

ISF: RESEARCH

WHAT DO UTS STUDENTS THINK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

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CHANGE.
DO



Institute for
**Sustainable
Futures**



UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY



WHAT DO UTS STUDENTS THINK
ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

SURVEY RESULTS

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Highlights

- Three quarters of UTS students who responded to this survey are highly concerned about the problem of climate change:
 - 59% think *it's a major problem that deserves serious attention*
 - 15% think *it's the biggest problem we face today*.
- Students are keen to be part of the solution; 68% said they *would like to do more* in their own lives to take action on climate change
- Students are already active in response to climate change. In the last 12 months 78% had taken action to *reduce personal greenhouse emissions* (29% often and 49% sometimes), and 75% had *learned more about climate change* (29% had done this often and 46% sometimes).
- Respondents who have taken action on climate change cited *increasing concern about the issue and wanting to make a difference* (59%) as the most important reason for doing so. However an interesting finding was that one in five was first prompted to take action by something *other* than simply 'increasing concern'. For example 12% had taken action in response to *a specific event, program or campaign*.
- Barriers to taking action included a *lack of time*, and a *lack of knowledge about how to do so*.
- Students were interested in opportunities to participate in climate change activities at UTS, with faculty based activities generating the most interest (55%).
- Most students are interested in finding out more about climate change. They also want to translate knowledge into action – the topic of most interest (69%) was learning *how to reduce personal greenhouse emissions*.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

This report describes the UTS results of an online survey of university students in NSW on the topic of climate change, undertaken by the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), UTS, during May 2008. The survey received 1,510 responses¹, of which 1,191 (79%) were UTS students.

The survey was conducted as part of a project that ISF is working on, in collaboration with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Australian Student Environment Network, and the UTS Environment Collective. The project is developing a climate change training and networking event, during which a group of university students will be trained to be peer leaders, and equipped with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to engage other students at their universities on the issue of climate change.

The survey was designed specifically to inform the development of this training – to provide an insight into the intended audience's attitudes to climate change, as well as to understand what kinds of events or activities they might be interested in becoming involved with. For this reason, many of the questions were quite specific to the needs of the project. However others are of more general interest, and provide a useful picture of UTS students' interest in the issue of climate change and their willingness to take action in response.

Distribution

The survey attempted to reach a broad audience, rather than only those students who were already involved in activities related to climate change or other environmental issues. For this reason, an attractive cash prize was offered, and advertised prominently in the survey distribution. The intent of this strategy was that the chance to win the prize would encourage a range of students to complete the survey, not just those with a particular interest in the topic of climate change. The distribution method was also designed to reach a broad audience, so while student environment groups did forward the survey to their networks, a range of other more 'mainstream' distribution methods was also used. These included posting the survey on the UTS website, sending it to contact people at various UTS clubs and societies to forward to their members, and forwarding to a range of academic and student contacts to distribute to their networks. The survey was distributed directly to all enrolled students in the UTS Faculty of Education and other UTS faculties advertised it in their e-newsletters and intranet sites. These strategies appeared to be successful in attracting a broad range of students, rather than just those who were already active on environmental issues – indicated by the fact that 92% reported that they were not members of any environment group (university-based or other).

Attempts were made to distribute the survey beyond UTS, in order to gain an understanding of the views of a broader range of students. However this met with only limited success as ISF researchers had difficulty accessing sufficient distribution channels at other universities. As a consequence of this, UTS students comprised 79% of the survey responses. One benefit of this outcome however, is that the UTS responses form a large enough sample to warrant analysis on their own. In total there were 1,191 responses from UTS students, representing a 4% response rate for the university.

¹ Of these, 1,472 were from universities in NSW.

This document is a summary and analysis of these UTS responses only.²

Limitations

While the response to the survey was pleasing and the sample size is sufficiently large to warrant at least some analysis, it should be noted that it is **not** a representative sample. This kind of online survey can never be representative, due to the self-selected nature of the respondents. The distribution methods described above also clearly affected the sample. In particular, those UTS faculties with the highest response rate are the ones for which ISF had the most direct distribution access. For more details of the sample see 'About the respondents' below.

