

Growing Concerns: Co-Creating Climate Narratives

An Action Research Study on International Students' Creative Responses to Environmental Photography

Michelle Lin Braby

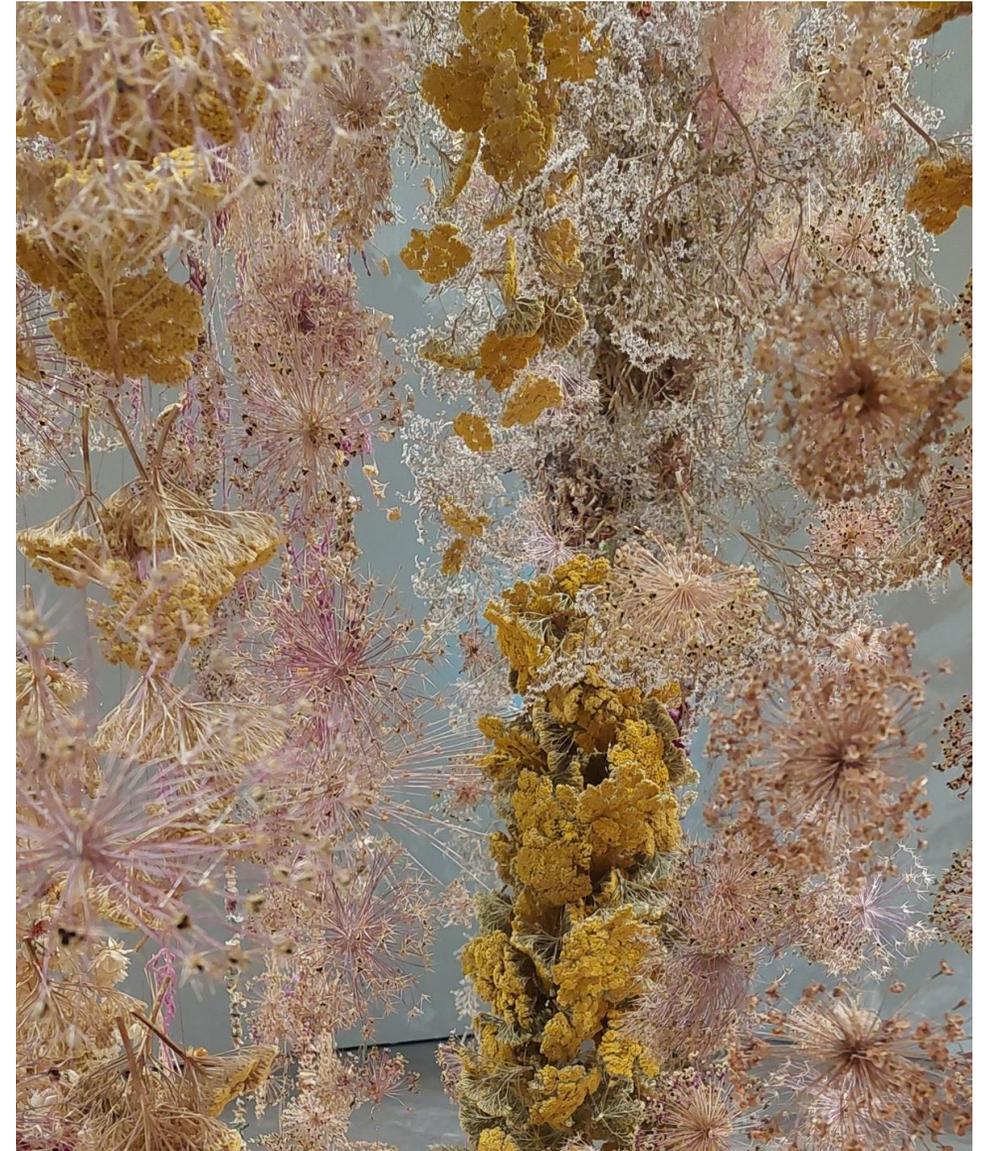
UAL – School of Pre-degrees

Curriculum Lead for L3 International Introduction to the Study of Design, Media and Screen

Student Voices in Higher Education Conference 2026

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Braby, M. (2024) *Untitled*. Photography. UAL.

