

## *Preliminary Research Findings*

# **YOUTH VOICES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN PAKISTAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION.**

### **Abstract**

Universities are uniquely situated to respond to the challenges posed by the climate crises, and young people's voices are necessary to inform a just and sustainable transition. Pakistan is a highly vulnerable country to the climate crises and faces significant challenges in quality of education across the higher education sector. This research report shares preliminary findings of four participatory workshops conducted by the Laidlaw scholar with 80 young people from Pakistan. A participatory and inclusive approach is employed to listen to students' experiences and ideas of climate change and sustainability education in universities. Youth policy recommendations are outlined in the categories of curriculum, campus and community which would be used to inform a policy brief for WWF-Pakistan. In conclusion, young people imagine a transformative shift in universities in Pakistan which prioritises sustainability and wellbeing with all species on campus. They recommended that the curriculum should be holistic, updated and practical by responding to local community issues and needs. Furthermore, the campus should be an alternative place of practices for example through elimination of single-use plastics. Finally, students should be provided opportunities to take initiative to lead and collaborate with local communities and learn indigenous knowledge and traditions as part of their degree.

## Introduction

For my Leadership in Action project, I took the initiative to lead a research project with close to 80 young people in Lahore, Pakistan to share their views and experiences on climate change and sustainability education in their university. I worked with WWF-Pakistan to design the research project and liaison with universities to invite young people to a participatory workshop.

I conducted participatory workshops with young people in which they shared their experiences of learning about climate change and sustainability in university and visions for a sustainable university. Using qualitative research methods, I plan to document the youth recommendations in a policy brief for WWF-Pakistan which is aimed at policymakers in higher education in Pakistan. As part of my first-year Laidlaw project, I led this same project with UCL students and decided to do a similar project with students based in Lahore.

I chose Lahore because it is the city where I live with my parents and young people in Lahore are experiencing critical socio-economic issues exacerbated by the climate crises. Young people are suffering due to heatwaves, health problems due to dangerous levels of PM2.5 pollution and other environmental changes in the city. About a third of the population in Pakistan are young people and there are over 200 universities in Pakistan. Most universities in Pakistan do not have efficient student voice mechanisms to ensure that the university experience and education is informed by student experiences. Therefore, I employed a participatory and inclusive approach to listen to university students' experiences and views with an activity to design policy recommendations for a sustainable university.

Researchers argue that climate change and sustainability education demands for more participatory, interdisciplinary and creative forms of engaging with young people to listen to their views and experiences as well as form spaces of learning which critically inquires ways to mitigate and adapt to the climate crises. Furthermore, universities, as part of the formal education system, are uniquely positioned to respond to climate crises through their primary roles of education, research and community advocacy. However, in order to achieve a just transition to the climate crises, young people must meaningfully participate and contribute to climate change and sustainability education policy in their university.

## Preliminary Research Findings

In this section I share some preliminary research findings from initial coding of the workshop transcripts. The young people's recommendations for sustainability in higher education are deductively categorised into Curriculum, Campus and Community.

The young people came from different universities across Pakistan including Institute of Business and Management in Karachi, The University of Punjab, Government College University Lahore and Lahore College for Women's University.

### Young People's Lived Experiences of Climate Change and Sustainability

Young people observed various environmental issues which affect their health, mental wellbeing, motivation to study in university and future prospects after graduation. Here, I share three quotes from the workshops to describe the young people's sentiments towards climate change:

'Very depressing for me to be in Lahore'

'It is difficult to survive in such a situation where you can't breathe properly or where you have respiratory issues, or where you have to survive in such a temperature that might make you die'

'We are being affected by heatwaves, smog, cold weather and lots of biodiversity decline. You can hardly find any birds in the sky. If you see 10 years ago, you see many birds and plenty of biodiversity.'

At the same time, the young people identified a consciousness of sustainability that existed for many generations before them. They described how their parents would teach them to conserve water, prevent food waste and to take care of their neighbours and community. However, they reflected that recent demands to live 'higher lifestyles' requires more resources and have resulted in prevalent anti-environmental behaviours in Lahori society.

### Barriers to Sustainability in Higher Education

Students particularly from public sector institutions described fundamental issues in the higher education system in Pakistan which prevented them from pursuing a quality education. For example, one student shared how his teachers would come to classes at times which would suit them rather than the timetable provided by the university.

However, there are no efficient anonymous feedback mechanisms in place in his university

and providing feedback to teachers or faculty members, could result in a compromise of students' grades and even prevent them from qualifying for their degree. Furthermore, some institutions are affected by political and religious groups which try to enforce ideologies to students in the classroom and campus which disrupts their studies and limits freedom of students on campus.

An education that prepares young people to act for the climate and sustainability is synonymous with a quality education informed by young people. A reformation of the higher education system in Pakistan is necessary for a sustainable response and should include enabling autonomy in higher education institutions, enforcing existing national education policies and meet international standards of education.

Students were frustrated and felt that their university is doing nothing about climate change except for performative actions such as tree plantations. Students observed that the expansion of infrastructure in their university caused the destruction of wildlife and nature.

