

Statement on Sustainability of Higher Education

1. Introduction

The world is currently facing what the United Nations calls the triple planetary crisis – the simultaneous and interlinked challenges related to climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Each of these challenges have their own causes and effects, and they all need to be resolved if we are to have a viable future on this planet. At the same time, we are facing an increasingly unstable world with many crises and situations which may seem more critical to solve in the short term. In such a time it is important to focus not only on what is happening in the near term, but maintain a focus also on the more long term challenges.

ESU believes that in order to solve the complex polycrises we are facing, systemic change and a knowledge based approach is needed. Here, the higher education institutions (HEIs) have a particular responsibility. This includes equipping students with the skills and knowledge which will be needed in order to face these challenges, developing and disseminating knowledge about the current situation and future scenarios, contributing knowledge-based arguments to the political conversation in their society, and working to improve their own operations to make them more sustainable.

In order to take this responsibility, and contribute to a more sustainable world, a whole institution approach is needed. HEIs need to look at the total of their operations, including education, research, capacity building, institutional practices, social outreach and leadership.

In this statement, we are outlining ESU's position on how HEIs can meaningfully contribute to a more sustainable world. As we already have a [statement on Education for sustainable development \(ESD\)](#), this topic will receive less attention here.

ESU thoroughly believes that with quick, targeted and knowledge-based action, the crisis can be mitigated, and a sustainable world can be achieved for people and for the planet.

2. Education

Education is a cornerstone of capacity building for sustainable development, and key to addressing both local and global challenges. In order to maximise their contribution to a more sustainable world, HEIs should implement Education for Sustainable Development. The goal of ESD is to equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to contribute to sustainable development. The education should promote a holistic understanding of sustainability, including economic, social and environmental dimensions. It should provide every student with an understanding of the global sustainability challenges we are facing, and equip them with the knowledge and skills to contribute to solutions within their field.

HEIs have a responsibility to integrate sustainability across all disciplines, not just as separate courses. Interdisciplinary approaches to sustainability should be fostered within institutions, through cooperation between faculties and departments. Institutions must develop strategies that genuinely contribute to sustainability, avoiding "greenwashing" and superficial environmentalism.

HEIs must equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address climate challenges, including skills for sustainable innovation, entrepreneurship, and the green economy, along with fostering community engagement. ESD must also address global challenges like climate justice and inequality, promoting international cooperation among students and institutions. Student participation is key to implementing ESD, so HEIs should support students through internships and research opportunities. The role of academic staff is also crucial, with calls for better training and resources to incorporate sustainability into curricula and research.

Academic mobility is a cornerstone of the European higher education landscape, fostering collaboration, cultural exchange, and academic excellence. However, the environmental impact of student and staff travel poses a significant challenge. According to the data gathered within the [Green Erasmus Project](#),

international students are more likely to use high-emission modes of transport. To mitigate this, it is necessary to promote sustainable behaviours and to raise awareness about the ecological footprint of international exchanges. The [ENGAGE.EU Green Mobility Report](#) highlights similar concerns, noting that over 70% of student mobility occurs through high-emission modes. This report emphasises the need for structural changes in mobility programs to support greener choices. European University Alliances, with their vast network and policy influence, are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for sustainable mobility, ensuring that international exchanges contribute to global sustainability efforts rather than detract from them. At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that green public transportation is still not as affordable and accessible as it should be and that there are huge regional differences in Europe in the necessary infrastructure. So, although it is necessary that HEIs fulfil their duty to promote green mobility, it is also necessary that we push for structural changes and investments to ensure the possibility to choose green mobility.

Lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling are essential to support the green transition in higher education and beyond. As the demands of the labour market evolve towards a sustainable approach, HEIs must equip students with the skills needed to address environmental challenges and foster innovation. This requires flexible learning pathways that enable individuals to continuously update their competencies in fields like green renewable energy, circular economy, and climate resilience. By embedding these opportunities into the educational system, higher education institutions can empower both current students and lifelong learners to contribute to a just and sustainable future. Stronger collaboration between academia, industry, and governments will further ensure alignment with green policy goals and workforce needs.

