

Youth Voices for Sustainable Futures in Higher Education

Introduction

The consistent progress of human ambition over time has materialised in forms ranging from the combustion of fossil fuels, widespread deforestation and negligent industrial practices and protocols. These activities cause an excessive release of greenhouse gases, leading to what we now know as the climate crisis, an urgent global issue characterised by the rapid and alarming changes in Earth's climate patterns. The consequences of the climate crisis are far-reaching, impacting ecosystems, biodiversity, food security, and human livelihoods, and addressing this crisis is crucial for the well-being of current and future generations.

Universities 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).

The aim of our research project was to engage with the perspectives of students on the role of universities in equipping them with the knowledge, tools and resources to understand, analyse and take action on sustainability issues that society today faces. Our objective was to, based on the ideas and opinions we gathered, design a policy brief 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.

Methodology

In order to successfully execute the research project and develop as comprehensive an understanding as we could of youth perspectives on sustainability education, we developed a step-by-step approach.

First, we had a set of meetings with our supervisor to broadly discuss the project outcomes and the direction we wanted the research to take.

We agreed that the primary goal of our work would be to serve as a bridge between youth perspectives on their sustainability education and the entities in higher education that make decisions on undergraduate curricula, resources and facilities. We wanted to acquire an overview of students' thoughts on the current quality of sustainability education but more importantly on what could be done at the university level to enhance this quality.

In order to do so, we needed to ensure that we were able to develop a deep understanding of the ideas and opinions that the students we engaged with possessed. So, we decided that a workshop, in the early part of our summer break, with a group of undergraduate students would be ideal; we also noted that a workshop in person would be significantly more effective than one online because in our experiences, students tend to be more active and share ideas more freely in person than virtually. Of course, participation in this workshop would be fully voluntary, and we quickly realised that our group would be relatively small because a vast majority of UCL students go home during the summer. Nevertheless, we prioritised the quality of responses over their quantity.

Our next step was to get to the details and fix the workshop's venue, timing and other logistics. We decided to take this step earlier rather than later because it gave us ample time to do any bookings or make any, perhaps tricky, arrangements for the workshop. A few weeks before we

began our research work, we had attended a leadership training program organised by the Laidlaw foundation in Windsor. Reflecting on this experience, we recalled that us students had several workshops and discussions out in the open close to nature, and this seemed to have a positive effect on the enthusiasm and idea-generation in the group. Therefore, we also decided to organise our workshop in a garden, narrowing down on the Gordon Square garden due to its suitable location. We further chose to organise the workshop in the afternoon since it would be warm and relatively more comfortable for us and the participants. To incentivise participation, we thought organising some refreshments would be helpful, so we earmarked some of our research budget for this purpose.

Next, we discussed how we will ask questions and record responses. There was some level of disagreement here: my partner thought both of us could ask questions and we could place a recording device near us to register all responses. I, on the other hand, thought that we could switch between asking questions and the person not asking could take notes of the responses. I thought this was a good option because the notes would filter out unnecessary information and be more helpful. However, the strength of the other option was that no response would be missed and we could both focus on the questions. Eventually, we went with the former option. So, we then prepared a consent form for participants to be recorded.

After these rounds of meetings and discussions, we were ready to begin reaching out to students about our workshop. We quickly prepared a registration form, asking for students' basic personal details. Of course, in today's day and age, one of the best ways to reach out to students is through social media! So we also created an Instagram account for our project and sent out a post about our workshop. Initially, registration numbers were dull, but it struck us that all our fellow Laidlaw scholars would be in London over the summer, and we hoped that they would be happy to help out in another Laidlaw project. So we reached out to them, and registration numbers increased significantly.

As we were doing this, we also prepared the list of questions we were going to ask during the workshop. My partner and I carefully considered the intended project outcomes and drafted appropriate questions. We started off with more general questions but also prepared specific,

focused ones on the recommendations that students had for improvements in sustainability education. Questions covered current scenarios and potential changes at the curriculum, campus as well as community level. We also added questions about improving the accessibility and inclusivity of sustainability education since we considered these aspects to be part of sustainability too. After we finished listing the questions, we met with our supervisor for approval, and a few changes later, our list was ready. During this meeting, we had an idea to invite participants, voluntarily, to edit the draft of the policy brief we produced after the workshop. These students would be added as collaborators to the brief. We thought this gave both us and the participants something in return, as it would help us refine our work and give them recognition for their contributions. We prepared a form for the same and sent it to the group.