'I witnessed the negative development from my university in 2018, they cut around 40% of trees in the name of development and we protested but nothing happened.'

'A tree is the home of a bird. Please do not cut it.'

Students mentioned that tree plantations were usually conducted by senior members of their department and involved taking pictures for the university social media. They even observed that they do not find the trees that were planted and the university grounds are not properly maintained due to littering by students and staff.

### Good Practices in Institutions

Some students had studied an environmental minor course which was compulsory to their degree. They said that it allowed them to become more aware of pro-environmental attitudes and be careful about personal sustainable actions.

One student from the private-sector Institute of Management and Business in Karachi was very positive about his institution as they had already started transitioning to renewable energy, provided e-bikes to students on campus and incorporated real-life examples of sustainability in the context of their degree.

## Youth Recommendations for Sustainability in Higher Education in Pakistan

In this section I share some summary findings of the youth recommendations for sustainability in higher education in Pakistan which are deductively sorted into three categories of Curriculum, Campus and Community based on Sterling's (2013) framework for a sustainable university.

### Curriculum

'I think lip-services are not sufficient. Teaching about certain subjects is half of what we can do. We must implement what we have been taught.'

'Less should be on memorisation and more on understanding.'

- **Holistic** – Every discipline should acknowledge the adversities caused by the climate crises and teach solutions for a sustainable future related to the disciplinary field.
- **Practical** – The university curriculum should incorporate practical, place-based learning from the first semester. There should be opportunities for students to work with affected communities, industries and non-profit organisations which prepare students for careers and skills for sustainability. The students emphasised on fun and engaging activities in the curriculum such as surveys and fieldwork.
- **Updated** – The syllabus should respond to current issues experienced by local communities and implement digital technology.

The young people also acknowledged that it is necessary for the faculty to have up-to-date knowledge and be regularly trained to teach on issues related to the community and the climate crises.

The curriculum should not aim to be punitive, therefore all universities must remove any examination system which results in ranks of students rather than marks.

**Campus** Students wanted to see transformative cultural change on their campus to prioritise sustainability, preservation of resources and prioritises the urgency of the climate crises. Some of the youth recommendations for the university campus are:

- The elimination of the plastic supply chain in their universities and banning all single-use plastic.
- Expansion and maintenance of biodiversity on campus.

- Separate bins for recycling, food waste and general waste which must be recycled at a recycling plant to form reusable materials on campus. Food waste from canteens can be redistributed to less fortunate communities.
- Introduction of green technologies such as e-bikes and water filtration pumps that conserve rainwater and groundwater.
- Shifting to renewable forms of energy particularly solar energy systems.
- Tree plantations should be carried out thoughtfully with planning in place to ensure
- Provision of student accommodation to prevent long journeys of students in private transport.

### **Community**

- All students must have a compulsory community service course as part of their degree which involves a project related to their degree that helps a local community in Pakistan. Students particularly from Geography, Biological Sciences and Earth Sciences disciplines emphasised the need for field trips in different areas of Pakistan to learn from the indigenous knowledge and communities and incorporate traditional practices as part of their discipline.
- There should be no hate or discrimination on campus based on a person's gender, religion or ethnic background.
- There should be opportunity for youth-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability for example a youth empowerment committee in university which is responsible for all youth-led activities and societies on campus. The integration of youth-led programmes can be communicated on a website or app.
- All stakeholders from communities must be involved in university collaborations including educationists, politicians, local people, religious scholars, NGOs and students.
- Environmental sustainability should be considered in religious programmes for example, during Friday lectures after Jumma prayers.
- Research conducted in the university should be in direct response to community issues.
- Research and documented work by students and faculty should be translated into local languages and awareness should be spread of good work such as seminars, distribution of leaflets and collaboration with primary and secondary schools.

## Conclusion

The participatory workshops were an effective way to create a safe space for students to anonymously share their experiences of studying in universities in Pakistan as well as share their ideas for sustainable futures in higher education.

University students shared that recent heatwaves cause lack of concentration and motivation to study, and significant respiratory issues due to waste mismanagement and high levels of PM2.5 and PM10 pollution. Students feel depressed to be in Lahore in the context of the widespread environmental issues and despondence across the society including their university community for environmental sustainability.

In this preliminary research report, I share student recommendations across three categories of curriculum, campus and community. The students emphasised that the curriculum should be holistic by teaching and responding to local climate change issues and it should be practical by encouraging pro-environmental behaviours such as through place-based learning. The university should be a place of alternative learning and living on campus, with a transformative culture that prioritises all communities' wellbeing, environmental sustainability and preparing for uncertain futures foreshadowed by natural disasters and political instability. University students have to be proactive in engaging with the community and learning from indigenous practices and knowledge and should be provided the opportunity to form a student's union which is not influenced by religious or political groups.

These findings would be used by WWF-Pakistan and for my undergraduate dissertation to document student priorities for sustainability in Pakistan's higher education.

**To cite:** Zaidi, B. (2024). Preliminary Research Findings – Youth Voices for Sustainability in Pakistan’s Higher Education. *Laidlaw Scholars Network*. [insert link]