

Working Together

Australian and Pacific universities helping to deliver a successful and ambitious COP31 climate summit



Contents

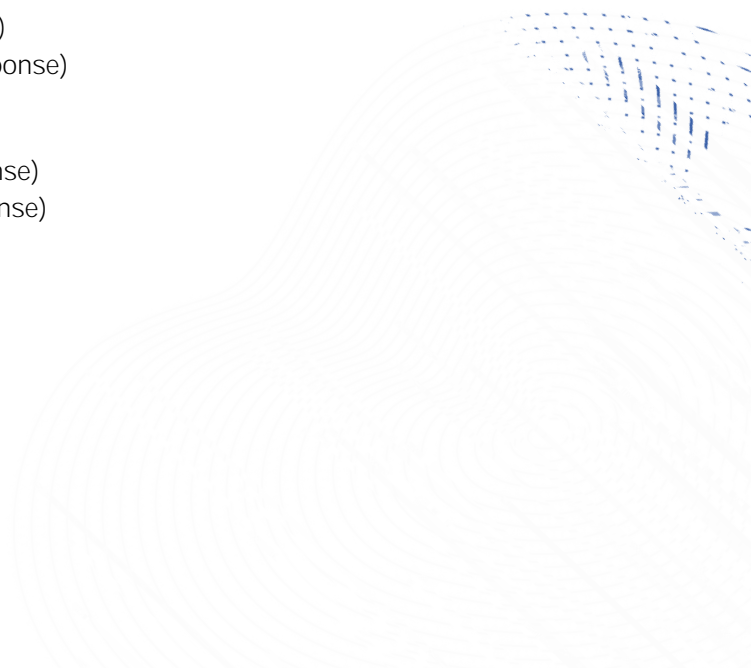
| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1. Hosting the world’s climate summit | 2 |
| 1.1 What is COP? | 2 |
| 1.2 Why COP31 is important | 3 |
| 1.3 Bidding to host COP31 | 3 |
| 1.4 Expectations of the COP31 President | 4 |
| Key takeaways | 4 |
| 2. Role of universities | 5 |
| 2.1 Supporting a successful and ambitious COP | 5 |
| 2.2 Higher education support for COP Presidencies | 6 |
| Other university climate alliances and networks | 7 |
| 2.3 Civil society and business organising for COP31 | 8 |
| Key takeaways | 9 |
| 3. The COP 31 Universities Alliance: Shared priorities | 10 |
| 3.1 Advancing action on adaptation and loss and damage | 11 |
| 3.2 Just energy transition, including the role of green industry and critical minerals | 12 |
| 3.3 First Nations and Pacific engagement and inclusion | 13 |
| 3.4 Understanding climate change impacts on human systems and ecosystems | 14 |
| 3.5 Innovating the format of COPs | 15 |
| Key takeaways | 15 |
| Ways forward | 16 |
| Appendix: COP31 Universities Alliance Membership | 17 |
| References | 18 |

Written by

Michelle Kerr (UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response)
 Dr Wesley Morgan (UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response)

Reviewers

Prof Ben Newell (UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response)
 Prof David Grant (UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response)
 Prof Jacqueline Peel (Melbourne Climate Futures)



Introduction

It is now very likely Australia will be announced as host of the COP31 global climate talks in 2026 alongside Pacific nations. This will be the largest diplomatic summit Australia has ever held, with satellite events in Pacific nations. The talks run for a fortnight and draw tens of thousands of delegates. Hosting COP31 presents Australia with a significant opportunity to demonstrate its leadership in climate action. The talks provide a platform to showcase Australia's accelerating energy transition and emerging role as a supplier of goods and technology. They are also an opportunity to celebrate the climate leadership of Pacific island nations.

The academic sector in Australia and the Pacific is preparing to support Australian and Pacific governments to deliver a successful United Nations climate conference. A COP31 Universities Alliance was established in May 2024 as a collaborative partnership between leading Australian and Pacific universities to coordinate the efforts and contribution of the Australia-Pacific higher education and research sector towards COP31.

Hosting COP31 is a chance to showcase Australia's energy transition and celebrate the climate leadership of Pacific nations.

