Summary for Staff



Cambridge Climate Society

Student Voices in Climate Policy:

Barriers and Opportunities at Cambridge

2025

Introduction

The Student Stocktake Report is a study by students, about students. It investigates the empowerment of young people in policymaking by researching the relationship between youth-led climate movements campaigning within the University, and the institution itself. The report will identify the key facilitators and barriers to the negotiation and implementation of climate policy within the University, and highlight existing and potential pathways to policy change. We also aim to support future initiatives with this report by providing a foundation for ongoing dialogue.

The University of Cambridge is characterised by a plethora of student climate societies, the largest being the Cambridge Climate Society (CCS). During our research, students highlighted the barriers, challenges and opportunities to effectively scrutinise the university. The unique institutional design of Cambridge University, with its independent colleges, departments and central institutions were frequently highlighted as both a barrier to implementation and accountability but also a potential opportunity for delivering change on a smaller scale.

The full report is made up of three sections; it begins with a discussion of the barriers to entry for students wanting to get involved with climate policy at the University, followed by an assessment of the ways students are currently advocating for policy change. It concludes with an analysis of the ways in which policy changes are implemented, and the extent to which there is accountability for these changes. Each section concludes with a set of recommendations for both students and staff involved in climate policy at the University of Cambridge. This summary will present the most relevant findings of the report for staff of the University of Cambridge.

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Methodology

The research for this report was undertaken over the course of the 2023-24 academic year. We began with an online survey, which contained general questions about student engagement with climate policy across five themes: ambition, collaboration, implementation, engagement, and visibility.

Respondents to the survey could express their interest in being interviewed. Over the course of the year, we interviewed 30 students. They were a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and most were or had been involved in one of the main climate societies (CCS, Cambridge Climate Justice, Plant Based Cambridge, college-level green societies/officers). We continued with the aforementioned themes in the interviews, which were open ended and guided by the interests and experiences of the interviewees.

Following the interview period, we organised our findings into the three sections that make up this report: entry points for students interested in climate policy, student advocacy for climate policy change, and points of implementation and advocacy in university policy.

We recognise that this report is not a definitive analysis of what all students and staff at the University think about climate policy. It is instead intended to lay the groundwork for an important conversation that we believe will facilitate greater staff-student collaboration in order to achieve our shared goal of a more sustainable University.

Key Findings

Entry points for students interested in climate policy

Key Barriers

One student noted that amongst the student body there is a *"specialised awareness but not a general one"*, in reference to the fact that the student body is aware about climate action, but not in relation to Cambridge. Concerns around the impact of student campaigns was also cited as a barrier to more student involvement in climate policy, as well as climate anxiety more generally. Participants also noted that the busy nature of Cambridge was a barrier for both students and staff wishing to get involved with climate policy.

Key facilitators

Many participants noted that getting involved in climate policy was easiest where it occurred in an established space. For instance, meetings that had already been set up between heads of catering to discuss more sustainable food provision. The siloed nature of the college system was suggested as both a barrier and a facilitator. In terms of the latter, for many participants the smaller and more communal nature of colleges made student-staff collaboration much easier than at the wider university level.

Recommendations

- Inform students about how to get involved in climate policy from the beginning of the year
- Create established spaces for staff-student, intercollegiate, and interdepartmental cooperation
- Create lower-commitment opportunities for student engagement

Key Findings

Student advocacy for policy change

Key Barriers

Participants frequently expressed frustration with the variation and lack of transparency of decision-making processes across colleges, departments and the University. Though students appreciated the wide reach of Cambridge Zero, they often felt that they were not *"led towards asking the difficult questions"* and that as students they were rarely *"in control of the conversation"*, especially on issues were staff and students disagree.

Key facilitators

Where staff-student collaboration does succeed, many students noted that it was an incredibly positive experience. In particular, the CCS Education campaign, which aimed to reform degree curriculums to include more climate-specific content, was frequently highlighted by those within the relevant departments. In general, there was an understanding across participants that staff working on sustainability encounter institutional constraints within *"university politics"*. However, students felt that the *"problems on each side"* could be *"better communicated"* in order to *"improve collaboration"* and to allow staff to take advantage of the relative freedom of students within campaigns.

Recommendations:

- Honest communication about the structures and constraints within University politics, facilitated by Cambridge Zero, so that student advocates know what systems they are pushing against
- Expand successful models of staff and student collaboration (e.g. Education Campaign) and in doing so, hold high standards for student and staff engagement

Key Findings

Points of implementation and accountability in university policy

Key Barriers

The institutional design and structure of Cambridge university adds an additional barrier to implementation and accountability. There remains no formal structure through which to deliver environmental change across all 31 colleges, leading to asymmetries on progress. Moreover, good practice is not shared and bad practice is ignored. The same can be said of departments, meaning that the university as a whole operates on a three tier system, which acts as a barrier to accountability and implementation.

Key facilitators

Through student campaigns, Cambridge's reputation as a world-class university could be leveraged to a greater extent in order to deliver progress. Students could benefit from framing the debate as an opportunity for Cambridge to deliver on its world-leading credentials, through becoming the first UK university to become carbon neutral for example.

Recommendations:

- Student campaigns could do more to leverage the university's reputation, both to celebrate existing progress and push for more change
- Successful campaigns within individual departments or colleges need to be better publicised so that other departments/colleges can emulate them



The Cambridge Climate Society

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