Climate Strategy Refresh Consultation

Analysis Report

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Original photo: Laurence Winram.

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Social Responsibility & Sustainability

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Introduction

The University's existing climate strategy was approved in 2016 and since then we have made major progress on delivering a range of commitments on climate, biodiversity and circular economy.

However, as the various environmental crises deepen, we recognise the necessity of a step change in effort and urgency, and we plan to update our strategy accordingly in 2024.

Four working groups consisting of over 80 academics and professional services colleagues from across the University have worked together to explore and suggest a revised climate strategy. Their three key recommendations were:

- Rebalance our focus from operational carbon reductions to increase the emphasis on the positive impacts of research, partnerships and learning and teaching to reflect the potential for impact in these areas;
- Widen the focus, strengthening efforts on biodiversity, water scarcity, and chemical pollution, bringing ambitions in line with our approach to climate change, sufficient to address the magnitude of these interrelated crises; and
- Set science-aligned interim targets, thus ensuring our net zero carbon target takes a science-aligned approach, in support of our existing 2040 goal.

The Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability (SRS) held a 4-week consultation to seek the views of staff and students on the proposed updates, whether they supported our direction of travel and what they thought priorities should be. The department also hosted four townhall events to share further details on plans and allow staff and students the opportunity to ask questions.

The consultation survey received 441 responses. Three quarters were from staff and the remaining quarter were from students. In addition, 237 staff and students attended one of the following town hall events:

- 23rd Nov Kings Buildings (17 attendees)
- 28th Nov Online (83 attendees)
- 29th Nov George Square (30 attendees)
- 4th Dec Online (107 attendees)

