

Why HEIs must commit to Climate Action

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TITLE

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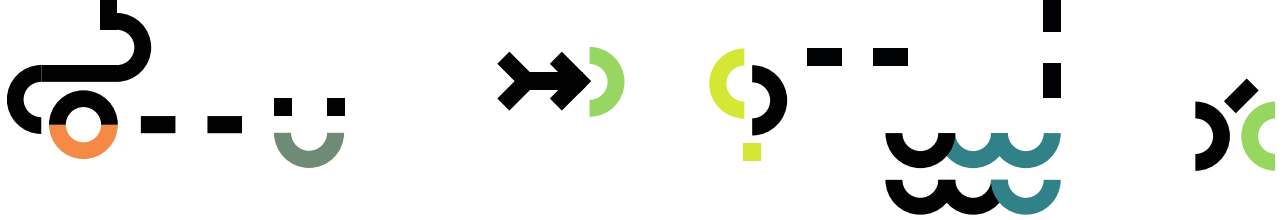
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Why HEIs must commit to climate action

The world is facing widespread climate-related challenges, with deep and long-lasting social, environmental and economic consequences. Climate change is causing increasingly devastating impacts on a global scale, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. Countless IPCC reports and supporting research have demonstrated that, to prevent disastrous environmental consequences, it is crucial to limit global warming to 1.5°C. This means acutely reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and eventually achieving net-zero emissions by mid-century. Yet, the world is currently on track for a 2.7°C rise in global temperature above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, far exceeding the target set by the Paris Agreement¹.

Climate Change is a complex web of wicked challenges, demanding urgent action towards systemic change across all economic and social sectors. Given Higher Education privileged position in society, climate action is seen as both part of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) missions, and of its own responsibility.

Within HEIs, distinct pathways of climate action can have cross-sectoral impacts,

starting at their own community and reaching the overall society and the natural environment (i.e., ecosphere). As illustrated in Figure 1, these are: 1) education, 2) research, 3) service providing and partnerships with the wider community, 4) enabling platforms for public debate and deliberations, and 5) campus operations management³.

Today, more than a third of the global population attends some form of tertiary education (reaching 80% in high-income countries)⁴. HEIs have a clear responsibility to equip the new generation of professionals with a climate-related set of knowledge, capacities, and values, such as:

- i. Enabling and empowering all students (not just those taking environmental-related courses) to becoming effective contributors to sustainability problem-solving in their lives, professions, and communities⁵.
- ii. Capacitating students to cope with climate challenges, in the context of widespread (eco) anxiety amongst young people⁶.

On another perspective, climate change can be regarded as a driver of pedagogical innovation in Higher



Education. Due to its complexity, moral urgency, comprehensiveness, global reach, and future thinking, climate change provides the context for a powerful and transformative educational experience overall. In fact, climate change provides opportunities for critical engagement with deeper questions of being (ontological), knowledge (epistemological), and value (axiological). Some examples of these questions are the interdependences of the natural environment, the human connection with nature, the notion of change and the future of humanity, and intergenerational justice⁷.

Moreover, with raising levels of misinformation and prevailing negationist movements, especially in what refers to climate change⁸, HEIs must keep providing sound evidence for scientific-based reasoning as well as train their students and overall community in critical thinking.

In this regard, HEIs also have a role in effectively communicating science to their own communities and to the general public, translating it into life-long learning climate literacy opportunities.

Much of the science that identifies patterns in the changing climate, its causes and possible solutions are produced in HEIs³. They are also platforms for interdisciplinarity to take place, a crucial component to understand and tackle climate change⁷. Thus, there is great potential in directing

research towards climate mitigation and adaptation and implementing such concerns within projects primarily focusing on other areas.

The role of HEIs alliances in amplifying climate action and solutions should be underlined. Learning with and through peers can accelerate action and scale up the impact, by unlocking common constraints and bottlenecks (e.g., financing). Also, by partnering with organizations in other sectors (e.g., thorough research projects, or services to the community), HEIs provide added value to society (e.g., contributing to policy design)².

However, HEIs also contribute to the aggravation of the problem, through direct and indirect GHG emissions from their activities and communities, which can be very significant (e.g., high electricity consumption in laboratory activities, emissions from business travel and international student travel)¹⁰. Increasingly, HEIs are assessing and reporting their emissions inventory and directing much of their efforts into implementing mitigation actions (i.e., greening their Campus, processes and their supply chain)¹¹ which is a powerful message, by leading by example for its own communities and for society in general.

HEIs are not exempt from suffering from climate change impacts, be it chronic or extreme events. By acting on a preventive basis to prepare for likely such events and avoid losses, HEIs are safeguarding their assets and



community (largely cutting expenses when compared to inaction). While dealing with climate impacts, HEIs can contribute to enhancing both the knowledge on local and regional climate risks and the capacity-building towards a more resilient community. Moreover, according to the European taxonomy Regulation, to set the conditions for direct investments, HEIs benefit if demonstrate contributions to at least one of six environmental objectives, climate mitigation and climate adaptation being two of them.

