

How universities could help whole communities tackle climate change

June 8 2023, by Arinola Adefila



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As centers of learning, universities have the potential to help whole communities learn about and [address climate change](#). Education can [lead us to change our attitudes and behavior](#). It can also help us deal with the anxiety or fear of doom that can stun us into inaction.

But there are aspects of how universities work that can create a divide between them and the communities that live and work around them. [Universities could anchor](#) climate collaboration. While many already take part in outreach work, they need to do more to build community links and use the resources they already have more widely.

Universities can be seen as elite institutions that do not welcome people who are not educated in a particular way, or those who have different ways of thinking about knowledge and beliefs.

Ivory towers

There are barriers to entering a university. These include grade requirements for students, or qualifications for lecturers and researchers who teach and develop new knowledge. It is more difficult for some people, such as those [with a disability](#), to navigate these barriers. Even if events that are open to all are held at a university, it may seem like a closed-off or unwelcoming place for people in the local community.

This means that most people on the planet are not able to engage with or contribute to essential learning and discussion taking place in [higher education](#) about the climate crisis.

This separation is extremely unhelpful when dealing with such a multifaceted issue with layers of complexity. It is what is known as a "[wicked problem](#)"—addressing one facet of the issue may result in further complications elsewhere. It requires people to work collaboratively to solve local challenges, while also thinking about implications on the global level.

The conversations around tackling climate change are too often fragmented. Researchers and universities discuss technological solutions. Governments focus on [social innovation](#) and activists on behavior

change. But we [need to collaborate](#). Working together as planetary citizens is the key to ensuring we can tackle the wicked problem of the climate crisis.

Valuable resources

Universities have the technological, practical, and social resources to support the critical element of collaboration. They have [cultural capital](#), meaning that people will pay attention to events and initiatives launched or developed with a university. They have the clout to spur communities, business, and policy makers to accelerate coordinated action.

They have staff with expert knowledge who can share this knowledge. They have the infrastructure and proficiency to create learning sites and spaces, as well as community engagement. Universities have the [physical space](#) to allow people to meet, discuss and learn, and the online learning facilities to do this virtually.

To put this into practice, universities need to do more to build connections with their communities. This could mean involving the [local community](#) in their day-to-day practice of teaching and research.

Learning can take place beyond the campus, so that [university students](#) and staff partner with local communities in the practice of carrying out research.

And universities can—and should—do more to promote learning for everyone. With the advent of online tools, universities have all the ingredients to support lifelong learning [focused on collaboration](#).

Higher education institutions could design courses focused on [sustainable living](#). They could train community educators to work with [local residents](#) and provide campus events on sustainable living involving people from the community.

The university learning environment is designed to support the development of "[epistemic agency](#)": assuming control of our own learning and the development of our own understanding. Epistemic agency is a fundamental feature of our humanity and a useful tool to be deployed to enhance collective responsibility in tackling wicked problems. Universities could support the epistemic agency of whole communities, not just students.

Universities cannot independently solve the climate crisis. But as custodians and producers of knowledge, universities have the characteristics and resources to support collaborative learning and collective action.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How universities could help whole communities tackle climate change (2023, June 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-universities-communities-tackle-climate.html>

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