Conference reflection: The climate emergency in higher education: working together to meet the challenge of student activism.

Keywords: climate change, sustainability, ethics, academic developers, collaboration

Abstract
This conference reflection explores the themes raised by participants in the authors' interactive workshop at the SHIFT 2021 conference. The workshop focussed on how universities are responding to the climate emergency through innovative teaching practices.

Introduction
The overwhelming majority (90%) of university students are 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about climate change (SOS, 2021). Greta Thunberg and the rise of school strikes have highlighted the urgency young people feel towards the slow rate of progress towards addressing climate change. This presents several challenges for universities beyond greening their campuses: they are under pressure to develop fresh approaches to teaching climate change, including in subjects where it has not previously been taught. This impacts on the work of academics and academic developers in programme design and connects to existing activity on employability and civic engagement. This article reflects on an interactive workshop we presented at the SHIFT Conference at the University of Greenwich in January 2021, 'The climate emergency in higher education: working together to meet the challenge of student activism'.

Sustainability and climate change in higher education
There has been significant interest in recent years around how to embed sustainability and climate change into UK higher education. This has come directly from young people being advocates for change. It is also driven by public policy, which will intensify in 2021 as the UK hosts the Glasgow Climate Conference COP26 (delayed from November 2020 to November 2021 by the covid-19 pandemic). The issue has re-emerged since the Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded a series of projects exploring education for sustainable development between 2010 and 2015. The Climate Commission for Higher Education[1] encourages and supports institutions to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The QAA has also recently released guidance on embedding sustainability into higher education[2]. The combination of national policy concern, and pressure from young people and champions working in higher education, are together a powerful force for change. The first step for many universities has been to declare a climate emergency; the challenge now is to develop innovative and collaborative approaches to embed climate change teaching.

Our workshop
The 2021 SHIFT Conference at the University of Greenwich gave us an opportunity to explore with participants our research into the challenges and opportunities of climate change teaching. The conference theme 'Radically reimagining Higher Education for a new era: working together for a just and sustainable future' provided a natural platform for us to run an interactive workshop. We would like to thank the organising committee for their professionalism and commitment, including useful feedback on our session proposal.

Our workshop was based on a programme of research which commenced in March 2020. We interviewed leaders of geography programmes about how they taught climate change (Cross and Congreve, 2020). In a parallel piece of research we explored the same topic in other disciplines. Working online at the start of the pandemic allowed us to easily interview participants across the UK. We chose innovative case studies from fashion, law and chemistry, drawn from our interviews, to generate debate in our workshop. We aimed to

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[1] https://www.eauc.org.uk/climate_commission
[2] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/education-for-sustainable-development

provide provoke discussion among academic and professional services colleagues about effective teaching approaches to address climate change, with a focus on sharing good practice and identifying common challenges. The format of the workshop was a series of short presentations led by us, reports on case studies based on our research, and structured discussions based on reflective questions to encourage peer learning: our own experiences of attending online conferences without interactivity were not overly positive! We encouraged participants to share their thoughts with participants by speaking to the group or giving feedback in the chat. We used a poll to explore environmental behaviours among students, then breakout rooms to identify:

    i.   The challenges of teaching and learning about climate change in disciplines that do not traditionally address it;

    ii.   Examples of embedding sustainability into policy, practice and curricula in their department or institution.

The conference focus on collaboration was also important to us, and the discussions explored the importance of strong partnerships between academics and professional colleagues. We were pleased to attract academic and professional staff and students from the University of Greenwich and other UK universities to our session.

Reflections on our workshop

The comments and engagement by workshop participants led to wide-ranging discussions that both aligned with some of our original ideas (see Cross and Congreve, 2020) and introduced us to new perspectives. Our reflections are structured around three key themes that emerged from our workshop activities.

Graduate careers and professional identity

Graduate careers and professional identity framed our wide-ranging discussion about how climate change is positioned in a curriculum and student engagement. We considered in detail the relevance of climate to a graduate's profession. One of the examples raised in the workshop we had not seen in our previous research was about law firms, and the significant efforts some are making to position themselves as climate-aware. Students wishing to pursue a career with them were motivated to study climate change to help secure their desired position. This contrasted with our research, which found that addressing climate change in law was relatively niche practice despite its relevance to legal theory and practice. In our research we had noted the importance of alumni with graduate roles; the discussions in the workshop emphasised to us the importance of them as influential advocates for current students 'seeing the value' of climate change teaching.