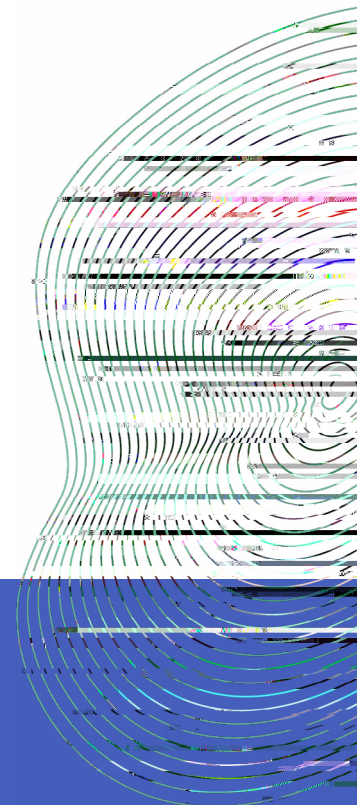
Universities can play a pivotal role in supporting COP presidencies by providing research, policy guidance and public engagement. The COP31 Universities Alliance aims to support the COP31 presidency by providing a single point of contact to engage with the higher education sector. The Alliance can also provide policy support by proposing ambitious climate policy and providing the evidence base for evaluating options. It can also help build capacity for climate action and deepen networks through universities' partnerships across the region.

An initial COP31 Universities Alliance activity - proposed for early 2025 - is a broad-based event region.

1. Hosting the world's climate summit

1.1 What is COP?

When a scientific consensus on global warming emerged in the late 1980s, countries negotiated a United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which set out a shared goal of limiting dangerous interference in the Earth's climate system. Since 1995, a Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC has been held each year (apart from 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic)



Key takeaways

- Australia and Türkiye are both competing to host COP31 in 2026. If Australia secures the bid, in partnership with Pacific island nations, it would host one of the country's largest diplomatic events, offering a chance to lead on global climate action.
- If Australia secures the COP31 Presidency, it will be expected to drive more ambitious climate actions aligned with the 1.5°C target. Australia also

2. Role of universities

Universities play a key role in global cooperation to tackle the climate crisis. Academic scientists and researchers worldwide collaborate through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to issue

