The road to Net Zero: The vital role of London's higher education sector

November, 2022

LONDON HIGHER

The climate crisis is one of the biggest threats facing society. Universities have a critical role to play in finding solutions that work.

Here in London, we are home to over 40 HEIs, giving us a combined reach of half a million students and staff. London HE is a collective powerhouse of sustainability education and research, with the potential to drive forward lasting change at a local, national and international level.

We also have a responsibility to do this work: the students in our lecture theatres are the future generations who will be most impacted by inaction.

As Executive Chair of the London Higher Sustainability Network, I know first-hand the excellent work already happening in London Higher institutions across the capital.

Through the new London Higher Sustainability Pledge, we are supporting sustainability practitioners to work more closely with senior leadership and make meaningful progress in their institutions.

By joining together over the coming years and working with government and other partners, we know we can and will have a lasting impact – in our city and beyond.

Professor Frances Corner OBE
Warden, Goldsmiths, University of London and Executive Chair of the London Higher Sustainability Network

I have said it before, and I will say it again: universities are not part of the problem in our society, they are part of the solution. Whether we are talking about filling skills gaps in our workforce, producing life-changing innovations or spearheading investment and business growth, our universities and higher education colleges are key to improving the world around us.

This is no more apparent than when it comes to the green agenda. As institutions whose main business it is to educate and meet the needs of the students of the future, universities are well placed to lead the UK Government's drive for Net Zero.

Through the social mobility they effect to the scientific discoveries they create, universities are positive agents of change. As former Universities and Science Minister, I was fortunate to see the good work that universities do first-hand and, as the Minister responsible for signing the UK's Net Zero commitment into law, I know our higher education sector has a critical role to play in helping us to achieve this, both by enhancing our understanding of the scale of the climate change challenge and by devising ways to tackle it.

As major civic institutions, universities, too, have a clear opportunity to lead by example and put in place a responsibility to make Net Zero happen on their own campuses as well as within their local communities.

No step in the right direction is a step too small. So, while switching to net zero emissions supply chains should be the ultimate aim for higher education institutions across the country, there are plenty smaller and meaningful changes that can help pave the way to more sustainable modes of operating – including reducing food waste in campus canteens, encouraging recycling and reducing the use of single-use plastics. Every institution of every size, shape and specialism can be doing something, however small, to contribute to our collective effort against climate change.

As sizeable institutions in our capital city, London's universities and higher education colleges are key to our national Net Zero effort. We cannot achieve Net Zero without London, and London cannot achieve Net Zero without its university sector, which comprises well over 40 different institutions, educates around 485,000 students and collaborates daily with organisations across the globe.

In my new role leading the Independent Review of Net Zero for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I am heartened to see London Higher members commit to a sustainable future through the London Higher Sustainability Pledge, and I encourage those institutions who are yet to sign up to it to agree to this highly important commitment to drive progress towards Net Zero both in our capital and our country at large.

As global citizens, we only get one shot at getting this right. That's why I want to see the full force of the UK academy turning its attention to how we achieve positive change and sustainable future growth. For so long, London has been the engine room of the UK economy. Now it is time for our capital to step up to become the driving force on the national journey to Net Zero – and its impressive array of universities are sure to be essential, once again, to London's ability to deliver on this commitment.

Rt Hon Chris Skidmore OBE MP
Chair, Independent Review of Net Zero for the UK Government

All speakers at the London Higher annual event on 12 October 2022 highlighted the importance of the need to incorporate sustainability into any university future planning and thinking. The Rt. Hon Chris Skidmore MP underlined this, illustrating that net zero is still firmly on the government agenda and that we need to really focus on how we can deliver this more efficiently and effectively. He stated the HE sector has a core role in helping make this happen.

To help solve the climate and wider sustainability crises, universities can become critical levers of change. The HE sector in London alone produces over a hundred thousand graduates a year. Each of these should have the knowledge, skills and experiences to assist organisations and communities with their own carbon reduction and sustainability pathways. The climate and wider sustainability impacts will affect almost every future job and household, so having well educated, capable and inspiring problem solvers, and innovators ready to deliver, is essential.

London is already recognised for its research excellence in the application of sustainability thinking, but it can do more. More through intra and inter institutional collaboration to work across disciplines to develop the understanding and innovations needed to deliver a sustainable society. Many universities and colleges are actively decarbonising their estates to meet ambitious net zero carbon targets. We must do more and faster where possible, we must seek funding and also apply our own academic expertise from not just staff but students to deliver net zero and create living labs across our campuses. We can't stop there, we must decarbonise our supply chains and ensure they meet wider sustainability, including social responsibilities, we must also think how we can make our estates more valuable for wildlife and resilient to climate extremes.

We must also work in partnership. Sustainability cannot be delivered alone. Our strength lies in our ability to reach out, to collaborate across universities, local and central government, to businesses and our communities. Universities and colleges have a unique place in society and one which, through our work, we can address the many challenges societies and our planet face. It is a challenging but inspiring position and one that today's event illustrated was something we all believed is possible.

Simon Goldsmith
Head of Sustainability, University of Greenwich and Practice Chair of the London Higher Sustainability Network

Working together to shape a sustainable future

London's much-respected higher education institutions are rightly determined to play a key role in driving forward the increasingly crucial focus on sustainability, the climate crisis and net zero targets.

It's really encouraging to see them taking a proactive lead in these critically important areas, individually and also collectively, as part of the London Higher Sustainability Network.

As an organisation determined to play its part in the transition to a low-carbon economy, Barclays is really pleased to support their aims and ambitions. It's encouraging to see high levels of active engagement, with expert panel discussions and thought-provoking presentations from insightful speakers focusing on improving sustainability and mitigating climate change.

As The Rt. Hon Chris Skidmore MP said in his keynote speech, London's universities are very much part of the solution when it comes to tackling the climate crisis and wider environmental issues, including the all-important drive towards net zero.

The capital's HE sector has access to incredibly talented people and amazing research resources that can really make a difference to the sustainability and net zero agenda.

For our part, as one of the first banks to announce our ambition to be a net zero bank by 2050, we're rapidly expanding our green and sustainable financing activities, while reducing the emissions we finance, focusing on the highest-emitting sectors first.

But, given that organisations tend to be at different stages on the journey, as both Simon Goldsmith and Professor Frances Corner stress, collaboration and partnership is crucial for long-term success.

With that in mind, we look forward to continue working closely with London's Higher Education Institutions and wish them success in their drive to help shape a better, more sustainable future for the planet.

Richard Robinson
Head of Education, Barclays Corporate Banking

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