Further, space constraints and a need to focus on the specific requirements of the project meant that the survey did not ask demographic questions, so there is no analysis of how similar the survey sample is to the student body as a whole. Despite these limitations, the survey does provide a useful indication of the views of a large number of UTS students, and perhaps a starting point for the development of further research.

² An analysis of all the responses is provided in a separate report.

PART TWO: RESULTS

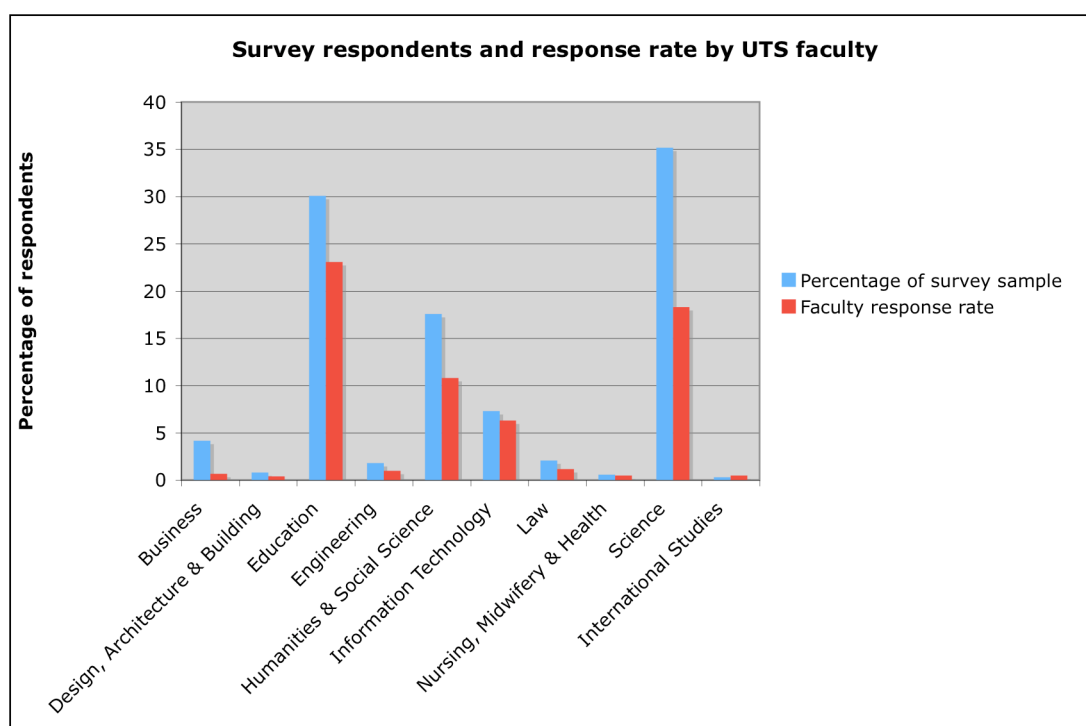
About the respondents

A total of 1,191 UTS students responded to the survey. This represents a university response rate of 4%.

The majority of responses (77%) were from undergraduate students, with 24% from postgraduates. A comparison with the proportion of undergraduate students enrolled at UTS (67%³), shows that undergraduates are slightly over-represented among the survey responses.

An analysis of the responses by faculty⁴ shows that students from the Faculty of Science made up the largest proportion of responses – one-third of the UTS sample, or 419 individual responses. Education made up 30% of responses (358), Humanities and Social Sciences comprised 18% (210 responses), Information Technology 7% (87 responses) and Business 4% (50 responses).

Students from the Faculty of Education had the highest response rate⁵ to the survey with nearly one in every four students (23%) in the faculty responding. Response rates were also fairly high in the faculties of Science (18%) and Humanities and Social Science (11%). There was a 6% response rate from the Faculty of Information Technology, 4% from Business and negligible responses from the other faculties.



Members of a UTS-based club, society or group comprised 37% of respondents. The most common were sports or physical activity based groups, comprising one-eighth

³ According to 2007 UTS enrolment data (latest available).

⁴ These results are indicative only because faculty coding refers only to the respondent's primary or first-listed faculty. Where the respondent listed more than one faculty – such as those enrolled in a combined degree – these responses have been coded according to their first-listed faculty only.

⁵ Response rates are approximate. Calculated using 2007 UTS enrolment data (latest available).