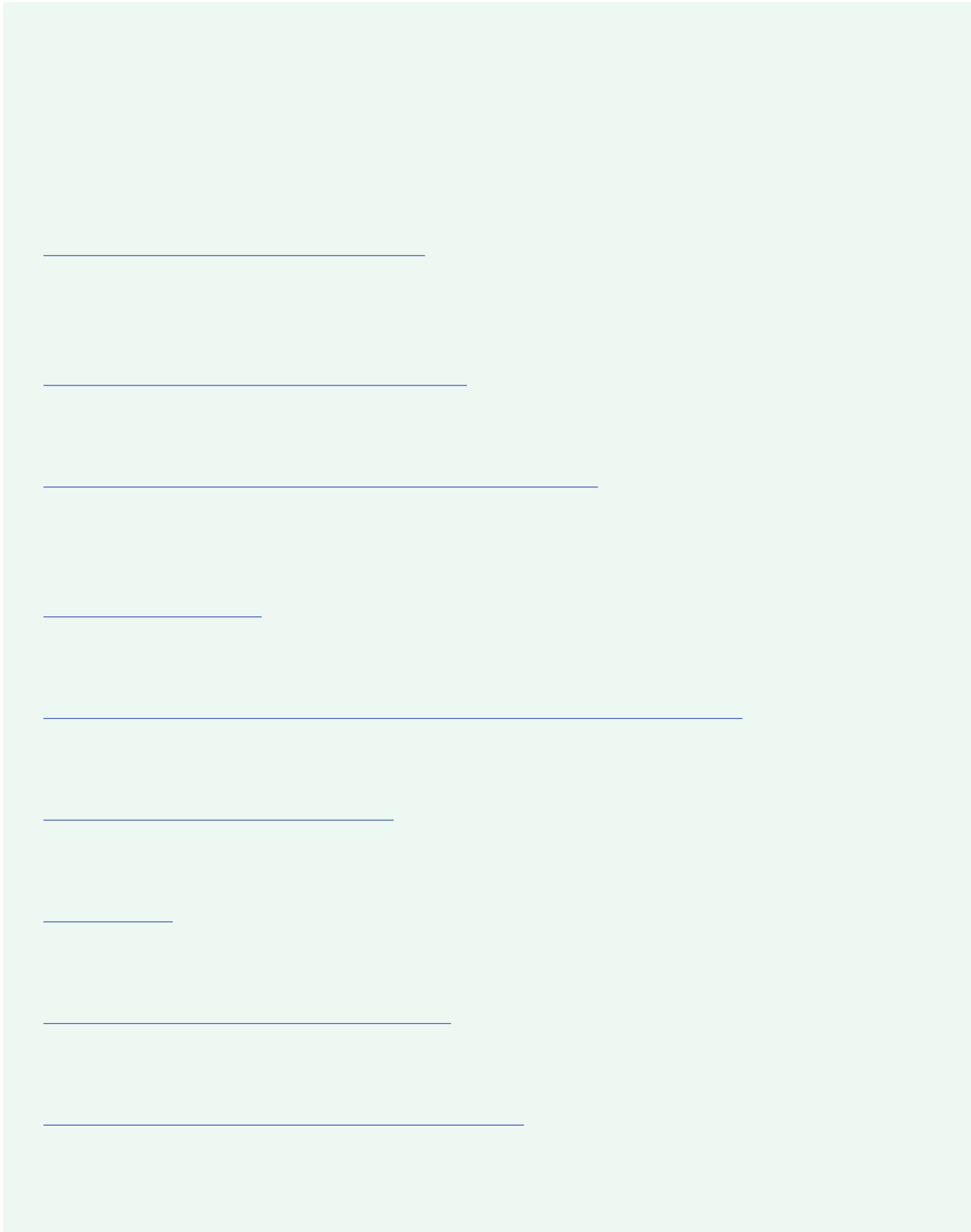
2.2 Higher education support for COP Presidencies

Ahead of recent UN climate summits, the COP presidency has established formal and informal relationships with universities to help them to deliver a successful COP. In the run up to COP26 for example, the UK government worked with a COP26 Universities Network (later renamed UK Universities Climate Network) that helped with public engagement, capacity building and policy development for the COP26 summit in Glasgow (UUCN n.d.). The UK Universities Climate Network also coordinated and published briefing papers ahead of COP26 to share evidence on key climate change topics (drawing from authors across the network).

Engagement between the UK Universities Network and the COP26 Presidency offers a model for collaboration between Australian and Pacific universities and the COP- u . univ M M esidencies inEr setm to to os in

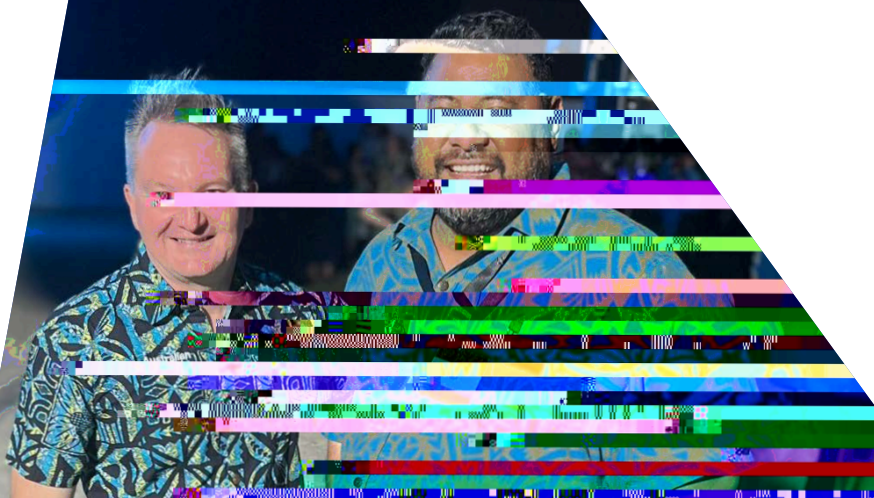
A er aiö an (COPr)and ra i (COP-). A er aiö an hes ustablished e COPr u cientific öenci that bri seharersfam univ68.7 (ersities and tink tankst woldwsid6 to suppor)34.1 (t the COP96 Pr91.9 (esidency COP9t)10 -1.4 d(20





