

By Dr Hridesh Gajurel, 2 December 2025

Among the very few presenters to present research on the youth was Babet de Groot (whom I know from the Hothouse's Future Leaders Program). She presented on the justice expectations of youth

participating in intergovernmental negotiations on the Global Plastics Treaty, revealing the limitations of current governance approaches when it comes to considering the voices of active youth demanding intergenerational equity and transformative action. This is yet another example, along with the recent COP30 in Belém, of how little formal intergovernmental mechanisms have achieved in the fight against environmental damage. Perhaps greater youth participation in global and national decision-making about intergenerational issues like climate change and environmental damage is the way to drive much-needed progress on these fronts.

Bill Shorten gave the keynote speech and a later dinner speech. He contrasted politics and academia in temporal terms, highlighting how he valued the long-termism of academia compared to the short-termism of politics that revolved around 24-hour news cycle, even though academia can be frustratingly slow at times.

While long-termism is certainly preferable to short-termism, academics still need to do more for real-world impact, especially relating to urgent issues like climate change and inequality: This is something that was discussed in another plenary on research impact. Many academics produce highly relevant and potentially impactful research but leave it at that, with the research rarely being picked up in public policy given the lack of a clear and concrete bridge. A short piece of work linking research to policy or direct engagement with policymakers and advocates would go a long way to harnessing the vast knowledge pool created by social scientists that, unfortunately, remains largely untapped. This is a kind of short-termism in supposedly long-termist academia that needs correcting, and it is the responsibility of not only academics but also of academic institutions to correct it.

I gave a presentation of policy paradigm shifts. One of the pathways to transformative change that I found in my research is that of 'expert persuasion', where evidence and persuasive arguments by experts like academics precipitate a policy paradigm shift. I found many instances of such shifts among case studies of real, past paradigm shifts. This suggests that, if academics dedicate a bit more time to real-world impact, we might get many of the transformative policy changes that we need, and sooner too.

Benjamin Leruth, who also helped organise the conference, presented on the topic of political long-termism and revealed encouraging findings about the power of expertise in promoting long-term policies. He found through a survey of over 16,000 people in Western democracies that the views of experts still matter when it comes to voters supporting long-term policies like environmental policies and public transport development. This is an encouraging finding in the context of the seeming wave of populism and anti-intellectualism sweeping across the West in particular – perhaps this wave is overstated and academics can have more confidence that their research can impact policy.

Anja Bless (also a Hothouse Future Leader), who won the best PhD thesis award at the conference, discussed the evolution of responses to climate change over time from the agrifood industry. She showed how the industry has gone from denial to delay tactics using several different types of discursive devices including cherry-picking information, moving goalposts, misrepresentation, red herring arguments, and false choices, among others. Agrifood corporations will do everything it takes to protect their short-term profits and shareholder payouts, it seems, even at the expense of their own long-term interest.

Justine Coneybeer (another Hothouse Future Leader), argued in her presentation that asking corporations to change may be hopeless given their 'fiduciary duty' to shareholders alone. Nevertheless, proxy advisors, who advise large institutional investors on how to vote on corporate proposals, may be instead a practical (though underexplored) route to getting corporations to change as they have greater freedom to consider wider interests including the environment and social equity. Indeed, it is the political responsibility of proxy advisors to do so, she argued.

While there are always reasons to be pessimistic about the future (especially now), perhaps it is ultimately through academic research and through solidarity and collaboration among academics and practitioners that we find genuine reasons to be optimistic and hopeful about the future.