

Choosing Life and Protecting Creation

Climate change affects us all but especially young people who have their lives ahead of them. It raises profound questions about the relationship between people and nature and our ideas about education.

The science of climate change has evolved gradually over many decades. The discovery of the greenhouse effect in the nineteenth century was of little more than academic interest at the time. However, it became more significant from 1930s onwards as trends in global warming began to be identified. More recently, the huge expansion in global economic activity (the 'Great Acceleration') has led to dramatic increases in atmospheric pollution. Now with the publication of reports from the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), the work of the Stockholm Resilience Centre and studies by hundreds of other scientists it has become clear that global warming is a serious threat to life on Earth. We also know beyond all reasonable doubt that human activity is the main cause of the unprecedented weather events occurring across many parts of the world. These 'foreshocks' herald potentially devastating events to come in the years ahead as levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide continue to rise.

Climate change is a complex phenomenon with multiple social, cultural, political and ethical dimensions. The fact that there is no direct link between cause and effect adds another level of difficulty. Pollution that was emitted in the past can linger in the atmosphere for many decades affecting people elsewhere in the world far into the future. The poor and disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable because they do not have the capacity to cope with significant disruption. This raises questions about power relations, intergenerational justice and the responsibilities that one group of people have to another. Our current institutions are singularly badly placed to deal with such issues. In these circumstances, socially constructed silence is a much more convenient response.

Climate change also challenges us individually. It is such a pervasive and bewildering problem that it is easy to feel powerless or overwhelmed. Anxiety, frustration, guilt, grief, denial, and wilful ignorance are some of the other common responses. It is easy to overlook the emotional impact of climate change and the emotional grit that is needed to live with the consequences. Evolution has equipped us to deal with immediate and tangible threats but has left us vulnerable to dangers that are delayed and distributed.

There are those who believe it is possible to 'fix' climate change and that technology will somehow come to our rescue. Whilst technology certainly has a part to play as we search for solutions, framing climate change in purely scientific terms smacks of hubris and fails to take account of the beliefs and values which underpin our behaviours. Indeed, climate change may be a symptom that reflects other issues rather than the ultimate threat itself. How we think about ourselves, our ideas about what matters and our relationship with the natural world are even more fundamental. Recognising that the Earth is a living, dynamic and self-regulating system,

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rather than as a patient to be cured, shifts attention away from anthropomorphic interventions towards balance and harmony.

Education has a vital role to play in this complicated, contradictory and contested terrain. Higher Education institutions have the opportunity to take a leadership role in developing new thinking about climate change which is well informed, critical and imaginative. We can harness young people's idealism and their hopes for the future whilst also helping them to build their resilience to cope with disasters. Exploring the spiritual and moral implications of climate change will deepen their understanding still further and guide them in making wise choices. Given their mission to develop active and responsible citizens, CUAC institutions are particularly well placed to perform this task.

This report contains a range of case studies which shed a fascinating light on different actions which are being taken by CUAC institutions around the world in response to the climate crisis. Many of the reports focus on campus-based activities – themes such as recycling and waste figure prominently. Practical action is highlighted but academic discussions and seminars on social justice form another important strand. There is encouraging evidence that a significant number of staff and students have been involved in different ways to mitigate climate change at a local level. There are also patterns with respect to regional differences. In very general terms, the reports from the US and UK tend to focus on carbon reduction measures, whereas the reports from the Global South show a much greater concern for the natural world and the importance of living within ecological limits.

There is no single approach which can be recommended in preference to another. Climate change education can be viewed as:

- a discrete subject in its own right
- a dimension of all disciplines,
- an opportunity to improve estate management,
- a rallying point for action or
- an institutional focus

It often combines these different elements in various proportions. What is to be hoped is that the examples presented here will offer ideas and spur further activities across CUAC and beyond.

In recent years there have been repeated calls for a paradigm shift in education to bring it into line with current needs and priorities. The student activist, Greta Thunberg, has summed this up in the notion of 'cathedral thinking'. If we are to construct new edifices, we need to see that they are based on firm foundations. It is almost certain that the leaders of tomorrow are enrolled in colleges and universities around the world today. We have the chance to shape their ideas and influence the future. CUAC and other HE institutions can play their part in 'choosing life' as urged by the Archbishop of Canterbury and other church leaders in their 2019 Joint Statement on protecting creation.

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