DECLARATION FOR UNIVERSITIES AS LIVING LABS FOR CLIMATE ACTION

From Campus Action to Climate Empowerment

COP31, Antalya, Türkiye - November 2026

PREFACE

We, representatives of higher education institutions and networks engaged in climate action,

Recognizing that the achievement of the objectives of the Paris Agreement requires not only ambitious national commitments but also sustained implementation, learning, participation, innovation and action at local and institutional levels;

Recalling Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, which calls for cooperation in taking measures, as appropriate, to enhance climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information;

Recognizing Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) as an important framework for strengthening climate education, training, public awareness, public participation, access to information and international cooperation;

Recognizing the important role of universities and higher education institutions in generating knowledge, educating current professionals and future generations, developing innovation, informing public policy, building capacity and connecting science to wider societal transformation imperatives;

Recognizing further that university campuses and the communities around them constitute real-world environments in which climate solutions can be researched, tested, demonstrated, evaluated, taught and continuously improved;

Acknowledging the growing international movement of universities committed to action on sustainable development, climate action, biodiversity conservation, carbon neutrality and Living Lab approaches;

Building upon recent university-led initiatives that support global environmental commitments, including the **Girona Manifesto**, the **Cali Charter from Universities for Nature**, the **Statement by University Leaders in Support of the Summit of the Future**, and the **HKUST-led Joint Declaration on Embracing a Living Lab Approach to Promote Carbon Neutrality, Race to Zero for Universities and Colleges** and the **Second Nature Climate Leadership Commitment**;

Recognizing nevertheless the need to strengthen the connection between these commitments, practice innovation and their implementation through national, regional and international higher education networks where institutional mechanisms for scaling successful practices are coordinated and shared;

Affirming that a university Living Lab can provide the physical and institutional environment for climate experimentation and action, while an ACE can provide a mechanism for education, training, participation, public awareness, access to information and cooperation;

We therefore declare our shared commitment to advancing Universities as Living Labs for Climate Action and Empowerment.

I. OUR VISION

A Campus as a Living Lab (CLL) uses the university campus as a real-world environment for testing, researching, and scaling sustainable solutions. Through collaboration between students, staff, researchers, and external partners, it combines campus operations, co-creation, and innovation practices to develop and evaluate approaches that strengthen climate action and empowerment and build climate resilience.

We recognize that climate education should extend beyond the transmission of scientific knowledge. The Living Lab campus should therefore become an **extension of the classroom and a platform for experiential climate education and empowerment for current and future generations.**

II. BUILDING ON EXISTING UNIVERSITY COMMITMENTS

We recognize that universities around the world have already developed important commitments and practices related to climate action, sustainable development, biodiversity and Living Labs.

The Girona Manifesto has highlighted the importance of climate education, student engagement, innovation, Living Labs, sustainability indicators and regional cooperation.

The Cali Charter has strengthened the role of universities in biodiversity conservation, nature-positive campuses, education, research, community engagement and Living Lab approaches.

The Statement by University Leaders in Support of the Summit of the Future has emphasized universities' broader responsibilities for sustainable development, interdisciplinary research, education, innovation, policy engagement and partnerships.

The HKUST-led Joint Declaration on Embracing a Living Lab Approach to Promote Carbon Neutrality has demonstrated the potential of university campuses as real-world environments for hands-on learning, research, experimentation, carbon reduction and knowledge exchange.

Race to Zero for Universities and Colleges has demonstrated the power of collective action, bringing together over 1,000 institutions globally to accelerate whole-institution climate action on campus and through their wider influence in society. **We recognize these initiatives as complementary contributions to a growing global movement.**

III. A CALL TO UNIVERSITIES & HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORKS

We invite universities and higher education institutions to:

1. Develop and progress institutional and network strategies to support **Living Labs for Climate Action and Empowerment**.

