THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GREEN DEAL IN THE ACADEMIC WORLD

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

28 02 2023

Circle U.
European University Alliance

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

This project has received funding from the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme under grant agreement No. 101004062

INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal is at the core of the European Commission's strategic and political actions for the near future and is Europe's answer to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. With the Green Deal, the European Commission sets out to transform the European Union into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy without greenhouse gases in 2050. The aim is also to protect the health of people and ecosystems in Europe and beyond.

A transformation of this scale can only work with mobilizing the sectors of education, research and innovation. From the very start, Circle U. has committed itself to become a laboratory for anchoring the Green Deal in the academic landscape in Europe. The topics of sustainability, climate change, global health and democracy are deeply embedded in every aspect of the alliance. Through Circle U., academics, students and partners from civil society come together in innovative formats to help implementing the SDGs and to catalyse change by transforming research, education and innovation.

With this paper, Circle U. wishes to share key messages and recommendations to universities and stakeholders, following a collective reflection we had in November 2022.

ENGAGING IN A COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

Within the Circle U. European University Alliance, it is the responsibility of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin to coordinate the Knowledge Hub on Climate. But even beyond the alliance, climate and sustainability are at the core of Humboldt's research and governance agenda: Humboldt-Universität has committed to becoming a climate-neutral university by 2030 and has made it one of its highest priorities to communicate climate science and advocate publicly for sustainability on a special platform. For these reasons Humboldt-Universität organised the event "Europe and the Green Deal in the Academic World" in Berlin on 28 and 29 November 2022, to bring together students, academics and staff from Circle U. universities and representatives of local and national authorities beyond the confines of academia to address the potential impact of European University Alliances in relation to the EU's Green Deal.

The dialogue evolved around the following questions:

- Is the Green Deal an opportunity or does it pose risks for Higher Education? Does it recognize the crucial role of universities as change-makers?
- How are sustainability and climate awareness reflected in research and teaching?
- What could a higher education policy strategy for the Green Deal look like, both in terms of content and organization and in relation to the different groups and levels of governance at university?

To tackle these questions, the event saw the participation of prominent international and European thinkers and politicians. These included:

- Prof. Dr. Maja Göpel, a political economist and sustainability scientist with a focus on transdisciplinary work
- Prof. Dr. Julia von Blumenthal, President of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
- Ruppert Stüwe, a member of the German federal parliament and member of the Committee for Education, Research and Technology Assessment
- Prof. Dr. Joybrato Mukherjee, President of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)
- Prof. Dr. Anne Enderwitz, Department of English and American Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Circle U. Chair in the Think and Do Tank on the Future of Higher Education.

UNIVERSITIES AS MODELS OF SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR

Universities are among the most trusted institutions in our societies. As such, we believe they should take an active role and lead by example. The purpose of the conference was therefore not to limit ourselves to talk about sustainability, but to be an actor of sustainability.

A *World Café* type of format was chosen to showcase initiatives in the field of sustainability, climate science and climate communication, both from within the university community (run by students, staff and research groups) and outside, including social entrepreneurs like *DeepGreen.glass*, which turn discarded glass bottles into planet-friendly glassware.

The conference dealt with the theme of sustainability not only on an intellectual and scientific level, through panels and best practice examples, but also on a practical level, through activities conducive to actually engaging in sustainability: we organised a tombola where participants had the chance to win prizes from small upcycling companies in Berlin. We collected a total of 400 euro for *Jyoti e.V.*, a young non-profit association that will use the donations to organise and finance workshops for the seamstresses in areas such as labour rights, women's rights, business development, but also literacy and English courses.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In spite of the distrust towards science institutions that is articulated by climate sceptics, **universities** are still among the most trusted institutions in our societies. As knowledge hubs, they **must adopt a leading role in working towards the radical reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and towards safeguarding the planet**. As civic organisations, universities can and should function as lighthouses within their local communities and take an active international role: by working towards climate neutrality, universities can set an example for other organisations and give hope to the younger generations that they educate.

2. In pursuit of climate neutrality, **universities have to engage with the different interest groups and diverse individuals that form academic communities, as well as with external stakeholders**. Universities are embedded in local communities and international partnerships, they work with and for society. While it is important for universities to communicate their findings, it is equally important to listen, both to society at large and to their students. The concerns and interests of various groups may differ and need to be heard. Knowledge exchange and communication play a crucial role both within universities and with society.

3. Science is by definition a transnational endeavour, hence alliances like Circle U. play a special role in promoting climate awareness and developing innovative solutions. Because of transnational research and their role in promoting international networks and cultural exchange, universities remain travel-intensive organisations. This is true for research as well as education. While the value of international exchange programmes like Erasmus+ and the benefits of personal contact and connections cannot be overstated, the recent pandemic has facilitated the introduction of digital formats. With hybrid options like blended programmes or the concept of internationalization at home, **universities should use the opportunity to continue part of their international endeavours digitally, while at the same time demonstrating awareness of the impact of mobility**. We cannot simply go back to business as usual following the digital shift brought about as a consequence of the pandemic.

4. Academic Freedom is one of the core elements of European Higher Education and Research. Science has to remain free, both in the ways it proceeds and in relation to the topics it chooses. While climate and sustainability cannot be the sole focus of research and education, **sustainability is emerging as one of the core challenges of contemporary societies and as a key part of higher education**. It invites interdisciplinary perspectives and working across disciplines and can facilitate innovative teaching practices. After all, sustainability initiatives are often spearheaded by students who engage in peer-to-peer teaching and student-led research. **Within an alliance like Circle U., member universities can exchange best-practice examples and research on innovative teaching and learn from each other how to best implement a sustainable education**.

5. It is not knowledge about climate change that is lacking, but political discourses and actions that acknowledge and mitigate this emerging catastrophe. **Universities in general, and European University Alliances like Circle U. in particular, need to rally interdisciplinary expertise and collaboration and engage policy makers in their quest for solutions** – the national conferences, such as the one organised by Humboldt-Universität, are an example for this.

6. In order to live up to this task, and **to function as a) incubators of knowledge and innovation, b) as civic universities that engage with their local communities and c) as a global network of stakeholders, universities and alliances like Circle U. have to be properly funded**. This includes the aspects of education and research as well as actions and efforts related to public