

Introduction

This research report forms part of Phase II of the YSJU Ecological Justice Action Research project. Phase II of the project involved students and staff working collaboratively to develop participatory research projects – and the interviews and survey conducted in ELP formed one of these aiming to serve as an internal audit of curriculum practices and student views insofar as ecological justice is concerned. The research questions for Phase II – which reflects the University’s strategic commitment to rise to the ecological and environmental challenges that increasingly face our planet by 2026 – are as follows:

- What approaches to learning and teaching will meet the needs and expectations of YSJU students in relation to ecological justice?
- What principles should guide the University’s curriculum development in order to equip students for the future they face as professionals and citizens?
- How should the approach be tailored to different programmes and courses?

The purpose of this study was to acquire an understanding of student and staff attitudes towards ecological justice related to teaching and learning opportunities in their subject areas. To fulfil this aim, two student researchers conducted four one-to-one/ group interviews with undergraduate students from the School of Education, Language and Psychology and designed a short, open-ended survey for teaching staff to complete in order to gain an insight into the prevailing attitudes that students and staff have towards ecological justice related teaching and learning opportunities in their subject areas.

Which Ecological and Environmental Justice Issues are Most Important to Students and Staff?

In the survey, staff were asked to select the three ecological and environmental issues that were the *most important* to them personally; 77% of the respondents believed that *Global warming from fossil fuels* was one of the most important issues, which is unsurprising given that the media often report that we need to reduce carbon emissions and invest in more renewable sources of energy. Since this is an issue that staff are clearly passionate about addressing, then it might make sense to encourage teaching staff to explore this issue – and the other issues that they highlighted – in greater depth in teaching and learning activities. That way, students would be able to see that staff are passionate about these issues and come to realise that these are important issues that they must address both in and outside of university.

Interestingly, however, none of the respondents thought that “housing” was one of the most important ecological and environmental justice issues, which tells us that some staff are unaware that ecological and environmental justice issues directly affect people and society - not animals, nature and *then* humans.

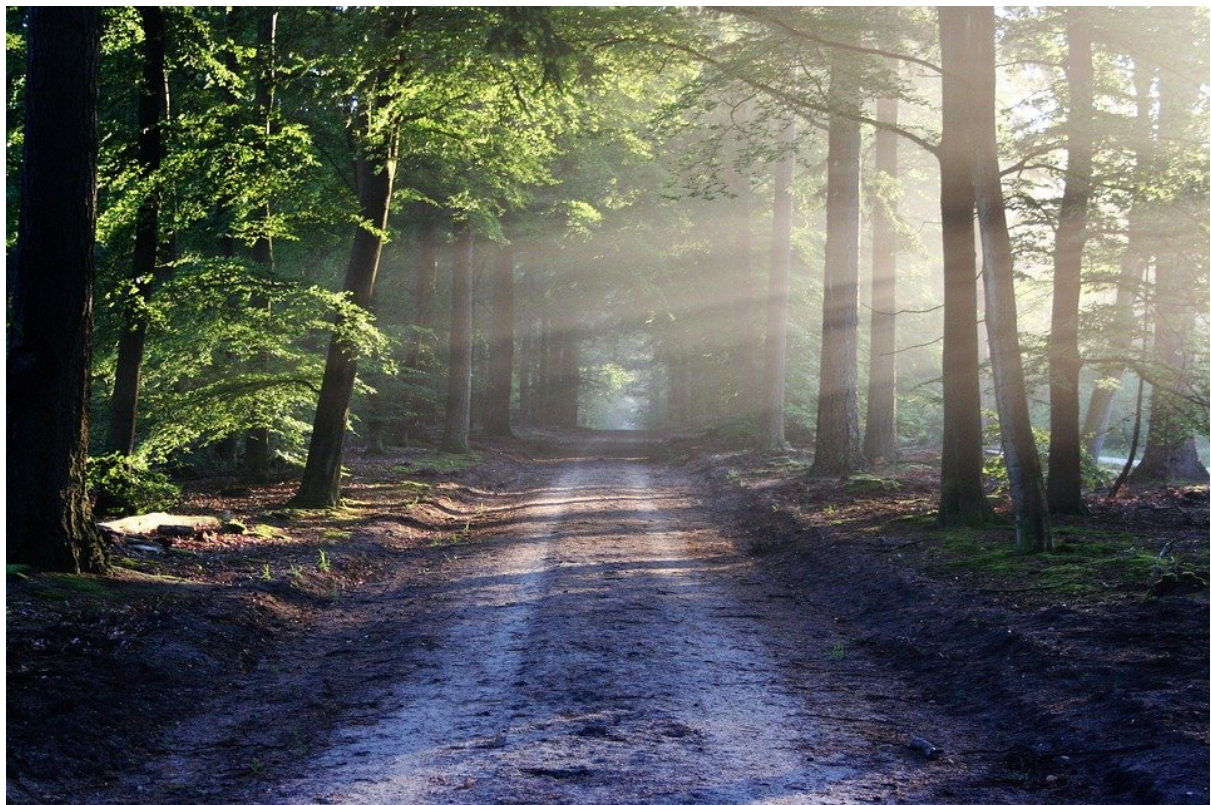
In the interviews, students stressed the importance of conserving water, using “reusable items”, finding “sustainable alternatives”, walking and cycling instead of driving and using litter bins. However, it could be argued that students stress the importance of such issues because these are manageable issues that they may feel

they have more control over and that can more easily be resolved through individual and locally collective actions. Evidently, students must be made aware of the fact that whilst these are important issues, there are other issues that are more important or are having a greater impact on the environment. Perhaps something as simple as a student guide, poster or leaflet could be designed to educate students (and staff) about the extent to which particular ecological and environmental justice issues have an impact on the environment and how these could be resolved within the university environment.

