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Closing the climate gap

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Closing the  
**climate gap**

The global crisis is driving students' concern for the planet, with those most affected leading the charge.  
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STUDENTS from the Global South, specifically Asia and Africa, care more about climate change than their counterparts from Western nations, according to a recent United Kingdom-based study.

Those from countries that are more likely to have been directly impacted by climate change think that environmental issues are more important than students from other countries, the 2024 Global Student Experience report by Etio found. "With climate change showing worrying signs of acceleration, sustainability goals are becoming an increasingly dominant topic of conversation within the international education community," said Etio Performance Benchmarking business director Nick Pidgeon in the report.

The report, published in June last year, is a global gauge of students' experience across the world, with 192,581 responses garnered, including from 122,975 international youths, studying at 155 institutions in 24 countries.

Based on the data collected (see infographic), countries like Pakistan and India, which experienced severe flooding, place a greater importance on climate change as these nations have been directly impacted by it.

This is in contrast to the attitudes recorded in countries such as the United States, France and Poland, where the impact of climate change has not been so severely felt.

"We can gain valuable insights into how students are approaching the issue of sustainability. For eco-conscious students, environmental issues are becoming a more dominant decision factor when deciding where to study," Pidgeon added.

This was echoed by the QS International Student Survey 2024, which found that sustainability is important to the majority of students from China and India, with 55% and 70%, respectively, stating that environmental sustainability is very or extremely important. The global average is 72%.

For 70% of Chinese students, the institution's sustainable research output is key when deciding whether a university is environmentally sustainable. This marks a notable difference compared to students

# Students care when they SUFFER

## Climate crisis a real concern for Malaysian youth

from other countries, who cited on-campus initiatives as the most important consideration.

### Malaysian scenario

Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Educational Studies senior lecturer Dr Nor Asniza Ishak said the disparity in concern about climate change between Western and the Global South countries stems from the immediacy of its impact in these regions.

"Frequent floods, droughts, and environmental degradation disrupt lives and livelihoods, making climate change a personal and urgent issue for these students," she said.

Locally, she said, the level of concern of Malaysian students often correlates with their exposure to natural disasters.

She said Malaysia's struggle with climate change has intensified in recent years.

"Rising temperatures have begun to alter ecosystems, threatening biodiversity. The economic and social toll of floods is equally alarming, with damages estimated at RM16bil annually," she said, adding that the situation is

worsened by deforestation and rapid urbanisation.

"A 2024 report from the World Bank warns that without immediate action, Malaysia could see more frequent and devastating disasters in the future," said Asniza.

Those from regions regularly affected by floods, landslides or heatwaves tend to feel a stronger sense of urgency in addressing climate change, she said, explaining that students in less-affected urban areas may view climate change as a broader global issue rather than an immediate personal challenge.

Emeritus Prof Tan Sri Dr Zakri Abdul Hamid said though they may not be very vocal about their fears and environmental convictions, Malaysian students are very concerned about climate change.

"This can be seen when big disasters happen in our country. Many of those who step up to help are young people," he added.

Prof Zakri, who is the UCSI International Institute of Science Diplomacy and Sustainability founding director and Distinguished Professor, and a former science adviser to the prime minister, stressed that the majority of countries reeling from the effects of the global climate crisis are not the ones who are causing it.

"Climate change is not triggered by us but by the Global North," he said.

Sharing his personal experience, Prof Zakri said he was in his home in Bentong, Pahang, when the devastating floods of 2021 hit and the water reached his ground floor ceiling within a few hours.

"Many lives were lost in that flood but my family managed to get to safety by driving to higher ground," he said.

While Malaysia was able to somewhat recover from the floods, Prof Zakri said not all countries are as lucky.

"Pakistan is still not able to recuperate from the loss and damages caused by a big flood that hit the country two years ago," he said.

Prof Zakri said it is crucial that students are encouraged to do their bit in battling the climate crisis.

UCSI University, he said, regularly carries out initiatives such as river and beach cleanups to reduce its carbon footprint.