Workshop participants explored how professional bodies could play a significant role in incorporating climate change into graduate outcomes and in softer ways through their influence on professional identities. Our research had identified a lack of agile thinking and innovation around climate change in a number of professional bodies, despite many giving climate a high profile in their policy work. They do not often effectively drive change in courses they accredit. The 'crowding' of the curriculum was blamed on the substantial and often competing demands of professional bodies for students to meet specific learning outcomes, and institutional guidance from the university on employability and skills. Workshop participants strongly agreed with these findings from our research, and supported our views that requiring climate change to be added to these demands is unhelpful and risks it being treated as an inconvenient addition to an already long list of issues for course teams.

Workshop participants were passionate about seeing climate change weaved into professional identities, and how it could be an underpinning theme to accreditation standards. This in turn would positively influence programme design and the behaviours of graduates working in the professions. The workshop participants advocated for climate

change to be considered in terms of professional ethics – a new idea to us that we had not previously considered in our research. Adopting a professional, ethical approach includes respect for others, taking responsibility for one's actions, being fair, and being concerned for the well-being of others. These four behaviours map well to climate-sensitive behaviours. Workshop participants shared with us how their alumni were increasingly likely to question their prospective employer about a company's ethos, which again was a new finding for us. More professions need to be ethically grounded in respect for the natural environment and concern for people who suffer the negative effects of climate change. Professional acceptance of the urgent need to take action on climate change creates a space for new graduates to propose measures that better reflect the scale and urgency of the challenge. This useful discussion has raised new angles for us to explore in professional ethics and identity.

Framing climate change
Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges society faces today, and has been termed a 'super-wicked' problem (Levin et al., 2012; Lazarus, 2009). This is due to its complexity, the lack of clear authority and leadership, and short timescales to develop solutions. Our workshop participants extended our current thinking by highlighting the significant moral dilemmas that climate change highlights. These include intergenerational responsibility, (lack of) political engagement and (lack of) diversity. If our actions now adversely affect society in other parts of the world and decades to come, what cost should we be prepared to pay today to avoid this? Universities are best placed to explore issues of inter- and intra-generational equity with students, and consider new and interdisciplinary approaches to move society forward. Workshop participants identified how being more aware of climate justice emphasises the super-wicked nature of the problem; framing climate change in alternative ways (e.g. the UN Sustainable Development Goals, global health and wellbeing, financial and market implications) can provide 'hooks' in to different disciplines. This point has shed new light on our current research project and will prompt a new line of questioning in our ongoing interviews.

Connecting climate change to classroom practices
The third important theme from the workshop was the need to support academics to integrate climate change teaching into their teaching. Our research had identified this as an important barrier to innovative practices, and participants in the workshop further highlighted how widespread this is and the clear impact it has on a lack of climate change teaching. Effective support is also important for designing programmes that specifically address climate change (e.g. the BSc Climate Change at Greenwich) and teach demanding practical skills usually delivered in specialist masters programmes or professional development. Academics need skills in interdisciplinary working to teach climate change effectively. We reflected on the importance of academic developers as catalysts for collaboration: one example was students working with estates teams to collect energy usage data, subsequently used to develop their data management skills. Academics also need support making global-scale climate challenges relevant to specific teaching sessions. We argue that framing climate change at an early stage of curriculum development is vital to exploit creative and collaborative teaching. We are working on a toolkit to support academic developers and programme teams develop climate change teaching, which we will present at the SEDA Conference in December 2021.

Conclusion
The chance to run the workshop at the SHIFT conference has advanced our thinking in key areas: professional responsibility and ethics; how we frame the problem with our students; and the importance of supporting academics more to develop climate relevant teaching materials and curricula. The discussions proved invaluable for shaping our work and we look ahead to the opportunities presented in 2021 by the Glasgow Climate Conference and Climate Commission to take these forward.

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