

## POSITION

# A university vision for the European Green Deal

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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with universities can unlock problem-solving capabilities, which the current framework risks overlooking due to outdated views of the university sector as mainly a service provider.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 synergetic 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.**

- Engaging with citizens and policy makers must be acknowledged and rewarded as a normal part of academics' work, since this enables universities to act as honest brokers in the Green Deal. The competitiveness of academic careers, as well as their assessment, currently generate only limited rewards for academics who take up such engagement.  
**Working at the science-policy interface and offering support to local communities must be incentivised by pursuing reforms of academic career assessment together with member states.**
- Universities can help calibrate the various strands of the Green Deal so that the ensuing transition is social and behavioural just as much as it is technological and industrial. Discussions about behavioural change are undoubtedly difficult, but an exit from past paradigms about economic growth and consumption is necessary.  
**Policy makers must partner with universities to develop and implement new thinking around sustainable well-being, which is central to orchestrating a holistic transition.**
- The Green Deal should be pursued in full awareness that different lifestyles and practices around the world may already be more aligned with the quest for sustainability. Universities can help nuance the discourse on Europe's leadership with evidence-based scrutiny of ways of living in the Global North and their spillover effects on the rest of the planet.  
**The EU must seek constructive partnerships between the Global North and South and tap into the many international and cross-sectoral alliances in which universities play a key role.**

Being aware of both the scale of climate change and the breadth of the knowledge available to tackle it, universities wish to have a meaningful impact on society through mechanisms that can adequately tap into their capabilities. The Green Deal is an unparalleled opportunity to do so, which is why the EUA calls on policy makers to ensure that this framework reflects the broad range of expertise and institutional drivers that make universities critical partners in the green transition. Following the recent COP26 climate conference, the university sector stands ready to support Europe in delivering on its commitments to sustainability and a greener, better future. A systematic engagement with the sector can boost Europe's chances of success by having a Green Deal that is more consistent, nuanced and scientifically informed. EUA, on behalf of Europe's universities, welcomes the opportunity to work with the European Commission and national policy makers and invites them to join the university sector in developing a roadmap to enable the vision set out here.

## WHY WE NEED A UNIVERSITY VISION FOR THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

A European Green Deal that achieves its purpose must be science-driven, with suitable mechanisms for the provision of scientific advice and the boosting of scientific literacy among citizens and policy makers. Europe's universities are ready and eager to help enhance these and to co-create the policies necessary for a sustainable society. Universities straddle boundaries between the public and private sectors, connect local and global communities and act as honest brokers in knowledge facilitation. Most importantly, they sit at the nexus of various coalitions for change, with partners from civil society and business that can disseminate environmental knowledge to an active citizenry and workforce. Leveraging these capabilities for a successful Green Deal is feasible, on the condition that policy makers initiate a strategic engagement with the university sector and address the issues outlined here.

## ENHANCING THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

While public policies generally draw upon scientific or expert advice, relatively few have managed to trigger broad discussion about the very nature of this advice or the mechanisms to provide it. The scope and complexity of the Green Deal not only makes it exceptionally reliant on such mechanisms, but can also turn it into a prime opportunity to discuss what is meant by expertise, and whether the processes to gather expertise at the EU level are optimal. The current, early stage in developing the Green Deal is the ideal moment to seize the opportunity and address detrimental guiding assumptions that only some actors and knowledge can support this policy framework. A successful transition can only be realised through full cooperation between a broad range of actors covering the entire spectrum of expertise and knowledge.

With the 2019 publication of the European Commission's [Green Deal Communication](#), universities were concerned to see few, mainly passing references to the higher education sector. The prospect of limited stakeholder support that this omission raises was particularly disconcerting, as was the impression that the Green Deal might not be an opportunity for a sector that is already greatly contributing to climate neutrality. The Commission's emphasis on continued economic growth, [even if successfully decoupled from resource use](#), suggests an approach that is heavily reliant on the private sector and less inclusive of different notions of what drives citizens' behaviour beyond consumption. In reality, public institutions such as universities also [integrate sustainability commitments into their strategies](#), often in response to student and staff engagement, or to reflect institutional values, which shows that there is wide potential for change beyond the sphere of markets and industry. Omitting this dimension will obscure the complex interplay of push and pull factors in the Green Deal, where drivers such as student demands and engagement with local communities are no less meaningful for climate action than regulations or targets for specific sectors. Moreover, those drivers maintain a steady process of curriculum reform, whereby universities respond dynamically to societal concerns and tailor their educational offerings for maximum impact through generations of graduates. For example, by using the UN SDGs to educate students, they prepare the future workforce for solving problems, such as trade-offs between using biofuels and alleviating hunger or protecting ecosystems. Insights acquired through this training could be used to strengthen the Green Deal and broaden its scope beyond the pursuit of growth, but policy makers must signal that this is desired by seeking closer cooperation with universities.

