



Canada's universities  
**Action for net zero**

# What we heard:

Universities Canada's regional  
climate workshop series

2023-24



**Universities  
Canada.**





## Introduction

Canada's universities have long been leaders in sustainability. Researchers at our institutions are developing new technologies and innovative approaches to mitigate climate change and help communities across the country adapt to the impacts of a changing climate and an increase in extreme weather events. In addition, universities are working to prepare students and workers for a changing, low carbon economy while actively reducing the environmental impact of their own operations.

To support these efforts, Universities Canada launched its [Canada's universities: Action for net zero initiative](#) in 2023. Through this initiative, the association is working to measure and track its members' climate impacts across their operational, research, teaching and learning activities, and to serve as a central hub for sharing best practices, facilitating collaboration and advocating for the supports needed to enable universities to succeed in this work.

In 2023–24, Universities Canada organized a series of regional climate workshops to better understand its members' climate work, identify common challenges and opportunities and to solicit strategic advice and insights from climate leaders across the country on how Universities Canada can best support their efforts. The workshops covered topics including measuring and reporting climate impact, green infrastructure needs, climate research and preparing students with green skills.

This report offers an overview of what we heard over the course of the workshop series and sets the stage for the association's next steps to help Canada's universities mitigate and adapt to climate change. Universities Canada would like to thank all participants for sharing their time and insights.

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## Approach

Between June 2023 and March 2024, Universities Canada held five regional in-person workshops and one virtual workshop to engage with and learn from climate leaders across its member institutions. Each workshop was co-organized and co-hosted with a local university. The workshops covered many of the same high-level issues and a distinct focus area aligned with regional priorities and context.



### The workshops were held in the following locations:

- Simon Fraser University on June 2, 2023, for institutions in the province of British Columbia.
- University of Alberta on March 27, 2024, for institutions in the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba).
- University of Toronto on September 21, 2023, for institutions in the province of Ontario.
- Université de Montréal (co-hosted in partnership with Polytechnique Montréal and HEC Montréal) on September 29, 2023, for institutions in the province of Québec.
- Saint Mary's University on October 17, 2023, for institutions in the Atlantic provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador).

Virtual wrap up workshop held on April 9, 2024, open to representatives from all regions.

Senior climate leaders at member institutions were invited to participate in the workshops. Overall, 122 individuals from 62 institutions participated in the workshops, with several attending both in-person and online events.



## Regional highlights



### British Columbia

The British Columbia workshop was attended by 16 individuals from eight institutions. The focus of the session was on climate operations and communications. There was strong support for Universities Canada's climate initiative. Participants noted the importance of national level data to understand the sector's impacts and contributions to Canada's climate efforts. They also highlighted the importance of talking about both mitigation and adaptation and cautioned against overwhelming already overburdened staff with additional responsibilities.

Universities Canada was encouraged to develop a national narrative on climate and convene leaders from member institutions to work on specific themes to collectively address climate change. There was also an interest to strengthen Universities Canada's advocacy for additional climate funding as well as deepen coherence on government policies and programs.

### Ontario

The Ontario workshop was attended by 27 participants from 14 institutions. The session focused on university greenhouse gas emissions and strategies to reduce their carbon footprints. More infrastruc-

ture funding was noted as being critical to build new sustainable buildings, address the backlog of deferred maintenance and retrofit current structures on campus. Participants emphasized the need for cross-sectoral partnerships and consistent and unified reporting standards to ensure data transparency and accuracy. Challenges related to offsetting emissions and addressing scope 3 emissions were also discussed. There is an interest in tools to better define, measure and track scope 3 emissions.

Universities Canada was encouraged to bolster advocacy for more infrastructure and climate research funding, identify synergies and build linkages with institutions and diverse stakeholders and develop tools to strengthen mechanisms to report on scope 3 emissions. Participants welcomed Universities Canada to serve as a knowledge hub, offering a repository of climate tools and resources for climate leads.

