

Policy Proposal: Climate Activism

Submitted by Oxford University Students' Union

Policy submission

Summary

As acknowledged in policy passed at the 2020 NUS conference, the Climate Crisis is one of the greatest issues of our time. Climate activism is, therefore, rightly becoming more and more prominent across campuses. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the ways in which such activism can exclude or even negatively affect liberation groups. This policy calls the NUS to encourage student activists, SUs, and HE and FE institutions to consider the disableist, classist and racist aspects of climate activism as it stands. Furthermore, it is vital to ensure that the effects on liberation groups are taken into consideration before any climate policy is passed.

The Issue

The climate crisis causes an existential threat to the human race. It is therefore rightly one of the most prominent issues discussed on campus. However, the complex issues for minority groups in current climate activism are not being acknowledged, leaving groups and individuals to be excluded, and in some cases targeted. The focus often lies upon a culture of individual blame, as opposed to fighting systemic issues.

For disabled students, the lack of inclusivity and inaccessibility of some aspects of the climate movement can leave students feeling isolated or targeted. For example, it is inaccessible to ask everyone to follow a vegan diet for environmental purposes. For students with a range of conditions, notably eating disorders, going vegan may have a highly detrimental effect on their health. Cultures of shaming those who cannot engage in this lifestyle can often have negative effects on student mental health, leaving some students to feel completely isolated from the movement. Similarly, the call for zero emission zones, though important, does not always take into account the access needs of disabled people, whilst calls for the banning of single use plastics forget that many of those with disabilities are reliant on these.

There are also issues for students from working class and low-income students who may not be able to make certain lifestyle changes or take part in certain campaign tactics, eg taking time off work to demonstrate, due to the economic impact. Similarly, the frequent use of conscious arrests by many climate groups fails to account for the negative relationship that many working class, minority ethnic and LGBT+ people have with the police and the negative treatment they often face within the justice system which can lead to significantly worse outcome

Representation of Black students and their concerns is also often lacking. This is particularly salient as ethnic minorities are disproportionately vulnerable to climate related issues. The movement also, in the most part, fails to acknowledge the colonial past that has contributed to the current climate crisis.

What could be the solution?

We want to see:

- Encouragement of student activists to acknowledge colonial narratives in their discussion of the climate crisis
- A conscious move away from the narrative of individual blame and focus upon systemic issues

- Promotion of a narrative of collective culpability and avoidance of individual shaming.
- Active acknowledgment that some groups cannot engage with all tactics for a variety of reasons and should not be made to feel guilty for this, and give more resource and attention to inclusive tactics.
- Acknowledgement that there are a wide variety of ways to contribute the movement which should all be celebrated and recognised
- Avoidance of blanket policy decisions that could negatively affect disabled people, eg the outright banning of certain materials, food types and behaviours from campus.