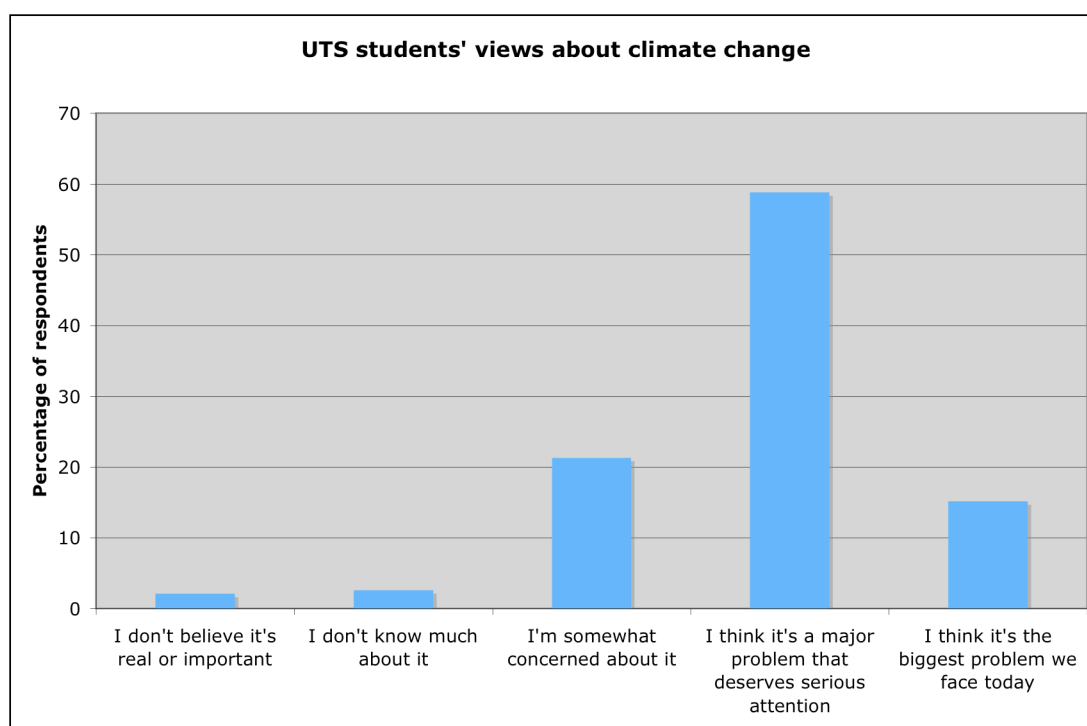
(12%) of responses, followed by hobby/interest based groups (10%). Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents were not members of any university-based group.

The vast majority of respondents (92%) were not involved with any environment group (university-based or other).

Views about climate change

The survey revealed UTS students to have high levels of concern about climate change, with the statement that best described most people's opinion being the second most strongly worded one offered, namely *I think it's a major problem that deserves serious attention* (59%). A further 15% chose the most strongly worded statement: *I think it's the biggest problem we face today*. Clearly three quarters of respondents to this survey are highly concerned about the problem of climate change.

One in five respondents show a moderate level of concern (21% said *I'm somewhat concerned about it*). Only 2% do not believe it is real or important, and only 3% said *I don't know much about it*. Clearly then, very few respondents to this survey are unaware of, or unconvinced about, the issue of climate change. On the contrary, 95% of the students report both knowledge and at the very least a moderate level of concern about climate change.

