

The Hamburg Declaration

“Facing the Grand Challenges of Climate Change and Sustainability”.

A statement adopted by the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg – a meeting of 45 university leaders from around the world invited for discussion held virtually in Hamburg from 2 to 4 June 2021 at the invitation of the German Rectors’ Conference, the Körber-Stiftung and Universität Hamburg.¹

At the fourth of its biannual meetings, the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg met to consider the role of universities and their leaders facing the grand challenges of climate change and sustainability. Informed by a comprehensive review commissioned by the Körber Foundation, documents such as the United Nations’ sustainable development goals and by our fruitful discussions over three days, we, the university leaders assembled, present the following declaration for consideration by the international public.

Premises

- Humanity is facing an existential challenge in its relation to the natural world.
- Climate change is a scientifically established fact. It is triggered by human-caused greenhouse gas emissions, posing threats not only to quality of life, but also to survival of species.
- Human civilization must urgently act to combat the effects of climate change, and concurrently to adapt to prevailing climate outcomes with practices that promote sustainable development, beneficial for a healthy world environment.
- Climate change is a global challenge requiring cooperation and solidarity among all institutions capable of contributing to solutions, including universities.
- Universities are uniquely positioned to lead society to a future of environmentally sustainable development and to promote mitigation of climate change. In their responsibility for educating citizens and professionals of the future, universities will play a key role in promoting sustainable development. In their role as engines of research and innovation, universities will generate effective methods of mitigation and environmental sustainability.
- University leaders are responsible for enhancing the profiles of the institutions in their care to assist society in confronting the challenge of climate change and in stimulating approaches to sustainable development.

¹ This Hamburg Declaration has been informed by the Hamburg Declarations of 2015 (*core mission*), 2017 (*Diversified organisation of higher education in the coming century*) and 2019 (*Relationships between universities and society*).

Universities have core values: The search for truth, respect for dialogue, concern for community and engagement for better welfare for the world and for humanity. As universities, in expressing our values, we will be leaders in facing the grand challenges of climate change. We intend to pursue the following actions and recommend them to our colleagues in universities worldwide:

- promote interdisciplinary research and teaching on sustainable development and climate change in all academic fields of study.
- ensure that students complete their curricula literate in sustainability challenges.
- cooperate with and learn from students, inspired by their concerns for the future, acknowledging that they are often the drivers of pursuing sustainability goals.
- provide incentives for faculty, staff, and students to develop information and strategies for mitigating climate change and promoting sustainability.
- make plans for reaching carbon neutrality on our campuses at a specified target date, appropriate for the university and our country.
- seek sustainable options for ongoing management such as recycling, renewable energy, reduced or repurposed water use.
- construct linkages with communities in our purview to support ongoing mitigation of climate change and nurturance of sustainability practices.
- engage with global networks focused on climate change and sustainability.
- strengthen public communication to promote good science and productive practices in sustainable development to assist society and counter misinformation.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered most social institutions in ways likely to have enduring effects. By virtue of needed social distancing, for example, remote means of learning have multiplied, and campus-based activities have been dispersed. This has resulted in a reduction in carbon emissions related to university activities, and closer communication with local communities aimed at integrating strategies for community health. While virtual learning is only one part of a rich learning environment, pandemic-induced effects like these demonstrate the adaptability of universities in providing various opportunities for academic and pedagogic interactions.

They provide an ideal starting point for universities to lead society in promoting sustainable development while serving as models for addressing global crises in general, such as pandemics. At the same time context is important: institutions differ with respect to geographical location, political framework and funding and thus in their relationship to sustainability and climate change. While the Global North faces distinct responsibilities quite different than the Global South, all universities have a duty to respond to the challenge of environmental sustainability and climate change in their own diverse ways.

Hamburg, 4 June 2021

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Some Specific Considerations

During our deliberations we gathered in six groups, each focused by topic. Each group recommended specific actions through their plenary discussions. Recognising that universities face limitations, we nonetheless advocate pursuit of the following challenges:

Institutional mission and identity

- University leaders will implement a cultural change at their institutions by reviewing their strategic decisions and their everyday action in governance, education, research and outreach through the lenses of sustainability and climate action.
- Universities will engage with their own and surrounding communities, interacting with society at the local, regional and global level.
- Universities will encourage good practices and act as living labs in terms of sustainable campuses and lead in promoting the development of public policies related to sustainability and climate action.

Education, teaching and learning

- Universities will create opportunities both within the curriculum and through co-curricular activities for students to understand, with urgency and agency, the threat of climate change.
- Universities will foster opportunities for students to develop a sense of social responsibility through community-based or service-based learning.
- Universities will recognise that there are competing university and national priorities and seek points of intersection and leverage that allow them to simultaneously make progress on sustainability goals and on combatting climate change.

Research and innovation

- Universities will lead in ensuring the integrity of research data and open access to it in the service of enhancing credibility of evidence. This will strengthen the central role of research findings at the core of developing sound policy by governments and intergovernmental agencies.
- Universities will facilitate interdisciplinary research within and beyond each university. This includes a key role for university leaders to ensure inclusion of the widest range of disciplines.
- Universities will facilitate partnerships, networks and connections beyond the university for the conduct of research and then use their convening power to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders to consider research evidence.

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Institutional dimension

- In accordance with their core values, universities will prioritise issues relating to sustainability, including curriculum, faculty, organisation and budget.
- Universities will provide leadership in transferring the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic and will prepare themselves to respond to similar challenges with a greater degree of resilience, innovation and adaptability, especially in relation to sustainability and climate change.
- Universities will learn from each other and share best practices. This includes corporate social responsibility, community service, and developing stakeholder consensus with local communities on addressing challenges of sustainability.

Political and financial framework

- Universities will engage in advocacy and activism by serving as public intellectuals in the communities in which they are located, positioning universities as anchor institutions. They will restructure hiring, tenure, and promotion processes to recognise the valuable contributions of those who engage in advocacy and activism, speaking across differences as a means of restoring public trust in higher education.
- University leaders will advocate with governments and relevant agencies to ensure that education and research public policy and funding instruments are aligned with sustainability. Where funding is constrained, universities will maximise collaboration on sustainability in pursuit of their core missions.
- Recognising the influence of international rankings, university leaders will inform governments, media and society on the value and limitations of rankings. They will advocate collectively to prioritise valid and verifiable metrics aligned with sustainability goals and to reduce the resource costs of participation.

Local, national and international partnerships

- Universities will use their convening power to play a key role with regard to sustainability and climate change. They will be important catalysts, bringing together actors from different contexts and contributing to finding solutions.
- Universities will find a way to involve their local communities – not only in local but also in national and global matters. This is of particular importance to grow trust in universities and to support their credibility.
- Universities will collaborate to create teaching resources on sustainability and climate change, making them available to universities all over the world. These teaching resources will acknowledge a variety of evidence-based perspectives.

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