ESU believes that:

- HEIs should take concrete actions to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, waste production and harmful impact on biodiversity.
- HEIs should establish partnerships across regions and engage in joint action in relation to ESD.
- Global perspectives of ESD should be included in curricula.
- HEIs should support student engagement and student-led initiatives regarding sustainability.

- HEIs, European University Alliances and other networks should promote green modes of transport concerning mobility.
- HEIs should establish microcredential programmes and short courses focused on green skills, allowing both current students and professionals to upskill and reskill in areas such as green renewable energy, sustainable technologies, and environmental management.
- HEIs should establish dedicated career services that connect students and graduates to emerging job opportunities in the green economy, offering guidance on career paths in sustainability-focused sectors.
- Lifelong learning opportunities are essential in order to ensure that everyone has access to up-to-date knowledge about sustainability-related topics relevant for their field.
- HEIs should promote interdisciplinary approaches to sustainability in their curricula, and foster cooperation between different institutions, faculties and departments.

3. Research

Our higher education institutions have a central role in developing the knowledge that we need in order to understand and address the effects of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. It is crucial to understand the mechanisms behind the changes we see, project future developments, and spread proof-based knowledge about these changes to society in general and policy makers in particular.

ESU believes in the institutional autonomy of HEIs, and the academic freedom of individual researchers. However, these freedoms also come with responsibilities. It is necessary to direct academic and economic resources towards projects which contribute to finding sustainable solutions to these challenges. This is a responsibility of national and international funders of research, as well as individual institutions and researchers.

Research should not be conducted in isolation. For both fundamental and applied research, it is important to stay in touch with other disciplines, as well as other relevant actors from different parts of society. The challenges we are facing are complex and interconnected, and we therefore need to build on research and knowledge from a range of disciplines and sectors in order to understand them

and identify realistic solutions. ESU therefore believes that more research funding should be directed towards interdisciplinary research in order to break down barriers between disciplines. It is also necessary to incorporate knowledge from diverse sources, recognising both academic, indigenous and local knowledge, and utilising them when applicable considering their different strengths and weaknesses.

Many HEIs have research corporations and agreements with private companies and/or other public institutions, involving funding or co-funding of research activities. This cooperation can contribute to more relevant research, and to new knowledge easier being made use of to solve practical problems. However, some companies also use these agreements to influence research topics and methods for their own gain. This goes against the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of the HEIs, and might also limit their ability to conduct the free and independent research on topics such as climate change.

Effective use of lab equipment and spaces is important in order to keep the general resource use of HEIs as low as possible. Increased cooperation between departments and institutions can reduce the need to buy new equipment for new research projects, while also allowing to pool resources to buy better equipment when acquiring. Cooperation around computing capacities such as through the European High Performance Computing Joint Undertaking will be especially important in order to carry out research projects which require advanced computing.

ESU believes that:

- There must be strong sustainability indicators in the allocation of research funds.
- Research funding should favour interdisciplinary research.
- Research and knowledge production in academia must be based on diverse sources of knowledge, recognising both academic, indigenous and local knowledge when applicable.
- Research collaboration agreements with private entities should allow academic institutions the freedom to independently determine the direction and methodology of their research. These agreements should

also be communicated transparently and made accessible to the wider community for accountability and openness.

- Sharing and more effective use of lab equipment and computing capacities is needed, both within and between institutions.
- Research that contributes to developing solutions for environmental crises should be encouraged by HEIs and supported through fund allocation.

4. Capacity building

All members of the academic community actively participate in the development of the learning environment and the principles that the HEI promotes, regardless of whether they are students, faculty, administrative staff, or members of the maintenance of the facilities or of the services on campus. Therefore, it is crucial that everyone commits to the common attempt towards sustainability. For this reason, it is necessary to offer capacity-building opportunities which can give the entire academic community and those connected to it the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to make their actions more sustainable. In this way, they will have the competences to actively contribute to the promotion of new opportunities and of a more sustainable educational environment.

