



The Compass Project

Guiding minds and inspiring action in climate education

Research insights from group discussions with young people aged 16-29 and educators in schools, colleges and universities in England

July 2025

Context

Young people today face many pressures on their mental health and wellbeing. Learning about the climate crisis - and witnessing insufficient action - can evoke a wide range of emotional responses, including fear, worry, distress, anger, hopelessness, hope, betrayal, denial and disengagement. In the UK, young people are also exposed to increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather, such as heatwaves and floods. These experiences can negatively impact mental health and disrupt the foundational conditions for good mental health, such as social connection, access to education, and safe housing. While engaging in climate action can foster a sense of purpose and wellbeing, it also carries risks of burnout and emotional overwhelm.

Today's youth will have a lifetime of navigating the realities of a changing climate and the societal transformations it demands. There is a growing and urgent need to equip young people with the knowledge, tools, resilience and agency required to build and maintain strong mental health, thrive in an uncertain future, take part in meaningful collective climate action, and pursue careers that contribute to a more sustainable world.

By integrating approaches to climate change education and to mental health and wellbeing support, education can better achieve the important outcomes of preparing children and young people to live and act in an uncertain future. Strengthening young people's ability to process and express challenging emotions, and develop agency and resilience, can also offer broader benefits of normalising mental health conversations and strengthening young people's capacity to thrive.

This brief shares early insights from the Compass Project, a research and co-design initiative exploring what successfully integrated approaches to climate education and mental health support can look like in schools, colleges and universities, and practical steps to achieve it.

We welcome your reflections and feedback to help shape the next stages of this work. Please contact Jessica Newberry Le Vay at j.newberry-le-vay@imperial.ac.uk.

Introducing the Compass Project

The Compass Project is led by the [Climate Cares Centre](#) at Imperial College London, in partnership with [Anna Freud](#) and [Force of Nature](#).

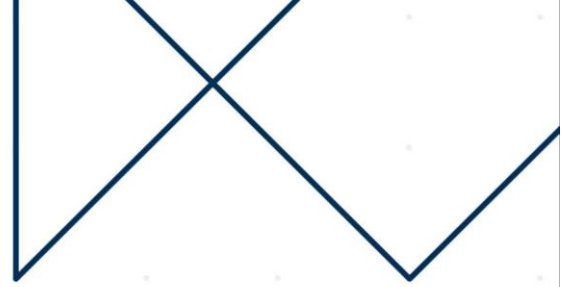
The Compass Project is guided by a Youth Advisory Board (16–29-year-olds currently at school, college or university in the UK), an Educators Advisory Board (educators working in schools, colleges and universities in the UK), and a Working Group of 20+ organisations and individuals working at the intersection of climate education, mental health and wellbeing around the world.

The project is funded by the [Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Global](#).

The Compass Project aims to understand:

- The relevant experiences of young people (aged 16-29) and educators in schools, colleges and universities in England. Particularly, what they have experienced in terms of:
 - Support for mental health and wellbeing in climate change education
 - How support for climate change-related emotions and actions can help wider discussions and skill-building for mental health and wellbeing
- What success would look like for education to successfully equip young people to live, work and thrive in a rapidly changing world
- What the barriers and opportunities are to achieving this success
- What's already working well that can be learnt from and scaled.

While the Compass Project currently focuses on England, we want to ensure learnings are relevant to and are shared across other contexts. By convening experts internationally, the project also learns from knowledge and experiences held across contexts in the UK and globally.



Research Insights

Background

This brief presents high level insights and quotes from 6 online group discussions held between February-March 2025. An in-depth analysis and recommendations for action will be published later in 2025, alongside quantitative insights from an online survey.

A total of 46 people took part. These were 32 young people aged 16-29 studying in schools, colleges and universities, and 14 people working in and with schools, colleges and universities with 16-29-year-olds. Participants were able to select to be in a group discussion with peers only, or in mixed groups with both students and educators. Most participants selected to be the mixed groups.

All participants were based in England. Recruitment sought to be representative across regions and demographics, and bring together a diversity of experience across subjects and types of education settings (see Additional Information).

Group discussions were facilitated by members of the Compass Youth Advisory Board and Educators Advisory Board, and designed in collaboration with these advisory groups plus the Compass Working Group.

