of research undertaken by two first year undergraduate students as part of the Laidlaw scholarship programme, between May and July 2023. Ethical approval was provided by

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

## Key activities included:

- An outdoor workshop was 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.

# What does sustainability mean to undergraduate students?

Using the responses to the first question ‘what does sustainability mean to you?’, we generated the word cloud seen in Figure 2.

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

## Youth recommendations for the future of university-based climate change and sustainability education

A central theme across all recommendations is that the sustainability agenda and the probable futures that society face must set an overarching context for all higher education 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.

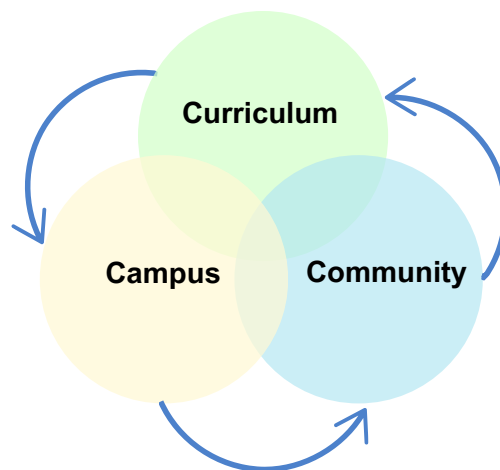


Figure 3. Recommendations identified across three key areas.

# 1. Curriculum-led transformational learning

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

Students expressed a desire to learn about climate change and sustainability in the context of their university degree. University education has the potential to enable students to think sustainably in the long-term and be prepared to take informed decisions in their lives, community and career. Analysis highlighted three 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. They emphasised that they want to learn and 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 should include consideration of 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 understanding of 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. In order for institutions to take the necessary actions to address the climate crisis, a fundamental cultural shift in leadership and operations is essential. Students felt that stringent actions should be taken to ensure key actors in the university decision-making system take steps to reduce institutional carbon emissions and implement 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 making processes as well as facilitate discussions with peers to inform the implementation and evaluation of campus-wide sustainability actions. For example, by appointing a sustainability officer for the 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 in the university and with 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 platforms 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, 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 in-person 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 business innovations.
5. Provide monetary incentive for students to conduct research projects to implement or evaluate climate change and sustainability solutions. For example, [UCL Grand Challenges](#).

## 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. For example, by conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students from various universities across the UK, more detailed critical insights can be drawn 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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