

Sustainability Matters Now Podcast

Season 1, Episode 2. Sustainability and Student Leadership: Activism in Education

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Hello and welcome back to the Sustainability Matters Now podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really pleased to be joined by Helena Ratcliffe, the Students Union Ethics and Environment Officer for 2526, along with Luke Davis, Taron Talbot and Finlay Arcos Archard, all members of the Sustainability Forum at Warwick Students Union. Today is going to be a conversation about student leadership, the connection between education and activism and what a more sustainable future could look like at Warwick and beyond. Helena, Luke, Taron and Finlay, hello.

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and welcome to Sustainability Matters Now. Hiya. Hey. Hello. What brings you to this conversation on sustainability, please? I'm here because I'm a sustainability forum member within the Students' Union. I'm also on Climate Justice Society, so I'm quite involved in climate-related activism on campus. I was always raised with environmental values, and in high school, I took a large student leadership role in a similar position, and so the Student Union Sustainability Forum is kind of a natural...

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progression of that. Similarly to Taryn, I've always been raised in a very political household and I feel like sustainability has always been a natural thing that like we as young people are encouraged to care about. So yeah, that's why I ran for Student Union Ethics and Environment Officer. That's why I've also been working on the forum with everyone else here. I grew up with lots of vegetarians in my family, so lots of conversations about sustainability, but I always took it for granted and never really thought about it much until I was 15.

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when I watched a wonderful documentary on Netflix called Sea Spirits Sea and then that made me sort of become vegetarian. I'm very involved with the young greens, so political and climate activism together now. So thank you all. I think it's really interesting that you all have different experiences of what has brought you to this conversation. But I wonder what prompted you to get involved in sustainability activism at Warwick specifically as part of your studies? I think a big part of it was community.

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So I made a lot of friends who were interested in like similar sustainable things as me, similar environmental issues and like people through my course like Helena. And that then got me introduced to societies like Climate Justice Society. And I started to see how the university has a role in sustainability, like climate issues. And like, I wanted to be part in like making that difference. think universities are so important in terms of, you know, the paradigm they give all the students.

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in terms of how they interact with the environment. think Warwick's really fortunate that we're right in nature and that's reflected in a lot of their values and the commitments they've made. But of course, there's still a lot more that can be done. The opportunity to work with sustainability presents itself quite broadly through the union and through

initiatives by the university. So I think they've already created an environment where it's easy to contribute. I completely agree. I think it's so easy to see what change can be made on campus.

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I know coming here in Freshers Week, you're already really excited to start new activities. And I remember meeting the previous environment ethics officer and being so kind of wowed at like the autonomy that they do give roles like this and how the union especially is really prioritizing sustainability and students getting involved. So I think there's a really big kind of space for and community for us to get involved in sustainability at work.

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I think for me as well, there's a lot of things that I wanted to explore further that you can sort of get more access to through the Student Union, such as like the BP archives that are in Warwick and the business partnerships that the university has with different companies across the world and the influences that that has. So even though campus is very green, I was keen to get more people sort of involved as well. Yeah, and I think the role that the Student Union plays or any Student Union really can play in sustainability activism is really important.

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because it gives you that space to hold roles like you hold on sustainability forums and the opportunity as well to engage with a wider group of students who perhaps haven't had the experiences you've had growing up around sustainability and around that kind of consciousness of a need to make a change. And with that in mind, student engagement with climate activism has shifted drastically in recent years. What patterns are you seeing now? I think there was so much momentum back when, um you know, the famous one is...

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know, Fridays for Future when Greta Thunberg started protesting every Friday. And speaking personally, I was part of that one, you know, back in 2018, 2019. And I think, unfortunately, there was a lot of movement away from sustainability and environmentalism as a sort of, you know, number one issue, mostly as a result of COVID and the like economic fallout that came after that, which I think was quite sobering for a lot of young, you know, young people, especially being like more economically vulnerable.

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So I think re-centring environmentalism now is quite important, especially as a lot of the issues that people are prioritizing over sustainability right now, like the cost of living and immigration or cultural issues are all kind of downstream of sustainability in the sense that sustainability is such a large existential threat that I think a lot, what we need to focus on is reminding young people that sustainability is so key to all these other issues.