A vision of success

Participants shared views on what change they wanted to see in schools, colleges and universities to successfully equip young people with the knowledge and skills to build and maintain good mental health and engage in sustainable, meaningful climate action.

In this vision, education prioritises connection. School, college and university cultures centre around wellbeing, care, and community. Spaces exist for collective discussion on climate change, mental health and wider social, economic and political systems, that acknowledge and validate emotional responses to these topics. Climate change education, interwoven into every subject, explores the root causes of climate change, the relevance of climate impacts to societies and young people's lives. This information connects to solutions - particularly systemic and collective action - and opportunities to learn in and with nature and local communities. Young people can connect their diverse skill sets and interests to meaningful and collective climate action, and education prioritises building competencies that prepare them for their futures.

"Climate change education should include emotional literacy skills, teaching students how to identify, express, and manage their emotions about the crisis." **University student**

"I would love to see universities be a genuinely nurturing place... Teach students to take agency and to know the regulations, know their rules and their rights. And I think that that is going to build better citizens, not just in terms of climate change, but just better students... to teach emotional resiliency." **University educator**

"Creating safe spaces for open dialogue will validate [students'] feelings. Connecting climate change to local, relevant issues and adopting interdisciplinary, systems thinking approaches will provide a holistic understanding, while prioritising outdoor education strengthens their connection to nature." **School/college student**

"[We need] something more nuanced on mental health. What do we mean by it? How do we acknowledge it? How do we sit with feelings without having to immediately move on to making it better?" **School/college educator**

"If it's a society wide problem, it needs a society wide solution. There's a real place for people who are passionate about art to see how art fits in and people who are passionate about design technology to understand circular economy and to have a sense of empowerment that if you're not a scientist, if you're not a geographer, there is still a place for your skill set and your way of thinking and your way of being in the world to take action. I think a subject wide curriculum where every subject steps up and brings their unique contribution is really, really important." **School/college educator**

What success looks like for individual schools, colleges, universities will need to be explored through consultation with students and educators, and include a diversity of approaches and opportunities to respond to different individual and collective needs.

Current experiences of integrated approaches to climate education and mental health

The need for change

Participants spoke of disempowering climate change education, with disconnections between the information given with what is relevant and relatable to young people's lives and futures, an overemphasis on individual responsibility, and focusing on the problems instead of solutions.

"We aren't given 'solutions' but also our curriculum isn't connected to (local) community action that we can tangibly get involved in." **University student**

"Although [young people] may be shocked by some of the photographs that they're seeing, if they can't necessarily see how that directly relates to their life, I think that's sometimes what causes them anxiety. They can't make that link from a shocking picture back to their life." **School/college educator**

Limited, narrow and unengaging climate change education is missing opportunities to build skills that are crucial to both engaging in climate action and good mental health (e.g., navigating social media, sitting with uncertainty and complexity, problem solving or critical thinking).

A lot of [information] young people get comes from social media and online. In my experience that has been a slight issue with some learners... particularly if they've not got the skills or ability to sift through that information. So that that's a challenge. It's very complicated challenge, but for their mental health and their preparedness for climate change and the world they're going into, that's a big problem that I see. **School/college educator**



Safe spaces to discuss mental health and emotional responses in the context of climate change – or to discuss climate change in general – are lacking.

“On discussing mental health in climate education, I think a lot of young people or individuals in general feel quite embarrassed or anxious when talking about climate change and I think this is due to these topics not being openly discussed.” **School/college student**

Educators lack appropriate support. Across schools, colleges and universities, educators spoke of feeling unequipped to facilitate discussions about climate-related emotions, lacking access to relevant resources and training, and experiencing overwhelm with multiple priorities for action in resource-limited settings.

“I think overwhelm is a huge challenge at the moment, lots of teachers feel the national curriculum is really demanding already. Their role has grown, I think. Unfortunately, I think a lot of the answers are systems level change, empowering teachers, enabling them to have the time. Every time we go into a school and say, do you want to help greening your curriculum? The answer is always yes, but I don't have the time.” **School/college educator**

Learning from what works

While there is a need for change, many actions and initiatives are working well across schools, colleges and universities. There are huge opportunities to learn from what is already working and identify readily implementable actions that can be embedded across education settings.