Key takeaways

- Universities play a pivotal role in global cooperation to address the climate crisis by contributing to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and help policymakers with scientific knowledge and technology needed to mitigate climate change.
- Universities directly support COP presidencies, including Australia's potential hosting of COP31 in partnership with Pacific island nations. They can assist with policy development, public engagement, and building momentum ahead of the summit.
- Universities can serve as neutral forums for public discussions on climate policy, and re-envision COP formats to improve inclusivity, sustainability, and decision-making efficiency.
- Civil society and business groups in Australia and the Pacific are organising to support COP31, seeing it as an opportunity to advance new industries, supply chains, and robust climate policies.



Australian climate and energy minister Chris Bowen with senior research fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs (ANU) Sal Dr George Carter, October 2024.

3. The COP 31 Universities Alliance: Shared priorities

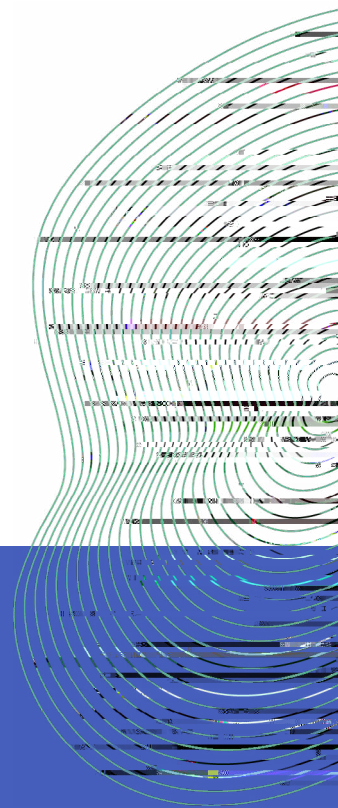
Established in May 2024, the COP31 Universities Alliance brings together universities and research institutions from across Australia and the Pacific. The Alliance provides a central point for collaboration on research and policy engagement in the lead up to COP31 and during the 12 months that Australia is set to hold the UNFCCC presidency in partnership with Pacific nations.

During initial roundtable meetings, Alliance members agreed to work together on five thematic priorities (see below). Universities in Australia and the Pacific are already playing a critical role in providing research, policy guidance, and capacity-building in these thematic areas.

The COP31 Universities Alliance meets monthly to coordinate activities. Membership is open to all universities in Australia and the Pacific. The Alliance is governed by an interim steering group with representatives from ANU, Griffith University, Monash University, UNSW and the University of Melbourne (see Appendix for current Alliance membership).

3.1 Advancing action on adaptation and loss and damage

As the climate crisis escalates, it is increasingly clear that, in addition to mitigation efforts aimed at reducing



3.3 First Nations and Pacific engagement and inclusion

As Australia anticipates hosting COP31, the inclusion and engagement of First Nations and Pacific communities will be critical to ensuring that the conference addresses the unique challenges and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and those living in the Pacific region. These groups are often at the frontlines of climate change impacts and possess valuable knowledge and practices that can contribute to global climate solutions.

Australia is home to the oldest continuous cultures on Earth – to First Nations peoples who have thrived for thousands of generations, adapted to changes in their environment, and who hold practical knowledge honed over millennia of continuous connection to land and waters. Indigenous Pacific islanders have a cultural history as master navigators and maintain an intimate connection to the ocean.

