

# THE CHARTER OF GREEK UNIVERSITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## 2022-2030

### *"Greek Universities as Beacons of Sustainability"*

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the third millennium of the modern era, Humanity is facing a number of major challenges related to the environment, social welfare and global health. Many of these unprecedented in intensity and scale challenges, have been created by the absence of meaningful understanding, recognition and awareness of the complex interactions between the natural and anthropogenic environment, resulting in its improper management, including of the natural resources. These challenges are also directly linked to the dramatic disparities and inequalities of socioeconomic development, with opposite tendencies towards, on the one hand, cultural "homogenization" and on the other cultural "entrenchment".

This Charter of Greek Universities is being updated at a historic moment internationally, characterized by a series of crises at the economic, ecological, political, cultural and institutional levels, all of which are intrinsically linked to a crisis of values. In Greece, these crises, as well as the disproportionate for the Greek society interventions for their management, are particularly perceptible in intensity and depth due to the size, structure and geographical location of the country.

Redefining values and priorities in the context of ensuring socio-economic and environmental stability and progress is therefore put forward as a necessity. The guiding role and responsibility of Universities in this process, including to reduce their environmental footprint, is a challenging task. This task is directly linked with the creation of socially and scientifically active personnel and creative core groups, that can not only contribute to mitigating and solving problems but also in promoting the principles of Sustainable Development that are fundamental for the future of the country.

The first two decades of the third millennium have shown that our world is changing faster than expected and that no social, economic and political progress should be considered safe, secure and guaranteed, if it is not cultivated. Universities provide the "natural space" for these processes.

The effects of climate change are already visible and entail tremendous social, economic and political costs. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the magnitude of the gaps and inequalities in the global health system. The relatively quick response of the scientific community and the private sector in the creation and

supply of vaccines, together with the widespread deployment of distance learning modalities secured the continuation of University studies in lock-down conditions.

Universities, and Education as a whole, are influenced by the crises but at the same time recognize that only with a radical reorientation of their function and role pertaining to both Society and State, could they contribute to overcoming the crises, avoid future ones from happening and establish the basis of a sustainable future for the coming generations.

Taking into consideration that:

- The process to Sustainable Development was initiated by the Rio Summit of 1992 and the resulting Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Agenda 21). In the latter, Chapter 36 acknowledges the role of all levels of Education and Universities are called upon to play a leading role. In 1997, the International Conference of Thessaloniki “For Environment and Society” laid the groundwork for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at all levels.
- The adoption of the “Strategy for ESD” by the 56 member states of the UN Economic Committee for Europe (UNECE) in 2005, at a momentous Conference in Vilnius of Lithuania, was a milestone for ESD in Europe and Greece. The Strategy calls upon Governments and all related institutions to promote ESD at all levels and invites Universities to considerably contribute by strengthening know-how and competences to become paragons through their teaching, function and operation, and governance. Notably, the Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (MSESD) was adopted by Ministers for Environment and Climate Change of the Union for the Mediterranean (Athens, 2014) and its Action Plan by Mediterranean Ministers of Education (Nicosia, 2016). It should also be highlighted that during the 9<sup>th</sup> Environment for Europe Summit in October 2022, the UNECE Ministers of Education and Environment will be invited to endorse the new Implementation Framework of the UNECE Strategy for ESD (from 2021 to 2030) and the update of the MSESD Action Plan towards 2030.

The need for the promotion of education as an exceptionally important factor in the achievement of Sustainable Development and the role that the Universities play, as well as the necessary and appropriate changes required within Higher Education itself, have been formulated in various ways in the declarations and conclusions of a number of International Conferences that have taken place and are reflected in the 2011 Charter of Greek Universities for Sustainable Development.

After the adoption of the 2011 Charter, three particularly important events took place related to the long-term planning of Sustainable Universities, given that both the climate crisis and the holistic approach to Sustainable Development directly and indirectly influence the Academic community. These are:

- a. the Paris Agreement (2015);
- b. the unanimous adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (17SDGs) (2015),
- c. the adoption of the UNESCO Global Framework for Action on Education for Sustainable Development #ESDfor2030 (2021).