Examples shared by participants included initiatives that connect students with practical opportunities to engage in accessible, collective climate actions that were relevant to their own lives and interests – including learning outside the classroom and spending time with nature and local communities. This included support for student-led initiatives.

“[The university] introduced a paid student-led position, sustainability champions, where they encourage students to come up with their own projects related to climate action and environmental justice. A lot of events, career events, mental health events, more inclusive workshops around climate justice have cropped up because of this.” **University student**

“In the setting in which I work there is a vast amount of deprivation, so it's bringing the focus to think about linking the two of: young people's agency of how they can be active participants towards climate change, but also in their own well-being... What's within your control in the space that is available to you? Do you recycle? It might be difficult to get to green spaces, but what green space is accessible to you? How can you get involved with community projects or organizations, do you know you have the small allotment spaces? Because actually some green spaces just feel beyond accessible for some young people.” **School/college educator**

“Previously, we used a particular case study all the way through. So we threw that one out and said to students, OK, you think about it... your own environment, your own issues that are important to you, and bring that into your project work.... Our feeling is that this approach, this socio constructivist style of teaching, is beneficial in terms of one, their learning, and two, their understanding of the environment in society. And in terms of my own personal feelings of writing it, it was such a relief to actually bring in the real world, you know, the genuine world, into the course.” **University educator**

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Initiatives such as [Climate Cafes](#) and [Climate Fresk](#) workshops had been used by both young people and educators, particularly in university contexts, and had provided safe and constructive spaces to collectively discuss climate-related emotions.

"I've been involved in facilitating [climate cafes]... The students say they learn a lot in the content that they're being taught, but there's not space to acknowledge how that makes them feel. In the role of a facilitator or a teacher or a lecturer, you may not be well equipped or supported to create a safe space to actually explore that. So it's been a really useful process for me... I've taken some of that into my teaching around sustainability and created moments when you're actually dealing with some of the really difficult content. I get the impression that that's not something that's being widely used in teaching at the moment." **University educator**

In many examples of what was working well, supporting mental health and wellbeing in the context of climate education was an additional emergent benefit, rather than the initiative's core purpose. This highlights opportunity to identify what else schools, colleges and universities are already doing that may be having these additional positive impacts.

"We do competitions about what school is better at climate action. I think that that's a really good way to show young people that they can actually do things while also taking care of their mental health because they are socializing, engaging, and they're getting to know more people that are interested in the same thing as them... I think [mental health] is an added benefit because the program was just about climate change." **School/college student**

Reflecting on a peer writing support group: *"It's been really interesting to see how much benefit our students get from just talking to their peers [from other departments]. ... They can use that opportunity to talk about, within reason, whatever they want to talk about. So often they'll talk about [climate change] because we'll have assignment questions around sustainability. And they'll be talking about those assignment questions, but it gives them that opportunity to talk more in more detail. And we think that the peer aspect has been really beneficial for them."* **University educator**

