

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Can Help Students Find Their Place in Fighting Climate Change

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Universities have [the resources](#) to help combat the climate crisis. What's more, they have a responsibility to their students – who want to take action, but may lack the support they need to do so.

One way universities can do this is to help students use their skills to contribute to university- and community-wide projects. This can create real change, as well as teaching students how to take collaborative action.

In 2019, we started a research project with colleagues at York St John University to find out what students felt about the climate crisis. To begin, we held [focus groups with 23 students](#) who had responded to a call for participation posted on social media and around the campus.

Eco-anxiety

We discovered that climate catastrophe was a pressing, even overwhelming concern – and that many felt daunted by its scale and severity.

“I think that for me, it massively affects like my health and my wellbeing just purely from like worrying about it.”

In particular, we found that the students were frustrated by the limits of individual action. They felt that any contribution they could make as individuals was far too small to have any meaningful impact – and that they were unlikely to ever have the power to initiate more widespread change.

“Unless for example you're a billionaire or something, with something backing you, you're not really going to make a difference [...] Everything is just too big now. Any, any small thing to do won't make a difference. A big initiative might make a small difference, but the majority don't care enough to make a difference.”

This theme emerged frequently. The students talked about the actions they themselves were taking, but lamented that it would never be enough.

“I'm part of a Change group and in that moment when you tie yourself to the tree, which I've done, it's really empowering. At that moment, but then you realise afterwards that this is a really tiny area that you've sort of protected for now. But in the grand scheme of things you probably haven't made that much of a difference and it's really irritating.”

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Their experiences meant that the students were not optimistic about their ability to create change in their future lives. They anticipated having no influence, as employees, on their employers' working practices.

But this is where universities can make a difference. By offering students opportunities to take part in collaborative climate action, they can help students combat the eco-anxiety they may find suffocating and, crucially, show them that trying to make a difference on a larger scale than the individual is not a futile task. One student said:

“If they were actively showing me and [...] making me actively get involved and the changes I could make it wouldn't seem so overwhelming.”

One way universities can help students contribute to climate action is by establishing “living labs” where staff, students and other community members can collaborate. These are physical or virtual places where people work together to solve community problems, quickly coming up with ideas and trying them out.

Living labs

At the [University of Manchester](#), students can [sign up](#) to take part in projects on subjects ranging from green space in the city to sustainable transport and fuel poverty.

At Plymouth University, [living labs have connected the university](#) with the local community in the city, and students are able to help [lead sustainability education](#) at the university.

We wanted to try to create opportunities for students to get involved with climate projects on campus at York St John University. In early 2022, we created our first “[living lab](#)”. In our living lab work, students bring their subject knowledge and skills to help [solve real problems](#) on campus or in the local area.

The first project focused on [air quality](#), and saw students from ten subject areas write dramatic and literary pieces, produce campaign posters, make music and explore the urban linguistic landscape, all based around one particular [highly polluted junction](#) close the university.

A second, larger project focused on food on [campus](#). Roughly 800 undergraduate students worked together to redesign the campus food system.

Business students researched the ethics and environmental performance of the university's own food suppliers and advocated for improvements in a public panel with supplier representatives. Education students developed lesson plans and workshops for local teachers based around the city's community food growing spaces. Literature students worked as bloggers publicizing the work and volunteering requirements of local social enterprises.

Living labs offer students opportunities to experience collaborative, social learning processes with tangible outcomes. And they prompt universities to turn their resources and expertise towards tackling local and regional issues – and consider the purpose they will serve in helping society and individuals prepare for future climate crisis.

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Catherine Heinemeyer, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate in Ecological Justice and Lecturer in Drama, York St John University. Her current practice-based research collaborations investigate storytelling and climate adaptation, the role of indigenous knowledge in responding to climate crisis, and disabled access to 'blue spaces'. She is the co-convenor of the Ecological Justice Research Group, based in the Institute for Social Justice, and coordinator of York St John's Living Lab, an interdisciplinary cross-university project engaging students in ecological justice issues.

Jude Parks, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer in Geography, York St John University. She is a social geographer with interest in community participation. Her work explores understandings of social sustainability and its links with environmental sustainability and responses to climate crisis. She is currently involved in cross-disciplinary pedagogical research into student engagement with climate and ecological justice, including through a Living Lab project.



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