Education for Sustainable Development (Target 4.7) is recognized as an integral element of the 4<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) for Quality Education and plays a key role in the implementation of all SDGs.

In this context, by 2030, it should be ensured that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, which encompasses the concepts of sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

In the current context where the boundaries of the planet are “shrinking” in a variety of ways and the problems and prospects linked to climate change, poverty, hunger, immigration, a globalized economy, and, undoubtedly, globalized knowledge, are increasing, the close collaboration of Greek Universities with each other and with corresponding Universities on a European, Mediterranean and Global scale, as well as their networks (such as UNU, GUNi, IAU, UNIMED, EMUNI, MEdIES, SDSN, MEDUNET, etc.) is absolutely necessary.

**The Synod of Rectors that collectively co-signs the present Charter** is fully aware of the increasing importance of the role that Greek Universities are called to play in ensuring a sustainable future at national and international levels, embraces the principles of Sustainable Development, the International Treaties and agreements on the (17) SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the European Green Deal, the Digital Transition, the Decades of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and Ocean Literacy (2021-2030), as well as the outcomes of relevant International and Regional Conferences on Education for Sustainable Development, and is committed to the appropriate harmonization of the programs and actions of Greek Universities towards these principles.

Considering the remarkable human resources of the country's Universities and the already successful application of the Sustainable Development principles within an adequate range of their educational, research and other activities, the adoption of the Whole Institute Approach (WIA) by the Greek HEIs is the next step

for them to without delay, steadily and progressively, integrate the principles and goals of Sustainable Development in all aspects and actions of their programs. Consequently, the Universities of the country will act as *"Beacons of Sustainability"*, i.e. models and examples of the possibilities of Sustainable Development in practice. More specifically, Greek Universities will closely and systematically collaborate along the following axes:

**1. Designing Education and Research to promote Sustainable Development:** so that the principles, essential knowledge and implementation of Sustainable Development are echoed and promoted in order to achieve SDG-4 (on Quality Education) and Target 4.7 as well as the long-term priorities of the European Union related to (a) the sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems, (b) the creation of a more resilient, inclusive, democratic European society, prepared and able to respond successfully to threats, emergencies and disasters, (c) tackling inequalities and empowering civil society, (d) making Europe a climate-neutral and resilient economy, and (e) people-centered digital and green transition innovations.

Regarding **Education**, the Greek HEIs, by designing new programs and reorienting, enriching and continuously updating their existing ones, will aim to further develop, strengthen and promote the knowledge, skills, understanding, values and actions needed to create a world which simultaneously and in a balanced manner, ensures the protection and preservation of the environment, promotes social equality, cohesion and progress and encourages economic prosperity.

The aim is to educate each student on the principles, methods and critical thinking for achieving Sustainable Development, within their respective scientific fields of study, and to ensure that each of their graduates is capable of responsibly dealing with and promoting the critical issue of sustainable development in their field of expertise and their personal life, both at the individual and collective level.

Through tailored educational programs at undergraduate and postgraduate course levels and inter-university postgraduate networks of course distinction, they will encourage multidisciplinary and extensive collaborations with other Universities, Research Institutions and Social Partners.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the Universities would be willing to promote appropriate education and training - in line with the principles of ESD - of new educators destined for all levels of formal, non-formal and informal education. The same applies for "in service" training for teachers that are already in schools, and for lifelong learning.

In terms of **Research**, the Greek HEIs will further encourage their interdisciplinary and inter-institutional cooperation, as well as collaboration with research institutions of the country and abroad, aspiring for a high quality of basic and applied research on the environmental, social and cultural dimensions of Sustainable Development, including on Energy, Water Resources, Marine Environment, Biodiversity, Quality of Life in cities and regions, Circular Economy,

Human Rights, Racial Equality, Governance, protection and promotion of tangible and intangible Cultural Heritage, artistic creation, etc. A standing support of the State is desirable in achieving this, which should also highlight as a strategic national priority the strengthening of research, innovation and entrepreneurship in all relevant sectors and industries.