Three Key Messages

- International students bring diverse environmental knowledge that enriches learning
- Student partnership transforms both pedagogy and outcomes
- Flexible methodology honors student expertise



Lin, J. (2024) *Collection*. Sculpture. UAL.

Research Foundation

Research Question:

How do Level 3 International students interpret and respond creatively to contemporary artists' work addressing climate change through flora-based visual narratives?

Context:

- Educator + Former International Student = Insider Researcher
- Level 3 IISDMS students (International)
- Saatchi Gallery 'Flowers - Flora in Contemporary Art & Culture' exhibition

Environmental Justice Framework:

Responding to systematic exclusion of diverse voices in environmental discourse (Greenpeace/Runnymede, 2022)

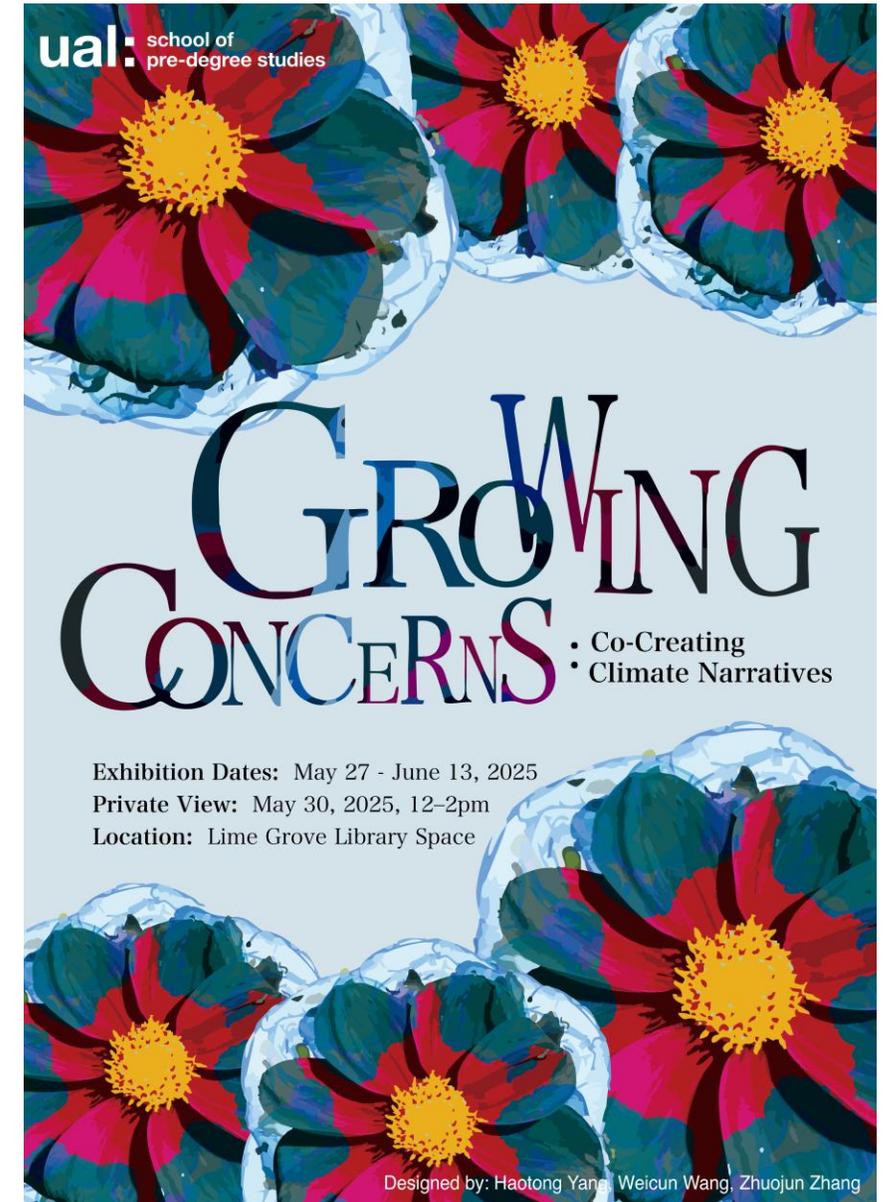
KEY MESSAGE 1: International students bring diverse environmental knowledge



