

Working Together

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



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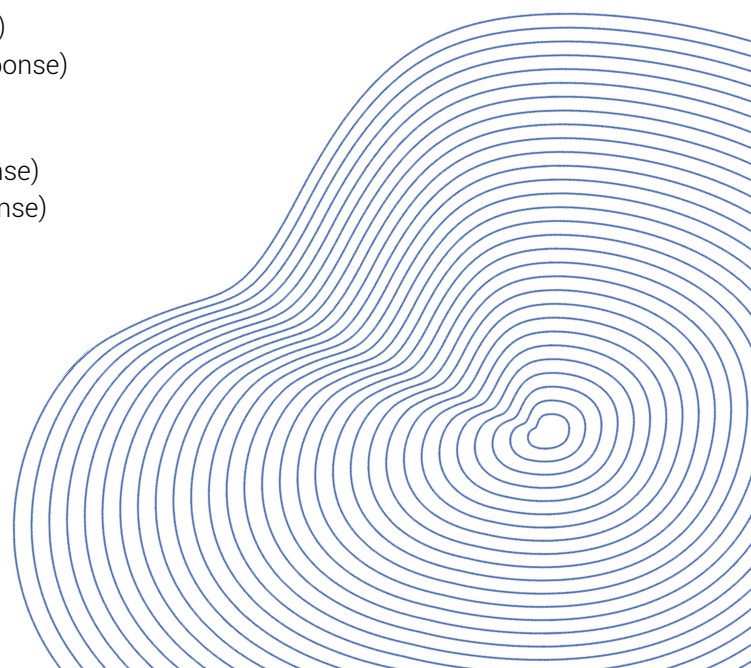
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Written by

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 to gather perspectives and discuss ideas about what a successful Australia-Pacific COP31 might look like. The COP31 Universities Alliance can also help to re-envision the future of COP formats (including COP31) to improve their effectiveness, inclusivity and sustainability.

This paper is arranged in four sections, with 'key takeaways' provided at the end of each section. The first section explores the importance of the annual UN climate talks and provides context for Australia's bid to host COP31 with the Pacific. Section 2 considers the role universities play in supporting COP presidencies and introduces the COP31 Universities Alliance. Section 3 sets out five priority areas for Alliance collaboration. The final section proposes a way forward, including proposed Alliance activities.

The COP31 Universities Alliance aims to:

Provide policy support

Provide the evidence base for evaluating options and proposing ambitious climate policy.

Develop capacity and networks

Help build capacity for climate change action and deepen networks through universities' partnerships in our region

Re-envision COP formats

Propose and explore alternative COP formats to improve their effectiveness, inclusivity and sustainability.

Convene discussions around COP31

Provide a forum for authentic dialogues on complex issues that generates options for policy innovation.

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)

During these annual talks, diplomats from around the world discuss progress against the overall UNFCCC goal of limiting greenhouse gas emissions and negotiate new measures to tackle the problem. The most important measure is the Paris Agreement, which was agreed at COP21 in 2015. The Paris Agreement is now the central mechanism for countries to collaborate to tackle climate change.

After the crucial 2015 Paris Agreement, the annual COP talks have been characterised by negotiation over how to cut greenhouse gas emissions and shift away from fossil fuels, as well as plans to adapt to growing impacts. At these talks, countries also assess progress toward their shared goals and wealthier nations may pledge support to help developing countries deal with climate impacts (United Nations Climate Change 2023, United Nations n.d., United Nations Climate Change 2022).

But the COP summits are more than this. They are also a de facto global trade fair, bringing together major players in clean energy industries and providing a platform to attract global investment in local projects. As host, Australia can shape an important action agenda alongside the formal COP meetings that is focused on clean energy supply chains and emerging opportunities in critical minerals, green metals and green hydrogen.

A number of Australian cities, including Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne and Sydney have shown interest in hosting the talks (Flannery et al. 2024). It is expected that the host of COP31 will be announced at COP29, which will be held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024.

The annual UN climate talks are key to global cooperation to tackle the climate crisis.



1.2 Why COP31 is important

If Australia succeeds in its bid to host COP31 in partnership with Pacific island nations, it will mark one of the most significant, and certainly the largest, diplomatic events ever held in the country. As host and president of COP31, Australia's first responsibility would be to ensure a successful conference that reinforces global commitment to implementing the Paris Agreement.

The official COP agenda is in large part decided in advance by all UNFCCC parties. However, the two years leading up to the summit, and the 12 months Australia and the Pacific hold the COP31 presidency, would be an opportunity to promote an ambitious action agenda to mitigate climate change and adapt to growing impacts. Events linked with this agenda could be held around Australia and the Pacific, and can also be held during the conference itself, alongside formal negotiations.

