

COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

Teaching Climate Change and Geography: Towards a Climate Education Pathway

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ABSTRACT

This is a crucial moment to reflect on climate education. Young people demand and deserve deeper knowledge, skills and understanding of climate change. Following the 2025 English Curriculum and Assessment Review, this commentary reflects on the relationship between geography and climate education in England. It convenes academics, postgraduate students, teachers, NGO representatives and researchers working across educational spaces. Geography has a distinctive and essential role in climate education but falls short of its potential contribution to students' understandings of climate change. We argue for the value of an ongoing climate pathway across geography education, and beyond, which is cohesive, dynamic and fosters the development of knowledge, skills and critical thinking. Central to this pathway is creative co-production, a reinvigorated geographical approach to climate education that empowers students. We end on two cautionary notes. First, we emphasise the intrinsic value of a geographical approach to climate, rather than merely a route to green jobs. Second, geography cannot be reduced to the study of climate alone and must retain its disciplinary identity. This commentary is intended to help shape these conversations as the Curriculum and Assessment Review is implemented.

1 | Introduction

Climate change education must remain anchored in Geography.

(Royal Geographical Society 2024)

Geography is the curriculum heartland for climate change education, sustainability and green skills.

(Geographical Association 2025, 6)

During the 2025 English Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR), geography's professional and learned organisations argued for the central role of geography in climate education. As development begins on the new National Curriculum in England

(to be introduced in 2028), now is an opportune moment to reflect on Geography's contribution to climate education in England.¹ The final CAR Report recommended embedding climate change and sustainability 'more explicitly across different key stages' in geography (Department for Education 2025, 84). Whilst this co-ordination would be welcome, as a discipline, we must extend these ideals of integration and coherence beyond schools, to academic geography, informal education and professional practice.² Informal education encapsulates what learners gain from daily life and personal experience, whereas professional practice describes how teachers engage in continuing professional development and collaboration with professional organisations. This commentary brings together academics, postgraduate students, teachers and NGO representatives to advocate for a more deliberate climate education pathway that transcends any

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single educational stage. We situate our argument within the development of the 2028 National Curriculum in England, not necessarily as a binding force, but for the momentum that this will generate for geography educators. Maintained schools are required to follow the National Curriculum as a key statutory framework (which is different to individual school curricula). Although other schools, like academies, are not required to follow the National Curriculum, it remains a significant driver of educational practices across England.

Geography is understood as climate education's natural home (Puttick 2025); however, the current National Curriculum fails to provide teachers with space to address the dynamic nature of climate science and governance. At the moment, key issues, like the Paris Agreement, loss and damage, or climate justice, are largely absent. Simultaneously, students encounter climate denialism, scepticism and trivialisation in political discourses, social media and everyday life. Knowledge alone, without critical thinking, does not facilitate students' ability to challenge such narratives, nor to navigate the trade-offs involved with mitigation and adaptation. Climate education in geography must be sufficiently dynamic to respond to developing climate science and the turbulence of climate politics without sacrificing cohesiveness across educational stages.

We therefore propose a climate education pathway: a flexible, yet cohesive approach to learning that extends through all stages of formal and informal education, prioritising creative, collaborative and critical approaches over a singular focus on knowledge acquisition (Figure 1). Strengthening connections among educators across the educational lifecycle, or all levels of education, including non-formal learning environments, is essential. This is

particularly important for climate change education where there is 'a "lag" between public discourse, research evidence, and curriculum development' (Puttick 2025, 227). From primary to secondary, higher education (HE) to beyond, geographers must champion the development of the discipline's distinctive approach and skills. Such collaboration has been exemplified in other geography education spaces. Groups like the Geography and Education Research Group (GeogEd) of the RGS-IBG are crucial in promoting exchange between different communities of geography education practice (West et al. 2022).

Our commentary is a starting point for sustained and collaborative reflection on the relationship between geography, education and climate. We begin by reflecting on the relationship between geography and climate change across different stages of education. We then examine how creative participatory approaches might reshape climate education to empower students in classrooms and the field, and how a pedagogy of critical hope might respond to students' and teachers' climate anxieties. We end on two cautionary notes: first emphasising the intrinsic value of a geographical approach to climate, rather than as merely a route to green jobs, and second, warning that geography must retain its disciplinary identity and should not solely become climate change studies.

2 | Taking Stock: Geography and Climate Education

Geography has always been entwined with the study of climate. Early geographers were concerned with connecting climate to theories of race, the human body, social unrest and eugenics (Livingstone 2024). These racist, deterministic ideas have long

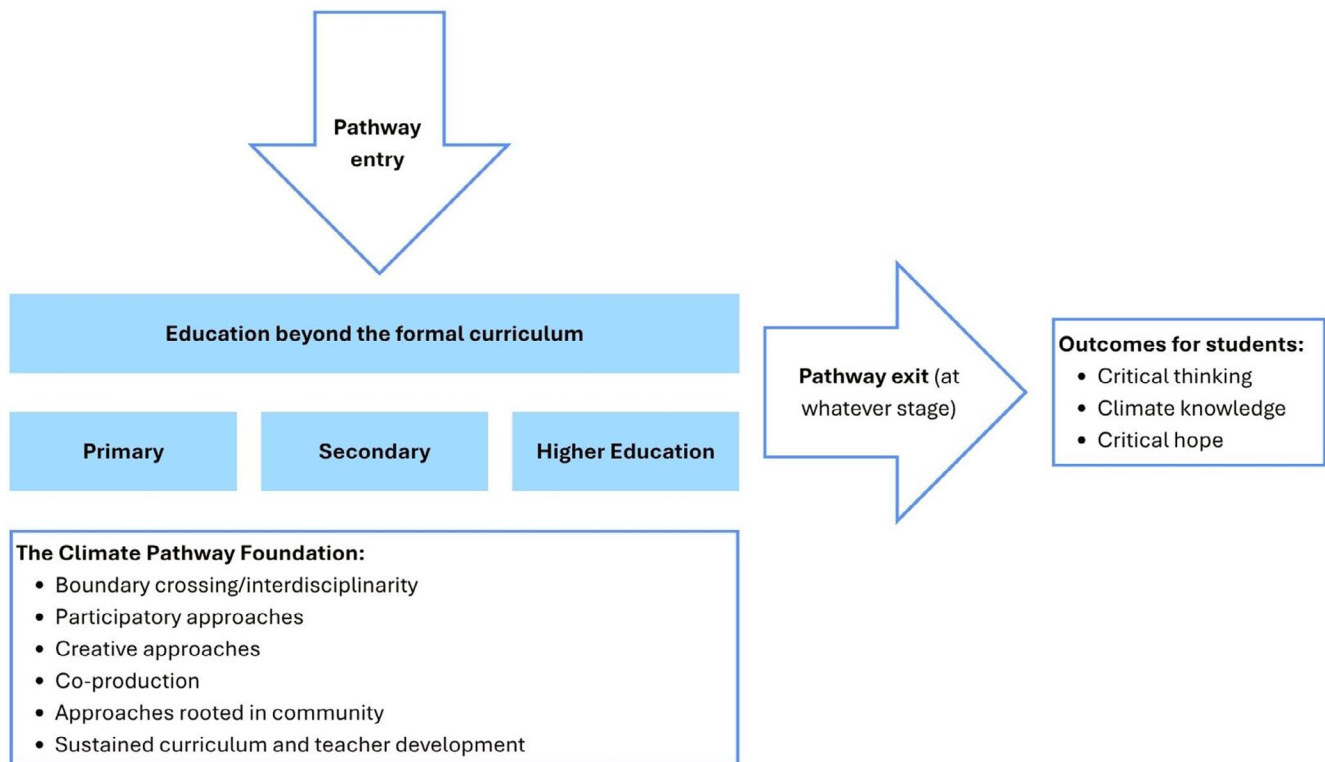


FIGURE 1 | The climate education pathway, a flexible, cohesive roadmap that spans the entire education life cycle.

been discredited, but we highlight them to illustrate that the discipline's engagement with climate precedes contemporary concerns about anthropogenic climate change. Acknowledging this history helps situate present-day scholarship within geography's longer intellectual lineage.

