

Zamzam's keynote to Student Sustainability Summit 04 November 2019

Thank you for joining us at our 9th annual Student Sustainability Summit!

I am so excited about all the amazing workshops and speakers we have lined up for you, and really hope the event gives you lots of ideas and inspiration to take back to your unions. I know many of you are here for tomorrow as well, for our fourth Student Eats conference, which is set to be a brilliant day, planning about how we can transition to a just and sustainable food system.

I'm here for both days and, this year, I'm speaking to you as both NUS National President and President of SOS-UK.

SOS-UK is NUS's brand new sustainability charity, created so we can go further and faster with our sustainability work, in response to the climate emergency and ecological crisis we find ourselves in.

And we *really* need to go further and faster.

When it comes to the environment, and our planetary life support systems, nearly all the warning lights are flashing red, and we are careering towards runaway global heating, humanitarian disasters and mass extinctions.

So why on earth isn't this *the* top issue for political leaders the world over?

Here in the UK, the sixth biggest economy in the world, and one of the oldest democracies, our elected Government is spending billions subsidising fossil fuel industries and building new roads and runways, whilst not taxing aviation fuel, allowing home builders to build inefficient gas-powered homes that need retrofitting before they are even occupied, and preventing any new on-shore wind generation. How is that compatible with the climate emergency we are in?

You have to admit, Greta is really on to something in calling out the abject failure of the political class. How can it be that the people we elect to serve and protect us make such unrepresentative and harmful decisions? When will our *so-called* 'leaders' grasp the gravity of the situation we are all in and put their egos and self-interests aside, in order to secure *our* future?

I have thought about this a lot recently and I think I've finally figured it out what the root cause of the problem is.

It's our education system.

I really believe our leaders are making bad decisions because they have been badly educated.

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. We are assessed on what we can remember, not what we can do with the knowledge. Our education system 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 everything is connected. Our universities are judged by what our starting salaries are rather than the good we go on to achieve. We leave education with so much debt we feel obliged to apply for the best paid jobs, rather than the jobs that will make the world a better place. The whole system, not just the education system, but the society in which we live, indoctrinates us to prioritise short-term profit over long-term prosperity.

David Orr, the US academic and activist, says, our universities are routinely equipping young people and students to be more effective vandals of Earth. He says it isn't the worlds' poorest and least educated people that are doing the most damage, it is those with BSc's, MBAs and PhDs. I agree.

According to UNESCO, 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?

I firmly believe our universities are massively culpable for the mess we are in.

Universities the world over are routinely failing to create leaders that can lead on sustainability, but UK universities have a special culpability. According to the soft power report, 55 of the current world leaders were educated in UK universities. I know Boris is keen to talk about exports, but I don't think even he would want to own up to some of the leaders we have helped educate here in the UK.

Our education system is outdated and is not fit for purpose.

Look around the world at the people leading us and what they are doing to *our* planet, *our* future. Our wonderful environmental and international development charities are constantly fighting bad decisions made by well educated people. The student strikers in Japan recently likened it to a game of bash the mole, and I see what they mean. As soon as we get rid of one urgent problem, like fracking, another one pops up, like Heathrow, the Amazon fires, Brexit, that we have to all jump on and stop.

Constantly firefighting bad decisions made by well educated people is exhausting.

We have to change the way our leaders think, or else we will always be fighting a losing battle to save our future. Humanity will, I'm sure, make it through the climate emergency in some form, but what will come next? We *have* to break the cycle of well-educated leaders putting short-term profit over long-term, prosperity.

Society needs reforming, and the way we must do that is by reforming our education system.

I'm sure many of you know, we run a transformational programme in the formal curriculum, called Responsible Futures, that supports students' unions and their institutions to elevate and celebrate the teaching of sustainability across the curriculum. We'd love to bring it to your campuses and work with you and your institutions. I also know many of you are leading your own initiatives to reinvent education, such as the three D's here at Sheffield. Here, the students' union are working with the university to

Decarbonise, Decolonise and Democratise the curriculum. It is a wonderful campaign that we can all learn from.

But we all need to go further and faster. We need to repurpose the whole of the education system around sustainability, not just tertiary. Students are heavily influenced by what and how they learn when they are younger, so we need to connect up the different parts of our education system on this.