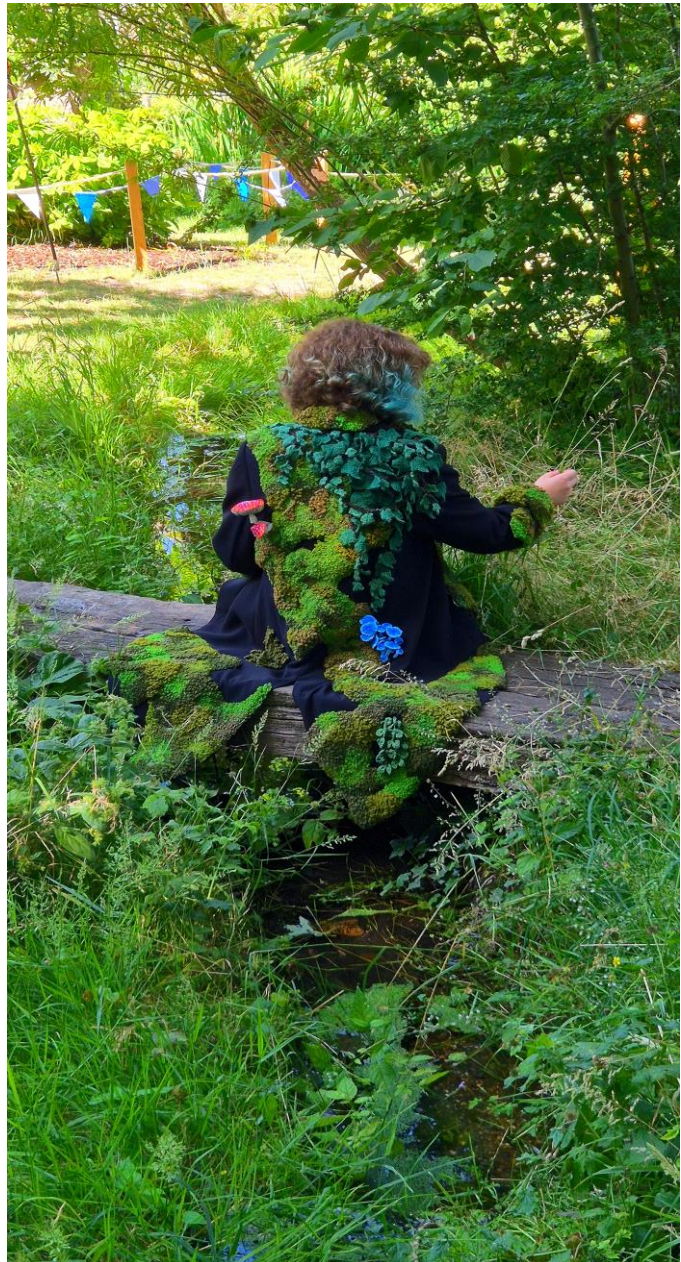


"As late-stage capitalism seems to kill this place we call home with more and more vigour, and the political system is so keen on eating our face, I wanted to create some hope. The worsening climate disaster that is threatening to end humanity as we know it (or even altogether) is something I think about a lot. So here I wanted to combine nature and humanity, to show that we can live in unison. That it's still not too late, the world may not fully go back to what it was before, but it doesn't have to get worse. In this climate (pardon the pun), hope is a radical thing, the way we can stay alive and imagine a better present and future, because if we can't imagine it, we can't work to make it happen."

Through this work, I have tried to deal with my mental health problems and express my hope for a better 'now', not just a hypothetical future. As the world seems to get scarier, it is more important than ever to reach out to people (friends and family) and seek a healthy way of expressing and experiencing your feelings. Using art as a way to work through emotions has helped me a lot in such trying times. In conclusion, try to take care of yourself, you are loved, and you are worthy of a brighter future!"

Moss Suit, by Diana Krasilova, College Student.

See Diana's work on Instagram:
[@diana__krasilova](#)



Barriers to creating change

There was much recognition of the challenges that schools, colleges, universities and the people who work within them face in trying to implement change. This included barriers inside education systems, and barriers in relation to wider societal contexts in which young people live and that influence education systems.

Within education systems

Limited time, funding and other resources to implement change was highlighted as a key barrier. This included lack of appropriate support and training for educators, a sense of overwhelm, and shifts in what is being expected from the role of an educator.

*"One major obstacle is the prevailing perception of climate change as solely a scientific or political issue, rather than a deeply emotional and psychological one... Do we agree that many educators feel ill equipped to address the complex emotional responses, such as anxiety, that climate change discussions can evoke? It's worth recognising that they may lack the training or resources to facilitate safe and supportive spaces for students to process these feelings, not all teachers are the same of course though."***School/college student**

*"I think feeling worried is wrapped up in the role of an educator. You're supposed to be knowledgeable and have answers... It's a really uncomfortable position when there are really no answers and that you're kind of in the mud with everybody else. And I think it's a unique challenge for educators and a major cause of worry that you feel like people are coming to you for reassurance and answers, and you don't have them."***School/college educator**

Educators spoke of fear of inducing distress among students by discussing climate change, as well as challenges in engaging students with climate change and climate action if they weren't already.