ESU believes that in order to foster a sustainable higher education culture it is essential that all staff are prepared with the knowledge and resources needed to face and effectively overcome sustainability challenges, as well as with a holistic approach that highlights the interaction between environmental, social, and economic justice. By providing the tools and resources, capacity building makes it possible for sustainability to become a core part of the institution's identity and operations.

Through capacity building, HEIs can encourage active participation and collective responsibility, creating a culture where everyone feels capable of and accountable for contributing to sustainability efforts. This collective empowerment is key to reach and promote the necessary transformation, as it ensures that sustainability is a shared commitment across the entire campus. However, while implementing these best practices, it is of foremost importance to acknowledge that every member of the academic community should be given an adequate amount of time to commit and engage in these activities, not impacting their work-life balance.

ESU believes that:

- HEIs should offer free and dedicated capacity building activities on sustainability to all their academic community, granting that they are accessible to all.
- HEIs should strive to increase awareness on environmental issues and sustainable practices among their academic communities, also through ad-hoc campaigns, fostering a campus culture that values sustainability.
- Every HEI should join or create repositories where the academic community can easily access resources on sustainability.
- Teaching staff should be provided the necessary training to meaningfully integrate sustainability principles into curricula and programmes. These training opportunities should also emphasise how to overcome historical biases and include indigenous knowledge in the curricula, promoting responsible environmental management practices that are both equitable and sustainable.
- Adequate time and opportunities to build up their knowledge about sustainability and engage in sustainable practices should be granted to every member of the academic community.
- HEIs should open to all the academic community collaborative reflections and dialogue on how to improve their sustainability, in order to shape together internal policies that promote sustainable practices.
- HEIs should ensure that sustainability is one of the key responsibilities of selected academic and administrative staff, in order to ensure that sustainability is prioritised across the operations of the institution.
- Every member of the academic community should be enabled to adopt and promote sustainable practices in their daily work that can benefit the overall institution.
- In order to make sustainable choices, each member of the academic community should also be provided adequate resources and retribution to contribute to and disseminate the sustainability mission of the institution.
- Governments should provide every HEI the necessary funds to promote capacity building initiatives which focus on sustainability.

5. Institutional practices

For Higher education institutions to be credible contributors to sustainable solutions, it is crucial to implement sustainable practices in their own operations. HEIs should ensure prioritisation of sustainable practices within teaching and research, but also in all other institutional practices. Students and staff should be involved in developing more sustainable practices, in order to ensure that they are applicable throughout the academic community.

Many HEIs are large institutions, with big budgets, and therefore also a strong consumer power. To ensure that the environment is taken into consideration when economic decisions are being made, there should be strong sustainability components in guidelines for purchases and within purchase agreements. This should apply to all guidelines and agreements for HEIs, both national and institution-specific ones.

Considering the great consumption capacity of HEIs, measures for reduced water and energy consumption should be implemented. It is important to ensure that water and energy efficiency is a focus both when it comes to renovation and building new facility capacities. Recycled and recyclable materials should be used whenever possible. HEIs should explore the possibilities for utilising green renewable energy sources within their premises to increase the production of green renewable energy.

Transportation is another large source of emissions for HEIs. Students and staff should therefore be encouraged and incentivised to use public transportation, walking or biking whenever possible. The HEIs have a responsibility to ensure that the infrastructure on campus allows for this, e.g. by ensuring bike parking spots and locker rooms available for students and staff. Emissions from travelling should be considered when shorter in-person meetings and conferences for students and staff are organised, and HEIs should work strategically to reduce air travel.

Over the past few years we have seen increasing extreme weather due to climate change, including natural disasters such as floods and landslides, with severe consequences for both students and staff. In these extreme situations, HEIs need to be flexible in implementing measures which keep students and staff safe, but

also allows for daily operations to continue as normal as possible. These measures can include immediate support for victims, flexible deadlines, extension of student status and delayed graduation, supplementary exam sessions and more. By joining forces with the community and fortifying together the support mechanisms for students and for the community, HEIs could provide shelters, resources and organisation that can make everyone feel safe, supported and cared for.