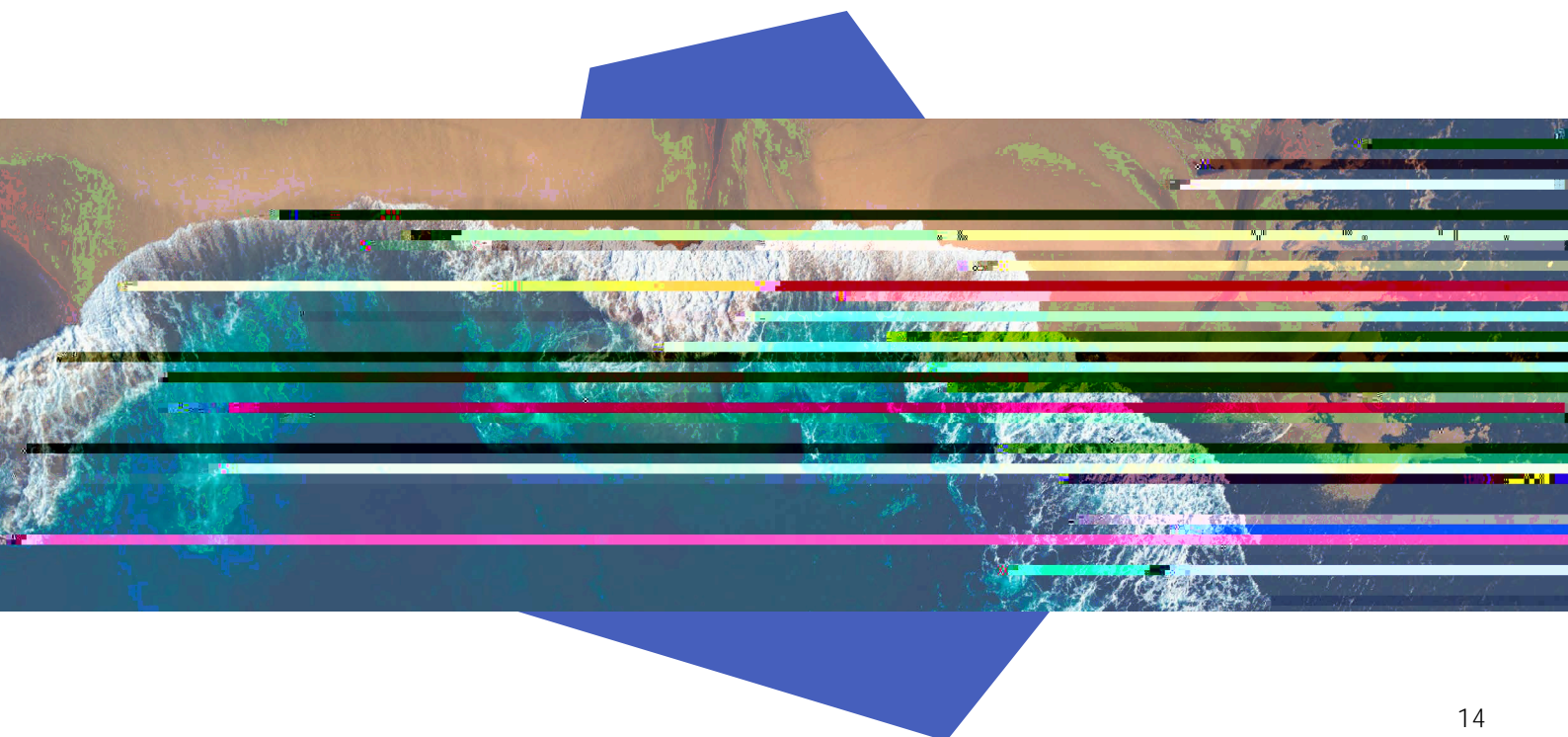
3.4 Understanding climate change impacts on human systems and ecosystems

A broad understanding of the impacts of climate change on human systems and ecosystems is essential for effective action to tackle the climate crisis. Climate change significantly affects public health, food security, water resources, and livelihoods and displaces communities, with vulnerable populations - such as those in low-lying coastal regions and developing countries - bearing the brunt of these consequences. It also drives biodiversity loss, disrupts ecosystems, degrades both land and marine environments, and leads to species extinction, all of which threaten agriculture, fisheries, and the ecosystem services vital to human survival.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report found that human systems and ecosystems in Australia face increasing risks, including more frequent and extreme heatwaves; longer-lasting fire seasons with more extreme fire danger days; loss of coral reefs due to ocean warming and marine heatwaves; loss of natural and human systems in low-lying coastal areas due to sea level rises; economic disruption and decline in agricultural production and increased stress in rural communities due to hotter and drier conditions. Pacific island countries also face growing risks from stronger cyclones, rising seas and coastal inundation, loss of coral reefs, changing fish distribution and ocean acidification (IPCC 2022a; 2022b).