*"We want to teach about climate change and raise awareness. But there's anxiety for the educator to say, well, what if I set some sort of chain reaction of concern amongst these children, how do I deal with that? There's a strong case for teacher training with established teachers as well as bringing it into initial teacher training."***School/college educator**

*"I've asked the careers advisor why there's nothing about sustainability in the induction careers talk that they give to everyone. They say because they don't want to shame the students into feeling guilty."***University student**

*"With the older students that I've worked with, I was surprised by how not bothered they were. [Climate change] wasn't something that really concerned them."***School/college educator**

Entrenched approaches in education settings that separate mental health from other learning, and separate knowledge from emotions, hold back integrated action.

*"You've got mental health here, you've got the environment and sustainability here, and never the twain shall meet. And I think that's the biggest problem."***University educator**

*"There's a tendency to compartmentalise mental health, separating it from other areas of study - this can lead to a reluctance to acknowledge the impacts of climate change to a person's mind as it may be seen as straying from the 'objective' presentation of facts."***School/college student**

*"Universities have a tendency to present valuable knowledge as knowledge that is 'rational' and 'objective' and separate from emotions. This is a huge challenge as it encourages students to disconnect from their emotions."***University student**



Participants highlighted how mental health is generally approached and conceptualised in education can be a challenge for both educators and students to navigate.

"Mental health is conceived in a VERY individualistic way (i.e., if you are suffering from poor mental health you are directed to therapy rather than encouraged to consider the systemic factors that impact your mental health and campaign for change). I have personally been told by a university therapist that what I'm talking about is "too political" for therapy because we are expected to be isolated individuals whose emotions somehow exist outside of the social world. Obviously this is extremely harmful." **University student**

"I think there's generally an anxiety and a fear for professionals [around mental health]. I think there isn't, well, there isn't a clear working definition, depending on the setting in which you're working. And I think especially within education and especially with 16- to 18-year-olds, especially adolescents, they're so vulnerable in terms of their brains going through so much change. It could be the beginning of living with a serious mental illness. So I think that there's a lot of anxiety and fear around even bringing it up. There's also that question of liability and insurance. So is it worth kind of venturing into territory that could potentially open up a can of worms." **School/college educator**

Outside education systems

Stigma and misunderstanding around both mental health and climate action was highlighted across schools, colleges and universities as a key barrier to collective discussion, peer connection, and engagement with students. Politicisation, polarisation and radicalisation, driven particularly by social media, is a further barrier to young people engaging with climate change and with each other.

"The stigma around talking about climate change and the stigma about mental health on its own is so strong that people, especially my age, I can definitely say from experience are not open about their emotions, especially in the classroom." The same participant said, *"I feel like [climate denial] is very 50/50."* **School/college student**

"I think there is real stigma about [being engaged with climate change]. I think I don't know the word. The word that actually comes to mind is it's kind of uncool to become so attached to a moral issue and to be sort of fixated on it." **University student**

Many participants spoke of social, economic and political contexts as a barrier to good mental health and wellbeing and to engagement with climate change. Some mentioned the influence of these contexts on education systems, and the lack of transparent dialogue about these issues in education.

"University... sets students up to work for really big corporations like the Big Four [the four largest professional service companies globally]. So I wonder, a barrier may be that there may not be anything to gain from supporting students' mental health because what is that contributing to capitalist society? So it ties into how our society is structured and that there is no obvious gain, economic gain, from supporting students' mental health." **University student**

"There are a lot of families... who are living in financial distress. And so the main priorities is a roof over their head, food in their mouth and trying to navigate clothing, because heating isn't available to them so I think that leads on into the conversation of who is privileged enough to feel distressed publicly about the climate crisis, and I think there's a wider discussion and conversation around this." **School/college educator**

Opportunities for creating change

Participants shared ideas of what schools, colleges and universities can do to support young people to build good mental health and wellbeing, learn about climate change and engage with climate action:

- Demonstrate visible leadership, with transparency and communication around sustainability and climate action (i.e., “walk the walk”), and provide meaningful opportunities for student leadership.

“[We’re] working with secondary kids around the idea of agency and getting kids together onto panels, creating visions for their schools, inviting all the head teachers, saying, these are our visions, will you commit to what we’re asking? There’s something about the pressure of everyone being in the same room together, and other headteachers going, “yes, we will.” And the pressure of it coming from your students who are voicing, this is what we want you to do. It was really successful. I think all the head teachers agreed to the visions. There was a collective feeling, the fear of missing out.” **School/college educator**

“I think it’d be great if universities, when they did the induction or freshers week, there was an hour or two spent reflecting on sustainability within the school. I feel like that could really teach a lot about climate change, but it could also ease a lot of climate anxiety. It’s teaching people about what the university is doing to mitigate climate change and improve their sustainability.” **University student**

- Embed content on climate solutions, as well as problems, into climate change education. Frame education in line with what is relevant and relatable to young people’s own lives.

