

Climate Change Policy at the OU

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I guess that most students, on reaching their third year of studying law at the OU, could not define clearly what the relationship between policy and law is. Unless, of course, they work for Government or a third sector organisation.

By choosing to study W360 Justice in Action, students can undertake a range of Open Justice projects. These allow them to develop a background in pro bono work in addition to acquiring valuable skills such as problem-solving working in teams. These skills provide an understanding that the academic study of law is very different from the practical application of law in practice.

On W360, this year, students learnt about policy, in an online clinic. They contributed to probably the most important policy for our and the next generation. No, not Covid-19 which currently dominates our thoughts but climate change which is with us - now and for the future.

The students undertook research for the Environmental Law Foundation (ELF), a charity, which aims to provide free information/guidance on environmental issues for individuals and communities. The students initially researched Councils in England and Wales to identify if they had made a Climate Emergency Declaration in acknowledging humanity is in a climate emergency. These were followed by making Freedom of Information requests to the Councils from which information was collated in a Report to ELF. They joined other universities who were undertaking similar research projects and were able to participate in conferences held together. ELF's aim was to build a picture of Council and climate change action across England and Wales.

What's in it for them?

The students may have been interested in the environmental matters before. However, by focusing on this project, this raised awareness of the topic for them and the need to accommodate climate change within policy development. That is particularly important given attention in the UK is heading towards COP26. That is the summit being held in Glasgow in November 2021 (delayed from 2020) bringing parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement (where the goal is to limit global warming to below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The project opened their eyes to other aspects.

Addressing climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is one of social justice. It is about basic human rights ensuring access to clean water, clean air, and shelter. Climate change affects those at the lowest end of society impacting on the vulnerable, being most susceptible to the effects of the weather and other climate events. They are least able and resourced to cope with that impact.

The students learnt about the intersection of law and policy. Policy is what a government does and achieves for society. Law sets procedures to be followed. It aims to achieve justice in the society. Working in policy, whether its creation, or implementation allowed them the chance to influence as well as developing an understanding of the iterative policy process.

Policy should “add value” and is a much-used term within Government. For W360 students and me, the tutor, taking part on this climate change policy -based project proved was an enriching experience. It was a journey of change on the cusp of COP26.

Let's hope that COP26 makes changes for the good of us all and society as a whole.