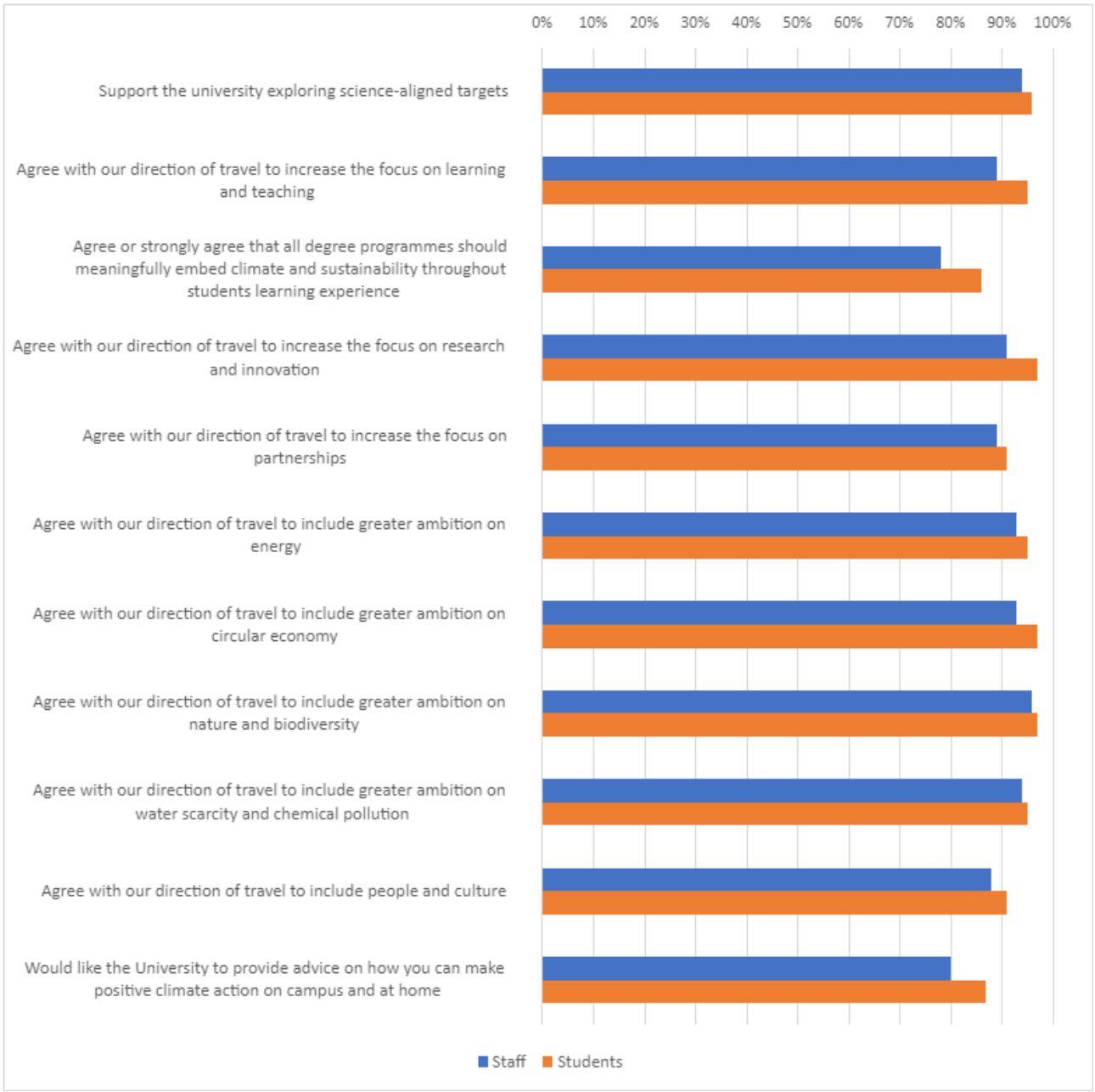
Headline results

Overall results were very positive with over 90% in support of the majority of proposals and 80% in support of all the proposals.

- 95% support the university exploring science-aligned targets
- 91% agree with our direction of travel to increase the focus on learning and teaching
- 80% agree or strongly agree that all degree programmes should meaningfully embed climate and sustainability throughout students learning experience
- 92% agree with our direction of travel to increase the focus on research and innovation
- 89% agree with our direction of travel to increase the focus on partnerships
- 94% agree with our direction of travel to include greater ambition on energy
- 94% agree with our direction of travel to include greater ambition on circular economy
- 96% agree with our direction of travel to include greater ambition on nature and biodiversity

- 94% agree with our direction of travel to include greater ambition on water scarcity and chemical pollution
- 88% agree with our direction of travel to include people and culture
- 82% would like the University to provide advice on how you can make positive climate action on campus and at home.

As illustrated below, students responded slightly more positively overall with over 85% expressing support for all proposals in comparison with 78% of staff.



Priorities in each area – Summary of qualitative responses

Learning and teaching

The majority of responses were supportive of embedding sustainability across all programmes to provide students with an understanding of climate science and the impacts and solutions specific to their field of study.

> *"Each programme should consider how climate change is related to their subject of study, how their field could contribute to reducing greenhouse gases as well as what students will need in order to practice in that area in a future impacted by climate change. I believe almost all subjects can both contribute to shifting society towards net-zero and will be impacted in some way by continuing and accelerating climate chaos."*

However, respondents felt that more resources, support and training need to be made available to support staff with delivery, such as centralised resources on climate science, challenges and solutions.

> *"In my experience of working with academic staff, one of the main concerns over change and restructuring is not having enough time, skills or direct related knowledge to be able to implement it. I think there needs to be robust training support so that academics feel confident implementing these changes in the curriculum and their teaching style. I think there also needs to be a strong direction from the top/senior management/university governance to get a sense of urgency and the need for change."*

Respondents suggested that experiential learning, challenge courses and collaborative cross-disciplinary approaches would enhance the learning experience. They also recommended that the learning should be considered through a climate justice lens and encourage critical thinking.

In terms of implementation, it was suggested that climate change curriculum champions could be appointed within each subject area, to provide specific support and training, and that the SRS team could engage with Board of Studies convenors to provide support with scrutinising course proposals.

A small minority of respondents were concerned that the proposals would infringe on academic freedom and suggested that, where climate and sustainability did not naturally fit within a subject area, it would be more appropriate to provide an undergraduate course.

> *"The key phrase in the strategy is 'meaningfully embed...'. This indicates that a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to the delivery of teaching on this subject would not be appropriate. Engineers and English Lit students both need to engage climate and sustainability, but it will materially be quite different in each programme - the criteria and benchmarks submitted to schools regarding teaching delivery should reflect this diversity."*

Research and innovation

Respondents felt the biggest research and innovation priority should be science and engineering solutions, citing examples like renewables, carbon capture, energy storage, precision fermentation, cellular agriculture and nature-based solutions.

