

Advancing Green Campus Initiatives through a Decolonial Approach

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Executive Summary

With the emergence of climate change as one of the most urgent global threats impacting our environment and survival, the need to address this challenge through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is imperative. This policy brief provides a pathway for HEIs to lead in addressing climate change by decolonising their Green Campus Initiatives (GCI).

Further, this document maps out how current GCI practices could be enhanced by incorporating diverse knowledge systems, particularly climate mitigation and adaptation practices of indigenous and marginalised communities. Failure to do this could result in climate strategies that are disconnected from the cultural and social contexts of those most affected by climate change.

Through the following problem statement and solutions, this brief draws from Ubuntu concepts as a decolonial approach for HEIs to implement in the transformation of GCIs. By incorporating decolonised educational frameworks and campus operations, HEIs can incorporate diverse knowledge systems and values, contextually relevant, ethically grounded strategies, and participatory and real-world problem-solving for climate mitigation and adaptation.

Introduction

For HEIs to truly lead in tackling the threats from climate change, these institutions must urgently reconsider their approach to addressing systemic inequalities and environmental injustices.

This policy brief outlines how HEIs can reduce carbon footprints by promoting eco-friendly resources, as well as teaching and learning environments through decolonised green campus initiatives. A green campus is a holistic organisational approach where institutional infrastructure, knowledge dissemination, and research and promote the values of “social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2023, p.2; Riberio et al, 2019, p.1). Climate change represents one of the most pressing existential threats of our time, with massive implications for natural and human systems.

The link between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the daily operations of HEIs is evident in their capacity to drive systemic change through

education, research, and community engagement. By adopting a decolonial approach to green campus initiatives, HEIs can transform their educational frameworks to integrate diverse, often marginalised, knowledge systems and climate literacies across all disciplines. This includes an authentic incorporation of mainstream scientific perspectives and indigenous and local knowledge that offers alternative understandings of climate mitigation and adaptation. The approach transcends technologically advanced research on climate change to include contextually relevant, ethically grounded, and social justice-driven strategies. This involves engaging students and faculty in participatory, real-world problem-solving that prioritises the voices and experiences of marginalised communities and ensures that the solutions developed are equitable and inclusive. In addition, the framework prioritises the co-creation of knowledge with communities, values their contributions equally, and ensures that green campus initiatives directly benefit those most affected by climate change.

Problem Statement

The need to decolonise climate change education extends to the wide variety of GCIs present in HEIs, particularly those in the Global North. To best understand the issues of decolonising GCIs, this policy brief highlights two key areas that require intervention: theoretical foundations and practical applications.

Decolonising climate change initiatives within HEIs is an urgent and paramount matter. Climate change is a grave global challenge that transcends national borders and disproportionately impacts underprivileged communities, especially in the Global South. The extinction of species, threats to the Great Barrier Reef, and the melting of polar ice, among other impacts, force us to confront the distressing reality that this crisis is a direct result of human actions, one which compels us to question the repercussions of our environmental footprint and underscores an ethical imperative to foster transformative solutions.

HEIs are integral in cultivating the knowledge, skills, and environmental consciousness of future leaders. Historically, initiatives such as environmental education, which

originated as early as 1972 (Zhu et al., 2020), and subsequent green campus movements underscore the potential positive impacts of such educational programs. Noteworthy developments include the University of Washington putting forward the first pilot plan for a green campus in 1997 (Han 2011) as well as the establishment of the International Sustainable Campus Network in 2007, which continues to unite prestigious universities worldwide and continues to advocate for sustainable infrastructural developments. These precedents suggest that fostering a sustainable development ethos within campuses can have tangible benefits.

However, despite these advancements, prevalent institutional approaches to climate change often fall short due to inheriting colonialist undertones which perpetuate systemic biases and paternalistic dynamics (Stein, 2023, 168). This not only has led to an oversimplification of complex environmental issues but also imposes ethnocentric views on justice, responsibility, and sustainability. The phenomenon of "green capitalism" and the pervasive risk of "greenwashing" are emblematic of such shortcomings, where institutions may appear environmentally progressive while engaging in fundamentally unsustainable practices rooted in continual economic growth and profitability (Stein, 2023, 169).

Moreover, the intellectual and theoretical foundations of many HEIs are deeply entrenched in Western philosophy, originating from Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. This Western-centric paradigm has historically and significantly excluded non-Western and indigenous perspectives, leading to a culture which has abstained from a holistic and inclusive approach to global environmental challenges. Therefore, an inclusive decolonial lens is crucial, one that prioritizes globally diverse concepts, such as Ubuntu, and fosters an educational milieu that values and integrates the distinctive intellectual traditions and voices from marginalized communities.

