THINK GREEN
ACT GREEN
MANIFESTO
SUSTAINABLE ACADEMY
EDUCATION
RESEARCH
OPERATIONS
GOVERNANCE
de jonge akademie

Think green, act green

Manifesto for knowledge institutions

The Young Academy and the Green Young Academy call on knowledge institutions to explicitly expand their academic and social responsibility to include planetary responsibility.
This takes courage.

This manifesto asks knowledge institutions' administrators to pledge concrete actions in the domains of education, research, operations, and governance. This requires clear and transparent decisions. After all, doing nothing is also a choice.

Why this manifesto? Why now?

The transgression of planetary boundaries poses a serious threat to human wellbeing in a healthy environment. Short-term thinking, concentration of power, and individualism prevent society from taking decisive action on the major transitions needed to address these challenges[1].

As knowledge institutions[2] we play a unique societal role and have the opportunity to contribute to a future-proof and sustainable world. Our autonomy and academic freedom come with the responsibility to act. Through our education, research, operations and governance we can develop, integrate and share knowledge across domains. However, academic freedom and diversity of thinking are under threat, in the Netherlands and internationally.[3] Disinformation and the politicisation of knowledge harm both the reputation of science and the free production and utilisation of knowledge. Within the knowledge system, sustainability transitions are pursued inadequately or too slowly due to short-term thinking, advanced specialization and competition.

This manifesto shows how we can collectively accelerate the just transition to a sustainable, green society, and how knowledge institutions can help tackle the major societal challenges of our time.

[1] IPBES Summary for policymakers (2024), p. 12.
[2] This includes research universities, universities of applied sciences and other public research institutions. We focus on institutions in the Kingdom of the Netherlands.
[3] *Academic freedom in the Netherlands: response to current threats* – KNAW.

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Education – embed sustainability in the curriculum

Our current educational programmes must better prepare young people to work towards sustainability as individuals, citizens and professionals, in a society where climate change and the transgression of planetary boundaries are urgent issues.

✅ Integrate sustainability into existing educational programmes

- Start reviewing all educational programmes within one year, testing their curricula against the EU GreenComp framework[4]. Fill in gaps in programme content and learning outcomes before 2030.

✅ Stimulate activating teaching methods

- Give teachers time, resources and recognition to develop activating teaching methods that encourage a positive contribution to a more sustainable society.
- Build transdisciplinary collaborations with various parties, including the arts and culture sector and government, to encourage lifelong learning in and with society.

✅ Communicate actively and transparently about progress

- Report progress on educational innovations and sustainability policy in each programme's annual report. Prioritise sharing experiences and acquired knowledge, so that these are not merely confined to paper.
- Communicate with existing and future students about sustainability competences,[4] for example during open-day events and in the university's study guide.

⚠️ Avoid a narrow perspective on sustainability in the curriculum

- Avoid oversimplification, such as a purely technical approach that does not consider social context, or vice versa.
- Offer a broad perspective with room for system-critical debate and a concern for mental health.

[4] GreenComp: the European sustainability competence framework

Research – encourage societally relevant science

To contribute to the major sustainability transitions of our time, research must adapt - away from competition and individualism and towards collective efforts; fostering collaboration between disciplines and between institutions; and in cooperation with students, alumni, civil society and creative partners.

✅ Facilitate research on major transition pathways

- Work towards a research portfolio in which by 2030, at least 20% of research[5]:
  - makes a concrete contribution towards a sustainable, climate-neutral and circular society;
  - *and* employs a transdisciplinary approach;
  - *and* fosters cooperation between knowledge institutions.

✅ Protect and extend room for critical research[6]

- Ensure a balance between fundamental, applied and systems-critical research.
- Acknowledge the added value of transdisciplinary research and encourage students, researchers and alumni to collaborate with civil society and creative partners.
- Appreciate and embrace different types of knowledge production. Incorporate cultural, social and ecological values alongside economic ones.
- Offer sustainability fellowships to researchers.

⚠️ Discontinue harmful external collaborations

- Assess public-private partnerships using specific guidelines (such as transparency and alignment with the Paris Climate Agreement) to avoid greenwashing, conflicts of interest or other adverse side effects.

✅ Promote active and effective knowledge circulation

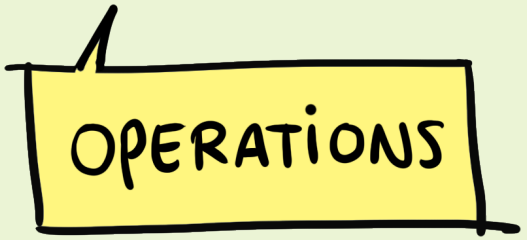
- Reinforce systems thinking in science communication together with politicians, policymakers, practitioners and the public.
- Ask research funders to increase sustainability themes in their funding schemes for research and knowledge circulation.

[5] The measurement method will be jointly determined by the formal coordination group.

[6] *Space to Think. An analysis of structural threats to academic freedom and integrity*

Operations – towards climate-neutral knowledge institutions

To credibly carry out and reinforce our core tasks, we must also accelerate our internal sustainability ambitions.



✅ Integrate sustainability into the organisational strategy

- Make sustainability a core value in the organisational strategy and establish clear goals and indicators.

✅ Report annually on sustainability results

- Draft an ESG report[7] in line with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science reporting guideline[8]. Consider the ESG report on par with financial reports submitted to regulators and the Ministry.

✅ Formulate an ambitious roadmap for climate neutrality by 2050

- Develop a roadmap for becoming climate neutral by latest 2050,[9] with an interim carbon reduction target of at least 60% by 2030 and 90% by 2040, based on a full carbon footprint accounting (Scopes 1, 2 and 3[10]).
- Explicitly include sustainability criteria in tenders and procurement contracts, including financial services.

⚠️ Minimize offsetting avoidable CO_2 emissions

- Emissions reduction is better than offsetting.
- Report CO_2 emissions without offsets.
- Implement binding institutional policies[11], for example on travel by rail instead of air.

[7] Environment, Social, Governance

[8] *Handreiking vrijwillige duurzaamheidsverantwoording: Onderwijs- & kennisinstellingen*

[9] In compliance with the Dutch Climate Act

[10] *Thirteen shades of green. Examining the climate ambitions of Dutch universities*. The Young Academy, 2025

[11] *Flying high but flying less*. The Young Academy, 2020

Governance – embed sustainability in institutional decision-making

Working towards sustainability requires clear decisions and embedding throughout our institutions.

✅ Anchor sustainability throughout the organisation

- Appoint an ESG portfolio owner at all governance levels (including Supervisory and Executive Boards) to ensure that sustainability is incorporated into the decision-making process.
- Appoint a central sustainability coordinator with adequate budget, mandate, time, training and support[12].

⚠️ Prevent brain drain

- Do not appoint sustainability coordinators in temporary positions.
- Guarantee the continuity of ESG positions as a stable percentage of the overall FTE.

✅ Anchor sustainability in evaluation and recognition

- Incorporate sustainability in vacancies and job interviews, during annual evaluations and in (variable) recognition and appreciation schemes through HR policy. This puts Recognition & Rewards into practice for employees who actively promote strategic sustainability goals.

✅ Foster knowledge sharing for shared progress

- Share knowledge about implementing organisation-wide sustainability initiatives with other knowledge institutions in an official coordination group.

[12] *Space to Think. An analysis of structural threats to academic freedom and integrity*

About this publication

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