As the workshop date came closer, my partner and I conducted a few run-throughs of the workshop to ensure that the conversations would flow smoothly and the questions were connected to one another. We also wanted to focus less on reading through our questions and more on the responses on the day of the workshop. As we were doing this, we also sent out reminders to the students that had registered to ensure their attendance. Finally, we were fully ready for the workshop.

The Workshop

On the day of the workshop, we first went to the grocery store to purchase refreshments for participants. Then, we set up at Gordon Square garden, ensuring adequate seating space for all participants. Soon, participants started arriving and we conversed informally with them until our entire group arrived.

After everyone settled in, we began recording and opened the discussion by asking what sustainability meant to each student. Sitting in a circle helped discussions at this stage as we moved around and each student responded with their definition of sustainability. Responses ranged from energy saving to compassionate living. Then, we focused more on the topic of the project and asked what sustainability meant in the context of each student's degree. Given the

variety of courses being studied across the group, responses were unique and diverse, providing multiple interesting perspectives.

The discussions began flowing quite organically as we gradually went through our list of questions. There were several comments about where universities were lacking in their coverage of sustainability and what could be done at the micro and macro levels to amend this. For instance, participants cited the importance of the student union in creating awareness and a platform for ideas on sustainability to be shared by people coming from various backgrounds. By the same token, there were thoughts on what the university's administrative staff could do on a more operational level to further the sustainability agenda, such as setting clear energy saving goals and making waste segregation and disposal more straightforward and natural. While there were some participants speaking more frequently than others, the discussion in general was extremely fruitful. As we came to the end of the workshop, we summarised the points raised, asked for final thoughts and then thanked all participants for their time and effort.

Outcomes

Very soon after the workshop, we both combed through the recording we took and made a document containing all points that we found important and relevant to the policy brief we were going to produce. This was certainly quite lengthy and required further filtration, so we prepared a second draft being more particular about the key points and ideas. After this was done and approved by our supervisor, we began preparing the first draft of our policy brief.

It was important to ensure that our policy brief was concise, focused and attractive to the eye, since our goal was for it to be read by decision makers in higher education and for changes to be made based on it. We started putting our points together and focused first on the content and then on the visual appeal. We were meticulous about the structure: starting with the key problem we were trying to address, the target audience, our methodology, students' thoughts on the current state of sustainability education and finally their recommendations for improvement. After this was done, we added graphics, colours and other visual features. These also were such that they evoked the theme of sustainability, environmental protection and change. This process took us a

week for good measure, but we prepared the first draft of the brief and immediately sent it to our supervisor for her feedback. She highlighted a few areas of improvement, mostly to do with brevity and the tone and wording of some of our points. We agreed with her feedback and made the suggested changes. Next, we sent the updated version of the brief to those participants of the workshop that had volunteered to help with the draft, inviting them to offer their comments and feedback for further development of the work. After accumulating all the feedback and making the necessary modifications, while also getting rid of any minor errors, the final version of our policy brief was ready. We sent the document to our supervisor, completed any last formalities and officially ended our research project.

Evaluation

As I reflect on this research project, I note several project related and personal strengths and weaknesses.

I believe a key strength of our workshop was that we prioritised quality over quantity. There was discussion of an online workshop, which would certainly have brought in more participants, but because of the shortcomings of virtual interactions in terms of the depth of discussions, we chose to go with a smaller group of participants but an in person workshop. This gave us clear, diverse and well thought out perspectives and allowed a deep understanding of youth perspectives of sustainability education. In fact, I discovered that critically analysing several options and making a careful decision based on multiple factors is one of the strengths and a quality I should try to build on. Another noteworthy strength was that our policy brief was well-structured and generally easy to follow. In particular, our recommendations were divided into three levels: curriculum, campus and community. Each level had to do with a different aspect of university education and was intended for a different decision making entity. This, I think, made our recommendations more impactful and actionable.

However, I believe a weakness of the workshop was the manner in which questions were asked to the participants. Sometimes, because we had a list of questions prepared, the natural flow of conversation and discussion had to be broken to cover the material. Although this allowed us to

stay more focused on the topic at hand, participants may have lost their train of thought and may have had ideas that were left unshared. Perhaps, being more flexible with the questions and subtly directing the flow of discussions according to our questions would have been ideal. I personally need to work on being more spontaneous and having a backup plan in case of more unexpected situations.

Overall, I believe that our research project was successful in delivering the project outcomes of shedding light on youth perspectives on sustainability education and communicating these perspectives to decision makers in higher education. Over the course of the project, I gained several skills, from planning and organisation to effective communication, and also learned some of my own qualities and shortcomings. I am grateful to our workshop participants, my partner, supervisor and the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme for this opportunity.