A significant number of respondents also stressed the importance of researching the social, political and economic factors that influence levels of support and adoption, citing examples like ethics, values, resistance

to climate change, community engagement, histories that challenge anthropocentricism, systems change and degrowth.

The second greatest priority from respondents was that research and innovation should be action and impact focused to reflect the urgency of the situation. It was suggested that research direction could be aligned with high-impact areas highlighted in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) pathways like clean electrification, nature-based solutions and circular economies.

> *"Science-aligned / science-based targets (dynamic, evolving, updating) and their implications for how much more GHG emissions the world can afford and how much of those can be equitably apportioned to the UK, Scotland, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University etc., must be enshrined as pre-requisite conditions informing / steering / guiding all of the University's strategic climate action with respect to Research & Innovation and more widely. This set of pre-requisite conditions should _not_ serve to stifle research and innovation but to clarify, communicate, make urgent and expedite taking those actions that will make the most significant contributions (as evidence by the best current science and knowledge) in the shortest possible time to tackling the climate crisis (an others), while expressly incorporating the dimensions of climate justice necessary to enable the required collective global action on climate. In the same vain it must thus also weed out of consideration those actions that do not align with the science-based preconditions as reducing enough, soon enough, in a just way."*

The next greatest priority was to focus on improving sustainability practices within the University on the design and delivery of research in terms of travel, energy efficiency, procurement and circularity.

> "I think there is a culture of exceptionalism within some academic circles, that leads researchers to believe that as their work is having a positive impact on the world, they do not have to engage with the negative consequences of their activities when it comes to impacts on the climate and environment. Nowhere is this more clear than academics routinely flying halfway across the world to attend conferences, or to collaborate with researchers at other institutions. I think this needs to be challenged more within the university climate strategy, as to how necessary this damaging travel is to conduct effective research."

A very small minority of respondents were concerned that the proposals would compromise academic freedom.

> "I agree up to a point, research works best when it's led by researchers themselves, not mandated by university managers or funding agencies - any scientist will tell you this."

Partnerships

Within the partnership section respondents felt the University's greatest priority should be to engage with more local partners within the community, NGOs, start-ups, local authorities and the Scottish Government. There was concern that partnerships can often be driven by economic and reputational reasons and respondents would like to see more smaller scale partnerships.

> *"Identifying and supporting local and regional partnerships. I feel like those are usually the most impactful ones, as everyone involved works on the same ground rules (from a political/legal/cultural point of view) and people are usually personally invested and thus have more innovative ideas and*

motivation to drive the work forward at a quick pace. Also, there are usually lower climate costs with regard to travelling to collaborating partners…"

The second key area highlighted by respondents was that partnerships should be prioritised and driven by impact and action.

> *"Focus on action - too much time is sunk in rewriting and talking over things - especially when that partnership is government or council related. The University should push for less short termism and more action."*

The third greatest priority cited by respondents was to partner with institutions and communities in the Global South. Learning from indigenous knowledge and recognising that these communities are often most adversely impacted by climate change.

> *"Wider partnerships to include all of Global South countries - including those in middle income countries (such as many of the Small Island Developing States) that are not always eligible for funding but still struggle with a lack of capacity to address climate change impacts. Explore and expand more of the existing partnerships within the University - many individuals have existing networks/partnerships but may not be known to the 'right' people or know how to develop these partnerships effectively."*

The fourth most cited priority was to be mindful of green-washing and not engage in partnerships with organisations who are driving climate change.

> *"Ensuring research partnerships are ethically informed and UoE Research (e.g. with oil companies on carbon capture) does NOT contribute to fossil fuel companies greenwashing their crimes and receiving a social license to continue as normal. I do not want my university to be the shield fossil fuel companies hide behind. Also ensuring recruitment partnerships between companies and the careers service are ethically informed. There should be an ethical careers policy that ensures that e.g., tobacco, oil, gas, mining, tar sands companies, weapons manufacturers such as Leonardo etc do not recruit our students and are not promoted by this university."*

Energy

There was the greatest level of alignment on priorities for energy. The majority of respondents felt that the University's primary priority should be to improve the energy efficiency of the estate, through retrofitting existing buildings and designing all new buildings to be net zero. Historic assets were highlighted as a key challenge and opportunity in this area.

