

# The European Green Deal & Universities

*A roadmap for the sector*

**Sergiu-Matei Lucaci**  
European University Association

**20 March 2023**

# Background to the roadmap

- The **complexity and scale of the green transition** extends far beyond climate and environmental problems:
  - availability and affordability of energy, clean water, healthy soils, food
  - cost of living and growing range of vulnerabilities related to gender, ethnicity, health inequalities
- **Universities are in a unique place** to address these issues by:
  - being producers and stewards of knowledge and connecting existing knowledge to develop new framings on societal challenges
  - bringing together researchers, innovators, public and private sectors, and their surrounding communities
- **The European Green Deal** provides a policy framework to integrate the scientific, educational, and institutional dimensions of universities' contribution to the green transition.

# Background to the roadmap

However, **the university sector's role** in the European Commission's initial plans was not adequately acknowledged.

- EUA published "**A university vision for the European Green Deal**" (2022) [LINK](#)



## POSITION

### A university vision for the European Green Deal

March 2022

Following on from its long-standing participation and leadership in global sustainability efforts, the European Union has embarked on a concerted quest for climate neutrality through the Green Deal. The level of ambition and the grasp of Europe's potential to lead in tackling climate change are welcome signs of its commitment to deliver a green transition for its citizens.

As the synergy of ideas and actions is vital for achieving this ambitious transition, universities hope that the initiative will match the extent of their expert knowledge about the climate emergency with the depth of measures necessary to solve it. With this response to the Green Deal, the European University Association (EUA) is thus articulating its position on how to improve the policy framework through enhanced use of knowledge-based assets stemming from universities' core areas of expertise: research, education, and innovation. As such, EUA aims to elicit policy makers' recognition of universities as critical stakeholders in the Green Deal. Moreover, it seeks to show that closer interaction with universities can unlock problem-solving capabilities, which the current framework risks overlooking due to outdated views of the university sector as mainly a service provider. The scope of this engagement comprises several avenues that national and European policy makers must open to universities to enable an effective co-creation of the Green Deal.

- A timely delivery of the Green Deal depends on universities' proven agility in integrating new perspectives on climate change and on what drives human behaviour. Interdisciplinarity is among the strongest tools to understand the challenges ahead and render realistic models of social change, using frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Interdisciplinary mindsets also enable students to demand climate action both within and beyond their institutions, and to collaborate in their future occupations towards achieving sustainability.

**Policies and funding programmes must adequately support interdisciplinary research and education and turn them into core enablers of Europe's sustainability agenda.**

- Universities' research and education missions are vital to bridging knowledge and action for climate goals, by providing the robust data and systemic approaches needed to develop Green Deal policies. Student and staff exchanges, and the creation of international and interdisciplinary research teams, can help deliver this by combining the full spectrum of views from across Europe.

**A synergistic vision is required to further boost Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ and expand the use of innovative methods like challenge-based learning and living labs.**

- Universities produce new insights into values, norms and processes that ensure justice and fairness in achieving sustainability. Policies and funding programmes for research and innovation are prime instruments to support this and to generate impactful fundamental science, while also ensuring that basic and applied research are better connected.
- A balanced mix must be ensured between basic research and more mission-driven approaches within the "smart directionality" of Horizon Europe.**

**Universities are not just service providers** transferring skills and information with no involvement in the co-creation of solutions. They are **critical stakeholders in the Green Deal.**

- But turning the vision into reality also requires **action on the part of the sector to transform itself...**
- **Not all institutions are well positioned** to act equally swiftly or in the same way.

# The roadmap: an overview

- An outline of processes and interventions **to boost universities' impact and visibility** in pursuing a climate-neutral, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable Europe.
- Reflects EUA's core concern with **solidarity, cooperation, and sharing** among its members.
- **The specificity of local paths to sustainability** allows for different starting and end points, as well as different timetables, in the proposed transformation.



## A Green Deal roadmap for universities

October 2023



Recognising this specificity is crucial as part of **a long-needed challenge to the reliance on quantitative goals in academia.**

- Differences are not adequately reflected in existing rankings and metrics of university performance.
- Learning between institutions can be enabled by sharing lessons from both successes and failures.

[LINK](#)

# The roadmap: overarching themes

Research &  
innovation

Education &  
students

Staff &  
operations

Public  
engagement  
& societal  
impact

- Includes **state of play & challenges**, plus **objectives & recommended actions** for universities and EUA.
- **No prespecified targets**: we cannot prescribe the ends of a complex institutional transformation when the necessary means are not readily available to the entire sector.
- Instead, it provides **good practice examples** from across Europe to illustrate the range of possibilities for enacting meaningful institutional change.
- It should serve as **an inspiration and template for universities**, enabling them to make both an effective contribution and serve as exemplars of sustainable communities.

# Education & students

- **Sustainability is increasingly acknowledged at institutional level**, but:
  - It does not always go beyond greening in daily operations and elective modules in learning and teaching.
  - The measurement of competence and uptake of knowledge tends to be chiefly numerical, e.g. numbers of students enrolled in specialised programmes.
- **Implementing interdisciplinarity** at universities follows different timelines and this should be respected, but:
  - Discussions about interdisciplinarity have been more about knowledge and less about skills or the need to challenge longstanding notions of expertise.
  - Some minimum expectations should be defined to raise the sense of urgency about interdisciplinarity's role as an enabler for the green transition.
- There is **greater impetus to prepare graduates** who can take up jobs in green sectors, but:
  - The SDG framework and more typical market demands and developments can only partially guide this process.
  - Institutional growth & higher student numbers should be balanced with an awareness of the impact of expanding campuses into surrounding communities.

# Staff & operations

- University autonomy provides wide scope for **strategy conception and goal setting** by the leadership team, but:
  - Strategies are often easier to endorse when they promote institutional growth through the attainment of numerical milestones.
  - Such milestones are not always appropriate or needed. An inclusive framing is required to incentivise the whole university community, beyond academics and leaders.
  - Trade-offs between quantitative goals can arise, e.g. between higher student numbers and less reliance on transport.
- Departing from established practice requires a **reframing of the strategic planning process**:
  - Pursuing the Green Deal is not just a question of costs and financing, but of optimising what universities already do.
  - Even abundant funding for much needed capital investment can be wasted when processes, incentives, and cultures remain unchanged.
  - Human resource policies can be key instruments to embed sustainability in an institution's identity, starting with induction procedures for staff at all levels.

- Aligning with the Green Deal requires universities to work not only **with other universities**, but to develop common implementation roadmaps **with a wider selection of stakeholders**.
- **Robust governance of interdisciplinary programmes is needed**, e.g. by appointing an institutional lead and champion to define activities that bring together all parties with a shared interest.
- **Sustainability strategies should outline clear roles & responsibilities** across the whole institution, indicating what is expected in practice on a day-to-day basis & allowing for direct student involvement in managing the strategy.
- **Codes of conduct** are needed to examine the rationale for high-carbon travel and guide staff members in choosing lower-emission alternatives.



# Thank you for your attention

Follow us on:

