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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Glackin, M. (2022). 'Denial is not a policy': Our national curriculum must respond to the call for action. *Research Intelligence*, (150), 34-35. Article 150.

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# ‘Denial is not a policy’

Our national curriculum must respond to the call for action



**MELISSA GLACKIN**  
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

On the eve of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), leaders of four unions, representing school, college and university staff, co-signed a letter calling for climate change education to be embedded in systems in the UK (PA media, 2021). Their demands follow increasing calls for the UK government to lead on implementing a greener, fairer and more equitable education system. England's Department for Education (DfE) has repeatedly rebutted such appeals, saying that environmental issues are satisfactorily covered in the national curriculum and that schools have the freedom to implement an educational ethos that emphasises caring for the environment. However, increasingly, young people are demanding more action from those in power and are angered by the status quo (Teach the Future, n.d.). It is therefore an apt time to ask: what is the current state of environmental education and what responses are needed from teachers, schools and political leaders?

In 2018, funded by the British Academy, my colleagues and I undertook a review of environmental education in secondary schools in England (Glackin & King, 2018; Glackin & King, 2020; Glackin et al., 2018). We examined both the policy landscape (national and local) and the perspectives of educators. Our research suggests that environmental education in formal schooling is weakly supported by national policies – there is a lack of intention or vision for environmental education explicit in education policies. This lacuna has led to patchy environmental education across secondary schools.

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Further, the quantity and quality of a student's environmental education is greatly dependent on their examination pathway, normally their GCSE subject choice, alongside the examination board specification studied. However, this national environmental education vacuum has not always been the case. Kate Greer's (2021) research illuminates the different levers that have facilitated the rise and fall of climate change policy directives and practice over the past century.

Our findings support the unions' call for an embedded climate change education. Indeed, we recommend a coherent national policy which sets out a vision for environmental education in schools and further education colleges (Glackin & King, 2018, p. 1). The policy would shape future national curriculum reforms and assessments. Moreover, our recommendations call for the national policy to recognise the multiple dimensions of environmental education – education *about*, *in* and *for* the environment – and ensure that all three are given equal footing throughout a student's school career. Going further, the national policy needs to recognise the numerous perspectives and responses required to answer climate change and biodiversity loss. A vision for environmental improvement must balance scientific, technical and political responses with socially critical and 'alternative' approaches – a recommendation that results from the current dominant discourse that technology alone will provide the solutions.

To signal a shift in values towards a pro-environmental vision, the innovative national policy needs to be written to incorporate language concerning notions of care for the environment, for other species, for fairness and for empathy. To this end, the policy should allow young people the opportunity to think broadly about local and global environmental issues and encourage the development of a sense of ownership, agency and collectivism. We require a policy that ensures students

receive a democratic pluralistic education about the environment and are able to develop the capabilities and resolve to mitigate environmental inequalities. Yes, we need to talk about politics.

A national education policy driven by the DfE is essential for the fundamental change required for young people to have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to manage future environmental issues. However, no policy works in a vacuum. The urgency of the crisis requires a response co-ordinated across different ministries. There are a number of opportunities to support and address the current absence of environmental education in legislation that are not directly education focused. For example: the new UK Environment Act will require all government departments to give due regard to the environment in future policymaking; and the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill includes amendments supporting skills and capabilities relating to climate change adaptation and other environmental goals.

While policy directives are essential to establishing the vision, our research identified ingredients that may support successful policy enactment (see our recommendations in detail at Glackin et al., 2018, p. 2). First, the necessity for **the policy vision to be interwoven through all subject curriculums, and to include a variety of modes of assessment which engender a creative landscape of pedagogy**. Effective environmental education needs to encompass equal opportunities for environmental action-oriented learning, subject acquisition and skill development. To achieve this, learning opportunities need to occur both in and outside the classroom. They need to be available for all and not limited to one subject or one examination specification. Examination boards need to be part of the conversation – they hold a great deal of power over what is taught, how it is taught and how it is assessed in schools.

Set within a supportive national policy landscape, our second ingredient for success chimes with that of the government, in that our **school leaders need to have the freedoms to choose the methods by which environmental education is addressed across their whole school community allowing the development of context sensitive learning**. By emphasising local considerations, students will be able to develop ownership and agency for solutions while also understanding the interconnected nature of local environmental issues in the global context. It is only through a national policy that senior leaders will feel encouraged and able to include and prioritise environmental responsibility and action-oriented learning in their schools' mission statements and

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aims. School leaders need to be supported (via policy and government resourcing) to incorporate principles of environmental responsibility into their school operations, policies and practices. Students will then experience curriculums that are sensitive to their anxieties about climate and reflect their desire for action.

Our schools respond to a complex array of policy demands that reflect a mix of government and societal values. Currently, in the hypercompetitive education landscape, where policies demanding school leaders' attention include external assessments, Ofsted ratings and school performance league tables, even the most green-minded and eco-conscious headteacher could be forgiven if their environmental mission became sidelined. As politicians and policymakers discuss the outcomes from COP26, our political leaders must step up and grasp the environmental education challenge and embed a deep-rooted vision for our world in school curriculums – their grandchildren will thank them for their courage.

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