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especially the big political ones, and that the degradation of the natural world will have consequences on all those other issues. So to answer your question, I think there has been a significant diminishing in just how passionate and active young people are. I think sustainability has been sidelined a little bit. So we're hoping that this can be the beginning of resurgence. I definitely agree that the students of activism across the country for climate change and

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richness of society has diminished. But I'm quite hopeful for the future because I think at the moment we're seeing a new conversation which is integrating and unifying sort of climate justice with social justice. And by unifying these and looking at tackling these issues together, if we look at the political stage at the moment, we see the Green Party surging in the polls, which I think is really good news for joining these two things together. So I'm quite hopeful that now people won't see climate justice as a separate issue, but more together along with

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fighting for economic justice as well. Yeah, and I think it's a really interesting point you raised, Finlay, around the three pillars of sustainability. And I think so often when we have these conversations, people equate sustainability to recycling, or they equate it to, as you say, climate action, when actually there is a much broader discussion to be had in an environmental, social and economic space. Thinking of sustainability in that way, how does sustainability show up in your courses? So do you encounter the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

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And have you found ways to connect this to your activism through the work that you do in class? In my experience, yes, but it's not given that much focus. I feel like on my course, so I do politics and international studies. On my course, it's kind of sidelined as it will be mentioned as a segment of a lecture or maximum one week on one module. But climate change, especially in first and second year, doesn't really get that much of a focus. We have encountered UN Sustainable Development Goals, but it's not really given like

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the proper attention I think it deserves on our course. I do a joint economics course and I know an optional module for first years is environmental economics, which, you know, is like pretty dead on and what Warwick is good in that it also has an undergraduate degree called Global Sustainable Development, of which I have many friends studying it. But I think to echo what Luke said in economics, especially, it's definitely a sort of a subtext or a specific like, you know, weak or

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that it gets brought up in as simply an example. There's situations like in economics, the tragedy of the commons gets talked about where it's, we prioritize environmental degradation or do we prioritize personal gain? And it usually ends up leading us in the wrong direction in that sense. So it gets brought up, but I think it doesn't get a sort of, you know, holistic inclusion. It's just a uh lone topic.

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And I think adding to what Taryn said is that it's very easy as a student to avoid anything to do with climate change or sustainability if you want to. If you don't pick that particular module or if you don't do GSD or if you don't pick that essay question to do it, you can just avoid it. And I feel like that leads students to not realize how big of an issue it is and how much it penetrates every aspect of our life. I hear what you're saying. And as someone who teaches on modules from innovation to AI, it is very difficult to have an entire module that focuses on the climate impact of AI, for instance.

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What would be really interesting would be to understand from yourselves, what would you want it to look like? What could sustainability look like in your courses that would be slightly more meaningful? So you've mentioned that students can kind of avoid it if they don't want to learn about it, or perhaps they don't know to even take it. If you see what I mean, they're not even aware of the challenge to then be able to take the course or to do the essay. But what could it look like, do you think, in courses that would allow more students who perhaps aren't aware of this to get engaged with sustainability? I mean, there's certainly concepts like

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you know, donut economics could be brought in like alternative economic models in my economics lectures and seminars, which I think would like immediately shift the paradigm because models like that, you cannot ignore environmental factors if you're thinking with the donut model. I think that like there are already solutions that exist. And I think so far shifting the dial for like departments to include environmentalism even like as a footnote has been like

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a large effort given that Warwick is like one of the more progressive universities environmentally. So I guess that's to say it would be a big challenge to like, you know, shift the thinking even further. And I think like a really good solution to this would be encouraging staff to kind of include this in their modules and giving them that space to do so. I know one thing I'm doing as part of the AI policy that I'm enacting is

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kind of ensuring that staff think about AI and how they're encouraging students to use it and how they need to situate this in a broader framework of understanding its ethical and environmental impacts as well as just like blindly telling students to do something without thinking of its wide implications. Yeah, I completely agree. And I think giving staff that space is really useful, helping them understand how sustainability can be brought into their courses and their modules, because it can be challenging, I think, for certain disciplines. I wonder...

