



University declarations of environment and climate change emergencies

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On 20 May, 2019, my university declared an environment and climate emergency (https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/university/title_717135_en.html). The University of Exeter's announcement came just over a month after my previous institution, the University of Bristol, became the first UK higher education institution to declare a climate emergency (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/biology/news/2019/university-of-bristol-declares-a-climate-emergency.html>).

The University of Bristol's declaration was at least partially a response to a letter to the university president signed by 100 academics and an online petition, first published by a group calling itself 'Extinction Rebellion UoB Students' in late 2018. The petition noted that:

There is a climate emergency. Bristol City Council has already declared an emergency, as have around 20 other local authorities in the UK (as well as multiple internationally). However, to date no university has declared a climate emergency.

Observers of the situation may note that Bristol, 'town and gown', has a good record in terms of addressing sustainability issues and publicly engaging in environmental politics. The university itself has pledged to divest completely from investments in fossil fuel companies by 2020 and to become carbon neutral by 2030, while in 2015 the city was awarded the status of European Green Capital through partnerships between hundreds of grassroots projects, businesses, community organisations and its two universities, echoes of which resonate through to the present moment.

Stepping back, while climate declarations in the UK and elsewhere have some impact in raising the profile of issues in the local, regional and national press, they also have a role in convincing an institution's students that universities are responding to their civic duty. The question, though, is what do you do after you have declared an emergency?

The University of Exeter's response was spelled out by the principal academic and administrative officer of the university, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sir Steve Smith:

From today, we will bring together our world leading experts on climate change and the environment to develop a specific set of actions and a programme of work that has substance and will make a difference based on evidence and science. Professor Juliet Osborne, Director of the Environment and Sustainability Institute, will be chairing a working group bringing together staff and students so that the University moves from declaring a climate emergency to a plan of action that we can measure by the Autumn.

And, so, two weeks after the emergency was declared, I was invited to join a small team of senior academics and professional services staff to be known as the Environment and Climate Emergency Working Group. Our task within the next four or five months is to come up with a strategy to address the emergency as quickly as possible. The group is made up of academics from every one of our Colleges as well as senior figures in Estates and other parts of the university, alongside student representatives. My particular brief is to advise 'on how we ensure our students get the best 'environment and climate' training, whatever programme they are studying – and how this is 'best embedded in the education strategy of the University' (Anonymous colleague, personal communication, June 4, 2019).

Many, if not all UK universities have been taking action for a number of years, be that independently or in partnership with aspects of their local and distant communities. In September 2018, Exeter announced a carbon reduction target committing the University to a 50 percent reduction in energy-related carbon emissions by 2026 (compared a base-line figure from 2005/6). To ensure this target is met the university has installed solar panels and energy-efficient lighting as well as, upgrading insulation and replacing boilers as the first phase of work.

More broadly, on July 10, 2019, UNEP, the United Nations Environment Programme, announced that 'networks representing more than 7,000 higher and further education institutions from 6 continents' had declared a Climate Emergency 'and agreed to undertake a three-point plan to address the crisis through their work with students':


1. Committing to going carbon neutral by 2030 or 2050 at the very latest;
2. Mobilizing more resources for action-oriented climate change research and skills creation;
3. Increasing the delivery of environmental and sustainability education across curricula, campus and community outreach programmes.

The first target is attractive to university managers because it lowers costs as well as being perceived as taking action by staff and students. It is also reasonably straightforward to achieve. The second target is more vague and dependent to some extent on funding agencies. Readers of *Environmental Education Research* would hope that social science as well as natural and physical science research would benefit from 'more resources'. We'll see.

The area where environmental education research has much to offer is in relation to the third target. What we can do is to suggest possible innovations and ways to test their impact. What we cannot do is to guarantee identifying 'what works'. Simplistic requests to identify the 'best "environment and climate" training' need to be avoided despite their urgency.

As articles in this issue show, innovations might include mundane ideas such as embedding sustainability education into every course and/or every year of a student's study. More innovative ideas might involve building carbon credits through volunteer work or internships. Students at Exeter have suggested replacing paper examinations with digital approaches and others have suggested using virtual field-work rather than flying around the world. All these ideas offer research opportunities to add to our knowledge of what works in specific contexts.

Finally, the whole idea of a declaration of a climate emergency offers a time limited research opportunity. The history of rapid policy implementation in education has a mixed record of success. Seven thousand institutions, with their millions of students, taking effective and sustainable efforts, could have a substantial impact. We must not lose the opportunity to research this unique moment in time.

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