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## Teach the Future

JUDE DANIEL SMITH  
on behalf of the Teach the Future team

**ABSTRACT** This article urgently addresses the importance of comprehensive climate education and its subsequent necessity in the midst of the climate emergency and ecological crisis, incorporating evidence from schools, colleges and universities, and outlining the need for net-zero education buildings, new professional teaching qualifications and a complete repurposing of the entire education system to prepare the next generation to tackle the catastrophe at hand.

Teach the Future is the UK Student Climate Network (UKSCN) and Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS-UK) joint campaign to repurpose the education system around the climate emergency and ecological crisis.[1]

As students studying across the United Kingdom, it is our experience that the majority of teaching and learning throughout the entirety of our education is misaligned from the systemic changes that are urgently required to make our society sustainable. Our education system routinely fails to educate, prepare and equip us, and our fellow students, for the climate emergency we are inheriting.

We sincerely believe that our educational institutions are culpable for the mess we are in. Our schools, colleges and universities are education factories, more interested in preparing us to pass exams than developing us as critical thinkers and global citizens. Our education system often teaches us to compete with our rivals, not to collaborate with our friends. We are led to believe that sustainability is a niche subject, not something that is fundamental to everything we learn and do. Our education system teaches us in silos, despite the fact that everything is connected. Our universities are judged by what our starting salaries are rather than the good we go on to achieve. We leave tertiary education with so much debt that we feel obliged to apply for the best-paid jobs, rather than the jobs that will make the world a better place.

According to Charles Hopkins, speaking at the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development World Conference in Bonn, Germany in 2009, globally less than 3% of the world's population go to university, but 80% of societal leaders have been to university. Universities are in the business of leadership education, but what sort of leaders are they creating? David Orr (1991), the US academic and activist, says that our universities are routinely equipping young people and students to be more effective vandals of Earth. He says it isn't the world's poorest and least educated people who are doing the most damage; it is those with Bachelor of Science degrees, Master's degrees in Business Administration and PhDs. We agree.

We feel that the whole education system is outdated and is not fit for purpose when it comes to preparing us to deliver the just and sustainable transition we so urgently need. That is why we had to act, and Teach the Future is our response!

We spent the autumn of 2019 researching education legislation and examples of how other countries have repurposed their education systems. Surprisingly, we took inspiration from the USA. In 1958, they passed the National Defense Education Act as part of the space race. It provided a massive investment of new funding for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) teaching and learning across all forms of education, starting with teacher training and retention. That, combined with a compelling vision and the can-do attitude of young people, ultimately led to the USA winning the race. It is a little-known fact that the average age of the team in the control tower on the day of the moon landing was just 28. They were the products of the investment in their education. We need to do exactly this for the climate emergency, and we need to do it now.

Our first Teach the Future 'ask' is for a review commissioned by the Department for Education, led by an independent Chair, into how the English formal education system, from primary through to tertiary, is preparing students to mitigate, abate and end the climate emergency and ecological crisis.[2] The review should propose detailed and costed recommendations for government and autonomous educational institutions, including universities. We believe that the review should include whether learning about the climate emergency and ecological crisis is a learning entitlement; what is the most appropriate learning pathway (taking into consideration the very real problem of eco-anxiety); and how any such learning pathway can join up through the various forms of education. We will call for similar reviews in the devolved nations in due course.

Our second ask relates to teaching. According to our teacher survey (UK Student Climate Network et al, 2019), 75% of teachers feel that they have not received adequate training to educate students about climate change. This is evidenced by our pupil survey (Students Organising for Sustainability, 2019), which found that only 4% of students feel they know a lot about climate change. In response, we are calling for the climate emergency and ecological crisis to be a compulsory part of teaching training courses. We would like to see

this detailed in the government's teacher standards for England and the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework. We would also like to see a new National Professional Qualification for teachers on the climate emergency and ecological crisis, including considerations relating to eco-anxiety.

Both asks are in the gift of the Secretary of State for Education.

