Summary for Students



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.

Elsie McDowell (*Policy Lead at CCS, 2024-25*)
Rose Amey (*Policy Lead at CCS, 2023-24*)
Max Perry (*Policy Officer at CCS, 2023-24*)

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

The ability of individuals to get involved in climate policy in colleges, departments, or the central university, is often overdependent on the work of a single engaged individual. Interviewees often noted that many students are not aware of the work of climate societies and campaigns across the University unless people around them are already involved in them. This is exacerbated by the *"echochamber"* that climate societies can create. Other participants noted that they did not feel like they were having an impact on climate policy until they had a "position of power", in particular with a committee role, which deterred some students on the basis of the time commitment.

Key facilitators

The existence of green societies at almost all colleges was suggested as something that facilitated student involvement in climate policy, as when already established, they tend to rely less on the work of an individual student. One participant also noted that a "buddy scheme" had been helpful when they were first involved in a climate society, as it provided them with a dedicated individual to come to with concerns or questions.

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

As most undergraduates stay at the university for three or four years, it is difficult to build institutional memory for campaigns, build strong working relationships with staff, and understand how policy-making processes work. As a result, are often subject to individual preferences and many lack the consistent and sustained pressure necessary to achieve implementation. Moreover, there remains no formal structure through which to deliver environmental change across all 31 colleges, leading to asymmetries on progress.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. Though the collegiate system can make good practice harder to share between colleges and departments, it can also allow JCR and MCR Green Officers to have a direct say in college policies and activities.

Recommendations:

- Student campaigns could do more to leverage the university's reputation, both to celebrate existing progress and push for more change
- Student campaigns should do more work to ensure the longevity of their campaigns, so that they do not fizzle out when involved students graduate.



The Cambridge Climate Society

2024