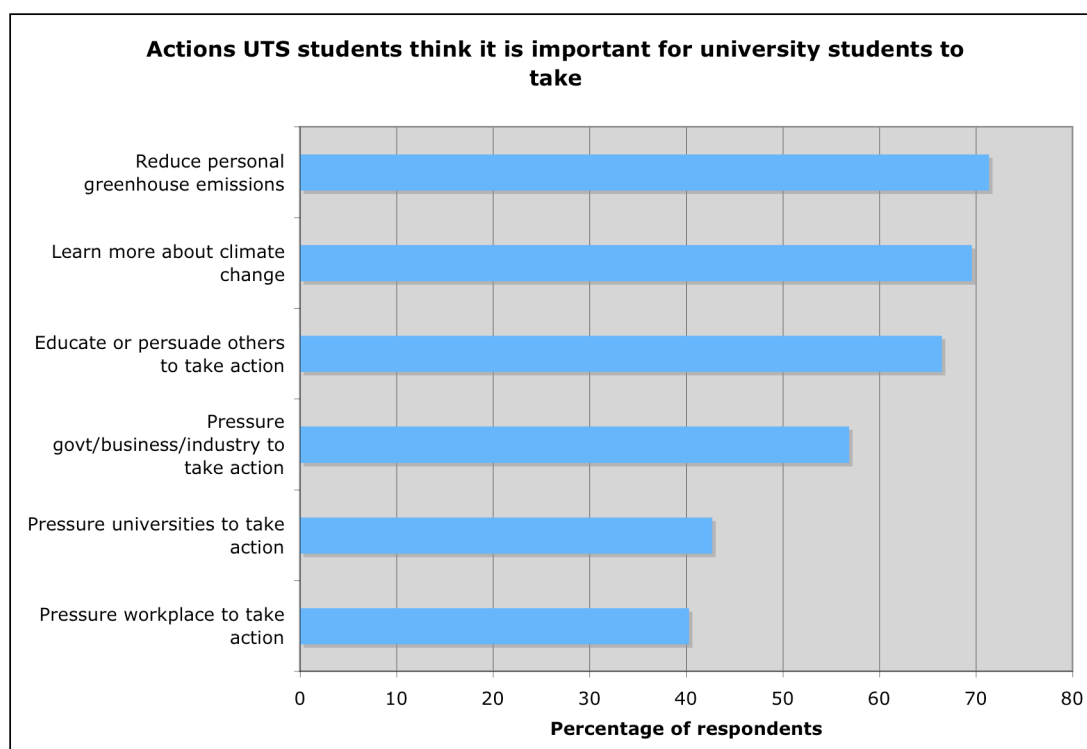


An analysis of the results by undergraduate and postgraduate students shows that postgraduate respondents generally have higher levels of concern. Postgraduate respondents were more likely to agree with the strongest statement, *I think it's the biggest problem we face today* (18% compared to 13% of undergraduate respondents).

Views about students taking action

When asked what types of actions they thought it was important for university students in general to take, UTS respondents saw a wide range of actions as important. *Reducing personal greenhouse emissions and learning more about*

climate change were nominated by 71% and 70% of respondents respectively. Educating or persuading friends, family or colleagues to take action (66%) and *pressuring government business or industry to take action* (57%) were also rated as important by a majority.



These findings suggest that students clearly see a variety of roles for themselves and their peers in taking climate change related action. These range from actions at the individual level, like increasing their own knowledge of the problem, and taking steps to reduce their personal contribution to it, through to communicating with people in their personal networks about the need for action. Actions outside their personal sphere, at the level of lobbying or pressuring organisations and institutions, were less widely seen as important, although even the least-rated of these kinds of actions were still selected by at least two-fifths of the respondents.

Asked how they felt about taking action in their own lives the majority of students (68%) said they *would like to do more*. A quarter said they were *already doing as much as I want to*, and just 2% were *not interested in doing anything*.⁶ Clearly, this suggests that most students are open to learning how they might be able to 'do more', and to taking up opportunities for further action.

Further analysis of the results was undertaken to determine whether those students who said they would like to do more were concentrated in particular faculties. When those faculties with response rates too small to allow meaningful analysis are eliminated, the students who would like to do more appear to be evenly spread across the faculties (although Humanities and Social Science and Education students are slightly over-represented).

Actions currently taken

Respondents indicated that they were currently undertaking a range of actions in relation to climate change. There was a high degree of consistency between the

⁶ 5% did not respond to this question.

kinds of actions that respondents had undertaken themselves and their views about what actions they thought it was important for university students in general to undertake.

Actions reported as most frequently undertaken by UTS students in the last 12 months were *reducing personal greenhouse emissions* (29% did this often and 49% sometimes) and *learning more about climate change* (29% did this often and 46% sometimes). Actions respondents were least likely to have done in the last 12 months were *pressuring your university or workplace to take action* (64% had never done and 20% rarely), and *pressuring government, business or industry to take action on climate change* (62% never and 21% rarely). Over half (55%) had not attended an organised climate change related event or activity in the past 12 months.