Our third ask mirrors the US National Defense Education Act. We are asking for an English Climate Emergency Education Act (Teach the Future, 2020a) – a symbolically important new Act of Parliament sitting above the various pieces of existing legislation; stating an expectation for education providers at all levels to deliver teaching and learning on the climate emergency, climate justice (the social injustice issues pertaining from global heating) and ecological crisis; and providing substantial new funding to enable this to happen at pace. We have even drafted the legislation to make it easy for the government. We believe that it is the first proposed education legislation ever to have been written by pupils and students. The funding provided by the Act would allow for:

- A learning programme for existing teachers and lecturers, and other key educational institution staff, on the science of the climate emergency and ecological crisis, and the systems changes required to abate them, including the provision of teaching resources at all levels. This would include training to enable these staff members to identify eco-anxiety and support pupils suffering from eco-anxiety.
- A climate education information institute to disseminate scientific information about climate change, its effects and measures of prevention.
- A programme of vocational training through the development of national centres of excellence to promote the reskilling of the workforce in line with the green skills requirements of industrial strategy.
- A programme for research into the impact and outcomes of sustainability learning in terms of learning outcomes, attainment, resilience and well-being.
- A programme of outdoor education and connection to nature linked to learning about the climate emergency and ecological crisis.
- An English climate emergency youth voice grant fund, so that youth voice climate boards can be established in all education providers, local authorities and National Health Service trusts.
- The establishment of a Youth Climate Endowment Fund to fund youth-led climate and environmental social action, enabling students in every educational institution to engage their peers, teachers and parents in practical, local action to abate the climate emergency and ecological crisis.

The Act would also impose a new duty on schools to ensure they designate a senior member of staff as a climate coordinator, responsible for implementing their new duties, and create a general duty for the Office for Students concerning teaching and learning about the climate emergency and ecological crisis.

Importantly, the Act would also ensure that the government puts our educational buildings to the front of the queue to be retrofitted to net-zero standards through the national infrastructure plan. Surely, if our education system is to teach students about sustainability, the buildings they learn in must be sustainable, especially given the importance of the subliminal curriculum to learning. The Act would commit the funding to make this happen, ensuring that all new state-funded educational buildings are net zero from 2022, and all existing state-funded educational buildings are retrofitted to net zero by 2030 (Teach the Future, 2020b, 2020c).

Since launching Teach the Future in November 2019, we have been amazed by the support we have received. We have formal support from the National Education Union and University and College Union, but have still to secure support from one of the head teacher associations, despite us approaching the Association of School and College Leaders and National Association of Head Teachers. We have formal support from many of the professional bodies and most of the large environmental charities.

Strategically, we are working to persuade the government that our constructive and pragmatic recommendations would make great pre-COP26 (2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference) announcements, so that they can showcase how our education system has been brought in line with our world-leading (albeit not ambitious enough for our liking) carbon reduction legislation. We are telling them that this is a time-limited opportunity to put English education on the global map for all the right reasons, and it will position UK plc to lead the world into the zero-carbon economy that we so urgently need.

If any readers can help us make this case to government, as individuals or through the organisations you are a part of, please do get in touch at [hello@teachthefuture.uk](mailto:hello@teachthefuture.uk)

## Notes

- [1] This article draws on and presents material co-authored by the Teach the Future team which has been published and is available on their website at <https://www.teachthefuture.uk>. The quotation can be found at <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/asks>
- [2] These 'asks' are available in expanded form at <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/asks>

## References

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**JUDE DANIEL SMITH** is a 15-year-old living in Sheffield. He is in Year 10, attends High Storrs School and is currently studying for his GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education exams). His biggest passion is youth activism and social action. He has been volunteering for Teach the Future since the start of February 2020, and has been especially focused on political and press outreach (such as engagement with metro mayors and media outlets), the social media team and the facilitation of online meetings during the lockdown. He sees Teach the Future as an amazing platform for over 40 young people, including himself, to impact the education system and have a voice on issues that matter to them concerning climate education. As of May, Jude has been employed as one of five Campaign Coordinators. Not only is he able to drive a cause he believes in, but he is also receiving direct career experience, arming him with the tools he needs for all aspects of his future. *Correspondence:* [jsmith155@highstorrs.sheffield.sch.uk](mailto:jsmith155@highstorrs.sheffield.sch.uk)