The Research Journey

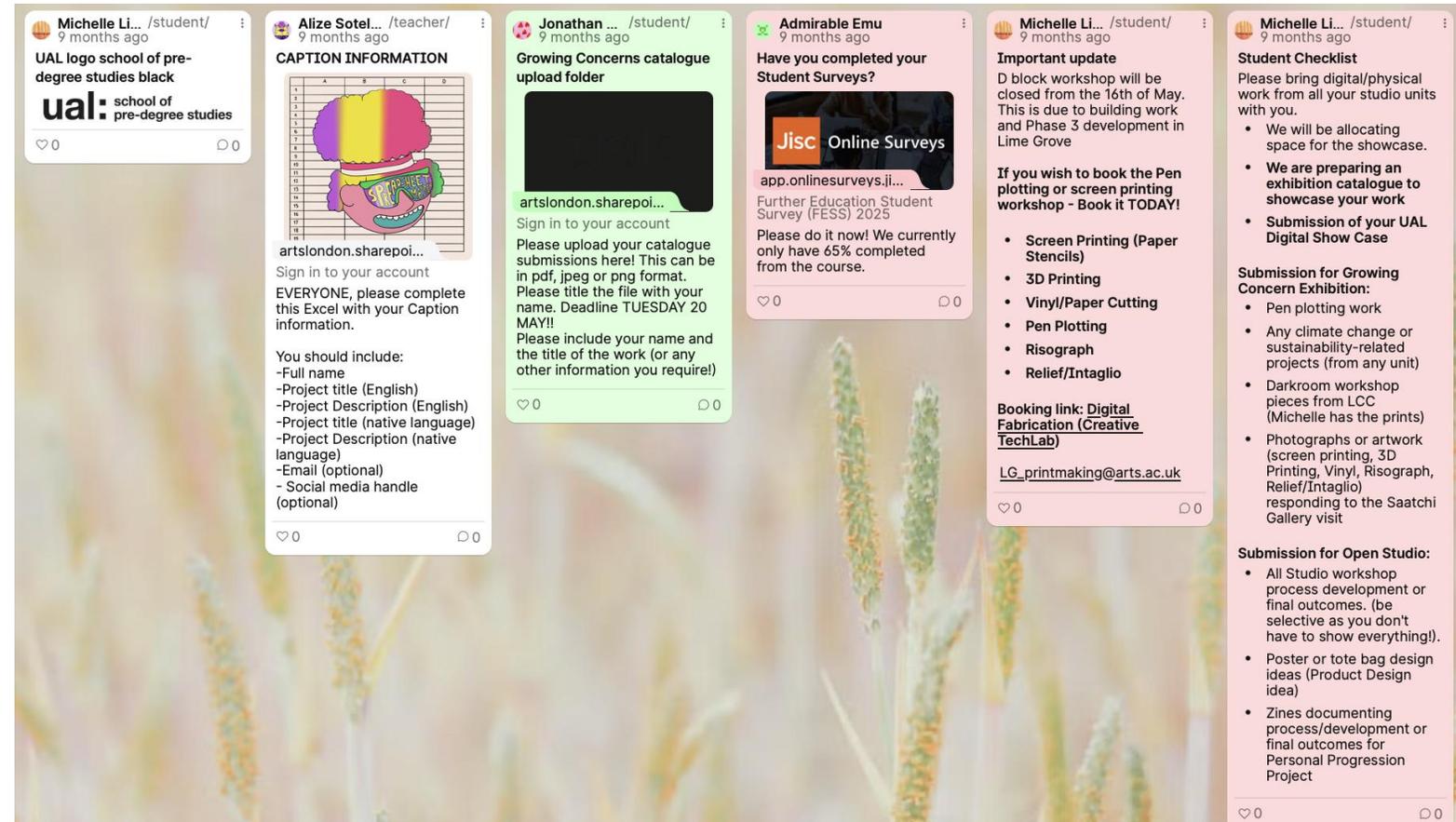
Action Research in Practice

- **Initial Plan:** Photography-focused responses
- **What Actually Happened:** Students went multidisciplinary - handcraft, 3D, digital manipulation, installation
- 4-Phase Evolution (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007):
- **Analysis:** Gallery visit revealed students needed more than photography
- **Creative Development:** Technical Resource Workshop became CORE methodology