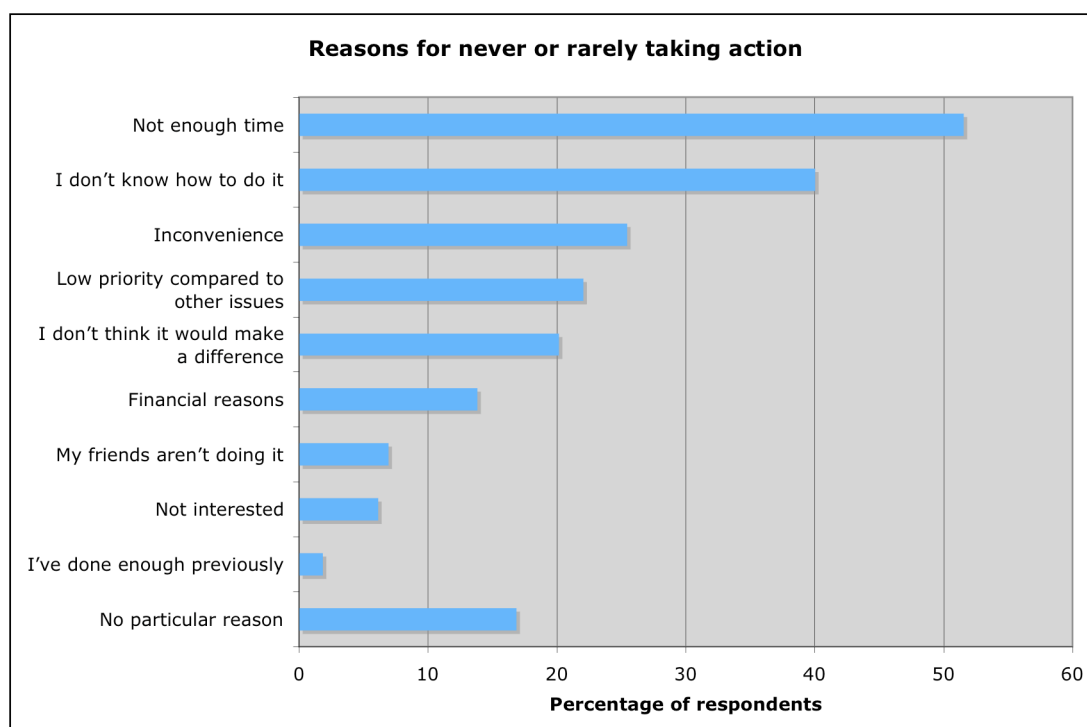
These responses suggest that students are not only concerned about climate change, but that many are also taking action in response to the problem. Actions at the personal or individual level are the more commonly undertaken, however even the least commonly reported actions have been undertaken by at least 1 in 10 UTS respondents in the last 12 months.

Motivations for action

Respondents who had undertaken these various actions (either sometimes or often) were asked to nominate the one factor that first prompted them to start. Overwhelmingly they cited *increasing concern about the issue and wanting to make a difference* (59%). It is clear then, that increasing levels of concern about climate change, and a personal desire to make a difference are very important motivators for most people. However 12% nominated *responding to a specific event, program or campaign* as the most important prompt, while 6% said *friends, family or colleagues* got them started, and 5% were primarily prompted by a wish to *save money*. Even though the proportions nominating these prompts are relatively small, they are significant given that people had to choose one answer only. The combined figure of 23% for these prompts suggests that one in five respondents were first prompted to take action by something *other* than simply 'increasing concern'. This may have implications for campaigning and educational strategies.

Barriers to action

Respondents pointed to a number of barriers to action. When asked why they had never or rarely taken the kinds of actions described above, over half (52%) cited lack of time. However, a *lack of knowledge about how* to take these actions was also a significant barrier (40%). A quarter thought such actions were *inconvenient*, and one in five thought such actions *would not make a difference*.



These findings suggest that campaigns and strategies aimed at university students will need to address a range of barriers – some practical and some psychological. They also show that it is wrong to assume that students are actively choosing not to take action. Rather, many apparently do not know how to go about it – suggesting that strategies addressing this knowledge and opportunity gap may have potential.