Hosting COP31 presents a unique opportunity to establish a foundation for new clean energy industries in Australia; to reset trading relations with Asian nations and to reaffirm Australia's role as a security partner of choice in the Pacific. Moreover, it offers a chance to strengthen global cooperation during a period of deepening environmental and geopolitical challenges.

Australian diplomacy matters. We have a history as a responsible middle power, galvanising action to protect the environment. In 1982, Australia supported a global moratorium on commercial whaling. In 1989, former Prime Minister Bob Hawke championed a treaty to ban mining in Antarctica (Stephens 2016). With similar ambition today, and working with Pacific island countries as a regional bloc, Australia can help broker a new era of climate action.

1.3 Bidding to host COP31

The Western Europe and Other Group at the UN is in line to host COP31 in 2026. Australia has already won support from a number of countries in the grouping for its bid to host COP31 in partnership with the Pacific. Countries that have publicly expressed support include the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Canada. The only other bidder to host COP31, Türkiye, does not currently have public backing from other nations in the Western Europe and Other Group. Türkiye also bid to host COP26 in 2021, but bowed out to allow the UK to host.

Even while the bidding process is still underway, preparations are being made to host COP31 in Australia. In its 2024 budget, the Federal Government allocated \$76.2 million for engagement in international climate diplomacy, including for the COP31 bid and to undertake initial planning in the event of a successful bid (Treasury 2024).

Australia's bid to host COP31 in partnership with Pacific island countries has widespread domestic support. A recent Lowy Institute Poll shows 70% of Australians support hosting the COP in 2026 with Pacific island countries (Neelam 2024). At the level of state governments and city councils, there is bipartisan support, with political leaders from both Labor and the Coalition putting up their hand to host the UN climate talks. Business groups in Australia are also enthusiastic and are working with the Federal Government to win the COP31 bid.

1.4 Expectations of the COP31 President

Hosting the UN climate talks will come with international expectations. As President of COP31 Australia, and the Pacific, will be expected to maintain global momentum toward climate action and to reinforce commitment to the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The COP31 climate summit falls in the middle of a make-or-break decade for the Earth's climate system. The science is clear, to meet the Paris Agreement goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C above the long term average, global emissions must be roughly halved by 2030. To avoid the worst impacts of global warming, countries will need to accelerate the shift away from fossil fuels and the roll out of clean energy, and set out their plans in new nationally determined contributions (NDCs) that are due in 2025.

International expectations on Australia will grow. While COP31 will be held in late 2026, Australia will be expected to take up the mantle for ushering in more ambitious climate action much sooner than that. Between 2024 and 2026, Australia will be expected to work with other Presidencies – especially Brazil, as host of COP30 in 2025 and current host of the G20 – to bolster global ambition in this crucial decade.

There are early signs of collaboration already with the COP30 Presidency of Brazil. Australia's Ambassador for Climate Change Kristin Tilley joined Brazil's Ambassador for Climate Change Luiz Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado at a business climate conference in Sydney in April 2024, to set out priorities for COP30 and COP31 (Impact X 2024).

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 has an opportunity to shape a COP31 action agenda that will help attract investment and grow new clean energy industries.
- Australia's bid to host COP31 is being supported by other countries, and has strong support from local business groups and the general public. There is bipartisan support for the bid at the state and city level.
- Australia has already allocated \$76.2 million for climate diplomacy and COP31 preparations, and the Australian government is making practical arrangements to host, including staffing and logistical planning.

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 regular assessment reports on the latest climate science, and to share the policy change and technology uptake needed to limit dangerous changes to the Earth's climate system. This knowledge, generated largely by universities, is drawn on by policymakers as they negotiate collective actions to address the climate crisis.

Universities also support COP presidencies in a direct way to deliver the annual UN climate talks. Australian and Pacific universities have a critical role to play if Australia hosts the COP31 UN climate talks in partnership with Pacific island countries in 2026.

Universities play a vital role enhancing public understanding of climate science and offer a neutral space for open discussions on climate policy.

2.1 Supporting a successful and ambitious COP

The academic sector in Australia and the Pacific is preparing to support Australian and Pacific island governments to deliver a successful and ambitious UN climate conference. Universities are well placed to build momentum ahead of the 2026 summit by engaging business and public audiences and explaining the opportunity that COP31 presents. Universities also play an important role by building public literacy with regard to climate science and explaining the significance of multilateral cooperation to address climate change.

Australian and Pacific universities have the expertise needed to provide policy support for COP31 and can help develop an ambitious Australia-Pacific 'Action Agenda' (an agenda alongside the formal negotiating process that will help to promote action on climate mitigation and adaptation in our region). Academic researchers can provide the evidence base for evaluating options and proposing ambitious climate policy.


