



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme**  
**Research Proposal**

**Climate Consciousness: Shaping Futures at the University of Toronto**

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## **Abstract**

This research seeks to investigate how climate change awareness influences the career and life planning decisions of University of Toronto undergraduate students. It seeks to understand if and how the perception of climate change directs these students towards sustainable career paths and lifestyles, and how it affects their personal decision-making regarding marriage, geographical location, childbearing, and more. The study is motivated by the observation that climate change awareness is increasingly becoming a factor in young adults' future planning, reflecting a shift from viewing climate change as a distant issue to recognizing it as an immediate reality impacting all lives.

The methodology includes a structured online survey with questions designed to measure the impact of climate change on students' personal, academic, and professional choices, complemented by demographic information collection. Participants willing to engage further with the project will be interviewed, for a qualitative data aspect of this research.

This project draws on environmental ethics, sociology, education, and public policy, for an interdisciplinary approach. Its findings aim to inform stakeholders, including educational and environmental organizations, about how to tailor their strategies to engage and support young adults effectively in climate change initiatives. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and programs that resonate with the values and aspirations of the younger generation, facilitating more effective climate change action.

## **Introduction**

The intersection of climate change awareness and the life choices of young adults represents a critical area of study in a world that is in crisis. This research proposal, focusing on undergraduate students at University of Toronto, seeks to explore how climate change influences

the future career paths and life plans of a young, impressionable demographic. My interest in this area is not just academic but also personal, as I have seen a significant shift in how my peers perceive and react to the climate crisis. I have great confidence in the fact that we are at a historical juncture where climate change is not just a distant scientific concept, but a lived reality affecting personal and collective futures. My interest in this research is fueled by a desire to capture this transition in thought and action. I am intrigued by how knowledge of climate change is shaping undergraduate students' aspirations and strategies for the future. Are they moving towards careers and lifestyles that are more sustainable and environmentally conscious? Has awareness of climate change affected their sense of responsibility and agency, or possibly marital and childbearing decisions? These are crucial questions that I am passionate about, as the answers will provide insights into how the next generation is preparing to tackle one of the most pressing challenges of our time.

## **Research Objectives & Questions**

How does climate change awareness affect the career and life planning decisions of undergraduate students at the University of Toronto?

## **Background**

Prior work in the field of climate change awareness has predominantly focused on a broad spectrum of demographics, often assessing the public's belief in climate change rather than its tangible impact on individual decisions and lifestyles. Such research has provided valuable insights into general trends and attitudes towards climate change but falls short of exploring the specific ways in which climate change awareness is shaping the future planning of young adults, particularly those in academic environments. Studies have frequently assessed the degree to

which individuals accept the reality of climate change, with less emphasis on how this awareness translates into concrete changes in career choices, lifestyle decisions, and personal planning.

However, there are three studies that have significantly influenced the direction of my research. Shealy et. al (2020) examined variations in climate change motivation among different engineering disciplines, suggesting the importance of disciplinary perspectives in shaping climate attitudes and career aspirations. Drawing from this insight, I intend to examine how disciplinary differences may influence attitudes toward and experiences of climate change. Additionally, Hocking and Kroksmark's (2013) work on occupational therapists' response to climate change underscores the importance of considering socio-political and geographic contexts in understanding young adults' perceptions and priorities, guiding my research towards a more comprehensive approach. By considering various contextual factors, I aim to gain an understanding of how climate change awareness intersects with students' experiences and priorities. Finally, Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell (2019) make an argument that my supports and motivates my research; climate change education is a catalyst for youth activism and enables political agency in academic settings.

## **Methodology**

The research will be primarily conducted through a structured and accessible survey using Qualtrics. The digital survey will include 15-20 questions that determine the extent to which climate change has shaped personal, academic, and professional pursuits, as well as questions assessing respondents' exposure to climate change information at the high school and university level, concern about climate change, and overall impressions of climate change. Data collection will also encompass demographic variables, including but not limited to gender, age, and citizenship status. Additionally, information pertaining to participants' academic pursuits at

the University of Toronto, such as their major, department, academic programs, and participation in extracurricular activities, will be gathered. All questions on the survey will be in a multiple choice or Likert-scale format. Qualitative data will also be gathered through interviews with participants who express willingness to engage further in the project, allowing for in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of climate change. To reach respondents widely across the three UofT campuses, the survey will be distributed through student groups, departments, and class email lists. I anticipate sample size of 100 for the survey, with 5-7 survey respondents expressing interest in participating in an interview.