2. Integrate climate action into education, research, innovation and campus operations.

3. Identify local contributions to the six dimensions of **Action for Climate Empowerment**.

4. Recognize that climate change affects communities differently and that climate action mechanisms should be inclusive and socially responsive.

5. Consider the CLL Roadmap for developing common frameworks for stronger institutional & community impact and capacity through Living Labs for Climate Action and Empowerment

6. Engage students and young people as active partners in climate action and empowerment.

7. Connect climate action with biodiversity, ecosystem resilience and sustainable development.

8. Establish and steward partnerships with communities, governments, schools, civil society and businesses for real-world climate action, innovation and learning.

9. Share knowledge, evidence and successful Living Lab practices nationally and internationally.

10. Contribute to ACE objectives and outcomes.

IV. OUR COLLECTIVE PLEDGE

By endorsing this Declaration, we express our shared commitment to advancing universities as **Living Labs for Climate Action** and Empowerment.

We commit ourselves to working together to transform universities from institutions that **study climate change** into institutions that also **demonstrate, implement, test and scale climate solutions.**

We recognize that universities and networks differ in their missions, resources, geographical contexts and institutional capacities.

We therefore support the development and discussion of a CLL Roadmap, as a **progressive, context-sensitive and evidence-based pathway** rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

Our shared ambition is to transform university campuses and higher education communities into spaces where:

Climate action is learned.
Climate solutions are researched.
Innovation is tested.
Communities participate.
Students become partners.
Impact is advanced. Knowledge is shared.
Successful solutions are scaled.
We invite universities and partners across the world to join us in making university campuses and communities a Living Lab for Climate Action and Empowerment.

Coordinating University:

Middle Eastern Technical University (METU)

Coordinating Network:

Higher Education Climate Network of Networks (NoN)

Supporting Networks:

African Green Universities and Youth Education Network (AGUYEN)
Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE)
Association of Amazon Universities (UNAMAZ)
Climate-U
COP Universities Alliance of Australian and Pacific Universities (CUA)
EAUC - the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges
Eco-Campus programme network, Foundation for Environmental Education
Ecosistema Futuro - ASviS
Euromed University Initiative for Climate Action (Euromed UICA)
European University Association (EUA)
German Society for Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions (DG HochN)
Global Alliance of Universities on Climate (GAUC)
Higher Education Climate Network of Networks (NoN)
International Sustainable Campus Network (ISCN)
International Universities Climate Alliance (IUCA)
Italian Network of Universities for Sustainable Development (RUS)
Least Developed Countries Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC)
Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED)
Red Campus Sustentable (RCS)
Second Nature
Smart Campus Cloud Network (SCCN)
Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Italy
U7+ Alliance of World Universities
UAE Universities Climate Network (UCN)
UK Universities Climate Network (UUCN)

Addendum: For further information and exploration (2027-)

CAMPUS AS A LIVING LAB (CLL) FOR CLIMATE ACTION ROADMAP

Led by the Middle East Technical University (METU), the Higher Education Climate Network of Networks (NoN) and the Race to Zero for Universities and Colleges (RtZ U&C, convened by EAUC)

Definitions – what is a Living Lab?

Campus as a Living Lab is a holistic, participatory learning environment that treats the university campus as an integrated experimental field for researching, prototyping, testing, and scaling sustainable urbanism, student-centred pedagogy, and community-engaged innovation. It combines real-world campus operations (energy, water, transportation, buildings, waste, health, digital infrastructure) with co-created inquiry and deployment, inviting students, faculty, staff, and external partners to collaboratively observe, design, and evaluate interventions in situ. The approach emphasizes iterative cycles of problem framing, data-driven experimentation, open knowledge sharing, and reflective practice, transforming everyday campus activities into measurable learning experiences and scalable solutions for broader urban contexts. It centres inclusivity, adaptability, and ethics, ensuring stakeholder participation, transparency of methods and outcomes, and alignment with social, environmental, and economic impacts.