Deliberations for an Australia-Pacific COP31 summit should be informed by a genuine appreciation of current and projected climate impacts. Universities in Australia and the Pacific have a strong track record of contributing to IPCC reports. They are also well placed to build awareness about the effects of climate change ahead of COP31 being able to provide 'decision-ready' information to enable business, government and society to assess the risks and opportunities associated with climate change and act accordingly. An interdisciplinary approach is vital. By way of example, the UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response (ICRR) brings together expertise from behavioural science, climate science, economics, law and governance to support decision-makers.

Innovative, cross-disciplinary research undertaken at ICRR has included: modelling the economic impacts of climate change; exploring the effects of climate change on hailstorms (and implications for insurance); providing holistic advice to government and business on sustainable finance and climate risk reporting; helping to integrate climate-related physical and transition risks into corporate strategy and planning; testing motivations for climate action amongst a range of stakeholders; and understanding attitudes toward climate migration.



3.5 Innovating the format of COPs

Concerns have been raised that the format for the annual UN climate conference is no longer fit-for-purpose and is in need of change. The COP talks are at heart an exclusive process, with key decisions - many of them agonisingly incremental in nature - being made by accredited officials in high-level closed negotiations inside a UN-sanctioned 'Blue Zone'. And yet the talks have at the same time become extremely large and unwieldy. More than 80,000 people attended COP28 in Dubai, with most participating in parallel events in a 'Green Zone', where industry and civil society groups discussed a wide range of climate solutions, often quite separately to the formal negotiating agenda for the COP.

Universities are well placed to propose and explore alternative COP formats that can help improve their effectiveness, inclusivity and sustainability. The main Conference may be complemented with smaller pragmatic meetings that are more inclusive and focussed on specific outcomes. Innovating the COP format could see investment in dedicated platforms and mechanisms that better incorporate the perspectives of marginalised voices, such as Indigenous communities and young people, to ensure that their concerns and contributions are meaningfully integrated into decision-making. Another area of innovation could involve using digital and hybrid formats to make some events more accessible to stakeholders who cannot physically attend, particularly those from low-income or remote regions.

Hosting COP31 would also be a chance to hold COP-related events across Australia and the Pacific to engage the private sector and wider community in a conversation about the rapid, transformative change that is needed to tackle the climate crisis - including both risks and opportunities. Well designed events can also enable meaningful participation of sub-national stakeholders (cities and local councils) and Indigenous communities.

