

Cambridge Climate Society

Student Voices in Climate Policy: Barriers and Opportunities at Cambridge

2025

Introduction

‘Student Voices in Climate Policy: Barriers and Opportunities’ at Cambridge 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. This policy 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 frequently highlighted the unique institutional design of Cambridge University, with its independent colleges, departments and central institutions, as both a barrier to implementation and accountability and a potential opportunity for delivering change on a smaller scale. As such, student involvement in climate policy takes places on all three of these scales.

This 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.

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

President's Foreword

The University of Cambridge is uniquely positioned to lead in the fight against climate change, not just because of its renowned research but also because of its engaged student community. The Report arose from the recognition that student voices are a crucial yet often underrepresented force in shaping the University's climate policy.

Across Cambridge, students engage with climate action at every level, driving reform in their colleges & departments. However, as this report reveals, the barriers they face can be as significant. By bringing these challenges and opportunities into focus, the Report highlights not only the complexities of climate advocacy but also the great potential for change when the institution and its students work together.

The findings of this report offer both a tough assessment and an urgent call to action. It was made evident that the University's climate societies - though present and active - are inaccessible to those not already involved. This lack of openness and receptiveness is likewise repeated in the student-university communication channels when discussing climate policy change at the central university level. Finally, while climate policy implementation can occur, it is often hindered by the high student turnover; with very limited visibility and leverage, student campaigns terminate abruptly when those who initiate them graduate.

'Student Voices in Climate Policy: Barriers and Opportunities at Cambridge' is not the end but the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. It not only identifies barriers to student involvement and systemic accountability but also offers concrete recommendations to overcome them. Whether through fostering collaboration between colleges and departments, creating lower-commitment entry points for student engagement, or leveraging Cambridge's global reputation to amplify student initiatives, these suggestions chart a clear and actionable path forward.



President's Foreword

The Cambridge Climate Society remains committed to supporting and leading these efforts, starting with the introduction of new, lower commitment committee roles and the expansion of our Education Reform Project to 4 new departments.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to the creation of this report. Special thanks go to our Policy Leads, Elsie McDowell and Rose Amey, and Policy Officer Max Perry, for their efforts in compiling and analyzing this insightful research. Your work exemplifies the passion and dedication that define the Cambridge Climate Society to amplify student voices in climate advocacy.

Together, as a community of students, staff, and leaders, we have the power to position the University of Cambridge as a pioneer of institutional climate responsibility. This report is not just a reflection of where we are but a roadmap for where we must go.

Shreya Patel, President, Cambridge Climate Society
Benedetta Radice, Vice President, Cambridge Climate Society

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.

A note on University governance

Many students we interviewed expressed frustration with the opacity of the University's governance structures, or were unsure who to turn to when wanting to change a specific policy. As such, we thought it would be appropriate to briefly outline how and where climate policy is decided across the University.

The main academic and administrative officer of the University is the Vice-Chancellor. They manage five Pro-Vice Chancellors, each of which has a specific portfolio, one being Education and Environmental Sustainability. Cambridge Zero sits within this portfolio,and is a "hub" for the University's response to the climate crisis across four streams, namely education, research, engagement, and decarbonisation.

Climate policy is also decided across various committees within the University. Some notable examples include the Environmental Sustainability Strategy Committee (ESSC), which monitors, reviews, and directs the University's sustainability commitments, and the Bursars' Committee: Sustainability Sub-Committee, which brings together the various colleges' Bursars' on matters relating to climate policy.

Individual colleges and departments also make their own climate policies, and as a result the level to which they involve students varies greatly. The School of Clinical Medicine, for instance, supports the Planetary Health Report Card, which is a student-led initiative that reports on the sustainability of medical schools. Ultimately, University governance is a complex web of devolved responsibility, which, as this report will explore, provides both opportunities and challenges.

Entry points for students interested in climate policy

How are students getting involved in climate policy? What is that experience like? How can that process be supported?

Key Barriers:

- Reliance on engaged individuals for entry into climate policy
- Lack of visibility of campaigns outside of the climate space
- Fear of failure and climate anxiety more generally amongst students

When asked about how they first got involved in climate policy in the University, participants frequently cited an individual person they knew who was already involved in climate policy. On an individual basis this is often a positive experience, but more widely it means 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. Equally, the success of campaigns and projects often comes down to a single engaged individual. For example, several participants discussed being involved in making catering at their college more sustainable. Where this was successful, it was because a specific person on the catering team was particularly interested in sustainability. As a result, the ability of individuals to get involved in climate policy in colleges, departments, or the central university, is often dependent on the work of a single engaged individual.

Many participants also noted that they were not aware of the work of climate campaigns and societies at the university until they got involved in one. This is exacerbated by what one participant described as the climate "*echochamber*" at Cambridge, which can seem difficult to understand from the outside. The use of acronyms like 'CCS' and 'CCJ' meant little to many participants until they were part of one or the other. As one participant put it "*there's 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.

Entry points for students interested in climate policy

Some participants also cited climate anxiety or fear of failure as a barrier to getting more involved with climate policy in the University. Especially given that many participants also stressed their frustration with the perceived impact of their work, worries about climate change more generally and the impact of climate societies and campaigns was suggested as a barrier for some students.

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. That said, other participants noted that the time commitment of committee roles, and the busy nature of Cambridge more generally, was a barrier to them getting involved in climate policy.

Key Facilitators:

- The presence of established spaces for collaboration between groups
- Buddy schemes for new climate society members
- The smaller scale nature of change on a college level

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. On a similar note, 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. In particular, many participants noted the new green officer network, as well as the shared climate society calendar, as good examples of facilitating spaces for cooperation.

Entry points for students interested in climate policy

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. This was, for them, a useful way of striking the balance between *"information overload"* and *"information underload"* for new members.

The college system was a key theme in many interviews, but both as a barrier to involvement in climate policy 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. Colleges also have more formal spaces for student involvement in climate policy, such as green societies and JCR green officers, though the extent of this varies between colleges.

However, the siloed nature of the college system can also be a barrier, as the lack of inter-collegiate collaboration means that successful projects on a college level are often not repeated elsewhere. Where intercollegiate collaboration does occur, participants often saw it as successful, such as through the aforementioned green officer network. The degree to which colleges are transparent with their climate goals also varies widely, and some participants suggested that few students are aware of their colleges' net zero targets, for instance.

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

Entry points for students interested in climate policy

It is evident from this report that more needs to be done to inform students about the climate policy action that they can get involved in, especially at the beginning of the academic year. The upcoming Climate Fresk workshops for incoming freshers or the presence of CCS at the Freshers' and Refreshers' fairs, are good examples of this.

Establishing more specific forums between staff and students, between colleges, and between departments would also lower the barriers to entry to climate policy. Participants often noted how difficult it was to contact key members of staff or balance their climate policy commitments with their workload. Having pre-established forums would facilitate collaborative projects and help minimise the work that currently has to go into establishing these channels of communication.

Moreover, creating spaces for students to get involved with climate policy and, crucially, feel impactful that do not involve high-commitment committee roles would also enable more students to engage with climate policy. Ensuring campaigns are visible to people who are not already directly involved with climate policy would also help reduce barriers to entry.

Student advocacy for climate policy change

How are students creating cultures of change and pushing the university forward in respects to ambitious climate initiatives? How is this integrated within efforts by staff and represented in the development of policy?

Key Barriers:

- Opacity and inconsistency of decision-making processes and institutional structures.
- Limited discourses and controlled debate between staff and students

Participants frequently expressed frustration with the variation and lack of transparency of decision-making processes across colleges, departments and the University. It was repeatedly reported that some colleges may have environmental committees, others may not; in some involvement in such committees was exclusively accessed by the Green Officer whilst others shared seats across active College Green Societies. Furthermore, very few colleges have a baseline of emissions that net-zero targets could be measured against.

It was also apparent that students were often unable to anticipate a positive reception from staff, as whilst particular individuals showed passion and ambition for student involvement, others were highly dismissive. Indeed, one interviewer describes instances of "*repeated harassment and discrimination against a particular student*".

Overall, participants described disempowerment due to the lack of visibility about the structures and individuals involved in decision-making affecting climate policy in the University. This was more apparent than the denial of access to spaces that participants could identify as decision-making bodies.

Student advocacy for climate policy change

Most interviewees showed dissatisfaction with the representation of climate justice issues within the University. In particular, Cambridge Zero was identified as promoting a discourse that centred on sustainability as net zero. Whilst showing ambition to achieve these goals, the emphasis on emissions reductions appeared to control and limit dialogue between students and staff.

One interviewee suggested that the carbon literacy programme run by Cambridge Zero is not "*led towards asking the difficult questions*", whilst another felt that "C*ambridge Zero has almost like a chokehold on everything environmental*".

This particular claim could also be interpreted as a testament to the wide reach of Cambridge Zero's work. However, the point here is that despite its wide reach, the diversity of debates was limited. Aligning with the dominant line of emissions reduction would engender support, funding and credibility. Yet, participants described feeling as though *"students aren't in control of the conversation*" and that the "*narrative isn't whole*".

One participant describes staff engagement with students; "*they just want students to be there and they will somewhat listen to you. But if you disagree with them, they won't … if you agree with them, then they'll be fine with it. And then they call that engagement".* This student's comments illustrate how the voices of students advocating for policy change are limited where certain problems are designated as institutionally acceptable debates. One interviewee succinctly states that *"there needs to be a stronger emphasis on people".*

Key Facilitators:

- A strong sense of community, often in localised environments, colleges and departments
- Staff utilise students' autonomy to apply pressure for more ambitious change

Student advocacy for climate policy change

Frustration towards the variability of college structures was paralleled by a strong sense of positivity and empowerment amongst college communities. One interviewee remarked on the "*proactive and dynamic*" nature of intra-collegiate collaborations for sustainability, which was lost at the scale of the university despite the possibility for "*the impact of change to increase exponentially*".