The approach is based on change management, using the quintuple helix innovation model, fast prototyping of services, co-creation and other innovation management systems that integrate research and innovation practices into real-world settings. In the *University Campus as a Living Lab for Sustainability A Practitioner's Guide and Handbook* Campus as Living Labs (CLL) are defined as the integrated organizational, technological and socio-economic approach in which a university uses its assets and facilities to investigate, test or demonstrate innovative technologies or services by, with and for their community.

Context – the 'why'

As place-based organisations embedded within local communities and regional economies, universities are well positioned to develop, test and scale innovative responses to climate challenges. The CLL approach supports universities to use their campuses, operations and partnerships to extend their reach beyond campus boundaries to support the co-development and implementation of climate solutions in real world environments. It also centres young people and learners as co-creators, researchers, innovators and community partners in the development and implementation of climate solutions.

Many institutions are already doing this. The intent of this roadmap is to both continue to grow the understanding and application of the CLL approach within the sector and to broaden the reach of this work in and beyond university campuses through partnerships with governments, businesses and civil society. Through collaboration and knowledge sharing, successful local innovations can be replicated and scaled across national and international networks, accelerating progress towards climate goals.

Universities are uniquely positioned to lead climate action because they sit at the nexus of research, teaching, and community engagement, with the capacity to model and scale innovations in real-world settings. The CLL approach leverages campus operations and partnerships to extend climate solutions beyond university boundaries, co-developing and implementing actions with students, staff, researchers, and local partners in authentic contexts, e.g. in Urban Living Labs or also Urban Transformation Labs. It centres young people as co-creators and builds pipelines for knowledge transfer through collaboration with governments, businesses, and civil society.

This roadmap-level effort aims to grow understanding and application of CLL, support implementation among institutions and expand reach from COP31 to COP32, so successful local innovations can be replicated nationally and internationally. By aligning actions with regional economies and place-based communities, the CLL framework can accelerate learning, scale inclusive climate solutions, and strengthen capacity for ongoing, ethical, data-informed experimentation that benefits both campuses and their broader ecosystems.

Objectives – the 'how'

The CLL roadmap is intended to be used as a practical guide for higher education institutions to advance their commitment to becoming living labs. Recognising that universities and networks differ in their missions, resources, geographical contexts and institutional capacities, the roadmap provides a context-sensitive and evidence-based pathway rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

The approach laid out in this roadmap is underpinned by 5 objectives. These objectives seek to encapsulate the key aspects of the living lab model and form the basis of further work around shaping future actions, outputs and delivery milestones.

1. **Embed Living Labs as a Core Institutional Approach.**

Establish Living Labs as a recognised and coordinated mechanism for delivering climate action and empowerment within the sector and promote this approach to external partners. Delivered through:

- Identifying best-practice approaches to use as model cases
- Developing a CLL toolkit
- Facilitating cross-institutional living lab collaborations
- Providing advice and frameworks for integrating CLL thinking into organisational strategy to support change processes

2. **Accelerate Delivery of Climate Commitments and Action.**

Support higher education institutions to implement existing climate commitments and decarbonisation targets through practical, campus-based projects and innovation. Delivered through:

- Applying Living Lab methodologies to climate action planning and review.
- Piloting operational, technological and behavioural climate solutions on campus and beyond.
- Capturing and disseminating lessons learned and case studies.

3. **Support Engagement, Partnership Building and Entrepreneurial Capacity.**

Use Living Labs as a foundation for developing partnerships between universities, local authorities, civil society, industry and policymakers to design and deliver place-based climate solutions. Delivered through:

- Building capacity across universities to engage with external partners to align CLL initiatives with local and regional climate priorities and co-design projects.
- Promoting the potential of the CLL models to governments, businesses and the broader community.
- Using campuses as demonstrators and hubs for climate engagement and knowledge exchange.

4. **Climate Research and Innovation.**

Create opportunities for inter- and transdisciplinary climate research, testing and scaling of solutions in real-world settings, and wider dissemination of evidence and experiential learning supported by a systems approach to climate research and solutions development. Delivered through:

- Improving publication and sharing of climate-related research outputs, data and evidence.
- Supporting the testing, piloting and scaling of promising solutions.