In order to promote research and innovation, it is necessary to strengthen the scientific and institutional basis of friendly, to both the environment and society, methods and modes of production and consumption, in combination with the assessment of the sustainability of new and/or “cleaner” technologies, the relative possibilities that they provide as well as any potential threats. The same applies for the environmental and energy provisions for targeted, large-scale interventions on the built environment with due consideration for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage and diversity, with techno-economic optimization, aesthetic compatibility, reverence to social equality and the prerequisites for Quality of Life.

**2. Applying Principles, Methods and Practices that promote Sustainability within Universities:** Through these, Universities will become real models of Sustainable Development and convincingly promote applied, simple and advanced, sustainable solutions, in practice.

For this to be achieved, each Greek HEI will commit to the adoption and implementation of measurable goals for promoting sustainability planning and the upgrading of university facilities and infrastructure by measuring, monitoring and reducing its environmental footprint in its transportation modes, connection with urban and regional infrastructures, the creation of free and green spaces, management of materials and services that achieves energy and raw materials use reduction, the use of renewable energy sources, recycling systems, proper management of toxic, dangerous or contagious substances and waste, the promotion of green products and catering services, in health and safety, and accessibility of all members of the university community to the services provided, the contribution of HEIs to a circular economy, and in general, the development, application and promotion of pioneering technologies, methods and practices that strengthen Sustainable Development in academic workspaces.

Particularly important for this axis is the systematic effort to exchange and transfer the know-how among Universities and, when possible, the coordination of their actions to achieve economies of scale and enhance the effectiveness of their interventions. Such efforts can be implemented in a relatively easy way based on the provisions of axis 4 (e.g. through the formation of a "Network of Greek Universities for Sustainable Development").

**3. Relationship between Higher Education Institutions and Society at both Local and International Levels:** The opening of the Universities to the society, through educational activities, initiatives, events for general and special groups is expected to

contribute to more substantial interaction between society and the Academic community.

Taking into consideration the collaboration with all social partners, the local and wider Civil Society at national and regional level and the promotion of public dialogue, which extends beyond public awareness and sensibilization, the Universities wish to facilitate the understanding of the problems and critical issues of our time and ways to counteract them, by the public, through the distribution of objective viewpoints based on valid data. In this respect, Universities will help local communities in making critical collective decisions for sustainable development. Furthermore, the HEIs have a leading role in the development and contribution of know-how and good practices for the management needs of the Local Authorities as well as the production processes of other social partners and sectors in order to approach sustainability.

Within this framework, Universities are determined to contribute to the sustainable orientation and planning of the country, which undeniably depends also on the corresponding provisions and intentions of the State, so that it decrees appropriate, scientifically-informed measures and processes in political decision-making with the active participation of Universities and their representatives, as well as the formulation and implementation of documented regional and decentralized policies related to sustainable development.

Special attention will be given to information, education and awareness raising of students on the Agenda 2030, both through their studies and through the substantial enhancement of the openness and interaction of the Universities with Society by strengthening the initiatives and volunteer bodies of both students and employees of the Universities, as well as any other voluntary initiative, in the direction of the environment, sustainable mobility and energy-saving, following standard and participatory applications.

Central goal of the Greek Universities is the openness to the society, following the outcomes of the Conference of the Council of Europe and the Organization of American States (Dublin, June 2022), which highlighted the imperative need of Universities to be examples of prudent democratic governance and social solidarity.

Equality, social inclusion and special attention to avoid the exclusion of less privileged population groups and vulnerable students (e.g. students with disabilities, refugees and migrants, people from low or middle-low income groups), are at the core of Greek HEIs' views on Sustainable Development, as well as of climate justice.

