**Sustainability at City - Focus Groups**

Introduction

In September 2021, SOS-UK conducted a study with just over 1200 students to understand their views and experiences of climate change. Results showed that 90% are either concerned or very concerned about climate change. To complement these findings, City Students Union conducted two focus groups to understand students’ views on sustainability, as well as what they would like to see from their university and Students’ Union do. The Union is also aiming to use the findings for its future sustainability campaigns, including the one in the 2021/22 academic year.

Methodology

Two focus groups were conducted as part of the research. The first one took place as part of a Students Council Meeting with twelve participants and the second focus group was conducted during an Executive Committee Meeting with seven participants. Both were recorded and transcribed and both recordings and transcriptions are stored on a password protected personal laptop and will be destroyed at the end of the academic year. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the focus groups and that reports will not include which idea belongs to whom, although participants might be recognised due to their Council and Executive Committee memberships.

Demographics

In the first focus group, 9 out of the 12 participants were female and 3 were male. 9 participants fell between the ages of 18 and 24 while 3 participants were a minimum of 25 and a maximum of 39 years old. 4 participants were coming from white backgrounds, while 2 participants were coming from black backgrounds, 5 participants identified as British Asian - Indian and 1 participant identified as ‘other ethnic background’. None of the participants had any known disabilities and 1 participant had caring responsibilities. 4 participants came from the School of Arts and Social Sciences, 4 from City Law School, 2 from School of Health Sciences, 1 student represented Bayes Business School and 1 the School of Mathematics, Computer Sciences and Engineering.

In the second focus group, females, again, were greatly overrepresented, with 6 out of the 7 participants being female and 1 male. 4 participants were between 18 and 24 and 3 participants were between 25 and 39 years of age. Participants came from white, black, Pakistani, Indian and mixed backgrounds. None of the participants had any known disabilities and 1 participant had caring responsibilities. 3 participants came from City Law School and 1 participant came from both Bayes Business School and School of Arts and Social Sciences. 2 participants were sabbatical officers and therefore were not associated with any of the schools. Out of the two focus groups, 1 participant identified as bisexual and all other participants identified as straight/heterosexual.

Findings

Data from the focus groups can be structured into 4 main themes. The first theme focuses on what sustainability means to students. The second and third focus on what students would like to see the Union and the University do and how they should communicate their sustainability work. The last theme centres around how to make our sustainability work relevant and accessible for all students, with a major focus on the liberation groups, especially given that 2 liberation officers were among the participants.

**What does sustainability mean to students?**

Sustainable products

It widely varied what sustainability meant for students. For some students, sustainability means buying products that do not harm the environment. Students have mentioned buying less fast fashion items, single use water bottles or items with plastic packaging, keeping in mind the products’ impact on our future.

“*When I think about sustainability in general, it's just about like being able to do something for longevity.*”

Social justice

For others, sustainability made them think about the social justice issues that the world has to face, which, as they mentioned, are comprehensively summed up in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Students talked about how the Global South is impacted by climate change, even though the Western World is contributing significantly more to the crisis than the Global South does.

Behaviour change vs system change

Participants seemed to disagree on how much responsibility should be on the individual and how much on the companies. Some of them argued that there is too much pressure is on the average person, such as a ban on single use straws, even though there is already an unimaginably large amount of plastic in the ocean. Others, however, pointed out that smaller individual changes will feed into bigger trends.

**What should the Union and the University do?**

Accountability

Participants agreed that the university should take action in, for example, divesting from fossil fuel. However, they also agreed that accountability was needed on the university’s side, in order to not let the university go into a ‘greenwashing’ direction by banning plastic on their campus while not taking action in the larger issues.

Engaging students

Participants mentioned embedding sustainability in the curriculum by making short online modules or courses about social justice issues and climate change accessible on Moodle. Students also expressed a need for sustainable events.