Key takeaways

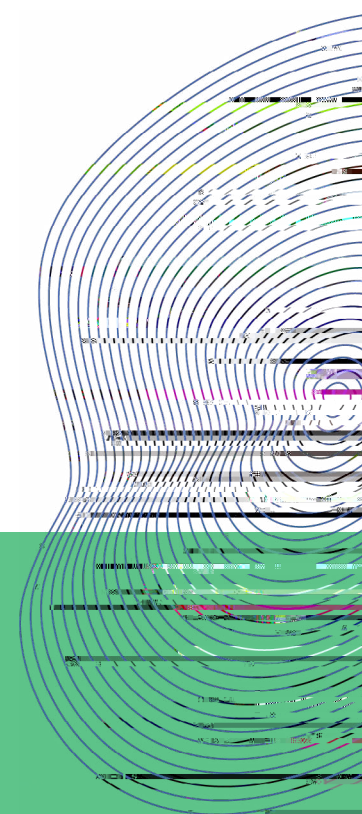
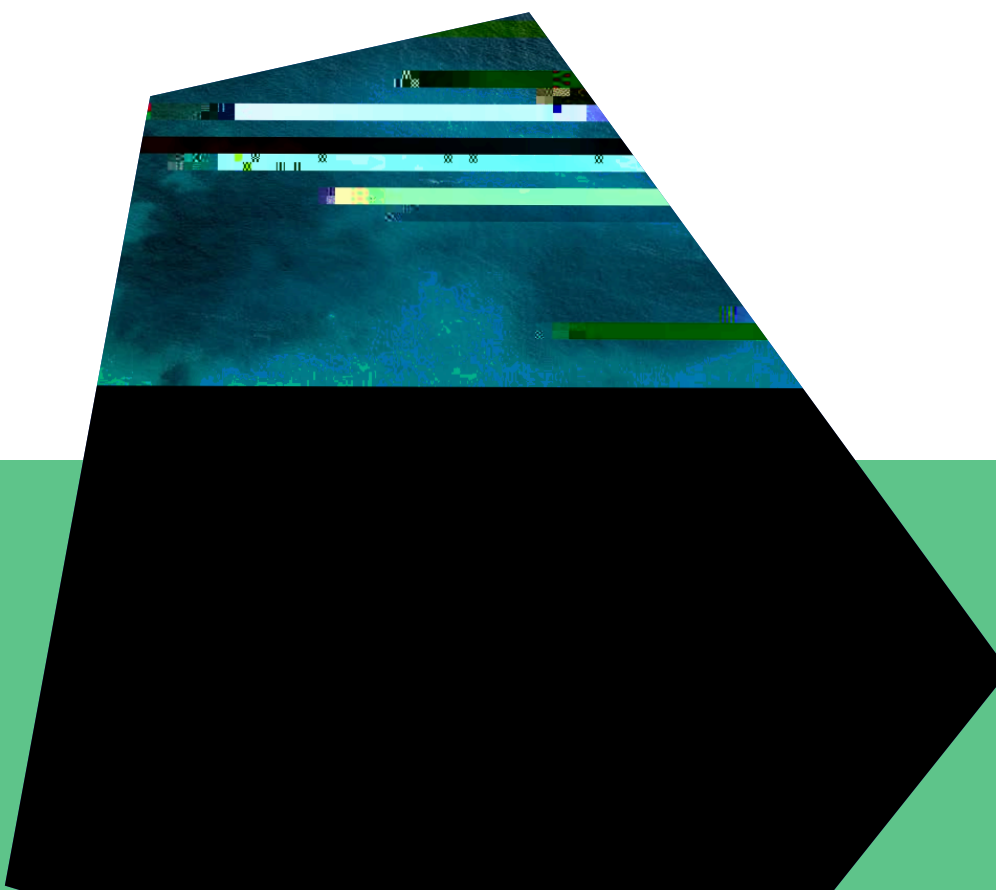
- The COP31 Universities Alliance has five main thematic priorities:
 - 1.) Advancing action on adaptation;
 - 2.) Just energy transition;
 - 3.) Engagement with First Nations and Pacific Island nations;
 - 4.) Understanding climate change impacts on human societies and ecosystems; and,
 - 5.) Innovating COP formats.
- Universities in Australia and the Pacific are already playing a critical role in providing research, policy guidance, and capacity-building in these thematic areas.
- The Alliance can serve as a central point for collaboration for research and policy engagement in these areas in the lead up to COP31, and during the 12 months that Australia holds the UNFCCC presidency in partnership with Pacific nations.

Ways forward

The COP31 Universities Alliance is ready to help Australia and the Pacific to plan and deliver a successful and ambitious COP31 climate summit. This would involve it playing a multifaceted role; one that leverages its expertise and resources in order to:

- Establish a single point of contact to coordinate university support in Australia and the Pacific region for the COP presidency;
- Help to coordinate and align academic research with national and Pacific regional climate goals;
- Provide training and development through education and other arrangements such as secondments and exchanges that builds capacity and expertise among Australian and Pacific government officials, academics, business and community members to more effectively participate in and leverage the opportunities afforded by COP31;
- Collaborate with business and government for a COP31 Action Agenda that supports Australia's clean energy transition and helps to develop new clean energy industries;
- Engage the public and businesses to raise awareness about COP31, climate science and climate impacts;
- Build public literacy around climate challenges related to mitigation and adaptation and the significance of multilateral climate cooperation;
- Host discussions in a neutral academic space to envision successful outcomes for COP31;
- Leverage existing university networks to build capacity for climate law, governance, and sustainability initiatives ahead of COP31;
- Propose new, more inclusive, and action-oriented COP formats.