A further aspect of the Green Deal that needs to be refined is how its political ambitions are informed by scientific data around the contexts and prerequisites for change leading to climate neutrality. The parameters within which such change is both feasible and timely stem from an assortment of factors, like culture and local specificities, governance structures, or the configuration of energy systems which vary across countries. While it is evident that collecting and analysing this data will not be impactful if done in isolation, integrating it as part of systemic solutions to the climate emergency remains challenging in the absence of a holistic approach. Interdisciplinarity, which brings together expertise from natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, is an established pillar of university research, education and innovation, and can enable such holistic thinking. However, it is unclear to what extent this is mirrored in the policy uptake of scientific knowledge. The structure of both the European Commission and the civil service in many EU member states suggests that much could still be done to address silo thinking and streamline interdepartmental collaboration for climate goals. In its current stage of development, the Green Deal provides little indication of how climate change is tackled using scientific insights from beyond the traditional remits of ministries or Commission directorates.

The ability of universities to bring together expertise from different areas can be used as a model to realise systemic approaches throughout the European Union. Additionally, it can make policies and their implementation more attuned to the complexity of behavioural change, social acceptance and the influence of value and belief systems that social sciences and humanities focus on. For instance, some actors in the Green Deal will focus on optimising solutions to make current systems more robust, while others will seek more radical ideas for deep-seated transformations. This does not have to be an intractable tension, especially since holistic approaches to any societal challenge are rarely complete as such, and thrive on the productive interplay of diverse perspectives.

A culture of openness to scientific advice and stakeholder input is important in this regard, but it no longer suffices in the face of a complex global challenge stretching over decades. Without coherent mechanisms for assessing, collating and applying the best available evidence, scientific findings risk being subordinated to momentary political objectives. Universities want a Green Deal that is evidence-based, and they have the capacity to offer strong, reliable data to this end. But doing so effectively also requires policy makers to discard outdated views of the sector as akin to a service provider transferring skills and information with no involvement in the co-creation of solutions. Scientific insight rarely, if ever, stops at the point of informing a set of regulations or shaping the tone of a policy proposal. It extends to issues of implementation, improvement and assessment of impact, so much so that achieving the green transition depends on dynamic feedback processes instead of narrow, time-limited exchanges of research results.

Robust mechanisms to facilitate this co-creation should be part of the routine formulation and execution of policies, as well as of how political institutions keep citizens informed. Transparency of decision-making is essential to demonstrating accountability for climate action, but it must go beyond one-way communication of disparate facts, or of decisions already taken. Policies aiming for grand societal transformations will not succeed without assembling facts into compelling narratives, and this assemblage should reflect citizens' values and concerns so that it generates the most effective narrative for action. To take just one example, the political discourse driving the Green Deal emphasises Europe's leadership potential in green technological innovation and the need to further invest in it. While certainly important, it also raises the issue of how much societal mobilisation this discourse could achieve, especially as [innovation for climate change mitigation is advancing faster than innovation for adaptation](#), and thus might not respond to some communities' needs. Universities' local knowledge puts them in an ideal position to nuance such discourses by showcasing to policy makers how to stimulate mobilisation through co-creating localised solutions with citizens.

Finally, as the development of the Green Deal proceeds, the European Commission has provided a roadmap with its ["Fit for 55" package](#). As an extensive follow-up to the ambitions of the 2019 Communication, the package is definitely welcome, but it should make room for acknowledging that the Green Deal is more than a set of sector-by-sector policies with fixed deadlines. What is needed is a comprehensive vision aligned more with the atmosphere's total carbon budget than with targets for 2030 or 2050 which risk suggesting that Europe still has time. There is no time. Urgent solutions are required now. Just recalling the sudden emphasis on access to nature, clean air and green public spaces triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, elements of a vision for future societies are discernible and should be consolidated in the present moment. Moreover, they shed light on the prospects for societal and lifestyle shifts by emphasising positive change, which university research can already identify and contextualise with large amounts of data. Policy makers thus have at their disposal a potentially immense evidence base for pursuing change now, particularly as this change does not necessarily have to stem from climate alarmism which is less and less effective in spurring action.

## CONCLUSION

Europe's commitment to climate neutrality requires a Green Deal that is evidence-based and holistic. Among the pillars that sustain this endeavour are the interdisciplinary expertise, local knowledge and societal engagement of the university sector. Decision-makers must therefore recognise the sector as a critical stakeholder that can help foster impactful narratives for citizen mobilisation and avoid the fragmentation of policies across different domains. They must also leverage the role of universities as key facilitators between the Global North and South, so that strong international partnerships can promote an outward-looking and equitable pursuit of sustainability. EUA is hopeful that these prerequisites will enhance the Green Deal and that systematic dialogue with a broad range of actors will make its implementation successful. It thus calls for support to universities as providers of knowledge and skills and as co-creators of solutions for Europe's climate agenda.