



Encouraging a culture of climate activism in universities

SGR's **Emily Heath** shares some tips based on her experience of leading and supporting sustainability campaigns within the UK higher education sector.

The need for activists in education

All parts of the education sector have an important role to play in teaching the factual evidence about the climate and ecological emergencies, and equipping their staff, students and communities with the skills and ambition to make a rapid transition to low-carbon living and working.

To make this happen, I think that increasing numbers of staff and students must be bold enough to challenge the status quo and become activists.

Activism can take many forms. It might involve behind-the-scenes information-gathering and policy development, using physical and digital media to influence social and political change, or participating in public protests or non-violent direct action. Everyone can do something.

Why focus on universities?

Despite all their talk about innovation, sustainability and leadership, universities have very large carbon footprints and are not doing enough to reduce them. Valls-Val and Bovea (2021)¹ reviewed the carbon footprints of 34 universities worldwide, and found that European institutions emitted an average of 2.25 tCO₂e per student per year. At the end of 2021, People and Planet reported that the majority of UK universities were not on track to meet sector-wide carbon-reduction targets.² Some are leading the way, but many have not yet even committed to reduce their emissions to net zero by 2050, let alone by the science-led target of 2030.³ Universities need to get their own house in order to be credible as sustainability leaders.

A culture change is desperately needed. Academic norms include working long hours, competing in a global market and generating a lot of international travel. There is a pervasive focus on rankings and maximising income. Students imbibe these norms and perpetuate them.

If you work or study at a university, what can you do to change this competitive, conservative, money-oriented culture to one that embraces rapid change and embodies values of co-operation, equality, justice and sustainability?

1. **Unionise!** Become a Green Rep or other officer in your trade union, e.g. University and College Union (UCU),⁴ or students' union. This will help you to communicate with and mobilise a lot of people, give your campaigning more clout, and benefit from training and networking opportunities and resources on a national scale.
2. **Get time and recognition for taking climate action.** Not having time is often the biggest barrier to making change happen. Could you reduce your working hours to free up some time for volunteering? Even better, could you find a way to make it part of your job or studies? Make a case for sustainability champions to be allocated some paid time every month. Integrate activism into your teaching or research. Switch jobs if yours harms, rather than helps, the planet. If you are a student, get elected as a student union officer, or choose courses, dissertation topics or placements focused on action for sustainability. Campaign to create new jobs to progress this agenda. Incentivise people by building sustainability leadership into promotion criteria. Create awards or submit nominations to recognise sustainability leaders (students, staff, institutions).

3. **Demand transparency from your institution.** It is no longer mandatory for UK universities to provide data on carbon reduction and other sustainability issues to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, although many are still doing so. Put pressure on them to publish and discuss their Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions, targets, monitoring and action plans with enough detail to understand where emissions are coming from and how to reduce them. Ask questions, and use Freedom of Information legislation if necessary. Find out how your institution is governed, and hold decision-makers to account. Meet with them and explain how you would like to work cooperatively with them. If they are resistant, campaign for democratic reform and stand for election if you can.
4. **Find ways to embed climate education, action and justice across the whole curriculum.** Decarbonising, decolonising and democratising go hand-in-hand. Link with campaigns such as Teach the Future,⁵ Students Organising for Sustainability,⁶ Why Is My Curriculum White?, and the Green New Deal.
5. **Create or support pledges and petitions.** These are easy ways to engage people, demonstrate high levels of support for action, and secure commitments. They need regular promotion by a well-networked team who collectively have good social media skills and face-to-face persuasion skills.
6. **Protect the right to protest.** This is threatened by repressive new legislation from the UK government, and some universities have adopted policies to deter protests on their campuses.
7. **Publicly support climate action and other activists.** Build alliances and help to give activists hope and motivation by simply thanking them or standing with them. The more we nurture climate-friendly behaviour and leadership, the sooner we will establish new social norms.
8. **Challenge greenwash, waste and high-emission activities.** Continuing to invest in fossil fuels, buying non-renewable electricity, failing to insulate buildings, and flying to academic conferences and graduation ceremonies are good ones to start with!
9. **Be brave and persevere.** Being an effective activist isn't easy, and nobody has all the answers – but don't let fear or uncertainty stop you. If you are in a privileged position (e.g. with a secure job, your own house, perhaps a senior role), use it to empower others and speak up for those who will bear the brunt of climate breakdown if we fail to act soon enough.

Dr Emily Heath is SGR's Office Manager. Before this, she taught Earth Sciences at Lancaster University for 23 years.

References and useful resources

- 1 Valls-Val, K., & Bovea, M. (2021). Carbon footprint in Higher Education Institutions: a literature review and prospects for future research. *Clean Technologies and Environmental Policy*, vol.23, pp.2523–2542. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10098-021-02180-2>
- 2 <https://peopleandplanet.org/university-league/2021-press-release>
- 3 For a list of all UK universities and colleges and their commitments (if any!), see: https://www.eauc.org.uk/sustainability_commitments
- 4 For more information on UCU Green reps, see: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/environment>
- 5 Teach The Future is a youth-led campaign which includes a teachers' network – see: <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/>
- 6 <https://www.sos-uk.org/projects>



Dr Emily Heath (SGR) & Dr Nils Markusson (University & College Union) at a climate protest on a UCU strike day in 2020.