Thus, a potent solution lies in the decolonization of GCIs. By actively challenging and restructuring the Eurocentric frameworks of HEI climate change programs, there is a profound opportunity to cultivate a truly inclusive, engaged, and reflective climate-conscious community. This paradigm shift not only diversifies the academic discourse but also engenders a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of

environmental stewardship, resonating with a global chorus of voices and experiences crucial in the collective fight against climate change.

Solutions

HEIs across the Global North and the Global South must adopt sustainable measures to help reverse the negative effects of climate change. Such measures must have the ability to meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This entails the provision of sustainable infrastructure for teaching and learning, reducing the environmental impact and cost of education, as well as raising awareness and increasing conscientiousness concerning contemporary ecological impacts.

Introducing *ubuntu* in Green Campus Initiatives

This policy brief proposes ubuntu as an approach to decolonise GCIs and contribute to HEI's ongoing and future climate efforts. 'Ubuntu' is a Southern African philosophical relational concept prioritising shared humanity and communal relationships over individualism. The major features of Ubuntu include interconnectedness, collective responsibility, mutual solidarity, respect for the dignity of others, ethical values, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility (Ewuoso). It sums up the notion of "I am because we are", which is underpinned by the principle that a person's existence is intertwined with the existence of others. Hence the very existence of any group or race is interconnected with the existence of other people or races; what affects one group or people must affect all humanity globally.

The Ubuntu principles present a framework for understanding and addressing existential issues like climate change, which threatens the very existence of people, particularly in vulnerable and marginalised communities, to promote inclusivity, cohesion, and emancipation. In the context of Green Campus Initiatives, ubuntu offers a tool in establishing and developing existing Green Campus Initiatives by drawing attention to crucial aspects of HEI's Green Campus initiatives which existing approaches do not capture.

Key Recommendations for GCI



Please refer to the infographic above for an overview of the top five recommendations from this policy brief. A comprehensive perspective on these five approaches to decolonised GCIs are explored below. Further, the following recommendations can be coupled with ubuntu principles to implement decolonised GCIs across HEIs.

Recommendations

- **Awareness and Mutual Understanding**
 - Develop and implement culturally responsive professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators to increase awareness and understanding of GCIs and sustainability issues.
- **Institutional Support and Leadership**
 - Create a sustainable culture and climate action within the institution through effective communication, engagement, and collaboration with knowledge holders.
 - Involve faculty, students, and staff in decision-making processes related to sustainability initiatives and integrate their feedback and ideas into planning and implementation efforts (Teixeira & Crawford, 2022).
 - Empower sustainability committees, task forces, or offices within the institution to drive climate change initiatives, set goals, track progress, and

hold knowledge holders accountable for their commitments to sustainability (Cambers et al., 2019; Dunlop & Rushton, 2022).

- Appoint sustainability champions or leaders at the senior administrative level to provide vision, direction, and support for sustainability efforts across institutions.
- Setting up a centralized department/unit at each HEI which is responsible for seeking and consolidating external funding opportunities, grants, and partnerships to support sustainability initiatives, research projects, and infrastructure upgrades focused on addressing climate change (Filho & Hemstock, 2019; Teixeira & Crawford, 2022).
- Establish sustainability funds, endowments, or revolving loan programs to finance energy efficiency projects, renewable energy installations, and other sustainability measures (Filho & Hemstock, 2019; UNFCCC, 2023).
- Collaboration and Partnerships
 - Promote interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-disciplinary dialogue on climate change through joint research projects, collaborative teaching initiatives, and interdisciplinary programs or courses (Teixeira & Crawford, 2022; Yli-Panula et al., 2022).
 - Create joint research programs and collaboration networks with institutions that are based in locations (e.g. Small Islands Developing States) that are regarded as highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, e.g. Norwegian - Pacific Ocean Climate PhD Scholarship Programme 2023 - 2026 (implemented by the University of the South Pacific and the University of Bergen).
- Indigenous Sustainable Practices
 - Integrate traditional ecological knowledge into GCI practices on campus.
 - Implement resource management practices based on indigenous principles of sustainability, such as farming, health and bio-diversity techniques.
 - Respect for the Earth and all living beings.
- Connection to Real-World Impact
 - Foster partnerships with local communities, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and industry stakeholders to connect academic research, learning outcomes, and sustainability initiatives to real-world impact.
 - Engage students in service-learning projects, internships, research opportunities, or community-based initiatives that address GCI challenges.

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