

Student Sustainability Forum on UCL Sustainability Plan

Discussion notes

Theme 1: Carbon & Energy

Net-zero 2030 commitment

- Students are happy with net zero commitment, but how we get there important. This should be articulated.

Scope 3 emissions

- Scope 3 will need a commitment in the future, but more data and granularity needed to set a baseline. Noted that these emissions have increased recently. Embodied carbon in new buildings need targets/limits as well.
- Feeling that Scope 3 should be included to really be net-zero, potentially deceptive otherwise? Trust and transparency highlighted as important.

Carbon offset

- Hypothetically, if UCL fails to reach net-zero by 2030 would students prefer investment in decarbonisation and related research, or offsets?
 - Depends on who you pitch to (e.g. knowledge of offsetting)
 - Prefer to see money spent on decarbonisation rather than offsets, shows commitment to Net Zero. Better to have long-term thinking/actions.
 - Also information on why this was missed, what research is being done -need transparency
 - Scepticism of offsets.
 - Decarbonise first (priority), then offset.
 - Research should be open access, understandable.
 - Additionality - is there more than you would have done and is it removing carbon? Heavily depends on what the research investment is.
 - Lack of trust in quantification of this.
 - Is research translated to actual removal?
 - Make decision to not offset clear, potentially use influence towards other institutions to adopt a similar approach.
 - Strong agreement that offsets (if used) should have tangible removal of carbon.

Carbon literacy

- Mandatory incoming training for sustainability like Active Bystander is a good idea.
- Happy to do it but concern some might not engage
- Metric to measure engagement popular
- Could be tailored to degrees, career paths

Internationalisation

- Agreement that travel emissions should be included in UCL footprint - big factor that can't be overlooked
- Believe UCL should take responsibility for flight emissions, especially if making money out of this, often chasing that money (part of business model).
- Start and end of term travel should at least be UCL responsibility.

- Solutions? Online courses, reduce number of international students, perhaps mention this emissions impact to students before enrollment. But don't want to limit education, life paths
- Some felt more of a shared responsibility.

Offset of travel emissions

- Generally a feeling that institutions should take responsibility to offset, not students. Different socioeconomic backgrounds may make individual action harder – costs can be very high.
- Hard to know when to suggest an offset to students – what's vital travel, what isn't?
- Some feel voluntary basis better - perhaps schemes to encourage/make it easy to offset (e.g. directly through UCL), awards, etc. Make it easier for people to know.
- Information on travel footprints should be known and available. Shared with students. Should be public regardless of student opinions.
- Would it influence how often you fly? Probably not. More awareness but probably not a lot of change in behaviour. Not going to stop visiting family. No current alternative solutions? Smaller offsetting actions around campus, money from individual offsets towards UCL offset research grants or similar, aiming for carbon negative institution to leave scope to include student travel emissions

Theme 2: Education

What is sustainable education for you:

- Sustainable education should include educating about sustainability and connecting it with practice, making education and the university itself sustainable, e.g. not using paper anymore.
- It's also about ecosystem and biodiversity, and understanding humans in relation to sustainability. One of our drivers as species in sustainability is our survival. That awareness is important to understand, and should be related to climate action. Being introduced to ESD at an undergraduate level is necessary to understand the challenges we have as humans.
- It's about the impacts of climate change, and particularly climate justice. Education should focus on the link to climate justice, and see how the effects of the environmental issues are affecting the Global South the most.
- It's not only environmental, but also about social issues. A more sustainable approach is necessary to move from an earning approach when students study.
- It is a good idea to give climate literacy training to every undergraduate student. We need to have everyone involved in these topics.
- Linking the content of the particular course with sustainability issues, e.g. in political science, they have a lot of modules integrating a sustainability approach.
- Shared values system.
- Linked to action – having direct action within a module.
- All students should attend inductions related to sustainability, so everyone knows about it.
- Concepts and real life examples.
- University should engage with sustainable careers, teach how a sustainable career looks like. It's not something that UCL is doing actively.
- Educating students who don't know about sustainability. Diversity in what students learn.

Skills and knowledge related to sustainability:

- Interdisciplinary training related to sustainability: technical abilities but also political skills to be prepared for the implementation side of it.
- Ability to reflect on the social implications of environmental issues.
- Sustainable design: sustainability at the core of whatever you are designing or planning.
- Analytical approach.
- Carbon literacy.
- Systems thinking, critical thinking: combining your knowledge of the world with solution creation.
- Structural understanding and the science behind climate issues.
- Efficiency, saving money.
- What actions we can take to live a sustainable life.

Which students should receive ESD:

- Every student should receive ESD: undergraduate and postgraduate, all courses.
- Challenge on how to introduce sustainability to subjects that are not directly related to sustainability. Some courses that are not very connected with the topic should do better by adding modules related to sustainability.

How would you want to learn sustainability knowledge:

- The education is more powerful when is situated in the context of your discipline. Every module should link to sustainability and mention why it is important.
- Every course should have a mandatory related sustainability module, could be for first-year students in particular.
- The module should be credit bearing, but also other options. There could be an incentive: an award, or a module that involves you working with an organisation or local community.
- Incentives to take a sustainability-related dissertation. Extra support should be given to students.
- Hands on experience, taking action – more impactful.
- Real cases on how to improve sustainability in the business context.
- Should be compulsory or credited, after exams in term 3. 5 months of vacation is a lot.
- It could be related to service hours like extracurricular activities. Link it to community service. Awareness is not enough, doing it separately is not efficient. Might be a gap between academic life and real life.
- A mandatory academic sustainability module that covers the basics of sustainability. Theories and practices. Carbon neutrality, food systems, structural perspectives. How an institution should be sustainable.
- 2-3 lectures per term in each module, to relate it with the students' degrees..
- Go beyond the environment, think about social and economic factors too. Making it as an interdisciplinary approach. Social focus on sustainability.

Theme 3: Responsible Consumption

Key points

1. Students think UCL should implement a universal system for sharing resources.
2. Students think UCL should increase plant-based options in a healthy and inclusive way.

3. Students think that UCL should aim to reduce the use of single use cups in UCL cafes.

Discussion notes

- Students focused on the importance of assessing the sustainability values of suppliers. However, the difficulty of getting assurance that companies will upkeep their sustainability commitments was considered.
- Students recognise the importance of reducing carbon throughout UCL's supply chain.
- A question about how UCL is going to regulate the supplies' life cycle was raised. There was a particular interest in addressing this in the context of UCL laboratories.
- A suggestion was made that UCL create an internal marketplace for lab chemicals. The difficulty in getting departments to collaborate on that was highlighted.
- Students proposed the creation of resource share schemes. The example of leftover food from conferences and cafes being matched to charities or students in need was discussed. The student-led project Zero Food Waste was brought up as a scheme already operating in line with tackling that issue.
- Finally, the idea of creating a universal system for sharing resources all across UCL was put forward. The system would include not only food but also items like department hardware. The potential to achieve that through an application was considered.
- Students expressed support for UCL to purchase more sustainable resources. There was a consensus that initiatives like Project Period should be scaled up.
- There was a discussion about UCL catering issues: The first question that was raised was about whether UCL should be selling beef. One view was that if UCL sells beef, the institution is compromising its commitment to carbon neutrality. Consequently, there was a call for more plant-based options.
- An alternative view that providing only plant-based options will be controversial was offered. There is a potential for this transition to negatively impact the profit of UCL cafes as the lack of meat options might decrease their customer base.
- Students shared their experiences and observations about veggie options in halls. The current vegan options were said to be substandard - of poor quality and not covering the nutritious bases. There was a call for a more thorough monitoring of the nutrition of plant-based options.
- A point was made that going fully plant-based might cause students to just go buy meat someplace else. That would result in driving people away as opposed to including them in the change.
- The key question of whether becoming fully plant-based too quickly would drive students away was raised.
- Students were not aware that UCL tracks the carbon-labor link.
- A point was made that UCL has the opportunity to empower sustainable manufacturers/suppliers.
- Students expressed support for a reduction in electricity use and a transition to green energy. There was an agreement that UCL should reduce its gas use.
- Students raised the issue of ineffective recycling on campus. Instances where waste thrown in recycling bins ends up in the same trash bag were highlighted. Students encouraged resource life cycle monitoring as a way of ensuring that waste is properly recycled and/or disposed of.
- Students expressed concern about the use of single plastic cups in UCL cafes. An example of Korea having banned single-use plastic cups was brought up.
- An additional concern was that most items in UCL cafes are wrapped in plastics. Students recognised that most of the wrappings were recyclable. However, a point was made (in

line with the aforementioned recycling concerns) that even if the packages are recyclable they are not thrown out properly.

Theme 4: Biodiversity

Biodiversity on a local level (on campus)

- Currently not enough biodiversity on campus.
- Accessible green spaces and incorporating biodiversity into study areas is popular & linked to higher student wellbeing. Biophilic design viewed as a good way of encouraging connection with the topic of biodiversity, even if just through aesthetics (biodiversity vs nature-based solutions).
 - Archaeology building was repeatedly acknowledged as an example of successfully integrating biodiversity into study spaces (Gordon square & external wall of print room café also mentioned).
 - Talks about how biophilic design could be incorporated into lecture theatres and not just within campus spaces but also within accommodation. E.g. access to allotments.
 - Wanting biodiversity to be incorporated into designs of buildings (e.g. green roofs, use of wall space) with *intention* during the design process (connection with nature throughout campus spaces viewed as important) rather than feeling disconnected.
 - UCL East campus as a good opportunity for the expansion of biodiverse design.
 - Area surrounding the Science library on the Bloomsbury Campus repeatedly addressed as an area that could be improved.
- Encouraging engagement with biodiversity on a local level by integrating nature into education – e.g. visiting biodiverse spaces. Incorporation of topic of biodiversity into course modules and potentially adding projects as a source of course credits.
- Some uncertainty of how biodiversity would be increased on a *local* level due to location of the university (not lots of examples in urban settings – perhaps focus on leading the way in this respect and education on how this can be achieved.)
- Lack of dedicated space as being a potential difficulty for achieving biodiversity goals on a local level.
- With regards to current projects/greenspaces on campus - higher commitment to their maintenance (designated budget & landscaping policies/teams etc). Aiming to make these biodiverse spaces as low maintenance/self-sufficient as possible.
- Encouraging people to choose vegetarian/vegan options when on campus by ensuring these options have good nutritional value. Focus on reducing meat consumption (some suggestions of not serving it at all).

Biodiversity on a global level

- Increasing the university's global impact on biodiversity via partnerships with charities, companies etc that have the common aim of increasing biodiversity.
- Sourcing food and other products from more ethical and sustainable sources.
 - Food being sourced from more sustainable agriculture organisations.
 - Sourcing locally where possible

Setting targets for biodiversity and importance compared to other areas of sustainability e.g. carbon footprint

- Important to focus on biodiversity, not just certain areas of sustainability.

- Measuring biodiversity, setting targets and working towards achieving these.
- Budgeting for biodiversity to ensure goals are viable/sustainable.