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What are each of you working on around campus right now through the Sustainability Forum or other projects that you're part of? So I'll start off by going through the stuff we're doing in the Sustainability Forum. So one of the main things we've worked on this term and last term is Green Week. Originally, Green Week was run mainly by the staff sustainability team, but we have been collaborating with them and other student societies to bring a plethora of interactive events to basically get students and societies as well that aren't necessarily focused on sustainability.

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to be talking about sustainability and thinking about it throughout the week. So this has kind of involved different societies. So we've got the political ones like Warwick Left Society, Warwick Climate Justice Society, the Greens, but we also have some of the non-political ones, course-based ones like Biosociety. The goal is basically to promote, yeah, sustainability discourse on campus, but also the sustainability form itself and the opportunities it provides for students on campus. So one of the main things we do.

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is we have a £5,000 money pot, which can be used by students for sustainability initiatives and sustainability projects. But most students don't know about it. There is not much publicity on that. Like if you ask an average student around campus, they'll have no idea that it's a thing. So we want to promote that through these events. Another big project we've been working on with the sustainability team is their aims to make a green space on campus, which will be a kind of space for staff and students.

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And we've been working with students sending out the forms sustainability team have provided us so that they can put their suggestions and have that input and have their say in the space. So like some ideas that people have come out with are things like a library of things or facilities to like mend clothes, like sewing machine, or just use it as like a general study space, like taking inspiration from things like the Nook, which was recently opened on campus. And yeah, it's just been a really good opportunity for us to like all work together.

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and foster that collaboration between staff, students, and also the SU and the societies on campus. I've also been working on the Community Fridge Initiative, which essentially provides free food for any students or staff who are kind of struggling, especially with the cost of living prices recently. And I rely a lot on student volunteers, so a lot of my work is getting students encouraged to collect leftover food from cafes and then bring them to the Fridge in chemistry. And I just think it's a really, really great

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great way for students to volunteer and do something and feel like they're actively involved in sustainability at work without kind of compromising or having massive time commitments. We're also hoping, well, we're planning to make a series of podcast episodes regarding experts on matters of sustainability, AI, that sort of thing, but also more broadly, so people who are involved in things like tax and research and economy, so you can look at how these things interact. It's great to hear that there's so much going on around.

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from Green Week through to the community fridges and this idea that you've got for new podcast episodes to help broaden knowledge that people have around campus. Helena, you mentioned that you're working on an ethical AI policy for the Students' Union. Why does AI ethics connect sustainability for you? So I've been really passionate about kind of combating AI on campus. Morey doesn't really have a very unified AI policy, so currently it's very up to each individual department to kind of decide what they want to do about AI.

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So we've got departments that have banned it completely, like Liberal Arts, and then departments that are actively encouraging it. And I think the most important thing for me is that students are getting their money's worth of teaching and learning resources. So I'm trying to make a really student-centred campaign where, you know, students are being seen more and more as consumers. And when you're paying £9,000, you expect really quality learning resources. And also, of course, there's the sustainable aspect to this.

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AI we know has really detrimental effects on the environment and also really detrimental social impacts. A lot of data labelling is done by people on very low wages in the global south and I think that's something that people really fail to connect with when they use AI or to really understand. And so this campaign is kind of both outreach to students so that they can get the most for their degree and also ensuring that they kind of consider these detrimental impacts, especially when

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you know, being so privileged and living in the West, we often don't see it for ourselves. I think the university should be promoting like ethical and sustainable careers to students rather than pushing them to engage in companies, know, billionaire AI companies that are causing all of these social environmental impacts. And I think it's great to hear that you're engaging with this bigger question around AI ethics. And I've spoken about it in other forums as well. It is a real

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challenge and I think having as many student voices as we can in that space and particularly with the angle that you're bringing on not just sustainability in terms of the climate but sustainability in terms of actually education and what we're doing I think is really really useful. One of the biggest challenges that students have now is time and the ability to engage with things meaningfully around degrees because of part-time work and care responsibilities. With that in mind what would make engaging with sustainability work on campus more accessible?