Interest in various kinds of university-based climate change events/activities

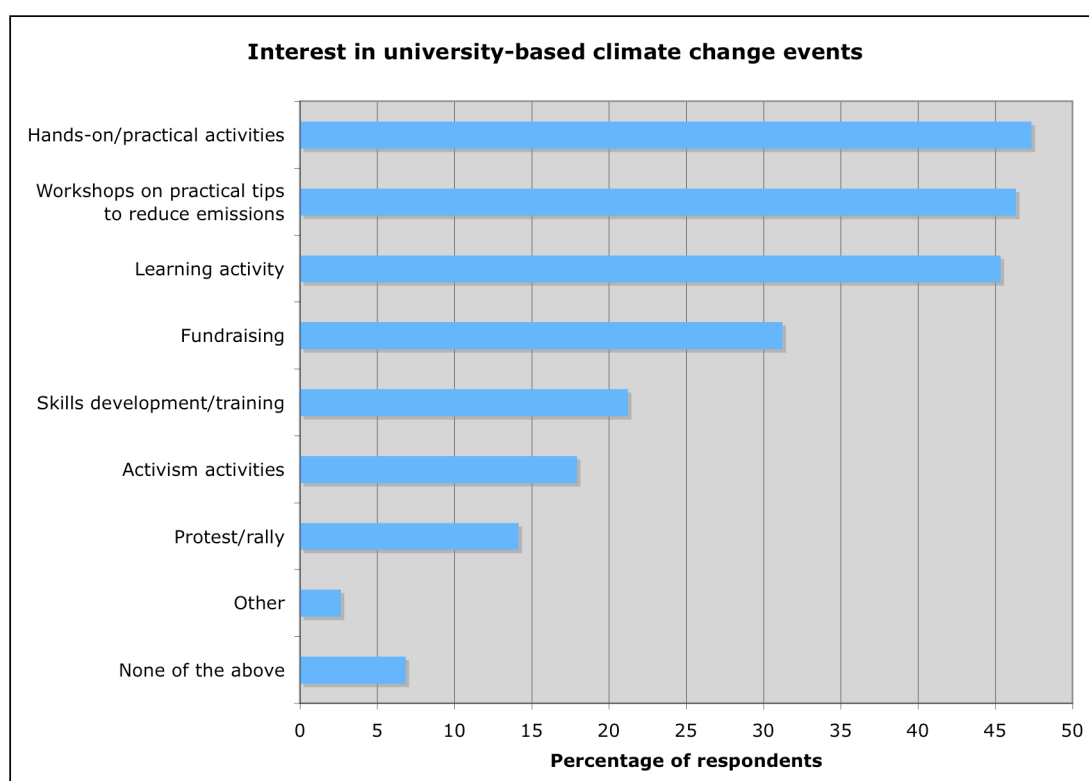
When asked what kind of university-based events and activities they might be interested in attending or getting involved with, social events were the most popular (54%). This is perhaps not surprising, but it is interesting to note that many other, less obviously 'fun' events were not far behind, with the following nominated by half the respondents: *'hands-on' practical activities* – such as making art or tree planting (47%), *workshops with practical tips on reducing personal greenhouse emissions* (46%) and *learning activity* – such as a seminar, lecture, talk, film screening or debate (45%). Almost one third (31%) were interested in *fundraising events*, and one in five in *skills development or training* (e.g. campaigning skills). The events attracting least interest were *activism activities* (although this was still nominated by 18% of respondents) and *protest or rally* (14%). Very few respondents (7%) were not interested in any of the activities listed.

Overall, it is striking that fewer than one in ten respondents said they were not interested in any of the suggested events. This apparent high level of interest suggests that there is great potential for attracting students to a range of different kinds of climate change related events and activities.

Further analysis of the results by enrolment level shows that undergraduate and postgraduate students are interested in different kinds of events. While the most popular choices for undergraduate respondents were social events (60%) and hands-on/practical activities (49%), postgraduate respondents were most interested in attending a learning activity (49%) or a workshop with practical tips on reducing personal greenhouse emissions (47%).