Anthropogenic climate change first entered research and policy arenas in the 1980s, and geography has been 'at the forefront of understanding its dynamics and consequences' (Bulkeley and McFarlane 2024, 1). Synergies between the characteristics of climate change—'simultaneously as physical transformation and cultural object' (Hulme 2008, 5)—and the scope of geography revitalised the discipline. Climate change is a wicked problem that defies disciplinary boundaries. As a discipline that is 'always already interdisciplinary' and with a 'stark diversity of scholarly approaches' (Bulkeley and McFarlane 2024, 1), geography is a vital site for diverse perspectives on human–environment relationships and the associated social, economic and political challenges. Focusing on geography and climate change, Kass's (2025) work on boundary crossing considers crossovers between disciplines and between theory and practice. Whilst academic geography has historically been crucial for interdisciplinary work, there are still improvements to be made which are vital to tackle climate change. This interdisciplinarity is not always present throughout all geographical education. In calling attention to the whole climate education pathway, we seek to maintain the dynamism that makes geography so rich and distinctive, whilst demonstrating the need for coherence across education.

In England, national surveys highlight that secondary-aged students generally report learning about climate change in geography and science (Walshe et al. 2024), which reflects the current National Curriculum (Department for Education 2014). The exam specifications that schools choose can function as the 'de facto curriculum' (Ofsted 2023); therefore, how they represent climate change matters. Glackin and King (2020) highlight that AQA and Edexcel ask students to think about mitigation strategies or 'solutions', whilst OCR focuses on technological developments and changes in international law. AQA, meanwhile, frames environmental geography through the lens of 'battles' between human and natural worlds, whilst Edexcel incorporates more socially critical perspectives. Many teachers have independently developed climate change education beyond the National Curriculum and examination specifications. Seventy-five per cent of primary and secondary teachers of geography have reported teaching themselves how to include climate change within their teaching (Healy et al. 2025). This suggests that the development of a climate education pathway requires attention to how curriculum and teacher development can be sustained over time.

Across education, students should be able to investigate climate change through geography's most distinctive method—fieldwork. However, high-quality fieldwork in schools is often challenged by cost, time pressures, teachers' lack of confidence, inclusivity and accessibility (Lambert and Reiss 2014; Holmes and Yorke 2025). Saddington et al. (2025) illustrate how this can be overcome at KS3 through climate justice research within the school site. At university, dissertations provide key opportunities for student-based research on human and physical aspects of climate change and their interconnections.

A key disjuncture emerges between primary schools, secondary schools and HE. Explicit reference to anthropogenic climate change is absent from the national curriculum until KS3. Primary teaching on climate centres on species' habitats, seasons and the weather (Majid et al. 2023). Once learners do encounter climate change, researchers contrast a tendency in school teachers to discuss climate change by foregrounding (often individualised) solutions with the critical approaches championed by many academic geographers, who explore climate change in relation to the complexity of issues like justice, socio-economic transformation or political mobilisation (Healy et al. 2024; Waldron et al. 2019). Crude though this distinction may be, it underscores that what it means for geographers to teach and learn about climate change is different at school, in informal settings and at university. This is not unique to climate change and has long been a phenomenon in geography more generally (Butt and Collins 2017). Understanding the entire pathway opens such tensions and contradictions and highlights the need to balance coherence with plurality.

3 | Climate Education and Co-Production, Participatory and Creative Approaches

The CAR acknowledges that 'content is only one part of the issue: pedagogy has an important role in applying an engaging climate lens to existing curriculum content' (Department for Education 2025, 41). Here, we consider how co-production, participatory and creative approaches can enrich climate education within geography to 'open up' the discipline (Hawkins 2019). Within school geography, geographical enquiry has been positioned as a signature approach (Lee et al. 2022), and there is much synergy between this approach and the foundations of the climate pathway. Geographical enquiry 'requires thinking geographically' where 'the teacher provides opportunities for students to make sense and exercise reasoning' (Roberts 2013, 9); therefore, enabling space for co-production, participatory and creative approaches. Climate change requires learners to interrogate the interconnection between places, spaces, people and the environment. Yet climate teaching remains dominated by conventional knowledge-based approaches, focusing on the retention of factual information rather than critical thinking. Such approaches are more likely to sustain educator–student hierarchies and propagate rigid assessment approaches.

