

Children deserve answers to their questions about climate change: How universities can help

October 19 2021, by Gabi Mocatta, Chloe Lucas



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Our children are growing up in a volatile climate. It's already damaging their health, wealth and well-being. Universities can be leaders in helping

young people gain the knowledge they need to navigate this uncertain future. [Curious Climate Schools](#), a project that connects young people directly with experts who can answer their climate questions, is a model for just this kind of leadership.

Universities across the globe come together this week to support [climate action leadership](#) in their communities as part of [Global Climate Change Week](#). In Tasmania, our Curious Climate Schools project has connected over 1,000 [school students](#), aged 10 to 18, with 57 [climate researchers](#) from diverse disciplines to answer students' questions.

Climate change will increasingly affect our children's lives, even if we take the profound action needed this decade to avert the worst of it. Young people will need to be climate-literate for the world they are inheriting. Although learning about [climate change](#) is established as vital in enhancing understanding and action, climate literacy education is not mandated in the [Australian Curriculum](#).

Our aim is to empower children to develop essential climate knowledge through student-led enquiry. Our experts' answers to questions from schools across the state will be made public on the [Curious Climate Schools website](#) on November 1. This will coincide with the [COP26 climate summit](#), connecting local and global climate leadership.

What do young people want to know?

Students have submitted questions to our project that range from the global to the local. Key themes in their questions included:

- who is responsible?
- how urgent is action?
- how do we adapt and care for the planet and its future inhabitants?

- why aren't politicians listening?

The children had many queries about the science of climate change, but even more about our social and political responses. For example:

- "I'm 13. What do you think climate change will alter about the world in my lifetime, and what can I do about it?"
- "Does the climate crisis have the potential to unite humanity in response?"
- "When it comes to future generations, how will they feel about what we have done?"

While children are interested in the physical science behind climate change, their questions show they are equally concerned with how we should act on climate as a society. This suggests that when climate change is taught in schools, it should be taught holistically. While understanding the drivers of climate change is important, teaching must also address the social challenges we face and the decision-making processes this wicked problem demands.

A way to counter climate anxiety

The current silence on climate in schools' teaching is bad for children's mental health. [Research has established](#) that speaking about climate change is an important first step in easing legitimate climate anxiety. Education that enables students' agency through climate literacy could reduce the mental health burden on young people.

We need climate-literate [young people](#). Empowering them to talk about climate change could both improve their mental health and help to build the engaged citizenry and leadership we need to face the climate crisis.

Acknowledging that children have a stake in climate action and decision-

making is vital. Without this, they feel disempowered and frustrated. We saw this in some of the questions submitted to Curious Climate Schools.

"Do you believe that we as the future leaders are being heard enough? For example, Scott Morrison or the other politicians, are they listening?"

These students are our future leaders. They deserve to be heard.

A model for university climate leadership

Many universities are well equipped to address local climate challenges in partnership with their communities. Curious Climate Schools is an example of how universities can engage with the public to enhance climate knowledge and action.

Our project is harnessing the knowledge, care and enthusiasm of 57 experts. They work in a range of fields, including climate modeling, biodiversity conservation, pyrogeography, chemistry, law, social science, engineering, geology, oceanography, paleoclimatology, Indigenous knowledges and health.

The Curious Climate Schools website will equip students with holistic climate knowledge and help teachers to address a subject at the forefront of students' minds—if not the Australian Curriculum.

With initiatives like Curious Climate Schools, universities can be leaders in climate action. In this decisive moment, it is crucial that we harness our collective talents in whatever ways we can to ensure a liveable world for our children.

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