

OPINION PIECE

Students as partners for critical climate learning

***Michael Salmon**, School of Management, University of Bath, United Kingdom.

Contact: mps61@bath.ac.uk

The growing climate impact of international student mobility is well documented (Shields, 2019), and students themselves are increasingly advocating for climate action. There is much rhetoric around putting sustainability at the heart of internationalisation strategies (e.g., De Wit & Altbach, 2021). However, the question of carbon emissions from student travel is, I would argue, not being systematically addressed; Shields (2019) describes a sense within the international education community that benefits such as intercultural proficiency, enhanced employability, and global knowledge transfer “outweigh” the environmental cost (p. 595). This has been characterised as a “sustainability balancing act” (Salmon, 2022), and it is not a calculation in which students have a voice.

van der Leeuw et al. (2012) criticise universities’ lethargy in tackling urgent environmental issues and pose the question of how climate education might be invigorated if students had an equal role in the initiation of projects. In this vein, this essay proposes that we take a students-as-partners approach to education which involves international travel. Engaging students in articulating and calculating the benefits and harms of their own mobility and empowering them to decide on where and how their learning take place has the potential to create impactful educational responses to the climate crisis and to foster deeper learning. This is in contrast with the current emphasis on institutional level environmental reporting, which prioritises infrastructure and lacks consistency (Helmers et al., 2021). In the UK, British universities notably declined to make commitments to address emissions from staff and student travel (Vaughan, 2021), focusing on supposedly more central metrics such as power consumption and construction emissions. Aside from demonstrating unwillingness to approach the issue head-on (preferring, as suggested, the balancing act of nebulous future benefits outweighing present-day environmental damage), this also has the unfortunate consequence of siting responsibility for carbon emissions within facilities and infrastructure, rather than drawing a connection to learning and teaching.

The term “critical climate learning” has been used (Salmon, 2022) to refer to pedagogies in international education which seek to involve students in analysing the impact of their own mobility. The phrasing is intended as an analogy to critical service learning, an approach which puts the inequalities and power imbalances of service front and centre and encourages students “to see themselves as agents of social change” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). Critical climate learning similarly proposes foregrounding and problematising questions of sustainability in education. As an educational practice, critical climate learning requires further development, and the incorporation of a students-as-partners approach looks to be a fruitful avenue for further consideration, as now described.

Student partnerships are recognised as an effective approach in international education, with students demonstrating more comprehensive fulfilment of learning outcomes when acting as co-creators (Green, 2019), but examples of students-as-partners initiatives in international education tend to focus on internationalising the curriculum rather than mobility (Green & Baxter, 2021). One project (Fortune et al., 2019) with Australian students partnering with community organisations in India and Vietnam demonstrates the feasibility of involving students in the design of international mobility, although this work was not exploring environmental impact. With educational initiatives involving travel rarely incorporating student partnership, we can say that the hidden curriculum of such initiatives—the “unintended, implicit, and hidden messages often unconsciously delivered by the way activities are organized” (Brewer & Leask, 2021, p. 245)—serves to reinforce the idea that mobility is environmentally unproblematic. Another, under-researched effect might be that the students most committed to green activism are dissuaded from participating in mobility.

So how can students work as partners for critical climate learning? What would this look like in practice, and what would be the obstacles to overcome? The unexpected outcomes of staff-student partnerships (e.g. Healey et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017) are perhaps especially problematic in education involving mobility, with its associated logistical challenges and consequent costs. However, critical climate learning would require students to be involved in the selection of destination and means of travel and articulate their choices in terms of environmental impact. Equally, students would need to co-create or audit intended learning outcomes, to ensure that the skills and knowledge they acquire from each programme will indeed outweigh the environmental cost of travel. This would represent a step-change in typical mobility “enrichment” approaches, where programmes are conceived of as optional opportunities for students to register for and generally involve fixed itineraries and activities which repeat year-on-year. Perhaps this “package holiday” way of thinking requires a fundamental overhaul.

Drawing on inspiration from existing students-as-partners work in the field of environmental education, we can predict that another challenge would be the “tensions between expert and novice, and between discovery and direction” (Nam & Lee, 2021, p. 168). Students may want to enact mobility in a way that conflicts with what educators see as best practice in the field. But the benefits of a students-as-partners approach are manifold: aside from the improvements in learning which partnership brings, a further benefit would be the inclusion into curricula of important skills such as systems thinking, environmental impact planning, and carbon footprint measurement. International mobility is often advocated for on the strength of its role in skills development, and skills related to sustainability can become a central part of this.

Ultimately, the first step is for international education teams to get together with students and begin to have these conversations in order to explore how students-as-partners approaches can enable meaningful critical climate learning and a head-on response to the climate crisis.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Michael Salmon is a doctoral researcher at the University of Bath's International Centre of Higher Education Management, with an interest in critical higher education policy analysis, covering themes such as internationalisation, employability and sustainability.

REFERENCES

- Brewer, E., & Leask, B. (2021). Internationalizing the curriculum, teaching, and learning. In B. Leask, D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, H. Charles, & F. Marmolejo (Eds.), *The handbook of international higher education* (2nd ed., pp. 242–264). Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021, December 4). *Now is the time to get serious on the climate crisis*. University World News.
<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211130110255785>
- Fortune, T., Borkovic, S., Bhojti, A., Somoza, R., Nhan, H. C., & Rangwala, S. (2019). Transformative learning through international project-based learning in the global south: Applying a students-as-partners lens to a “high-impact” capstone. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(1), 49–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318814571>
- Green, W. (2019). Engaging “students as partners” in global learning: Some possibilities and provocations. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(1), 10–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318814266>
- Green, W., & Baxter, A. (2021). Engaging students as partners in international education. In B. Leask, D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, H. Charles, & F. Marmolejo (Eds.), *The handbook of international higher education* (pp. 306–324). Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. Higher Education Academy.
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher>
- Helmets, E., Chang, C. C., & Dauwels, J. (2021). Carbon footprinting of universities worldwide: Part I—objective comparison by standardized metrics. *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 33(1), 30. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-021-00454-6>
- Matthews, K. E. (2017). Five propositions for genuine students as partners practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2).
<https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v1i2.3315>
- Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.205>

- Nam, A. H., & Lee, S. (2021). Students as partners. Implementation of climate change education within the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In F. M. Reimers (Ed.), *Education and climate change: The role of universities* (pp. 153–180). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57927-2_6
- Salmon, M. (2022). Critical climate learning: Striking the right balance. *EAIE Forum*, 2022 (Spring), 9–11.
- Shields, R. (2019). The sustainability of international higher education: Student mobility and global climate change. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 217, 594–602. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.01.291>
- van der Leeuw, S., Wiek, A., Harlow, J., & Buizer, J. (2012). How much time do we have? Urgency and rhetoric in sustainability science. *Sustainability Science*, 7(1), 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-011-0153-1>
- Vaughan, A. (2021, October 19). UK university climate targets strongly criticised for lack of ambition. *New Scientist*. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2294126-uk-university-climate-targets-strongly-criticised-for-lack-of-ambition/>