In the cases where HEIs provide accommodation and food services for the students and staff, it is necessary to ensure alignment with sustainability guidelines when it comes to providing these services. HEIs should support local producers to ensure seasonal meals when possible. Low impact meals should be offered when possible and food waste should be monitored to reduce the environmental impact.

ESU believes that:

- Students and staff should be involved in developing sustainable institutional practices.
- Sustainability should be a strong component in purchase agreements and guidelines for HEIs.
- Renovation of buildings should be prioritised over building anew, and recycled materials should be used whenever possible.
- HEIs should explore the possibilities for utilising green renewable energy sources.
- HEIs should prioritise utilising green renewable energy sources when possible.
- HEIs should reduce their greenhouse gas emissions linked to travel activities by encouraging students and staff to use public transport, biking or walking, and reducing air travel.
- HEIs should strive to preserve and increase biodiversity on campus, namely through conservation of soil, water and air within their premises.
- On campus, HEIs should also engage in sustainable waste management practices, including recycling and composting.
- By joining forces with the community, HEIs should fortify the support mechanisms for students and for the community in the case of extreme

weather events. HEIs should also create institutional contingency plans to deal with such events.

- HEIs should adopt eco-friendly practices in student housing, such as utilising energy-efficient systems and incorporating sustainable materials in constructions and renovations.
- HEIs should offer locally sourced food options, minimising food waste and using environmentally responsible packaging and disposal practices.
- Within its spaces, HEIs should avoid and discourage the usage of single-use plastics.
- HEIs should establish smart consumption measures for the reduction of energy and water usage.

6. Societal outreach

HEIs are not isolated entities, through the learning and research opportunities they offer they can hugely impact society and provide solutions for pressing global issues. For centuries, they have been a space for democratic discussion and participatory governance. In the time being, HEIs should not step back on this responsibility towards society and should not fear their role as active participants in their communities, fostering a collective commitment to sustainability and community engagement on the topic.

Through their work, HEIs can create new partnerships, support their local communities, empower marginalised groups and vulnerable communities, and influence sustainable actions at all levels. This can be done by developing sustainable projects or internship opportunities, addressing local challenges together with municipalities, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders, fostering active citizenship, community-based research and citizen science and tackling the local consumption of natural resources.

Through their actions, HEIs can actively contribute to the social development of their regions. They can offer their facilities to initiatives of shared and collaborative production of green renewable energy, implement green technologies that benefit the society at large and promote new sustainable practices for the labour market. By offering science-based contributions to different discussions on sustainability, they can help the society enhance (or in some cases re-build) its trust in science. Following this commitment, HEIs should

also be active participants in policy discussions and democratic spaces within their local communities.

HEIs should strive to set a model for other institutions when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions and investments in fossil fuels. The on-going under-financing of HE is pushing HEIs to look into partnerships with the private sector which can support them for new degrees and learning opportunities, for research equipment and the renovation of laboratories. However, if forced to explore potential partnerships, HEIs should set high standards regarding the companies' commitments to sustainability, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and divestment from fossil fuels.

Furthermore, HEIs can support marginalised and vulnerable communities, who are often the most impacted by climate change. By promoting science-driven discussions with the local authorities, HEIs can contribute to the development of specific programmes that address the needs of these communities, and support them in the adaptation to environmental degradation and climate disasters.

The focus of community outreach should not be only at the local level. HEIs should also strive to share best practices and learn new ones from other fellow institutions on a global level. They can start from their cross-border relationships to engage in interregional sustainability initiatives that can benefit multiple communities at the same time. Exchanging knowledge on a global level is essential to learn sustainable practices from other regions who face different climate challenges.

