

# Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education



Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP Prime Minister's Office 10 Downing Street London SW1A 2AA

Cc: Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, President for COP26, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, Minister for Universities and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education

15<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Dear Prime Minister

We are writing to you as the **Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education**, which is a collaboration of Association of Colleges, EAUC – the alliance for sustainability leadership in education, Guild HE and Universities UK.

We, the key agencies within the higher and further education sector, have come together to catalyse action to create real impact and change. Our aim is to develop an Action Plan in response to the UK government's stated climate emergency and draw together a strategic sector-wide approach to the Climate Framework. The Climate Commission has been key in encouraging universities and colleges to align with the UK Government net-zero agenda.

The further and higher education sector has a combined staff and student population of 5.13 million people which is 7.7% of the UK population. Therefore, the Climate Commission is a vital route for the Government to engage with learners, students and staff in key anchor organisations within our communities to make lasting change and impact.

We would like to work with Government and the relevant departments on the following issues:

- **Green jobs and skills** – we want to ensure that universities and colleges are seen as a vital partner in developing and delivering the core skills that are needed as part of the Build Back Better plan. This includes ensuring teachers and academics have the training and knowledge to teach climate skills. We have already submitted evidence, through our partners Association of Colleges and EAUC to the Environmental Audit Committee and would welcome a greater involvement with the Green Jobs Taskforce.
- **Measuring and reporting** – ensuring universities and colleges are playing their part in reducing emissions as part of the Government's Climate Emergency targets. We are already working with ESFA on improving reporting for the FE sector through the SECR and working with Office for Students on mandating reporting for the England HE sector. We would like to see clearer direction from Government on the role that universities and colleges can make towards the Government's targets.
- **Raising the profile of the education sector leading up to COP26 and beyond** – universities and colleges are the homes of the leading climate scientists, researchers and educators. We need to ensure the Government and departments are listening to the science and are making holistic decisions in current and future policies. As key anchor organisations within their communities and regions through initiatives such as Incubation Hubs and place-based actions universities and colleges can be part of the solution and route to creating lasting change. As the UK is hosting COP26 there is an opportunity to showcase the leading education sector we have and continue to invest in. We are already working closely with the COP26 Cabinet Team in developing an

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Education Zone and an Education Campaign as part of the Together for our Planet campaign. We would like to work together on ensuring a clear legacy and direction for the education sector beyond COP26.

- **Curriculum** – we need to work across the whole education sector to fully embed climate education into the curriculum. We need to ensure young people and adults are taught about the climate emergency we are facing to ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to create the solutions and adaptations that we need as a society. The response that the sector has shown from the pandemic shows the adaptability and different ways we can educate. We would welcome discussions with the relevant departments on how we can work together to progress this.
- **Research** – the UK has a globally leading capacity in research and innovation to inform climate action and drive change. But the recent reductions in ODA-related research funding present challenges to maintaining the global leadership. We wish to express our concerns and ask you urgently to review the decision relating to ODA-related research funding, especially in light of the UK hosting COP26 and when you are wishing to portray the UK as a leader in climate action and sustainability. Our detailed concerns on this issues are attached in the the appendix.

We welcome constructive discussions and actions, with the relevant departments, in the above areas and look forward to hearing from you.

Signed by

Climate Commissioners of the Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education  
Students and Leaders

## Institutional Leader Climate Commissioners

- Steve Frampton, AoC President & AoC representative
- Professor James Longhurst, Assistant Vice Chancellor, University of the West of England & EAUC Trustee
- Professor Joy Carter CBE DL, Former Vice Chancellor, University of Winchester & GuildHE representative
- Professor Judith Petts CBE, Vice Chancellor, University of Plymouth & UUK representative

## Student Leader Climate Commissioners

- Amy Brazier, Student, Portsmouth College, AoC representatives
- Manveer Gill, Graduate, University of Warwick & EAUC representative
- Katie Major, PhD Researcher, Plymouth Marjon University, GuildHE representative
- Marta Crispo, PhD Researcher, Grantham Centre for Sustainable Futures, University of Sheffield, UUK representative

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## Appendix: Concerns regarding reductions in research funding

Following the Chancellor's decision to drop overseas aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has confirmed a reduction in the ODA budget that will lead initially to a £120 million shortfall for 2021–22, meaning deep cuts to over 800 projects where funds are already committed to cutting-edge research collaborations between UK universities and leading international partners. The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) alone has seen £225 million invested since 2017 in 37 projects with 69 partner countries to grow research capacity around the globe. The aim being to strengthen and broaden skills and expertise to address specific challenges of developing regions and countries, and to generate long-lasting partnerships, ideas and knowledge. In addition, 12 interdisciplinary research hubs have been funded (from last year) for between £13 million and £20 million across a range of development challenges. The hubs include 400 unique partner organisations in 85 countries and 550 researchers from a range of disciplines addressing 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This year GCRF started an investment of £20 million funding 5 interdisciplinary research projects with 11 countries that aim to improve understanding of the impacts of plastic pollution in developing countries, explore ways to mitigate the impacts of plastic pollution, to enable cleaner and more resilient and productive environments and support economic growth and societal wellbeing.

The scale of the planned reduction will result in the termination of existing and future research projects, negatively impact the meaningful completion of research that has been publicly funded and the publication of the result, including recommended policy interventions, from that research, damage the sector's international standing and overseas research relationships, and reduce the capacity to drive economic growth and prosperity in the UK and beyond.

Such a move runs contrary to the explicit aims set out by the Government in its R&D roadmap and comes at a time when UK university research has been instrumental in the worldwide fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and is, and needs to be, instrumental in the global climate crisis. While the Government has committed to returning to 0.7% overseas aid spending when possible this tends to push action further into the future at the very time when response is urgent and required now. The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Newton Fund – both recipients of ODA money – have seen UK universities take centre stage in essential sustainable development efforts with both UK and international benefits, including addressing plastic waste management, protecting biodiversity, developing renewable energy and clean water technology, supporting communities living and working in marine environments to adapt to climate change, improving worldwide labour laws, and rolling out 5G networks in lower and middle income countries.

In the past year alone, lessons learned from ODA-funded projects have enabled UK universities to support national as well as global efforts. With the world facing the biggest threat to humanity, in both the pandemic and the climate crisis, this is the time that the UK should be leading in climate and sustainability research and solutions at a global level. The impacts are clear:

- A £1 billion reduction in domestic research funding is roughly equivalent to the total research and innovation budgets of the Medical Research Council and Science and Technology Facilities Council combined.

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- It would also lead to a further reduction of up to £1.6 billion in private R&D investment which would have been stimulated through public investment.
- The cut comes at a time when the UK's largest international competitors – including the United States and China – are currently ramping up their investment in science.
- These cuts have significant impacts on climate related research in the low – middle income parts of the world as well as in the UK and undoubtedly will lead to redundancies for research staff and the loss of research capacity. The cuts will directly impact on the UK's position as a trusted partner on the international research stage.
- The cuts to research related overseas development funding also affect important initiatives such as the Royal Society's FLAIR scheme (<https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/flair/>) supporting independent research by African scientists on climate impacts amongst other subjects.

The impacts of the decisions are significant in and of themselves, but have additional and very visible negative poignancy in terms of the UK's commitments to climate action and sustainability and 'building back better' when it is about to host COP26.

We, of behalf of the UK Higher and Further Education sector, urge you to review this decision immediately.