Rankings and reputation indicators alike are increasingly contemplating climate mitigation and adaptation topics. Thus, change within Higher Education is also coming from external pressure, as HEIs face increasing societal scrutiny, especially from the student community. More and more, climate change is one

important criterion when looking for study programs and institutions, as well as the subject of demonstrations and demand for action from already enrolled students.

In summary, HEIs have multiple and diverse reasons to embrace climate action. Mostly, the knowledge and skills behind climate action exist within each HEI. The challenge is to make it visible and applied to their own premises and campus. Highly reputed universities have already committed to a climate goal. Although HEI, as public institutions, must not comply with legal climate frameworks that currently target only private organizations (e.g., CSRD directive), there are effective and meaningful benefits to take on the journey towards a climate goal.

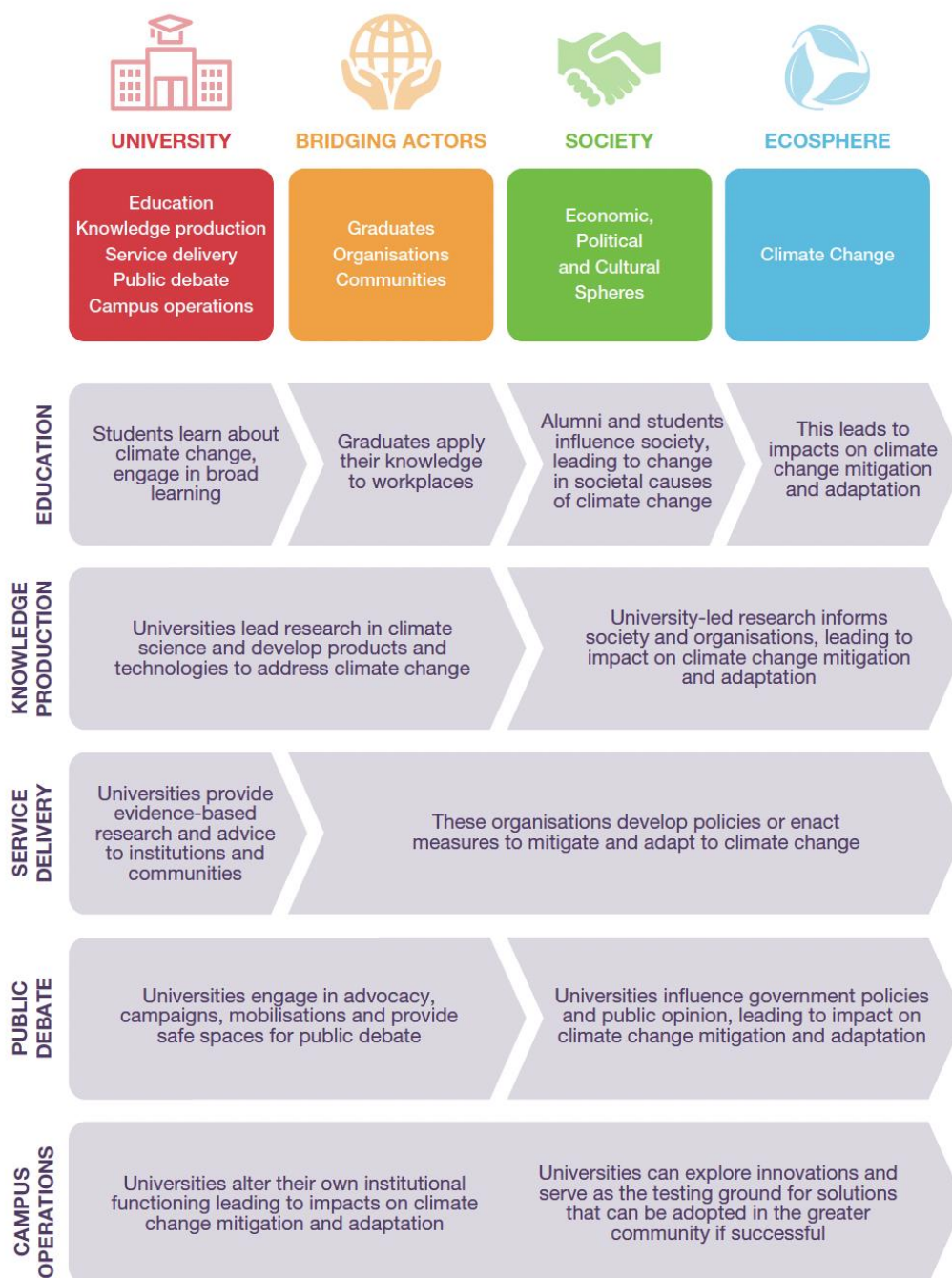


Figure 1- A framework that explains how HEIs can enable systemic change in climate change mitigation and adaptation.
 Source: Net Zero on Campus, SDSN, 2023²



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