Action Research in Practice

- **Collaboration:** Student-led exhibition development
- **Engagement:** Month-long exhibition with ongoing dialogue
- **KEY MESSAGE 2:** Student partnership transforms pedagogy and outcomes
- **KEY MESSAGE 3:** Recognition of methodological flexibility as strength



Exhibition Padlet

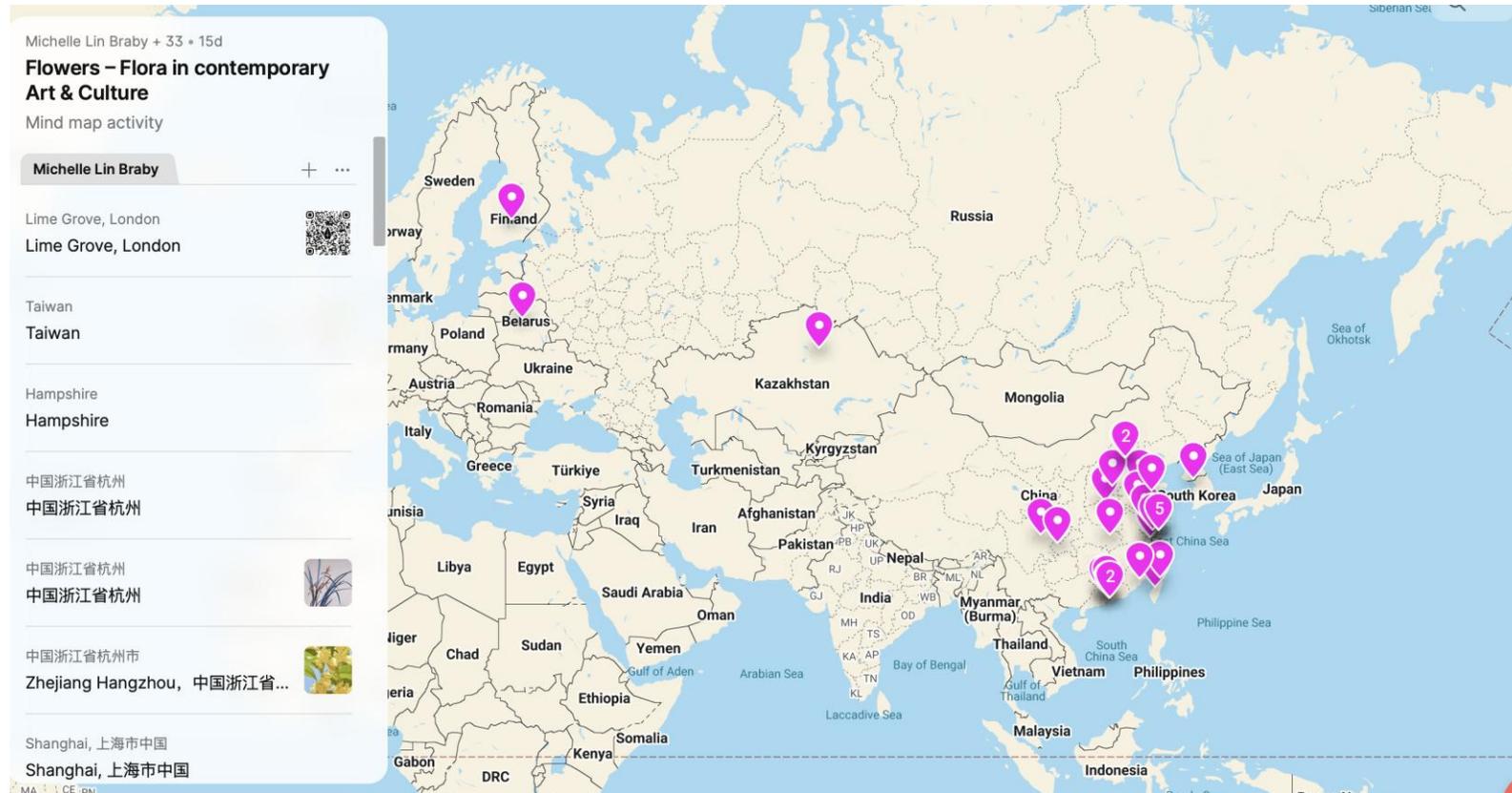
Multiple Voices and Positionality

Zone 1 Climate change is experienced differently across cultures, communities, and geographies