**4. Governance of Greek HEIs:** It is based on the principles and objectives of Sustainable Development with dedication to the principles of a democratic, constructive dialogue and consent, absolute transparency, mutual respect and

responsibility and participation of all actors of the Academic Community, in formulating policies of Sustainable Development as well as the principles of meritocracy, justice, self-government of Universities and the Public and free Education. The main objective of the Greek HEIs is that their general governance is compatible with a system of Integrated Environmental Management, for the supply and purchase of products and services as well as the conduct/construction of projects with a reduced environmental footprint and minimized environmental impacts throughout their life cycle that should take into serious consideration the environmental, economic and social targets of Sustainable Development.

For the effective governance of the Sustainable Development actions, the Greek HEIs commit to proceed with the establishment of a Special Committee and a supporting administrative instrument, e.g. Coordinating Body/Office of Sustainable Development Actions in each University, which will have a coordinating role for the implementation of the aforementioned actions concerning the three axes of this Charter. Within the responsibilities of this body will be the monitoring of the common criteria and indicators that will be jointly adopted by the Greek HEIs at National level (e.g. as "National Sustainability Threshold") as well as any other criteria that each institution may wish to adopt for the successful promotion of its individual goals. Another responsibility will be the monitoring of the overall ecological footprint of each HEI, e.g. using the EUSTEPS program and/or other monitoring and evaluation methods/systems.

## **Suggestions for next steps**

### **1. Proposal to Determine a “National Sustainability Threshold”**

By evaluating data from the educational and research reality of the Greek Universities, such as the increasing number of academic educational programs and research projects related to the objectives of Sustainable Development as well as the successful participation in many international evaluations and networks for Sustainability, the Synod of the Rectors concludes that the conditions are now met for the establishment and adoption of a single, national and commonly accepted set of Sustainability criteria ("Sustainability Threshold"). Such set of criteria should be the reference point of all national academic institutions, based on which their relative progress and creative response to the sustainable development challenges faced by the environment, society and economy at national and international level can be evaluated and enhanced. The methodology and selection of the set of criteria, (the "Sustainability Threshold"), is to be agreed by a Special Committee/Working Group, open to all Greek HEIs, and is proposed to constitute a minimum of common specifications compatible with prevailing international practices and inextricably linked to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

Through the establishment and adoption of the Sustainability criteria, it is pointed out that, as a whole, the Greek Universities are expected to obtain significant benefits. The "Sustainability Threshold" and its systematic application may offer a model for the implementation of the SDGs in the administration, operation and policy of any public organization as well as becoming an example for other public and private bodies and the society, in general. It is also expected to essentially promote the requested strengthening of the institutional role of Greek Universities in the policy-making regarding Sustainable Development at the local, national and international levels. Furthermore, the benefit that the Greek Universities will obtain from the adoption of the Sustainability criteria will be significant, taking into account the fact that the majority of them already participate actively in international evaluations, in which they must demonstrate proven and measurable progress in achieving the SDGs. Such an example is the evaluation methodology of Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, which requires as prerequisite, the submission of data on the achievement of SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals).



## 2. Proposal for the Establishment of the Network of Greek Universities for Sustainable Development

The Network of Greek Universities for Sustainable Development is formed, by appointed representatives of Greek HEIs, whose mission will be to act as an advisory body to the Synod of Rectors for all issues that promote scientific knowledge, research and education regarding sustainable development and greatly concern specific collective goals of the Synod of Rectors. This advisory body will seek to function as an inclusive and interdisciplinary forum for sustainable development, with no exclusion of scientific fields, opinions or approaches, and will facilitate the unified and autonomous decision-making of the Universities of the country in the consultation processes with national or international policy-making bodies for education, research, innovation and sustainable development. Furthermore, it will promote public debate on understanding the principles, content and impact of these policies.

The Network of Greek Universities for Sustainable Development will be governed in a democratic manner and in accordance with the formulated regulations upon the approval of the Synod of Rectors. The formulation of the regulations for its establishment, operation and administration will be elaborated by a Special Working Group.