“I think it’s really important to focus enough on solutions as well. So that students aren’t just given the problems. I think they can incorporate more talk about systemic verses individual action into content at university. To try to reflect on why we feel guilty and what’s ours to do versus what might be a more systemic issue.” **University student**

“Education must shift from a fear driven narrative to one of agency/empowerment... This involves balancing scientific realities with a strong emphasis on solutions, collective action, while actively engaging students in real world problem solving and projects.” **School/college student**

- Build skills and competencies relevant to young people’s futures and real-world experiences.

“Our school has a key focus on oracy [the ability to express yourself and communicate]. So developing students’ oracy skills to give them that empowerment, not only to take their ideas and put them into action, but also to be able to properly express their thoughts and feelings, rather than keep them bottled up.” **School/college educator**

- Embed climate change across subjects to build connection between climate change and climate action to what all young people learn, care about and enjoy.

“One way that would be good to introduce learning about climate change to schools wouldn’t be to have an isolated topic. Because a lot of people, if they are of the mindset that they don’t care, they’ll go into that subject not caring. In one of the schools [I was at during] year 7 to 9, every single subject [had] modules about climate change in that subject. For textiles, we had to make things with sustainable fabric and learn about how that was produced. Chemistry, we were making recycled plastic. It can literally be implemented in every single subject at Key Stage 3, and I think it just embeds it into the curriculum.” **School/college student**



- Explore opportunities for learning outside the classroom to enable young people to learn with nature, connect with local communities, and provide practical routes for collective action.

“More teaching (or other organised activities) outside to encourage engagement with the natural world and to help people see the ways in which we’re connected with/part of it.”

University student

“If you give [young people] more concrete opportunities to do things and volunteer, that genuinely would help a lot of people. It also helps the environment, but it takes away that powerlessness and frustration and fear quite a lot.” **School/college student**

- Embed the links between climate change and mental health into educator training and support (which was discussed mostly in the context of schools and colleges).

“This is something that you should be talking with all your staff from day one. Something that enables us as professionals to have those conversations before we even start to engage with children and young people.” **School/college educator**

“Teaching and mental health support are really, really different skills. Listening, feeding back and active listening... Teachers aren’t taught that. So I think training is really, really important.” **School/college educator**

- Foster community and connection, e.g., safe spaces for collective dialogue, peer support networks (for both young people and educators), and opportunities to discuss, validate, and acknowledge emotions related to climate change.

“Just teaching people that there is this intersection and allowing people to discuss their mental health towards climate change and showing that awareness can help maybe take that stigma away and stop people feeling isolated in their feelings. So they might be more proactive and not afraid to take action.” **University student**

“This requires individual effort obviously, but since this is such an overwhelming cultural issue, we have to deal with it as a community, as a classroom, as a university.” **University student**

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The Compass Project is also advised by **Dr Emma Lawrance** (Climate Cares Centre).

Thank you to all group discussion participants for their insight, thoughtfulness and openness.



Additional Information: Group discussion participant details

46 people took part in the online group discussions. This included:

- Young people aged 16-19 studying at school or college: 14
- Young people aged 18-29 studying at university: 18
- Educators working in schools and colleges: 8
- Educators working in universities: 6

Recruitment sought to be representative of the population in England (Table 1).

Table 1: Group discussion participant details		
Demographic		Percentage of participants (%)
Region	North East England	4
	North West England	11
	Yorkshire	20
	East Midlands	2
	West Midlands	9
	East of England	0
	London	15
	South East England	20
	South West England	20
Age (young people)	16-17	26
	18-20	20
	21-24	9
	25-29	17
Age (educators)	Below 35	2
	36-49	15
	50+	9
	Not specified	2
	Female	67
	Male	28
	Nonbinary	2
	Not specified	2
Ethnicity	Asian	11
	Black	13
	Mixed	7
	White	59
	Other/unknown	11