Action Research Padlet

Process and Participation Wall - Zone 2 This zone highlights the journey instead of solely focusing on destination.



Shanghai, 上海市中国 white magnolia



The flower language of white magnolia is pure love, sincerity, and nobility. Its flower language may come from its white and elegant appearance. In addition to love, it can also express the purity and sincerity of friendship. It symbolizes the warm sunshine of spring, people's yearning and pursuit of beautiful things, and only each other in their hearts, and will never be betrayed.

Action Research in Practice

- **Visual Dialogues**
- Zone 3 Photography / visual art in this zone is presented in conversational groupings that explore different approaches to climate visualisation.
- **Co-creation Space**
- Zone 4 The exhibition concludes in the Library Learning Room with an active space where visitors may transform from observers into participants.



Key Findings

What Students Created

Cultural Responsiveness:

94.7% positive flora awareness across cultures

"Different flowers in different countries" - connecting local to global

Methodological Innovation:

Beyond photography → handcraft, 3D, digital manipulation, installation

"Use more handmade crafts"

Scientific-Artistic Integration:

21.1% demonstrated interdisciplinary thinking

"Long-term photography can record flowering time changes"

Student Partnership Success:

84.2% comfort with experimentation, ZERO negative responses

**ALL THREE KEY MESSAGES
VALIDATED**



Impact: 'Growing Concerns' Exhibition



Student Reflections:

- "Participating in Growing Concern has made me further realise how artistic practice integrates with environmental awareness... This exhibition provides us with a space for co-creation, allowing artistic expression to deepen our attention to climate issues." - Jason Sun, Photography
- "Working on this project allowed me to extend those inquiries across installation, video, and sculptural forms... This opportunity not only expanded the visual and conceptual vocabulary of my work, but also reaffirmed my commitment to making art that responds to the subtle tensions of the worlds we move through." - Fai Kong, Installation/Mixed Media

Dissemination Destinations

Conferences

- Student Voice in Higher Education Conference (11th-12th Feb 2026)
- Power of Prestige 2026 (Fiji, June 29-July 2, 2026)

Institutional Partnership

- Exhibition proposal connected to Design Museum "More Than Human"

Future Trajectory

- PhD proposal: Long-term cultural intelligence in climate education

Academic Publication

- Planning Journal article: Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education



Evaluating Impact: What Matters Beyond Metrics



For Pre-degree Educators:

Framework for allowing student expertise to guide creative development



For International Student Support:

Evidence that diverse environmental knowledge systems enrich learning



For Environmental Education:

Addresses environmental justice gaps (Greenpeace/Runnymede)



What Actions This Research Enables:

- *Develop culturally responsive unit briefs*
- *Design technical workshops that liberate rather than constrain*
- *Create assessment frameworks valuing diverse ways of knowing*



Policy Implication: Supporting international students means creating space for their cultural capital in curriculum design.

Reflection & Next Steps

Limitations:

- Time constraints (single academic year)
- Language barriers in some verbal reflections
- Scale and reach (one institution)