As a practical next step, an initial COP31 Universities Alliance activity is proposed for early 2025. This would be a broad-based event that would gather perspectives and discuss ideas about what a successful Australia-Pacific COP31 might look like.



Appendix: COP31 Universities Alliance Membership

The COP31 Universities Alliance is a collaborative partnership between leading Australian and Pacific universities to coordinate the efforts and contribution of the Australia-Pacific higher education and research sector towards COP31. Membership is open to universities in Australia and the Pacific. Current membership (October 2024) is below)

- University of Melbourne (Melbourne Climate Futures; Centre for Cities)
- University of NSW (Institute for Climate Risk & Response)
- Griffith University (Climate Action Beacon; Griffith Asia Institute)
- Monash University (Climate Change Communication Research Hub; Climateworks)
- Australian National University (Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions)
- University of Western Australia (Oceans Institute)
- University of Technology Sydney (Institute for Sustainable Futures)
- University of the South Pacific (Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development)
- University of Queensland

- Stephens, T 2016, Australia proved it was an environmental world leader with the Antarctica agreement. We need to do it again, The Sydney Morning Herald, viewed 2 October 2024, <<https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/australia-proved-it-was-an-environmental-world-leader-with-the-antarctica-agreement-we-need-to-do-it-again-20161003-grtm6i.html>>.
- Treasury 2024, Budget 2024-25, Budget.gov, 14 May, viewed 23 September 2024, <https://budget.gov.au/content/bp2/download/bp2_2024-25.pdf>.
- United Nations n.d., Global Stocktake reports highlight urgent need for accelerated action to reach climate goals, United Nations, viewed 14 September 2024, <<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/global-stocktake-reports-highlight-urgent-need-for-accelerated-action-to-reach-climate-goals>>.
- United Nations Climate Change 2022, COP27 Reaches Breakthrough Agreement on New 'Loss and Damage' Fund for Vulnerable Countries, Unfccc.int, United Nations Climate Change, viewed 18 September 2024, <<https://unfccc.int/news/cop27-reaches-breakthrough-agreement-on-new-loss-and-damage-fund-for-vulnerable-countries>>.
- United Nations Climate Change 2023, COP28 Agreement Signals 'Beginning of the End' of the Fossil Fuel Era, UNFCCC, viewed 2 September 2024, <<https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era>>.
- UQ n.d., UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and Innovation Strategy, Uq.edu.au, viewed 2 October 2024, <<https://research-support.uq.edu.au/resources-and-support/research-strategy-policy-and-performance/uq-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-research-and-innovation-strategy>>.
- USP n.d., Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development - PaCE-SD, PaCE-SD, viewed 5 September 2024, <<https://www.usp.ac.fj/pace-sd/about-us/who-we-are/>>.
- UUCN n.d., About Us | UK Universities Climate Network, uucn.ac.uk, viewed 1 October 2024, <<https://uucn.ac.uk/about-us/>>.
- van Leeuwen, H (ed.) 2023, COP28: Chris Bowen backs last-ditch push for tough fossil-fuel action, Australian Financial Review, viewed 2 October 2024, <<https://www.afr.com/policy/energy-and-climate/bowen-urges-fossil-fuels-phase-out-as-cop28-talks-struggle-20231211-p5eqg3>>.

Contact us

COP31 Universities Alliance

A collaborative partnership of universities from across Australia and the Pacific committed to supporting a successful COP31.

<https://www.unimelb.edu.au/climate/collaboration/cop31-universities-alliance>

COP31-UA@unimelb.edu.au

UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response

Empowering business, government and society to address the risks and opportunities of climate change.

<https://www.unsw.edu.au/research/icrrchange>.