### Quebec

The Quebec workshop was attended by 31 participants from 14 institutions. The focus of the session was on scope 3 emissions. Quebec universities already have a well-established network of climate leaders and indicated a desire to increase collaborations with others across the country. There is a strong interest in developing common definitions and tools for scope 3 emissions to help universities calculate emissions in different categories.

Participants considered Universities Canada well-situated to develop tools such as calculators and standardized methodologies to help universities better measure emissions. Guidelines with action paths and targets could enable institutions to address low hanging fruit that reduces their footprint. Universities Canada was encouraged to facilitate knowledge sharing amongst climate leads to impart successes, failures, and scientific best practices with others in the sector.

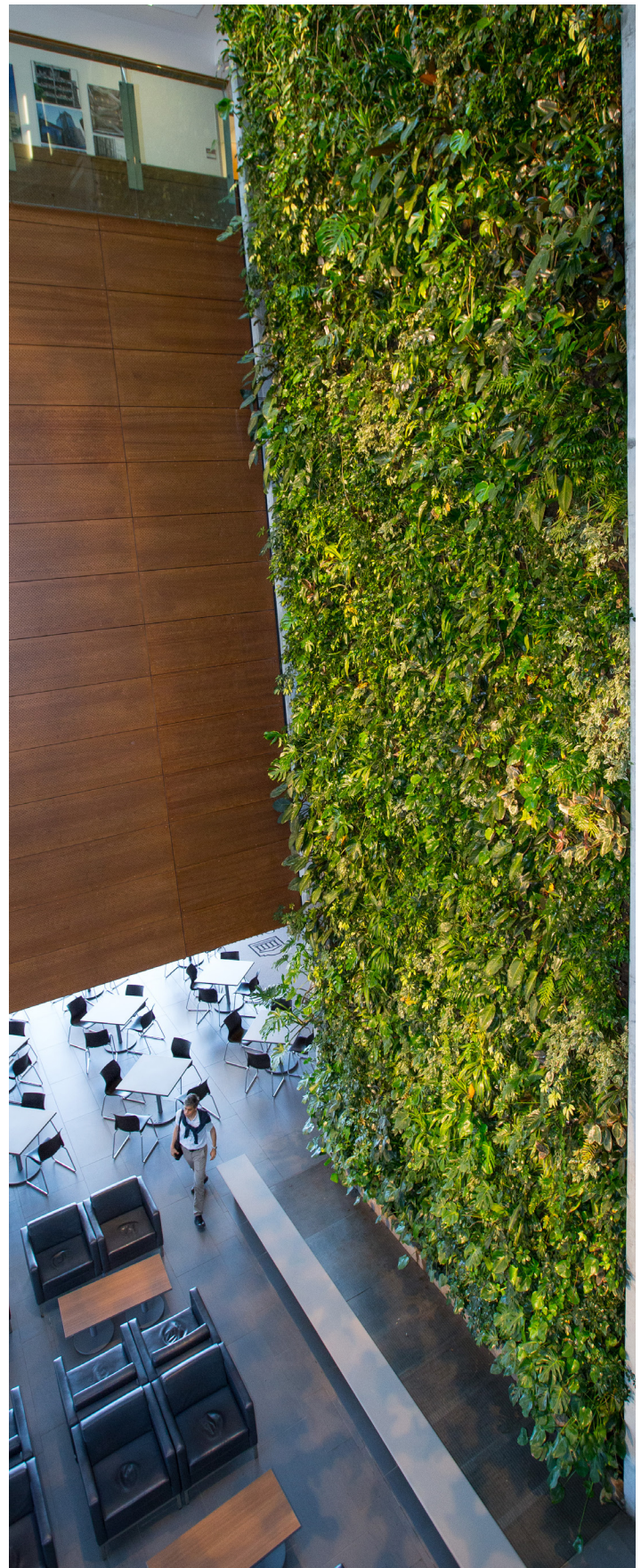
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## Atlantic

The Atlantic workshop was attended by 12 participants from eight institutions. The focus of the workshop was on how university operations and research inform each other's climate work. The need for infrastructure investments to address deferred maintenance and green retrofits emerged as a critical concern. The need for common scope 3 tools was raised to help universities achieve climate mitigation goals. Participants reflected that certain aspects of university culture and structure will need to be reconsidered if the sector is committed to reducing emissions. For instance, conference travel for early career researchers is in many ways integral to academic tenure, grant access and networking. Universities Canada was encouraged to continue its advocacy efforts, develop common tools and engage executive heads on climate change issues and the concept of net zero.

