

Guest editorial: Experiences of participatory methodologies in promoting climate action in higher education

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The challenges of climate change and sustainability require new ways of working between diverse sectors, institutions and communities in society. The ecological crisis facing humanity touches every part of our lives, and has its roots deep in the dominant political and economic structures, as well as in our sense of self and relationship with others (Bell, 2021; McCowan, 2025). Furthermore, it is characterised by complexity and resists simple, linear solutions. The constantly changing nature of the problem and its variegated form across geographical space mean that mitigation, adaptation and regeneration efforts will need to take place in contextualised ways across the world and engage all societal actors.

These conditions have significant implications for the role of higher education institutions (HEIs). The higher education sector has been increasingly recognised as key to addressing the full set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically climate change, through its role in educating a growing proportion of the population, in forming professionals and leaders and developing ground-breaking basic research, as well as applied research and technological innovation (Leal Filho, 2010; McCowan *et al.*, 2021). However, HEIs cannot fulfil their potential working alone. They must collaborate in new ways with local communities, government, civil society organisations and the private sector to garner the benefits of diverse perspectives and expertise, in the context of an ecology of knowledge. Solutions must be contextualised for particular sectors and locations, with HEIs operating effectively in all regions, countries and localities, rather than relying on a few star institutions to make globally applicable breakthroughs.

In fact, higher education trends over the past century have placed greater emphasis on social and economic impact. The ivory tower model of institution has been challenged by greater engagement with agriculture, industry, equality and democracy emerging from various movements around the world, including the land grant universities in the USA, the Córdoba reforms in Latin America and the developmental university in Africa (McCowan, 2019). Some countries, such as the UK, now include social and economic impact as a significant criterion in research evaluation. Nevertheless, universities' engagement with society does not always take place in conditions of horizontal dialogue, open collaboration and mutual benefit. HEIs can struggle to shake a historical sense of their own superiority as the privileged space of knowledge generation, and are also influenced by contemporary marketisation and demands to prioritise income generation over contribution to society. An authentic coproduction or cocreation with external communities is therefore hard to achieve.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a generative model in this regard. Building on practices of action research, through which practical interventions are combined with systematic documentation and analysis in a cycle of improved knowledge and impact, it



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integrates egalitarian and democratic considerations. PAR counters the historical practices of extraction through research to consider positive impacts on communities and to involve community members as subjects rather than objects of the research process. Drawing on ideas of dialogue and conscientisation from Freire (1970) and the work of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda (1987), it has provided universities with a new model of coproduction of knowledge that can simultaneously bring positive social and economic impacts while transforming relationships towards a more just society.

Nevertheless, using PAR in practice presents significant challenges for HEIs. Both universities and communities can struggle to adopt new relationships, to avoid paternalistic or transactional attitudes and collaborate as equals, drawing on their unique qualities and perspectives in climate action. Furthermore, international rankings in higher education rarely give credit to community engagement of universities, and encourage elite models of research production and dissemination. Authentic and impactful climate action together with different societal actors will involve a significant transformation of HEIs and associated national and global policies and dynamics.

HEIs are, therefore, increasingly recognised as key actors in driving climate action, not only through research and knowledge production but also through their engagement with stakeholders and communities. One important approach to advancing this role is to place participation, collaboration and co-creation at the centre of institutional strategies. By means of participatory approaches, universities can work more effectively alongside students, staff and external partners in jointly shaping climate responses that are context-sensitive, inclusive and action-oriented.

The special issue “Experiences of Participatory Methodologies in promoting Climate Action in Higher Education” builds upon the need for further investigations around climate action in higher education, in all its dimensions, and the benefits and challenges of using these participatory methodologies. Universities are in a unique position of not only advancing sustainability but also promoting climate action and climate justice within and outside the campus. Participatory approaches are expected to contribute to student and community engagement, thus connecting HEIs with social and local challenges.

The aim of this special issue is to showcase examples of how participatory methodologies can contribute to sustainability and climate action in higher education and support engagement with academic and local communities. The contributions outline the value of PAR and encourage researchers, teaching staff and practitioners in the areas of sustainability and climate change in higher education to consider more participatory approaches in their initiatives. Furthermore, the articles within this issue provide inspiring cases of sustainability and climate-related campus actions and initiatives with local partners. The special issue covers a range of examples and key features, including climate justice, sustainability in higher education, sustainable universities, student engagement, climate change education, teaching and learning and community engagement.

In addition, some articles from this collection reflect the research developed by the Climate-U Network {www.climate-ni.com/network}, which, through a PAR approach, brought together partners from eight countries to strengthen their capacity to tackle the causes and impacts of climate change and to contribute to a deeper understanding of how education can support the achievement of the SDGs (Climate-U, 2021; Mazigo *et al.*, 2023; Salvia *et al.*, 2023). Initiatives of this type will be

increasingly important in the coming years, with international and cross-sectoral partnerships providing the key to effective climate action.

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