It's not good enough that sustainability is siloed in certain subject areas. Sustainability needs weaving through all that we learn, like a golden thread, from early years through to adult education.

Sustainability should be like equality. It should be a principle that applies equally to everything we learn and do, not something that is treated in isolation, something that is just for geography or science students to think about. That sort of siloed thinking is what has got us into this mess.

It is this realisation that led us to develop Teach the Future with our friends at UKSCN, who are here today.

Where are our friends from UKSCN?

Please can you wave?

I want to applaud your amazing work in raising the profile of the climate emergency through your strikes and campaigning. You are all so inspiring to me, and everyone here!

Through Teach the Future we are calling for Government to do six things that we believe will quickly repurpose the whole education system around the climate emergency and ecological crisis.

The first is an independent review of how the education system is preparing young people and students for the climate emergency and ecological crisis, with costed recommendations for what needs to change.

The second is changing the teacher standards so our universities have to ensure the teachers they train are knowledgeable about sustainability.

The third is a new act of parliament, the Climate Emergency Education Act, that will compel and fund our education institutions to prepare students to take action to stop the climate emergency and ecological crisis.

The fourth is a new Climate Endowment Fund that will fund young people and students in every school, college and university in the country to engage their peers, their parents and their teachers and lecturers.

The fifth is funding for charities to set up youth panels on the climate emergency in every school, college, university, local authority, NHS Trust and Government department.

And lastly, the sixth is about the buildings we learn in. We know we can change the formal and informal curriculums through our campaigns and programmes, but the subliminal curriculum requires capital investment. We are mostly taught in inefficient, unsustainable, fossil-fuel dependent classrooms and lecture theatres. This is a massive missed opportunity. Updating and upgrading our learning spaces should be a national infrastructure priority, because we don't just learn *in* these buildings, we learn *from* these buildings. Imagine if every new educational building, school or campus was net-zero carbon from 2020, and every existing building was net-zero carbon by 2030. Buildings that are warm, full of natural light, and fully powered by renewables. Well, that is the sixth demand of Teach the Future.

I said I am here all day today and tomorrow. I actually need to leave early this afternoon, for which I apologise, because I need to go to London. I've been invited to a reception hosted by Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Education, at the Department for Education. Every autumn the minister holds a reception for key people in the education sector. Strangely, given we represent the interests of seven million students, they have never invited NUS before. So, I'm going, and I'm going to use the opportunity to tell Gavin what I've told you. We urgently need his support turning Teach the Future into action. Hopefully we will still get our invite next year!

We urgently need your help too. Please can all of you visit our Teach the Future page - that's www.teachthefuture.uk - and sign up to register your support. Then follow the link to our parliamentary petition and sign that too. We only need about two thousand more to get a formal response from Government. Please tell everyone you know to support Teach the Future. If we all tell five people, and ask them to tell five people, and so on, we have the numbers, and this will happen.

As you might have noticed, there is a general election campaign happening. That is actually why Danielle Rowley, our keynote, isn't able to be here today. She is out canvassing for votes, as all MPs and prospective MPs are. Whilst we are sad that Danielle can't be here, as she is a progressive and young MP, we are pleased that the general election is presenting an opportunity for us to make progress with Teach the Future.

Please help us to reach out to candidates and ask them if they are willing to support our campaign asks, and what they can do to help us.

Whoever gets into Government, we are going to be there, right at the start, asking for an urgent meeting, asking them to help us repurpose our education system around sustainability.

Of course, as the Teach the Future name suggests, education is *long-term* investment in society, in that it takes time for young people to work their way through and into positions of influence. It is essential we draw a line and create better leaders, leaders who can lead us to a more just and sustainable future. But we still have lots of urgent influencing of current leaders to do now as well, and I want to outline some of what we are working on alongside Teach the Future...

In the spring SOS-UK will launch its second major national campaign, to get universities and colleges to bring their carbon reduction targets forward to be net-zero by 2030.

We are continuing at pace with Divest-Invest, our joint campaign, with the amazing People & Planet, to get every university to divest their endowments from fossil fuels. In

just four years we have gone from ten universities having made the commitment to just under a half of all UK universities. Thank you for all your work on this over the last few years, and I implore all of you from universities yet to announce to keep the pressure on them, once we reach the half way mark it will be the minority that haven't divested, and that will become a tipping point for the sector. A big shout out to Laura Clayson for her amazing work on Divest-Invest.