## Prairies

The Prairies workshop was attended by 25 participants from eight institutions. The focus of the workshop was climate research. Participants discussed the importance of research on both climate mitigation and adaptation. Renewed advocacy for adequate federal funding is needed; lack of funding poses a significant obstacle to climate research. There is a desire to involve industry partners in climate research to increase its impact. Participants noted a lack of capacity, particularly at smaller institutions, to advance climate goals. Universities Canada was encouraged to use its convening position to connect academia with industry and government, as well as strengthen collaboration between large and small member institutions.





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## Key takeaways

Across the workshops, Universities Canada received helpful input on strategies to bolster climate work as well as guide the organization's climate initiative.

Key takeaways are outlined below.



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## Investments in infrastructure and research

- There is a need for increased investments in sustainable infrastructure and climate research. Funding gaps were identified for green developments and retrofits; sustained and reliable funding is needed for large scale research projects.
- Innovation and cross-sector partnerships are key to drive meaningful change.
- Universities Canada will strengthen its advocacy to support universities' climate work and seek opportunities to strengthen collaboration amongst the sector and with diverse stakeholders.

## Convening the university sector

- Universities are enthusiastic for a national climate network to foster dialogue, share knowledge and drive collective action.
- Universities Canada, as the national association, is well-positioned to build this network and engage external stakeholders as appropriate. Universities Canada will develop subgroups on key themes to deepen dialogue and strengthen climate capacity across the sector.

## Developing adaptable tools for institutions

- Universities are eager for adaptable tools and resources to assist navigating the complexities of reporting, measuring and reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. There is a need for user-friendly platforms and resources, particularly for scope 3 emissions, that can be tailored to meet the unique needs of universities regardless of size, context or geographic location.
- Universities Canada will collaborate with member institutions, partners and other stakeholders to develop and share tools that can address these needs. Universities Canada has launched a climate

hub, an online evergreen repository of tools and resources for climate leads. The organization will continue to add more resources to the hub overtime.

## Data collection strategies

- The collection of national-level data on the sector's climate impact is helpful to universities' own efforts and to the sector's communications and advocacy work.
- During the first year of the climate initiative, Universities Canada conducted a survey on university outputs and offerings related to its greenhouse gas emissions. It also gathered data on its member's teaching and learning activities related to sustainability and climate research. Universities Canada plans to conduct the survey again in the spring of 2025 to compare progress over time. Consultations will be held with member institutions in advance to ensure the survey is not onerous.

## National-level communications

- Participants agreed that Universities Canada could play an important role providing national-level communications to raise awareness among the public and the Government of Canada of the critical role that Canada's universities play in addressing climate change.
- This national narrative could help advance collective climate action across the country and underpin advocacy efforts to ensure that universities receive the funding they need to help Canada meet its climate goals.
- Universities Canada will continue to build member institutions' climate work into our communications strategy. It will continue to work with climate leads and directors of communications at each institution to share success stories and translate research findings.





## Conclusion and next steps

Universities Canada would like to thank all workshop participants for sharing their insights and guidance. The feedback gathered across the workshop series was shared with the executive heads of Universities Canada's member institutions at its April 16–17, 2024 spring membership meeting and has been used to help shape and guide the future activities of its Canada's universities: Action for net zero initiative.

The association will continue to build on this momentum and engage with climate leaders from its member institutions through its climate leads network and its subgroups dedicated to teaching and learning, climate research and operations, the climate hub on its member portal and through other data collection and communications activities.