Further analysis of the results was also undertaken to determine which faculties might be most conducive to particular types of events. This analysis included only those five faculties with a response rate of 4% or more, and 40 or more responses (namely Humanities and Social Science, Education, Science, Information Technology and Business). No strong pattern emerged, although the following trends might be noted:

- Humanities and Social Science students were more likely than average to nominate an interest in social events (66% compared to 54% of all respondents)
- Information Technology students were less likely to be interested in ‘hands-on’ practical activities (38% compared to an average of 46%).
- Business students were less likely to nominate an interest in workshops with practical tips on reducing emissions (36% compared to 46% of all respondents). They were also more likely to nominate an interest in skills development or training (30% compared to 21%)
- Students from Business (48%) and Humanities and Social Science (40%) were more interested than the average (31%) in fundraising events.



Interest in activities/events at different levels

Respondents were interested in events that might be organised at a range of different levels. The most appealing were faculty-based events linked to respondents’ areas of study (55% were interested in events at this level). However there was also strong interest in *university-wide events* (44%), internet-based activities (37%) and organising through *informal networks* via discussion with friends and other students (36%). Of the 37% of respondents who were members of a UTS-based club or society, half (50%) were interested in events organised through that existing group.

Undergraduate respondents were most interested in becoming involved in climate change activities within their faculty (58%) and at the university-wide level (44%). Postgraduate respondents were also most interested in activities at these levels

although slightly less enthusiastically (43% and 39% respectively). More undergraduates were interested in events organised within a club or society (20% compared to 12% of postgraduates). Postgraduates were more likely to say they were not interested in events at any of these levels (13% chose *none of the above*, compared to 9% of undergraduates).

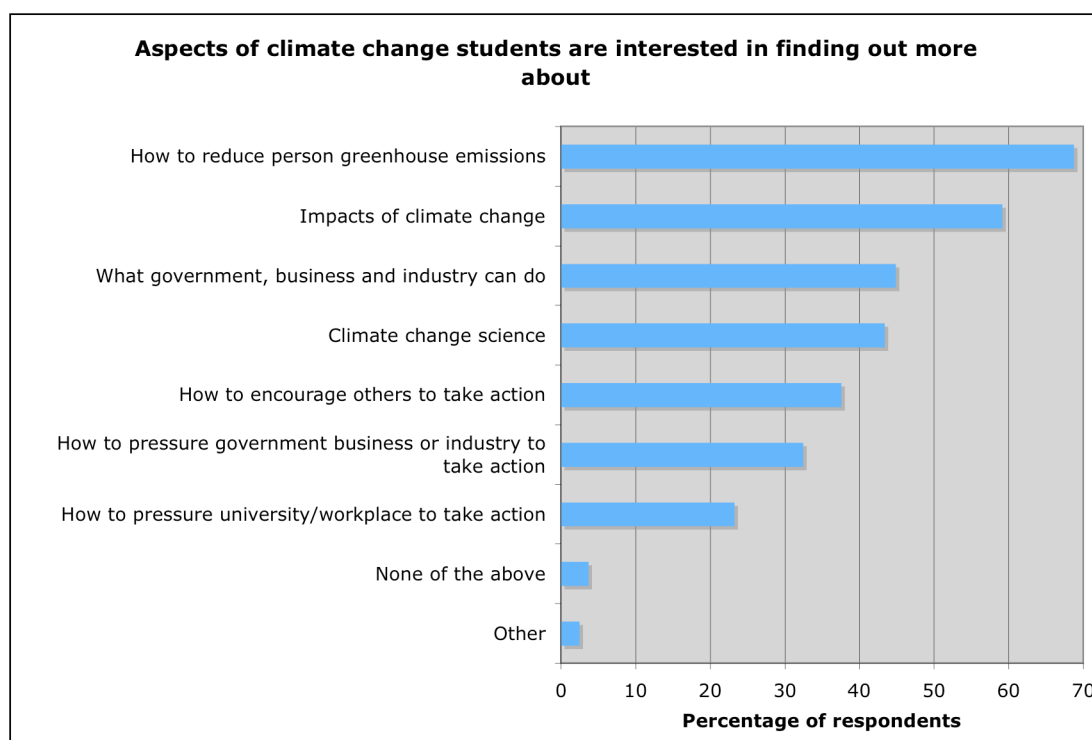
Again, it is striking that only one in ten respondents said they were not interested in events at any of these levels. This generally high level of interest suggests that strategies at various levels have potential for success, with the most promising being faculty-based events.