The success of 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 most cases staff met students expectations by engaging wholly with student-led reports, working alongside students to implement those recommendations.

In general, there was an understanding across participants that staff working on sustainability encounter institutional constraints. One interviewee worried that "*maybe [Cambridge Zero] is covering the University's back or that they have to answer to someone higher up*." A staff member interviewed remarked on the difficulties of working "*within the confines of University politics*". Further, the same participant suggested that if "*certain constraints*" were "*better communicated, like what the problems are on each side*" that would "*definitely help and improve collaboration*' '. There was an implicit acknowledgement here that students themselves don't sit within the same constraints, holding a greater degree of liberty to act, as one participant commented, "*as change makers*".

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, in doing so, hold high standards for student and staff engagement
- The empowerment students described within college-level and department-level communities should be both supported and modelled.

Points of implementation and accountability in university policy

Key Barriers:

- Lack of continuity within the student body limits institutional memory
- Lack of enforcement of university policy amongst colleges
- Departmental “microcosms” that inhibit the sharing of good practice

Several students highlighted the structural and institutional barriers to change. In particular, the lack of continuity within the student body means that it is difficult to push for policy change when students are constantly starting and finishing degrees. 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. This lack of continuity means that campaigns are often subject to individual preferences and many lack the consistent and sustained pressure necessary to achieve implementation. It is important to note that this problem is not unique to Cambridge, all student activist groups are limited by their transitory membership.

However, as multiple interviewees highlighted, the institutional design and structure of Cambridge university adds an additional barrier to implementation and accountability. Firstly, the collegiate nature of the university can act as a barrier for delivering change on a university-wide level. As each college is controlled by its fellows, there is no centralised body which can deliver progressive environmental change across all colleges. As a result, each college’s progress towards hitting key environmental targets, such as net zero, are varied. On the one hand, the collegiate system can be beneficial, allowing JCR and MCR Green Officers a direct say in college policies and activities. However, whether or not student voices are heard in such discussions are often reliant on individual relationships and fellows' good faith. There remains no formal structure through which to deliver environmental change across all 31 colleges, leading to asymmetries on progress.

Points of implementation and accountability in university policy

As one interviewee noted: *"the time and effort required to do something on a university-wide scale is just so difficult and so much work that it just doesn't happen."* Another went as far as to say that those who work on policy at a university level are *"quite invisible...they're just the people that float above us"* which acts as an *"additional barrier"* to change.

The institutional barriers to implementation and accountability are also reflected in the university's departments. Students praised the work of several departments in taking positive steps towards reaching net zero, such as the decision to introduce subsidised plant-based food options in. However, as they are all separate institutions, too often departments exist in their own microcosm, meaning that good practice is not shared and bad practice is ignored. As a result, the university as a whole operates on a three tier system, where colleges, departments and central institutions pursue their own policies. Without significantly more transparency, this institutional design acts as a barrier to accountability and implementation.

Key Facilitators

- Leveraging the prestigious reputation of Cambridge to create greater pressure for change, both at a university and college level

However, despite challenges, students noted how Cambridge's unique status could be used as a catalyst for environmental change. Through student campaigns, Cambridge's reputation as a world-class university could be leveraged 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.

Points of implementation and accountability in university policy

The reputational gains which such bold policy could deliver could be transformative to the universities green ambitions. It is also important to note the case for reputational gains at a collegiate level as several interviewees noted the positive press reception King's College received following their decision to put solar panels on its chapel.

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. Established channels for staff-student collaboration would help facilitate this
- Successful campaigns within individual departments or colleges need to be better publicised so that other departments/colleges can emulate them

As highlighted, there are several barriers to effective implementation and accountability, largely stemming from the university's idiosyncratic institutional structure which make it difficult to achieve change on a large scale. However, as some students noted, such barriers can also become opportunities to deliver tangible change on a smaller scale.

Conclusions

Throughout this report, it has been made evident that student involvement in climate policy at the University of Cambridge is fraught with complexity.

In the barriers to entry section, it was made evident that student climate societies can form "echo chambers" that seem impenetrable to those not already involved. The high workload of committee roles, as well as concerns around the impact of said roles, can also deter some students. As a result, we suggested that lower commitment opportunities for student involvement could facilitate greater student involvement in university policy change. It is also imperative that information about climate societies and campaigns reaches students, especially new students, at the beginning of the academic year.

The student advocacy for climate policy change section explored the diverse ways students are involved with climate policy at the University. We noted that students often felt more empowered to enact change on a collegiate or departmental level, but that when policy change is particularly successful in one college or department, it is rarely repeated across others. We also suggest that staff are clearer with students about the barriers and structures that can inhibit policy change, as many of our student interviewees felt that the changemaking structure at the university lacked transparency.

Finally, the section exploring points of implementation and accountability in university policy outlined the challenges that the constant cycle of students beginning and ending degrees poses to student campaigns. We suggested that successful campaigns should be better publicised in order to ensure their longevity after those who initiate them graduate. We also suggested that the prestigious nature of the university's reputation should be leveraged more efficiently by students pushing for change.



The Cambridge Climate Society

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