# Making academia environmentally sustainable: a student perspective

Universities have an important role in the fight against climate change. Academic staff contribute to the identification and development of effective solutions through theoretical and applied research, technological innovation, and education for future generations. Yet, we argue that a university's role should not be confined to these aspects. Academia has a social responsibility to practise what it advocates: becoming a model for sustainability and an agent of change, meeting the demands of today's society, including its students. This responsibility is even more prominent for public health institutions considering the substantial health costs of climate change. Regrettably, in most cases, the sustainable transformation of universities is not sufficient to mitigate their own environmental impact, a gap that students and staff members often work voluntarily to fill. Here, we give a students' perspective on what we consider to be an unjust burden on students and staff members, a missed opportunity for university directors to make their institutions leaders in their own sustainable transformation, and lay out a broad framework for co-operative, sustained, and effective transformation.

Students are increasingly demanding that their prospective or current universities be more environmentally sustainable. In a 2020 international survey by Students Organizing for Sustainability International, 92% of respondents believed sustainable development is something universities should be actively promoting and addressing.[1] In the UK, between 2019 and 2020, 50% of 6000 students surveyed considered a university's commitment to environmental issues to be an important factor when choosing a place of study.[2] Similarly, in a survey of 14 093 US college applicants and their parents in 2021, 75% indicated that institutional commitment to environmental issues would affect their choice of college; a 10% increase from 2020.[3] In addition to the moral and social responsibility for action, these data suggest a potential direct competitive and financial benefit.

The gap between student demands and universities' actions has so far been partially filled by movements led by students and staff members.[4] These collectives have been shown to be strong and powerful agents of change, with some remarkable success stories, such as the fossil fuels divestment campaign by People & Planet.[5] However, their efforts often face several challenges (appendix pp 1–2). First, the absence of a cohesive strategy often results in initiatives that are redundant, do not capitalise on potential cobenefits of concurrent actions, and, in the worst cases, can be counterproductive. Furthermore, many students and staff are less inclined to participate in sustainability initiatives if they are not supported sufficiently by university administration. Second, the absence of sustained financial and managerial support and the high turnover of volunteers might lead to projects being discontinued or unable to fulfil their maximum potential, especially the initiatives focused on long-term changes. Most importantly, this approach is unjust to students and staff, who should not carry a disproportionate burden of improving and changing their university's environmental impact on their own. Such a burden is likely to have an effect on the productivity and mental health[6] of students because it diverts them from their studies and duties, potentially having a longstanding detrimental effect on their future career success. A 2018–19 UK National Union Students survey of 566 higher-education staff identified a paucity of resources and capacity (40% of respondents), prioritisation of other goals (37%), and a shortfall of financial support (32%) as the leading barriers to sustainability.[7] This kind of collective action problem has also affected sustainable transition in other sectors.[8]

We propose that all universities develop centralised, institution-level frameworks that remove the burden from students and staff and place the social responsibility and accountability on the university leadership, while still encouraging student and staff involvement (appendix pp 1–2). First, universities should publish a sustainability strategic plan, in which the university states and defines its environmental stand, and a roadmap to show time-bound objectives and the pathways for achieving these objectives. Second, a better understanding of the needs, barriers, and challenges underlying a transformative change

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towards sustainability is needed. Surveys, monitoring, and evaluation encompassing both quantitative and qualitative assessments are useful means to improve current practices and inform future actions. Third, transparency must be ensured throughout the entire process to guarantee accountability and promote knowledge sharing. Staff members and students have the right to understand how their university is investing its resources to which they directly or indirectly contribute. This information should also be made publicly available for prospective staff and students[4] as well as for external audits. Finally, all the above should receive financial and managerial support from the university. The little data available suggest that having dedicated sustainability teams and offices—a minimum requirement—is still not an accepted best practice for universities.[4] Universities where such teams exist have shown improvements in their sustainability practices—eg, King's College London and the University of Brighton.

For many years, most universities have been avoiding the responsibility of undergoing a sustainable transformation, leaving the action to students and staff. In addition to being unfair, this practice is often inefficient because of the restricted financial, managerial, and organisational support received, which are crucial for success. A framework encompassing strategic planning, managerial and financial support, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge transfer, and transparency is key to ensuring a successful and collaborative transformation, in which students and staff members can be actively involved without bearing an unreasonable burden, which should reside with the universities directors.

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For more on **King's College London's sustainability strategy** see https://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/strategy/sustainability/index

For more on the **University of Brighton's sustainability practices** see https://www.brighton.ac.uk/about-us/your-university/sustainability/governance/index.aspx