The societal outreach of HEIs also passes through the actions of their students in the society. A common tendency today is that of criminalising or discrediting young climate activists. ESU believes it is fundamental for HEIs to empower their students to be free to decide to continue or start engaging in activism for the climate, without fear of repercussions in their academic path. HEIs should also strive to make their spaces an accessible place for climate activists, where they participate in discussions and make their voices heard.

ESU believes that:

- Higher education institutions have the responsibility to contribute to a knowledge based public discussion about climate change.
- HEIs should ensure that the research they conduct is available and easily accessible to the society at large, so that sustainable practices and new innovations can contribute to the sustainability of the broader community.
- HEIs should commit to open data, making available their data and research outcomes to society.
- HEIs should promote citizen science initiatives and engage in collaborative projects and in the creation of internship opportunities to address local sustainability challenges together with municipalities, civil society organisations and other relevant local stakeholders.
- HEIs should participate in partnerships with local and regional stakeholders to establish interdisciplinary hubs with a focus on sustainability that involve students, academic staff and other stakeholders.
- HEIs should open their facilities in order to establish energy communities that can benefit the institutions but also the local community.
- HEIs should be an active policy advisor in the local policy dialogue, using the science-based knowledge coming from research on sustainability to support the local community development.
- If the HEIs manage assets in funds, these must be fossil fuel free and live up to the UN Principles for Responsible Investment and respect human rights.
- HEIs should focus their research also on the elaboration of indicators to transparently measure the environmental impact of the use of AI and digitalisation within their day-to-day activities, promoting this approach in the society.
- HEIs should proactively engage in science-driven discussion with local authorities and marginalised communities to support the latter in overcoming environmental challenges.
- HEIs should strive to exchange good practices and learn new ones by engaging in interregional sustainability initiatives at a global level.
- HEIs should empower and support their students who decide to participate in climate actions.
- HEIs should create multiple opportunities of discussion about climate change and environmental issues, open to the local community and involving climate activists and NGOs.

7. Leadership and institutional strategies

Leadership within higher education institutions (HEIs) bears a pivotal role in addressing the urgent sustainability challenges facing society. They must guide HEIs in adopting a "whole institution" approach to sustainability, embedding sustainable practices across all areas, from education and research to institutional governance and societal outreach. They are responsible for ensuring that HEIs develop and implement concrete action plans to achieve climate neutrality in alignment with European and global sustainability goals. This includes fostering a culture of sustainability that equips students with the knowledge and skills to tackle the interlinked crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Leadership must also engage in transparent reporting of emissions, ensure interdisciplinary collaboration, and contribute to policy discussions at all levels. By leading these efforts, HEIs can not only improve their own operations but also act as catalysts for broader societal change, positioning themselves as active contributors to sustainable development.

In order to identify and implement concrete actions to cut emissions and make their institution more sustainable, HEIs need to actively involve students and staff in decision making processes. This can for example be done by establishing "green offices" - co-creation spaces where students and staff can come together to receive information about the sustainability work of the institution, and create sustainability initiatives and events.

Sustainability initiatives at all levels should be guided by facts. Correct and transparent reporting of direct and indirect emissions from each HEI is therefore necessary. These reports should then be used as part of the basis for decisions when economic decisions and plans for emission reductions are made. Reporting should also be standardised, allowing for aggregation of comparable data on a national and European level.

ESU believes that:

- All HEIs shall make concrete action plans for a goal of cutting 55% of emissions between 1990 and 2030, and reaching climate neutrality by 2050, in line with European commitments.

- Mapping and transparent reporting of direct and indirect emissions are needed in order to implement effective emission reduction measures.
- Decision-making bodies and processes plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the whole institution approach to sustainability is implemented in all aspects of the institutions' operations.
- Student engagement in sustainability initiatives should be actively supported and encouraged, offering opportunities for research, internships, and activism as key components of HEIs' sustainability efforts.
- Regular reporting on sustainability progress is essential, ensuring transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement in alignment with institutional and societal sustainability goals.
- HEIs should establish green offices where students and staff can come together and work on sustainable initiatives.
- HEIs' reporting on emissions should be standardised, and data should be aggregated and published on national and European levels.