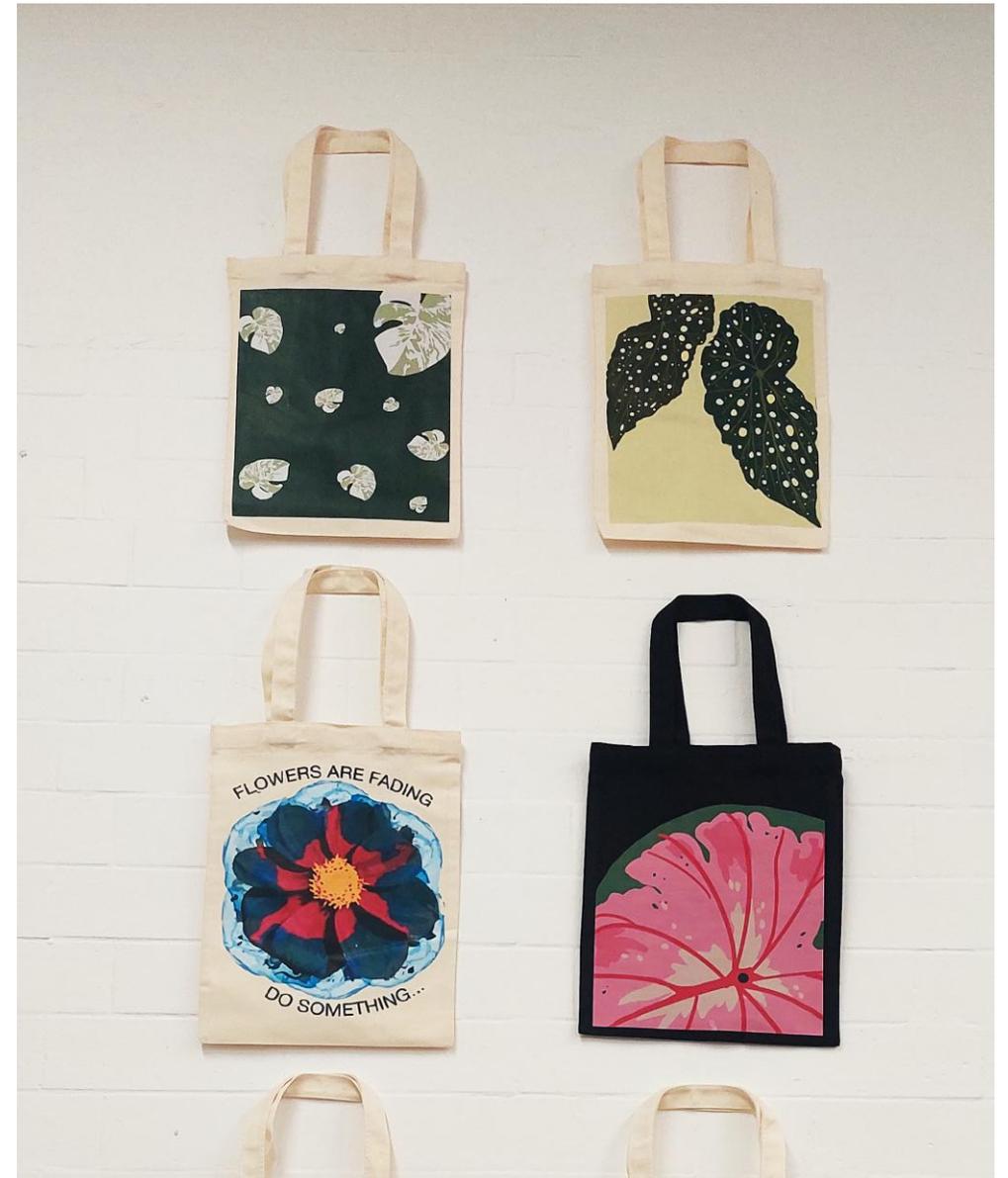
What I am Developing:

- Level 3 IISDMS unit brief integrating these principles
- Culturally responsive assessment criteria
- Second exhibition building on Design Museum connection

Personal Transformation:

From photography educator → practice-based researcher integrating cultural intelligence, environmental justice, and exhibition-making as research methodology

What I Learned: Methodological flexibility is not weakness – it is how you honor student expertise (**KEY MESSAGE 3**)