Similarly, 44% of the respondents of the staff survey believed that plastic pollution, littering and recycling was one the most important ecological/ environmental justice issues. Therefore, whilst these posters could also serve to educate staff, perhaps more could also be done to encourage students/ staff to address this issues, such as signposting students/ staff to kerbside recycling programmes in York and zero-waste shops. In other words, once again, as students/ staff clearly share common ground in the sense that they are both passionate about this issue and believe it to be of importance, there is arguably a lot that they can do by working together to make York a cleaner and better place.

Clearly, both students and staff need educating on what the 'justice' part of ecological and environmental justice means because currently it appears that they assume that this is the same as environmental issues, rather than environmental issues and how they affect particular communities and groups in society.

What is the Widely-Accepted Discourse of Ecological and Environmental Justice in the School of Education, Language & Psychology?



The term *discourse* is used to describe particular, widely-accepted viewpoints of an area of society¹. But what is the widely-accepted discourse of ecological and environmental justice in the School of Education, Language and Psychology?

In the survey, some staff suggested ways in which ecological and environmental justice issues could be incorporated into teaching and learning activities in their subject area. For instance, in response to the question, *How could [the modules that you teach] address ecological and environmental justice issues?*, one staff member commented:

Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis is a new module and is therefore in a good position to be able to address these issues more directly from the outset. The module will incorporate positive discourse analysis which enables the analyst to examine discourses of change, challenge and resistance - this makes it a suitable way in for examining the role that language plays in constructing positive discourses of ecological and environmental justice. The Language, Gender and Sexuality module examines the role of language in perpetuating and challenging gender- and sexuality-based injustices. Gender inequalities globally tend to be linked to ecological and environmental justice and this is something that could be included more explicitly in the module in the future.

Their response to the question clearly demonstrates that they are keen to incorporate ecological and environmental justice issues into their teaching and learning activities, wherever possible. Moreover, they identify specific modules where ecological and environmental justice issues could be incorporated into teaching and learning activities in a way that is natural to the subject area (i.e. in modules where students are required to apply discourse-analytic approaches, students could be encouraged by tutors to explore texts that address environmental issues).

Similarly, another staff member suggested that tutors could address the issue of how “disadvantaged individuals fare within current systems when they also have to acquire particular skills, or have particular barriers to learning”, which tells us that tutors recognise the fundamental relationship between ecological justice (i.e. justice for the earth) and social justice (justice for people) and thus the importance of achieving ecological justice in order to protect the world’s poorest and most disadvantaged communities.

In the interviews, some students discussed how they had been learning about “ecolinguistics” and “ecological linguistics” and one of the students even went onto explain how they had chosen to write their dissertation on the language of the climate change debate. Clearly, this tells us that some students are already passionate about environmental issues and believe that ecological justice issues are relevant to them both as a student and as a global citizen. Furthermore, the student discussed the importance of analysing the language surrounding environmental issues, such as climate change, because “language shapes opinions and attitudes”, which demonstrates that there is a clear link between students who have chosen to explore ecological and environmental justice issues in assignments, dissertations

¹ Fairclough, N. (2015) *Language and power*. Third ed. London, Routledge, pp. 7.

and research projects and students that understand the importance of ecological and environmental justice issues in relation to their subject area. Therefore, tutors should encourage students to explore ecological and environmental justice issues in assignments, dissertations and research projects as this will ultimately improve student's awareness of these issues.

Elsewhere, another student mentioned how they had been learning about eco-anxiety and the impact the ecological/ environmental issues have on mental health. Once again, this shows that students are able to establish connections between ecological/ environmental justice and their taught programmes, but also that a good number of students feel that ecological/ environmental justice is relevant to them as a university students, even though they are not studying a subject that directly relates to the environment.

Overall, it is abundantly clear that the widely-accepted discourse of ecological and environmental justice within the School of Education, Language & Psychology is that ecological and environmental justice issues are important to students and staff both as individuals and as global citizens. In other words, students and staff recognise the importance of tackling these issues and are willing to do so in whatever way they can. Therefore, encouraging staff to incorporate ecological and environmental justice issues into teaching and learning activities should not be a difficult task and students will feel motivated to address these issues.

What Assumptions Do Students and Staff Have About Ecological and Environmental Justice?

Both students and staff hold a variety of assumptions about ecological justice. For instance, some students do not understand the true meaning of the term *ecological justice*. In fact, when asked what ecological justice means to them as an individual, one student replied:

I'm 24. So I've travelled, like, quite a lot of the world before studying, so, like I'm sort of a mature student.