A creative, inclusive approach to learning reframes educators' view of climate education from preparing students for future employment to enabling real-time change. Participatory methods encourage students and teachers to interrogate their understanding of expertise and reframe dominant knowledge narratives—crucial for a wicked problem like climate change. Creative approaches to learning, co-produced with students and communities, can connect different actors, generations and disciplinary facets. Interdisciplinary projects such as storytelling can draw on the arts to co-create educational experiences that focus on relationships rather than hierarchy (Law et al. 2021). When students are invited to think critically about climate change, they can see themselves not as isolated observers but as participants in a shared system. Their communities, landscapes and everyday choices are connected to those of others across scales. Learning about climate change becomes less about locating oneself at the

centre of a problem and more about recognising one's place within a network of reciprocal relationships between people, places and environments.

Such approaches can also modernise fieldwork. Geography's pedagogy has a history of interrogating the methodological 'norm' and the climate education pathway poses an opportunity to reinvigorate fieldwork. With growing conversations surrounding reflexive and inclusive fieldwork (Bracken and Mawdsley 2022), participatory creative approaches to geographical climate education provide a convincing additional avenue towards fieldwork approaches rooted in co-production, decolonial and feminist approaches.

Participatory fieldwork can produce grounded knowledge and can open wider possibilities of a geographical education to develop 'real life' skills and critical thinking that directly address young people's climate concerns. However, the challenges present in traditional forms of teaching and learning—for example, unequal power dynamics and extractive research practices—can be reproduced through participatory and creative approaches. Educators must therefore approach this carefully and thoughtfully, possibly by looking beyond formal disciplinary spaces to reach learners where they are at.

A comprehensive climate education pathway recognises that geographical learning extends beyond the classroom and formal curriculum. One example is Football for Future, a non-profit working on the intersection of football and sustainability,³ with fans introduced to climate action through the language of football. Creative initiatives that expand geographical learning beyond the classroom encourage learners to consider their role within climate change assemblages.

Students are understandably impatient for solutions, but researchers, educators and curriculum designers must also be careful in selling climate solutions. The usual recourse is to suggest that whilst the situation is perilous, all is not lost. The need for a hope-infused pedagogy, even if it is a critical hope (Schwittay 2025), is routinely acknowledged. Climate education must explore scenarios that are not doom-laden, as relentless crisis messaging might bring students to question the purpose of study. Educators are not immune from this either. We should reasonably expect most teachers to be neither heroes nor hypocrites (Jerome 2018). They will have their own anxieties; helping learners find hope amidst a climate crisis is a tremendous burden to carry. Nevertheless, classroom production of consensus and conformity may ill-prepare students for a world of controversy and difference (Öhman and Öhman 2013). Co-production, participatory and creative approaches within a climate education pathway can offer hope to students' imagined futures and recentre learners' agency in the face of an ontologically destabilising phenomenon.

4 | More Than Green Jobs

Important though student employability is, to treat the climate education pathway merely as an instrument to access 'green' careers is to misunderstand what geography *can* and *should* do, and to narrow education's civic and intellectual purposes.

Geography can offer a unique perspective on climate change—one that calls upon creativity, interdisciplinarity and co-creation as a way forward. It need not legitimise itself through the constant assertion of added value via the output of green workers.

There is a balance between acknowledging learners will enter a labour market that is itself being reshaped by climate change and putting geography into the service of that very market. Employability is an important concern—especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst it is easy to be dismissive of 'green jobs', we note that a national survey revealed that although 76% of school students in England think learning about climate change and sustainability is important, only 31% agreed this would lead to more job opportunities (Walshe et al. 2024). Supporting geographers who will go into environmental jobs is important. Such transitions may happen long after a student has finished their formal geographical involvement. We advocate for a pathway that nurtures curious learners who think critically about climate change through its embodiment of interdisciplinary, participatory, creative approaches—regardless of how long they stay on this pathway or their post-education journey. In this regard, we envision a future in which learners engage diverse publics on climate change throughout their professional lives, regardless of whether they work directly in environment-related fields.