Further analysis of the results was undertaken to determine which faculties might be most conducive to events organised at the faculty level events. This analysis included only those five faculties with a response rate of 4% or more, and 40 or more responses (namely Humanities and Social Science, Education, Science, Information Technology and Business). The analysis shows that there is most interest in potential events at the faculty level among respondents from the Faculty of Education (54% were interested in faculty-level events compared to the average of 45%). Respondents from the faculty of Science were the least likely to display an interest in faculty-level events (37% compared to the average of 45%).

There appears to be high interest among club/society members for events organised through their clubs, however as a sub-set of the results, these respondents form too small a sample for meaningful analysis to determine which clubs are most interested. Further investigation of the views of clubs and society members would be necessary in order to successfully target any clubs-based strategy – for example it may be that interest in participating in climate change activities with one's club may depend on the nature of the club.

Interest in different aspects of climate change

Respondents showed an interest in finding out more about many different aspects of climate change, including both 'the facts' of the issue, and what they (and others) might do about it. The highest level of interest (69%) was in learning *how to reduce personal greenhouse emissions*. Many were also interested in learning more about the *impacts of climate change* (59%), and *climate change science* (43%), and *what governments and business/industry can do* (45%).



Undergraduate and postgraduate respondents had slightly different patterns of interest in the various aspects of climate change. The topics of most interest to undergraduate respondents were *how to reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions* (70%) and the *impacts of climate change* (61%). These were also of most interest to postgraduate respondents, although their levels of interest were somewhat lower (64% and 54% respectively). Postgraduates were less interested than undergraduates in finding out more about *climate change science* (36% compared to 45% of undergraduates). Postgraduates were also more likely to say they were interested in 'none of the above' (6% compared to 3% of undergraduates).

Further analysis of the results was undertaken to determine whether an interest in any particular aspects of climate change was concentrated in particular faculties. This analysis included only those five faculties with a response rate of 4% or more, and 40 or more responses (namely Humanities and Social Science, Education, Science, Information Technology and Business). The following trends can be noted:

- *How to reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions* was consistently rated the topic of most interest across all the faculties – with the exception of respondents from Information Technology, who were just as interested in *impacts of climate change*.
- Respondents from the Faculty of Science are more likely than average to be interested in finding out more about *climate change science* (60% compared to the average of 43%)
- Respondents from the Faculty of Education are less likely than average to be interested in finding out more about *climate change science* (30% compared to the average of 43%)
- Respondents from Humanities and Social Science are more likely than average to be interested in finding out more about *what government/business/industry can do* (54% compared to an average of 45% average)
- Information Technology was the faculty least likely to be interested in finding out how to *pressure governments, business or industry to take action* (22% compared to an average of 32%)

- Business was the faculty demonstrating the most interest in *how to encourage family, friends and colleagues to take action* (48% compared to an average of 38%).

Conclusion

These results provide a useful indication of UTS students' attitudes to climate change. The survey shows that there are a large number of UTS students who are both concerned about climate change and willing to take action. The findings suggest that if climate change related activities are made available at UTS, then students will participate, particularly if those activities provide practical advice on how they can reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions.

In the short term, the results of this survey will directly inform the design of the climate change student training program, to take place in August 2008. The findings bode well for the success of this program.

In the longer term, it would be valuable to undertake further research to test the validity of the survey findings, with a representative sample of UTS students. It may also be useful to undertake a more in-depth exploration of students' attitudes, and to conduct a comparative study to determine whether or how students' attitudes differ from those of the general population. The high number of responses to this initial survey suggest that students are very willing to give their views on this issue.

The survey also has implications for the current UTS Environmental Sustainability Initiative – suggesting that students are keen to engage with these kinds of university-based activities. It also suggests that there is scope for UTS to consider what initiatives might be developed to harness students' enthusiasm for climate change related activities at the faculty level.

Contact

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Acknowledgements

The Institute for Sustainable Futures, and its project partners; the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, the Australian Student Environment Network and the UTS Environment Collective; are grateful to the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change and the NSW Environmental Trust for the grant that is funding this project.