Two separate forms will be connected to the survey to ensure anonymity in the data. Participants interested in entering a lottery for a gift card will fill out one form, accessible at the end of the survey, while those interested in participating in an interview will use another form. Consequently, contact information will solely be collected from students who complete either of the two forms, ensuring it remains distinct from the survey data. Only survey participation will result in an entry into the gift card lottery; interviewees will not receive additional entries. There will be a total of ten gift cards available, and the winners will be chosen through a random drawing. The gift cards will be distributed through electronic means in the last week of research using contact information from the separate form.

### **Training/ Certifications Needed**

To effectively analyze the data, I will need to familiarize myself with Qualtrics, a survey platform, inductive and deductive coding methodologies, and both survey and interview question design. This entails understanding how to design surveys, collect data, and perform qualitative coding techniques. No specific training days are required as I plan to complete these familiarizations independently.

## **Research Location**

All six weeks of the research will be conducted in Canada, with the interviews taking place across the Greater Toronto Area.

## **Research Ethics Board**

This research project on the impact of climate change on undergraduate students will require approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board by virtue that it will involve human participation in surveys and interviews. My research supervisor and I anticipate a submission no later than April 16<sup>th</sup>.

## **Timeline**

Prior to June 17<sup>th</sup>, I will conduct an extensive literature review and finalize outreach messages in collaboration with my supervisor. During this time, we will also work together to build and refine the survey and interview questions to ensure their effectiveness in capturing relevant data while I familiarize myself with Qualtrics and coding methodologies. Starting on June 17<sup>th</sup>, the survey deployment phase will begin. Over the initial two weeks, my primary focus will be on outreach efforts aimed at maximizing participation. This will involve targeted communication strategies and engagement with various student groups and departments across the University of Toronto campuses. Subsequently, from the third through the fifth weeks, I will remain concentrated on data collection. This will entail overseeing the distribution of the survey, tracking responses, and conducting interviews with willing participants. Transitioning into the sixth week, I will continue conducting interviews and commence preliminary data analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes. The sixth is also when I will randomly draw for the gift

card lottery and then distribute the gift cards. Finally, from July 26th to September 1st, I will dedicate substantial time to conducting a thorough analysis of the survey and interview data. This will result in a comprehensive research report and posters that will include detailed methodologies, key findings, areas for future research, and significant study conclusions.

## **Resources & Support Needed**

My research supervisor, Professor Matthew Hoffmann, and I have collaboratively outlined a plan for the success of this research. We have agreed upon regular weekly meetings, supplemented by additional sessions as needed, to maintain effective communication throughout the project. During these meetings, I will provide updates on my research progress and seek guidance or clarification on any pertinent issues. Additionally, to ensure continuous support and alignment with project objectives, we will maintain frequent communication via email both during, preceding, and following the research period, up until the September 1st deliverables deadline.

## **Potential Impact**

Understanding how climate change influences young adults' career choices, life plans, and sense of responsibility will assist stakeholders in tailoring their strategies and interventions to effectively engage and support this demographic. This research could provide critical guidance to the developers of educational programs, policy initiatives, and advocacy campaigns to reflect the values and implement changes that cater to the aspirations of young adults. Organizations that could benefit from this insight include Canada Green Corps to apply to the development of curriculum and resources that resonate with this demographic, and Regensis Environmental Organization to use for recruitment and engagement strategies that appeal to

environmentally conscious youth. Through this research, I want to highlight the resiliency and challenges of undergraduate students in the face of their lived climate change experience as they navigate their aspirations. I intend for this, in turn, to help the formation of evidence-based policy initiatives that are better suited to effectively address climate change.

## References

- Cutter-Mackenzie, A., & Rousell, D. (2019). Education for what? Shaping the field of climate change education with children and young people as co-researchers. *Children's Geographies*, 17(1), 90-104.
- Hocking, C., & Kroksmark, U. (2013). Sustainable occupational responses to climate change through lifestyle choices. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 20(2), 111-117.
- Shealy, T., Katz, A., & Godwin, A. (2020). Predicting engineering students' desire to address climate change in their careers: an exploratory study using responses from a U.S. National survey. *Environmental Education Research*, 27(7), 1054-1079.