5 | What Gets Lost by Repurposing Geography-As-Climate-Education?

Much work has considered geography's distinct contribution to understanding climate—arguing that 'making human sense of climate change needs the intuition and skills of the geographer' (Hulme 2008, 6). The climate education pathway allows us to ask the inverse: what does climate do for Geography? Geography's engagement with climate change has expanded understandings of the phenomenon itself whilst redefining what geography is and ought to be. Its relationship with climate is so intertwined that any reflection on a climate education pathway has automatic implications for the discipline's wider identity.

Geography's purpose as a discipline and school subject has long been debated. The current debate gives a characteristic whiff of introspection and opportunism. A decade ago, Bennett (2013) lamented geography's failure to position itself as a leader in sustainability. When it comes to geography and climate education, it is difficult to disentangle our disciplinary interests from those of children, society and the planet. In the background lies the felt need to connect human and physical geography, a gap that environmental change has addressed for years, along with the familiar refrain of relevance (Crofts 1999). Castree (2015, 2) rightly warned of the potential for a relatively small cohort of policy-relevant human–environment geographers linking arms with the big beasts of global change science: 'talk of such things as the Anthropocene, "planetary boundaries", and global "tipping points" will reactivate well-worn narratives about geography's value as a holistic discipline that reaches the parts others cannot'. This paper opposes the narrowness of such 'solutions-oriented' approaches: climate education might be good for the

discipline, in a distinctly instrumental way, but carried out merely in terms of policy-relevance it will not serve students.

There are other reasons to be careful in yoking geography too tightly to the wain of climate change. Geography is a broad discipline—and must continue to allow learners to follow their interests. Important though climate change is, there are other epochal challenges to reflect upon—not least inequalities, geopolitics and digital transformations. These challenges are connected to, and affected by, climate change, but warrant their own study. Moreover, geography has a rich tradition of advancing work that might not address epochal challenges, but rather unconventional, conceptual or theoretical inquiry. Often this work is the most marginalised, yet it is precisely such inquiry that sustains geography's distinctiveness and inspires countless learners. None of this is a reason for geography to avoid confronting climate change, but a reminder of our rich disciplinary identity beyond climate.

6 | Conclusion

We are at a critical juncture for anthropogenic climate change and thus climate education must be fit for purpose. To enable knowledge and innovation to flow across the stages and forms of geographical education, this paper has argued for placing creative approaches at the heart of a climate education pathway shared by students, teachers, academics and researchers. An emphasis on lifelong learning is needed, extending across the school curriculum, undergraduate studies and public engagements (Dupigny-Giroux 2010). As Kass (2025, 9) argues, 'Boundary crossing rarely happens by itself, and the conditions for doing so must be explicitly cultivated, requiring the necessary time and space, but also institutional support'. Here, we argue that boundary crossing must also extend across educational stages and spaces.

As Geography Departments across England and beyond are at risk of closure or redundancies, there is a temptation for ever greater integration of climate change into the curriculum at all levels to try and retain Geography's disciplinary relevance. However, a narrow focus on geography-as-climate-education risks the richness of the discipline's offerings. The role of researchers and educators is not then to reach for opportunities to seem relevant or to find ways of justifying Geography's disciplinary existence, but to 'expand people's sense of what Earth futures are desirable and achievable' (Castree 2015, 2). As illustrated in Figure 1, the Climate Education Pathway must think about multiple entry and exit points, equipping learners with more than just knowledge but also critical thinking and critical hope. Geography's contribution to climate cannot be seen through an economic lens alone; nor must the discipline's rich offerings on other critical issues be sidelined.

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alphabetically by these two sub-groups. We thank the reviewers for their helpful comments.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹In 2023, the Department for Education (2023) *Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy: A strategy for the education and children's services systems*. London also launched a sustainability and climate change strategy for education in England, which is being applied across all education stages (including schools and HE) (2023).

²The government has accepted recommendations from CAR to reform subject curricula. Draft curriculum will be developed and published for consultation in September 2026. This will inform the subsequent development and accreditation of new GCSE and A-level qualifications to be taught from 2029 and 2031, respectively (Department for Education 2025).

³Football Sustainability Non-Profit | Football For Future.

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