> *"Our carbon emissions (at KB) are driven largely by the poor estate with very energy inefficient buildings. If we are serious about this then investing in insulating and upgrading the estate is critical. While the solar farm at Easter bush is nice, we could put solar PV on the roof of many University buildings and reduce their heating bills significantly. New buildings could use sustainable construction (e.g. modern timber frame) rather than steel and concrete - more expensive but less emissions. We need to look at a whole system approach."*

The next greatest priority was to increase the use of renewable energy across the estate. Respondents were supportive of the Easter Bush array but felt that the University could do much more in this area, suggesting

solar arrays on all buildings and replacing existing combined heat and power systems with heat pump alternatives.

> *"A massive expansion - stop doing it half hearted and make a huge investment in green energy production. We have the money and it is an investment, the money will be saved and earned in the long run. We should be a leading creator and provider of solar and wind power and spending a significant amount now to get this up. One small solar farm is nothing - let's get panels on every roof and wind farms planned as they will take a long time for approval."*

The third most cited priority was behaviour change and an increase in communications, training and resources to support with this. Respondents felt that poor practice around heating, ventilation and lighting was prevalent and offered a quick win.

> *"Greater awareness-raising amongst all staff as to this work and the ways in which they can play their part needs to be a key focus, not a footnote around 'behaviour change' in the ambition outlined above. A culture of co-design: working with staff to come up with ways in which to effect this will ensure ownership and sustained activity."*

Respondents were also keen that the University lead the way, showcase what is possible within a complex organisation and use its influence to encourage partners and policy makers to be more ambitious.

Circular economy

Within the circular economy section respondents felt that the biggest priority should be information technology, both through expanding work on repair and reuse of IT and lab equipment and through being more efficient with online storage. The second most cited priority was to increase awareness of circular economy among staff and students through better communication, guidance and training.

> *"I think as a university, we need to take a closer look at the shocking waste of resources within IT. On a micro level, I constantly see perfectly good laptops and computers being thrown out because of minor faults such as damaged screens, machines needing RAM upgrades or IS's inability to fix basic driver problems often caused by their own security updates. The standard response to querying this waste is: "these machines are recycled and given to good causes, etc". In 90% of cases I have seen that is simply untrue - they remain languishing in people's cupboards, etc. Nor does this argument address the fact that in most cases, the machine didn't need replacing in the first place. We need to have on-site staff who can actually fix basic hardware problems."*

The third most cited priority was catering, where respondents mentioned single use plastic, food waste and wider supply chain considerations like food miles.

> *"One thing I would really like to see - which isn't mentioned above - is a reduction in the waste generated by on-campus catering. For example, at KB campus it is quite difficult to buy a meal which does not include single-use plastic, and many buildings don't have a water fountain for refilling bottles. Cafes serve takeaway hot drinks in single-use plastic cups with University branding on them - which is surprising to see."*

There was also wide support for incorporating circular thinking into procurement processes, increasing support on reuse and repair via student hubs and training courses.

"We must radically rethink and critique each and every purchase we make, to ensure no existing product would suffice rather than taking more resources from the earth. When we do make purchases we must ensure they are durable, repairable, reusable and can be broken down for full value-reclaim recycling at the eventual end of life. The University should invest in staff and locations to host a large reuse hub which can serve the University as well as neighbouring institutions (public and private) across southern Scotland. With large enough scale a reuse hub will work. Small scale operations in this area fail when supply doesn't match up with demand, and there is insufficient space to store items until the demand arrives."

Nature and biodiversity

Respondents believed the biggest priority for nature and biodiversity should be to increase and improve green space across the campus through diverse and regenerative landscaping. It was felt this was particularly important within the central campus where biodiversity is most lacking and is perceived to have been overlooked in recent developments, such as the Edinburgh Futures Institute. Respondents were also keen to see biophillic design principles included within the built estate, citing examples such as green roofs and vertical farms.