Laura is also working with People & Planet on Divest Barclays and we are in the middle of a mobiliser tour. It is not the first time we have boycotted Barclays on divestment – our successful boycott Barclays campaign in the 1980s led to the Bank withdrawing from South Africa, which was seen as a pivotal moment in the fall of the racist apartheid regime. We need to be bankrupting the fossil fuel industry alongside continuing to challenge their social license to keep operating.

In 2020 we will be starting a new additional phase of our work on university money. Once universities have divested we want to support them to move their collective £3.5 billion of endowments invested in listed stocks and shares out of the stock exchange and into new renewables, both on and off campus. Universities should be making their money work in the fight against global heating. We have some new funding from Friends Provident Foundation to help us with this work.

We are also looking at how we can get colleges and universities to manage their land better in relation to the climate emergency and ecological crisis. Many universities own acres of farmland, often around their campuses, with much of it is rented out to tenant farmers that typically industrially farm the land, depleting soils and contributing to the climate emergency. UK farming is responsible for 9% of all the UK's carbon emissions, and our universities are major landholders. The Oxford and Cambridge colleges alone own 140,000 acres of land. For every 0.1% increase in soil organic matter, that equates to nine tonnes of carbon sequestration per hectare. We want to help colleges and universities put their collective land holdings to use by managing the land to build up soil organic matter for carbon capture and storage, and we are looking at how this could be funded through a sector-owned carbon offset scheme, to offset the travel of international students.

An issue of great importance to me is equality, diversity and inclusion. Last year we published a report which showed that the average diversity in UK environmental charities is just 0.6%, compared to 14.1% of the general public. There is a shocking lack of ethnic diversity in sustainability. According to Government data, the only less diverse sector in the UK, in terms of ethnicity, is farming, where families inherit the farm, so at least they have an excuse.

Linked to this, some of you might have heard me talk about climate justice, and it will be a big part of many of the sessions today. Climate change is a racist issue, in that it is predominately caused by rich white communities in the global North, but it will predominantly impact poorer black communities in the global South. We have to start working together on inclusion. As we enter what could be the last stand for our environment, we can't afford for 14% of us not to be engaging in the work of our environmental charities. It is not just our education sector that needs change.

Hopefully a lot of the issues I have spoken about ring true to you.

I think you will agree, there is a lot to do, and not much time to do it in. Now is the time for action.

Some of you might have heard that we have turned down an offer to be a part of the EAUC's new Climate Commission in tertiary education. Our reasoning is that we are in a climate emergency. In an emergency you need IMMEDIATE ACTION, not yet more talk about possible action in the future. We now know what universities need to do, the solutions are all there. We will instead invest our time in supporting you all to call on your institutions to go further and faster in their response to the climate emergency and ecological crisis. I'd implore the same sort of approach at your institutions. Being consulted and involved is one thing but being a part of any initiative that delays action is dangerous. As Greta says, our house is on fire. Now is the time for real action.

Lastly, I want to let you know about something I'm amazing excited about, SOS-International. SOS-UK is the UK chapter of SOS-International, which we co-founded with DSF, the Danish NUS, and USI, the Irish NUS, at the start of this year. Some of our SOS-International friends are here today, please can you wave?

Thorough SOS-International we are working to get every NUS in Europe, and around the world, collaborating on sustainability. In the UK we have 140 universities, but that is just 1% of all the universities on earth. We need every NUS to be supporting every one of the 14,000 students' union around the world, so that they are leading the charge on the climate emergency and the ecological crisis within their institutions. This new international chapter of our work takes us right back to when NUS was founded, 97 years ago, after the first world war, with the vision of students collaborating across borders for a better world. I'm so excited for what we are going to achieve together with our international friends.

On that note, I'm so proud of what our friends at UKSCN, People & Planet, our staff at SOS-UK, and, above all, you all, within your students' unions, as activists, are doing. We are an amazing movement of amazing people doing amazing things, and it is an honour to be able to share my thoughts, and our plans, with you here today. I'm so proud of you all for what you are doing, and I'm really looking forward to meeting as many of you as I can today and tomorrow, and seeing how we can work together as Students Organising for Sustainability.

We can do this!

Thank you