5. **Empowering Climate Citizens through Experiential Learning.**

Placing young people at the heart of designing, shaping and driving change. Increasing opportunities for learners and staff to engage with real-world climate challenges through experiential learning, fostering the knowledge, skills, agency and leadership needed to take meaningful climate action. Delivered through:

- Integrating Living Lab approaches into learner experience.
- Strengthening partnerships with employers to support green skills development and pathways into green careers.

- Developing the Campus into a resilience hub, acting as a long-term partner and establishing the university as a trusted innovation partner for transformation and change processes.

Outputs – the 'what'

These objectives are underpinned by outputs. The specifics of each output will require further scoping and refinement to maximise their alignment with the final objectives for the CLL roadmap.

1. **Consultation with sector**

Consultation with key internal stakeholder groups as identified in the stakeholder section below, to refine the principles of the living lab concept and test key messages ahead of broader engagement with external stakeholder groups. The purpose of the external engagement will be to consult with these stakeholders to get their feedback on the principles, and to identify opportunities or risks that may not have been covered. *(Supports objectives 1-5)*

2. **CLL best practice toolkit (institutional use)**

The toolkit can support broader application of the CLL concept by amplifying practical guidance for institutions. The intent of this is not to provide a single model for a successful living lab, but rather to align on a framework that includes common terminology, evaluation approaches and documentation methods that can support broader implementation and information exchange across institutions and networks. This is intended to help the concept mature from many network efforts to a broader unified effort, and to advance dispersed living lab projects on a campus to campus as a living lab programs, and potentially urban/regional living labs. Intended to bring together and codify existing work, rather than duplicate. *(Supports objectives 1-5)*

3. **CLL handbook (external use)**

Practical guidance to external partners on the concept, terminology, opportunities and risks, and partnering approaches. Supports knowledge transfer and upskilling of external partners. *(Supports objective 3)*

Proposed Timeline – the 'when'

Dates	Key Milestones	Lead/s (tbd)
Sept – Oct 2026	CLL declaration finalised & shared	
Nov 2026	CLL declaration presented at COP31	
Nov - Feb 2027	CLL Working group established (membership TBC, but likely to include CoP leads). (Determine frequency of meetings to keep all the leads and supports up to date.)	Lead: Support:
Nov 2026 – March 2027	Roadmap consultations and refinement External Consultation approach developed Outputs agreed to (toolkit, handbook, etc.)	Lead: Support:
Jan – June 2027	Output development	Lead: Support:
Feb – May 2027	HEI Consultation with networks and institutions: CLL baseline principles drafted 'Good practice' baseline/case studies identified.	Lead: Support:
Mar – Jun 2027	External consultation 'Good practice' baseline/case studies identified.	Lead: Support:
June 2027	Roundtable discussion at Intersessional Share drafts of toolkit and handbook	Lead: Support:
Jun – Oct 2027	Final draft of outputs	Lead: Support:
Nov 2027	Outputs and engagement framework presented COP 32 Pavilion space hosted[?]	Lead: Support:

Partners – the 'who'

Strategic Partners

- Higher Education Climate Network of Networks (NoN)
- International Sustainable Campus Network (ISCN)
- International Universities Climate Alliance (IUCA)
- Second Nature
- Race to Zero for Universities and Colleges (RtZ U&C)
- Universities and Higher Education Institutions
- UNFCCC Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) community and associated climate action initiatives.

Institutional Stakeholders

- University/HE networks
- University leadership teams
- Academic staff and researchers
- Professional services teams

- Estates and facilities teams
- Sustainability and climate teams
- Students and student organisations.
- Communities of practice.

External Stakeholders

- Local authorities
- Civil society organisations
- Industry and business partners
- Regional climate partnerships
- Employers and skills providers
- Community organisations and residents.