

Press release

Universities in the fight against climate change University presidents from 27 countries discuss responsibility for climate protection at the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg

Hamburg, 17 May 2021. Climate change and its consequences are among the greatest challenges facing the global community. What has been less discussed so far is the potential of universities worldwide to contribute to the accomplishment of this global task, for example through research and technological development.

In addition, universities as educational institutions shape generations of students and thus indirectly influence the basic attitudes and actions of tomorrow's society – an aspect that is becoming increasingly important in view of the worldwide growth in student numbers.

These and other contributions by universities to tackling climate change will be discussed by 46 university presidents at the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg from 2 to 4 June, with topics ranging from the design of curricula and research profiles to energy-efficient campus development and the transfer of sustainability issues into society. The Council is a joint initiative of the German Rectors' Conference, the Körber-Stiftung and the Universität Hamburg.

On the day before the Council, Nobel Prize winner in Economics Esther Duflo will give a keynote speech on "Good economics for warmer times: How to address our climate change challenges" as part of the virtual public event at Universität Hamburg. The keynote will be broadcast live on 1 June at 4:30 pm on www.guc-hamburg.de.

Recent study examines universities' commitment to climate change

The basis for discussion and the scientific foundation for this year's Council is the study "Universities facing Climate Change and Sustainability" commissioned by the Körber-Stiftung. The research, conducted under the expert leadership of university researcher Tristan McCowan of University College London, shows what universities can already contribute to tackling climate

change and the challenges they face in doing so. To that end, the authors studied two universities in each of seven countries: Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, South Africa, UK, and the USA.

The case studies clearly show the regional priorities of the universities, some of which differ greatly. The main obstacle to climate protection at the global level is the growing marketisation of higher education systems, which is also reflected in the performance criteria of the influential international university rankings. In addition, Tristan McCowan pleads for "higher education institutions . . . [to] increasingly formulate holistic institutional strategies to reduce CO2 emissions and ultimately achieve climate neutrality". Among other things, the authors of the study advocate strong and reliable public funding for the higher education sector to promote public welfare-oriented activities such as climate protection measures. In addition, they argue for more differentiated higher education systems, in which universities with a focus on sustainability also have their place. They also say that education for sustainable development should be taught to all students, regardless of their chosen field of study.

For Germany, the study examines the Freie Universität Berlin and the Eberswalde University of Applied Sciences. Both institutions are successfully engaged in the field of CO2 emissions and climate research.

Materials for download

- [Full study](#) (English, PDF)
- [Executive Summary](#) (German translation, PDF)
- [Infographic](#)

Interview opportunities (enquiries via press contact please)

- Prof Dr Tristan McCowan, University College London
- Prof Dr Peter-André Alt, President of the German Rectors' Conference
- Tatjana König, Member of the Executive Board of the Körber-Stiftung
- Prof Dr Dr h.c. Dieter Lenzen, President of Universität Hamburg

A joint initiative of

Press briefing and participation in the Council

- A digital press briefing with the Council's initiators Peter-André Alt, Dieter Lenzen and Tatjana König will be held at 10 am on 4 June, 2021. Accreditation deadline is 2 June, 2021.
- Journalists will also have the opportunity to obtain accreditation for some sessions of the non-public Council. In both cases, please register via the press contact.

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