"Key public facing areas of the University such as Bristo Square have been devoid of any plants, any biodiversity, since they were refurbished in recent years. 2020 may be too recent as a baseline for biodiversity loss. Biodiversity was lost in Bristo Square before 2020, and that greenery has never been replaced. Similarly, Old College has a monocrop of grass. If you want to showcase UoE's intention to increase biodiversity, diversify these famous areas with a range of plant/ tree species, and maintain them. Protection of biodiversity when UoE estates are used by visitors, such as the Festival, should also be prioritised."

Respondents felt the University's second biggest priority should be habitat restoration and connectivity to support wildlife across campuses and other owned landed. They would like to see a more visible commitment to this, such as beehives, bat/bird boxes and ponds. Several respondents were also in favour of rewilding and would like to see the University support the reintroduction of apex predators in Scotland.

"Emphasizing biodiversity connectivity with Edinburgh. The University has a variety of campuses and locations, but little attention thus far has been made to develop wildlife corridors or cultivate urban biodiversity. Zones of high ecosystem importance or potential for biodiversity ought to be unmanaged; an aesthetic park may be an ecological dead zone, unless spots are allowed to develop natural dynamics."

Respondents were also supportive of reforestation efforts through the Forests and Peatland project and felt this should be the University's third priority.

The next most cited areas of priority were working in partnership with government and other landowners, engaging effectively with local communities and linking institutional work on biodiversity to learning and teaching programmes.

"Please ensure you include communities and landowners in your land procurement and ensure you are not part of the enclosures/land dispossession problem. The University can be a good manager compared to a rich individual or company, but you must ensure you do this correctly. I would like to

see a social ethical environmental scientist who works on Environmental justice and community rights at the forefront of this project."

Water scarcity and chemical pollution

Respondents felt that the highest priority in this section should be increasing our research on chemical pollution and water scarcity. Focussing on areas such as the effects of chemical toxicity on reproduction and trans-generational health, the legal implications of chemical pollution and sustainable management of water resources in drought-prone regions.

> *"Be led by science and experts in these areas; be mindful of water scarcity being felt by other parts of the world more acutely and more quickly; undertake research (including legal research) that will help change and influence policy around use of chemicals."*

The next biggest priority was making changes to the estate to improve water efficiency, such as rainwater harvesting and low flush toilets, and to reduce the amount of chemical pollution from laboratories. Respondents would also like to see the University set more ambitious policy and regulation around the use of chemicals and an increase in communications to raise awareness of these issues and mitigation options for staff and students.

> *"Priorities need to involve educating the university community about the sacredness of water and how to protect it. Currently, we are not supported in understanding and avoiding chemical pollution as illustrated by the difficulties ensuring toxic chemicals do not go down university drains."*

People and culture

Within people and culture respondents felt that providing more training, guidance and tools for staff and students to increase knowledge and empower impactful action should be the biggest priority. This was followed by increasing communications to ensure staff and students are aware of existing achievements and initiatives and any new opportunities or events.

> *"There needs to be mandatory in person training on every campus to really fuel discussion that will have lasting impact and mindset changes."*

The next most cited priority was embedding sustainability into decision-making at all levels including recruitment, inductions and objectives.

> *"I think it's highly important to create the right sustainability culture in our teaching and research. This is particularly because in academia many staff have more freedom than in other professions, so central policies can be less effective."*

Respondents were also keen that the University take strong action and set an exemplar, and voiced concern that there should be less focus on individual action as opposed to systemic change. There was also concern that staff are overworked and therefore additional resources would need to be allocated for them to be able to effectively engage with sustainability issues.

“I think the university needs to ensure they draw a line between individual action and systemic efforts. Once we begin talking about educating people about climate change and how they can reduce their impacts, it can often veer towards placing blame and responsibility on individuals. I trust the university to continue their university wide climate efforts, while encouraging individuals to take action and reduce consumption. But they must be sure to not place responsibility on others.”

Summary and next steps

This consultation sought to generate feedback in response to the recommendations for an updated Climate Strategy, from across the University's community. With the overwhelming majority of responses supporting the proposed changes, the Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability will now consider the responses and seek to integrate some of the suggestions when preparing the refreshed strategy for publication in 2024.

This publication can be made available in alternative formats on request.

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