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to students at Warwick. I think it's quite tricky because of the time commitments, like you mentioned. But I think one way that it can be done is through the promotion of sustainability related societies events. So in climate justice, we run board game nights. Sometimes we have speakers come in. We have movie nights with pizza and snacks. And I think when there's these kind of incentives of having fun and not just like, it's another lecture or another thing I have to do, if you have a fun incentive, people will go.

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And so I think there needs to be more of a push, potentially from the SU, to push these kind of events and these kind of societies. Yeah, and I think it's really important. mean, Luke, you mentioned about the ability for students to engage in kind of low stakes ways through societies, through these kind of social events. And I think we need to think about it in that more holistic way of those low stakes events through to careers events and careers weeks. With all of that said, and you're obviously very engaged in this space, what have you personally gained?

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from the sustainability campaigning work that you've been doing during your degrees? Well, I think it gives you a great sense of hope. um Despite all the cynical news and all the sort of counter movement against environmentalism, there is still so much going on. And I think Warwick is a real beacon for that. It's quite easy to engage in really meaningful ways. And I think going into the future, I'll take a more positive outlook that I just wouldn't have had without.

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you know, being part of a community with all these people who really believe that, you know, the actions big and small that we do here, the lobbying, the encouraging, the nudging will actually have some meaningful impact environmentally. Yeah, thank you, Taron. I think it's a really important, you know, way of thinking about that and what you've gained. And that sense of hope is one that I think can get lost sometimes with the pressures of university and the challenges that come with both being a student, but also being able to thrive at university and be involved in as many things as you can.

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And the last question I want to ask you all is what steps can we take to ensure a more sustainable future both at Warwick but also beyond? I think it's something that the university could do is to promote uh more sort of career paths that are involved with sustainability initiatives because for a while I was quite involved with the Effective Altruism Society and their whole sort of point is to sort of encourage people to go and pursue careers which are going to make impact in the fields that you care about.

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And in Warwick, what we see very often is that lots of people don't particularly know what they want to do, but they often end up still applying to the same things, which are sort of the corporate spring weeks, know, the summer internships and the big banks. And I think for lots of people, they sort of don't really consider career paths or jobs or even placements in areas that they might care about lot, such as in the sustainability sphere. So if the university could do better at sort pushing those things out there and making them more widely known.

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I think people might feel a bit more hopeful and driven to pursue them as well. I think the biggest thing people can do is try to make a systemic difference and be very mindful of the policies of who they're voting for uh in terms of sustainability and whether that's one of their main objectives and how that ties into their whole manifesto, as well as all the usual small actions that people can take on an individual level. Yeah, I was also thinking of getting involved with your local community.

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I think at Warwick, we have such like a strong communal feel. That's very easy to get involved with stuff. But once we graduate, I think it's important that like we get involved with like local community projects like gardens or allotments, things like homeless shelters, food banks, like just trying to make sure that we are pursuing these things on an individual level, on a community-based level. And I think like that's where you can actually have like real change.

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I really want to echo that because obviously individual action is important, but I think we can often feel lost because we're encouraged just to think individually. And, you know, while you've got all these big corporations who are actually the biggest emitters. But, I think, yeah, coming together in a community, think students have so much lobbying power over the university if we really came together and made sure that, like, we set our priorities straight for what we as students want and kind of continuing this student-centred approach to university governance.

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And I think it's great to hear all of your different perspectives and you've gone from individual actions that we can take through to systemic change through elections. And I think, Finlay, your point about using that privilege that you have at Warwick to take these optional courses, to engage with people, is a really crucial thing that perhaps, I know that when I was a student, I wasn't aware of the options that were available at the time. And I think that's a really important thing that we can do for students moving forward, as well as designing new courses is actually saying,

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look what we already have, look what we already do, and look at the sustainability strategy that we have at the university and how we're working to kind of implement this. It's been great to speak with you all and a really good opportunity to learn more. And I hope that we have more conversations in the future, both about sustainability and AI ethics and all of these other things that I think we've kind of touched on. So thank you all very, very much. And I look forward to speaking to you again very, very soon. Thanks so much. Bye. Thank you, Tom. Thank you so much. Bye bye.

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Thank you, bye. Thank you so much for having us. It's been really, really interesting to talk about everything. Yeah, thank you. Bye bye.