## Youth to the fore

Climate change is a very important issue for Malaysians. The Maldives is the lowest-lying country in the world and the consequences of climate change can really affect us. Rising water temperatures and sea levels are causing massive erosion of our shores and we are under threat of being fully submerged by 2100. Recently, there were heavy rains that caused severe flooding and damage to our homes and livelihoods. It is really disheartening because while we know why this is happening, there seems to be insufficient action by the developed countries causing global warming. Even within the Maldives, land reclamation is killing our coral reefs.

Ashiyath Layan Ahmed, 20, Maldives



Oh Khang Chiang, 22, Malaysia

Climate change is not something that's in our distant future. Even today, you can already see the effects of global warming. For example, some places that never flooded before are now flooding. And the days are getting hotter. The youth must now be creative and produce innovative solutions to address these problems before things get worse.

Syed Wajeeh Hassan, 20, Pakistan



Lahore is a very polluted city. We have such bad smog in the winter that schools usually have to close for nearly a month. Yet, there has been little action from the people, especially the youth. It's disappointing. They just don't care. They are happy that their classes have to move online so they can sleep in. We need to be more mindful about the damage we are doing to our environment and understand the consequences.

Rachel Tan Min En, 22, Malaysia

The effects of climate change are very real to my friends and me. I am very keen to do my part to help things improve. As the office director of UCSI University's Youth Beyond Boundaries, I am part of a team that carries out awareness and action programmes for the campus community. This includes talks by social enterprises and zero-waste campaigns. The youth need to be more environmentally conscious if we are serious about making positive changes.

Rachel Tan Min En, 22, Malaysia



The UCSI Riverbank Cleanup Project was carried out for the Klang Gates Dam and the Ulu Klang river recently while the varsity's Regional Centre of Expertise Kuching and its Sarawak Campus combed the Pasir Pandak beach for trash last October.

"Changing the mindset is so pivotal and we are trying to do it here on campus. Hopefully, it will become our way of life," said Prof Zakri.

"What we're doing here is also an indication of the increasing awareness among young people about sustainable development," he said.

### Clarion call

Etio Performance Benchmarking (Asia) director Guy Perring said higher education institutions are implementing more sustainability programmes and adopting greener practices in response to the global climate crisis.

"I've been in Malaysia for nearly 20 years now and there's been a sea of change in the approach of universities to environmental issues."

"Most institutions have implemented green campus initiatives that look at energy-efficient buildings, waste management systems, water conservation and even ensuring air conditioning is turned down to a reasonable level," he said, noting that there are also more programmes and research focusing on environmental issues.

Malaysian universities have many more partnerships with local communities and organisations that promote sustainability and are now actively participating in ecological conservation projects," said Perring.

He, however, added that there is still a long way to go when it comes to sustainability training for staff and students.

More also needs to be done in terms of community outreach programmes to promote environmental education and sustainable practices beyond campus borders.

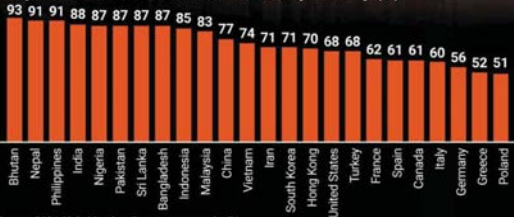
"Universities need to encourage students' sustainability initiatives by providing both moral and financial support for these projects if we are to harness the passion and creativity of the younger generation to create real, impactful change," he offered.

As Malaysia faces escalating environmental challenges, Asniza said the role of its youth becomes ever more critical.

"The concern they express about climate change reflects not only their awareness but also their readiness to act."

"With the right guidance and opportunities, this concern can translate into meaningful, lasting change," she added.

Importance of environmental issues by country (%)



Source: 2024 Global Student Experience report by Etio

Education for sustainable development (ESD)

- Education Ministry
  - > Green School Programme
  - Encourages sustainable practices in schools.
- Higher Education Ministry
  - > 2025 Strategic Plan Focus 7: Infrastructure, Digital and Campus Well-being
  - Includes the Green Campus Initiative, which promotes principles of sustainability and the creation of zero-carbon campuses.
- The programme emphasises energy savings, waste management, green technology, renewable energy, and the adoption of planetary health values.
- > Campus Sustainability Blueprint
- Guides universities in implementing eco-friendly policies.

Source: Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Educational Studies senior lecturer Dr Nor Asniza Ishak

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