1. International students bring diverse environmental knowledge that enriches learning

→ 94.7% positive flora awareness, connecting local to global perspectives

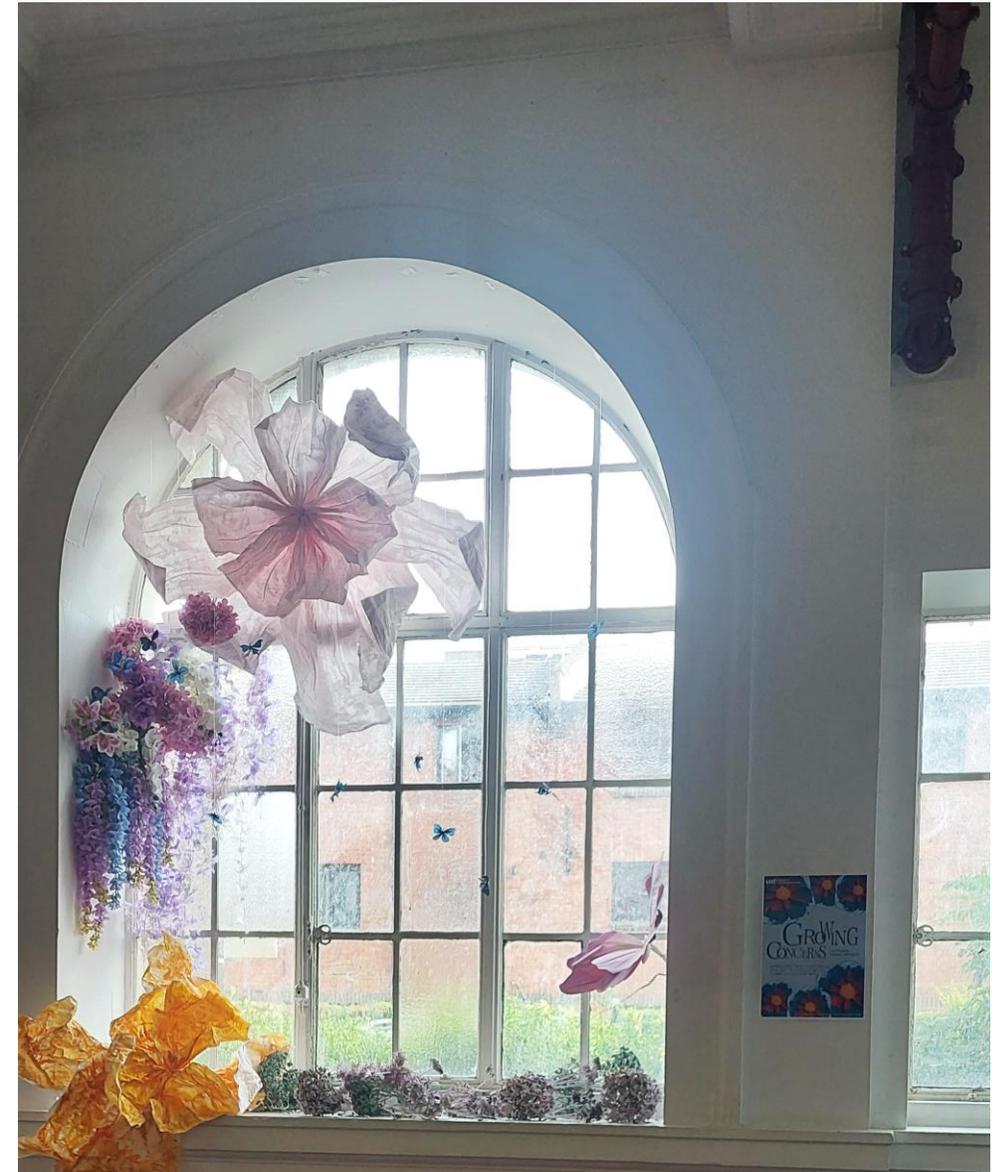
2. Student partnership transforms both pedagogy and outcomes

→ 84.2% comfort with experimentation, student-led exhibition, zero negative responses

3. Flexible methodology honors student expertise

→ From photography-only to multidisciplinary, technical workshops that liberate

These messages demonstrate how co-creating climate narratives with international students produces richer educational outcomes and advances environmental justice in higher education.



Thank You

Questions & Discussion

Taking away the three key messages from this:

- 1. Diverse environmental knowledge enriches learning**
- 2. Student partnership transforms pedagogy**
- 3. Flexible methodology honors expertise**

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