The student's response to the question suggests they hold the assumption that mature students and students that have travelled the world before attending university have a better understanding of ecological and environmental justice issues than students that have come straight to university from college or sixth form. On the one hand, this tells us that learning about ecological justice issues cannot be achieved in the classroom alone or simply by looking through a textbook. On other hand, this tells us that ecological justice related teaching and learning activities should be fun, engaging and practical in order to create a memorable experience for students that they can take with them into the world of work and their future careers.

Whilst some students recognise the importance of ecological/ environmental justice in their subject area, others, perhaps unsurprisingly, assume that learning about ecological and environmental justice issues is only relevant to students enrolled on science-based courses, such as geography and environmental studies. For instance, one student claimed that there is "quite a vast difference between like language learning and the environment", which creates the assumption that learning about

ecological justice issues in subjects, such as modern foreign languages, is irrelevant and a waste of students' time and money. Clearly, this assumption must be challenged because these issues affect students both as individuals and as global citizens.

This assumption is also commonplace among staff. 88% associated the term ecological and environmental justice with the School of Science, Health & Technology and 77% associated it with the School of Humanities, which includes environmental subjects, such as human and physical geography. However, ultimately, if ecological/ environmental justice related teaching and learning activities were embedded into the curriculum on School of ELP programmes then this may start to change these perceptions.

In order to challenge this assumption, a respondent of the staff survey stated in response to the question, *How could [the modules that you teach] address ecological and environmental justice issues?*, that ecological justice related teaching and learning opportunities could be integrated into the modern foreign languages curriculum simply by “encouraging students to explore such topics for their research topics” or by “using them as topics for debate in language classes”. Therefore, languages tutors should encourage students to start conversations about environmental issues in language classes and introduce topics, such as sustainability and ecology, to the syllabus.

Students commonly assume that ecological justice is only achieved through individual and collective actions. For instance, several students cite the importance of actions, such as recycling and cycling instead of driving. Whilst it is great that students recognise the importance of individual and collective actions, it is worth highlighting that none of the students mention the role of large organisations and institutions, such as the university and the government, in addressing the ecological crisis. Therefore, whilst tutors should continue to educate students about the importance of individual and collective actions, they should also make them aware of the ecological destruction that is caused by large organisations and institutions, such as universities and the government, and what they can do to reduce this. Consequently, this would enable students to make more ecologically-conscious and informed life choices in everyday life, such as by buying products from an environmentally-responsible organisation.

A staff member mentioned how “paperless teaching” materials could be implemented and “online teaching” provision for languages and TESOL students could be increased in order to address ecological and environmental justice in their subject area. Ultimately, it is abundantly clear that more must be done to challenge the assumption that achieving ecological justice is simply about making small changes to the way that we live our lives. In other words, small changes, such as cutting down on printing, have very little impact on the environment. Therefore, there may need to be a workshop or a training and development session for teaching staff where they can learn about the most important ecological and environmental issues and what can be done to resolve these.

The findings of the staff survey suggest that many staff members – although keen to address these issues - lack the enthusiasm and confidence to incorporate ecological justice issues into teaching and learning activities. This is probably because - like students - staff associate the term ecological justice with science-based courses, such as geography and environmental studies, and therefore assume that it is insignificant to them as lecturers and researchers in education, language and psychology. Additionally, it is commonly assumed that scientific subjects are technical and mathematical, which could explain why some staff – in particular, those that are experts in qualitative research - lack the confidence to incorporate these issues into teaching and learning activities. In order to challenge the assumption that incorporating ecological justice issues into teaching and learning activities is too technical and mathematical, staff need reassuring that actually, incorporating these issues into teaching and learning activities is not as challenging or daunting as it may sound.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the interviews and survey, it is clear that ecological justice related teaching and learning activities must be embedded into the University curriculum in a fun and engaging manner that is practical and natural to the individual subject area. Therefore, it is recommended that the University's executive board advises that teaching staff do the following:

- Develop ecological and environmental justice related teaching and learning activities that are fun, engaging, practical and that differ from the average lecture or seminar session. This is because, in order to get the message across to students that achieving ecological justice is an important task that must be addressed immediately, such teaching and learning activities must be memorable so that students are reminded about the importance of ecological justice as they progress into the world of work and their future careers
- Introduce ecological justice related training and professional development opportunities for teaching staff in order to challenge the assumption that ecological justice is only relevant to science-based courses, such as geography and environmental studies, and the assumption that incorporating ecological justice issues into teaching and learning activities is a challenging and daunting task
- Since it is clear that students who choose to study ecological justice issues as part of their programme or for an independent research project are more environmentally-conscious and aware of the ecological challenges that face our planet, more should be done to encourage other students to explore these issues in assignments, dissertations and research project – especially in subject areas that students might not typically associate ecological justice with. This could be achieved by showcasing previous research projects which discuss ecological justice issues, studying environmental texts in class or by inviting a guest speaker who has conducted environmental research that is relevant to the subject area.