“*The reasonable thing to do is events that make that inspiring and don’t make you feel like it’s this huge huge issue that’s completely out of your control*”

Many event ideas were mentioned, including gardening sessions to place more focus on nature and the trees instead of plastic. Moreover, one participant argued that capitalism is the source of the problem. He suggested a competition among students to come up with project plans which are sustainable but economically feasible as well:

*“So the university should - there are lots of bright people, smart people, including lecturers - organize contests for example for the Bayes Business School. They can develop some projects for a particular company or sector to make it sustainable. Law School can produce some projects on the possible regulations about regulating the competition law for example because this is the real problem behind this economic disaster.*”

Another student, who agreed with the idea, added that students should be aided to generate ideas and the university could also discuss it with module leaders to make sustainability part of assessments:

*“Zara does clothes, McDonalds does food, university does student. This is our biggest potential, like students are, you know, they are going to be leaders in their field and I think influencing their ideas and their thought processes can make all these changes”*

**How should the Union communicate its sustainability work towards students?**

Students had many different ideas about how the university and the Union should communicate their sustainability work to students, ranging from putting speakers near the Union’s office to advertise events every thirty minutes or every hour, to organising a green party with green ‘mocktails’ (non-alcoholic cocktails) and green dress code. One participants also suggested to ‘scare’ students with facts about climate change, but not scare them so much that they just turn away from the issue. They, however, all emphasised the crucial role of social media, especially Instagram. One student suggested that posts could be phrased as questions to promote the Union’s sustainability work.

*“Most students love when they have to figure out a solution.”*

Others proposed to engage students through society leaders. That way, instead of waiting for students to come and engage, the Union goes to them to advertise the sustainability events.

*“Students are so peaceful in their whole world that they don’t actually go to these things unless you actually go to them.”*

Lastly, several students raised their concerns about not knowing what is happening at the university due to too many channels. Participants, therefore, proposed to have one channel instead, where all sustainability work of the University and the Union can be found, such as a sustainability hub or a virtual space.

**How can we make sustainability relevant and accessible to all students?**

Participants drew attention to keeping all students’ interests in mind. The Union should acknowledge that a sustainable lifestyle is not affordable for all students. The Union should also focus on women’s needs and provide menstrual cups and reusable diapers, if possible. Ensuring that students with disabilities are not disadvantaged by the Union’s sustainability work should also be a priority. The Union should analyse each policy’s impact on students with disabilities, such as banning straws on campus or plastic packaging, which might be the most accessible option for certain students.

Participants also raised their concerns about the university’s and the union’s work on sustainability not being relevant to all students, especially for students coming from minority backgrounds.

*“I think when it comes to sustainability at City and I've mentioned this before, but it's very white. It really is. I don't see students of colour, for example, participating. And I think it's mainly because the things that we talk about is not really, I don't want to say relevant, but maybe it's not relevant to those students or maybe it's just not of interest. We have, I think around like 50% of our students are international students. (…) So how do we make it relevant to them? And how can we ensure that when they go back to their home countries they can take whatever it is that they've learnt in the UK and implement it, which is why I'm very big on the whole of Global South aspects of it. Because a lot of our students are from the Global South and, especially international students, and I just don't think it resonates with them because at the end of the day, their countries are being flooded or they're having you know, they're literally seeing the impact of climate change.”*

Participants suggested that events should try to address the experiences of international students from different countries. The union should also advertise charities from outside of the UK, organise workshops to raise awareness of global issues and push for more academic research in the area.

Conclusion

Findings of this study show that although sustainability meant different things for participants, ranging from eco-friendly products and social justice to changing the system, it is definitely a priority for students. Students found it important for the university to be accountable and to organise sustainability-related events in order to engage students. Participants agreed that social media is crucial when it comes to communicating with students, but the Union should also turn to other methods of communication, such as advertising events through society leaders. Lastly, participants expressed a need for events that are relevant to international students as well, and also for the Union to keep in mind the interest of women, as well as students with disabilities.