Universities in Australia and the Pacific are well placed to convene public discussions on climate policy in a 'neutral' space. As the Australian government prepares to host the UN climate talks, universities can host discussions that ask the question: 'What should success look like if Australia hosts COP31 in partnership with Pacific island countries?'. During the preparatory phase, universities can also help to re-envision the COP format, by proposing and exploring COP formats that will improve their effectiveness - in terms of advancing decisions, promoting inclusivity and being more sustainable.

By bringing together academic expertise from across Australia and the Pacific, the COP31 Universities Alliance provides a single point of contact for the COP31 Presidency to engage with the higher education sector in the region. The Alliance also helps researchers engaged in the COP process to coordinate their efforts.

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 COP31 Presidency. Universities also played a role supporting COP presidencies in Egypt (COP27) and United Arab Emirates (COP28) and are set to do so in Azerbaijan (COP29) and Brazil (COP30). Azerbaijan has established a COP29 Scientific Council that brings together researchers from universities and think tanks worldwide to support the COP29 Presidency (COP29 2024).



Universities play a key role supporting COP Presidencies. Australian and Pacific universities can help ensure COP31 is a success. Image Credit: Kenneth Leanfore

Other university climate alliances and networks

The COP31 Universities Alliance is a collaborative partnership of Australian and Pacific universities committed to supporting a successful COP31. The Alliance focusses on Australia-Pacific collaboration to host the UN climate talks. Other networks that encourage international collaboration between universities on climate change include the following:

[International Universities Climate Alliance](#) (IUCA) - includes several Australian universities, such as the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and University of Melbourne. The alliance focuses on amplifying climate research and engaging with policymakers and the public on climate change issues. IUCA has a broad global membership (beyond Australia and the Pacific) of 44 universities.

[Higher Education Network of Climate Networks](#) (NoN) - is a global body to improve connectivity between more than 20 higher education climate networks and is linked with the Climate Champions Team supporting the UN Climate Change High Level Champions.

[Research and Independent Non-Governmental Organizations](#) (RINGO) - RINGO is a recognised NGO constituency to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), bringing together researchers from independent, not-for-profit organisations. There is a RINGO focal point at the National University of Singapore.

[UK Universities Network](#) - This is a group of UK-based universities and research institutions collaborating to advance climate action and support the UK's climate goals through research, education, and policy engagement.

[Global Alliance of Universities on Climate/Climate Alliance/University Alliance](#) (GAUC) - Australian National University (ANU) is a member of GAUC, which brings together leading universities from around the world to address climate change through education, research, and policy engagement.

[Climate Law and Governance Initiative](#) This is an international consortium of partners within the climate law community focused on building capacity and advancing knowledge in legal and governance strategies to address climate change.

[Universitas 21](#) (U21)- includes Australian universities like the University of Queensland and the University of Melbourne. This global network focuses on collaborative projects, including those related to climate change and sustainability.

[Pacific Islands Universities Regional Network](#) (PIURN)- a network among 15 universities in the Pacific Islands Countries and Territories established in 2013 to enable closer collaboration among researchers in the region.

[University Climate Change Coalition - Second Nature](#) - This a network of leading North American research universities committed to accelerating climate action by collaborating with businesses, governments, and communities to develop and implement local and regional climate solutions.

2.3 Civil society and business organising for COP31

The higher education sector is not alone in starting to prepare for COP31. Business and civil society groups in Australia and the Pacific are organising to support the hosting of the UN climate talks in 2026.

The Business Council of Australia sees COP31 as “an opportunity to put ourselves at the frontier of new industries and supply chains that will deliver new opportunities for Australians” (BCA 2022). The Carbon Markets Institute polled its membership of Australian companies and found almost two thirds of respondents (65%) support the bid and wanted to see Australia adopt more robust climate policies to support the credibility of its climate diplomacy (CMI 2023). In July 2024, the Australian Sustainable Finance Initiative launched a COP31 workstream supported by members ANZ, Commonwealth Bank, CBus, HSBC, IFM Investors and Moodys (ASFI 2024). The organisation will develop initiatives to unlock private sector finance and investment into net zero aligned activities for COP31, in collaboration with government, financial institutions and other partners.



Civil society groups have also mobilised to support the Australia-Pacific bid to host the UN climate talks. A COP31 Collaborative Committee was established in mid-2023 to act as a focal point for civil society engagement with the Australian government, bringing together a range of business and community groups and centring First Nations and Pacific voices within that (Community Council of Australia 2023). A COP31 ‘Base Camp’ event was held in Sydney in August 2023, which saw hundreds of stakeholders from business and civil society discuss the potential for COP31 to transform climate ambition in Australia, and consider Australian and Pacific priorities for the road to COP31 (ImpactX et al. 2023). A second COP31 ‘base camp’ event was held in Canberra in September 2024.



The inaugural meeting of the COP31 Collaborative Committee was held at Parliament House in Canberra in May 2023.

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.



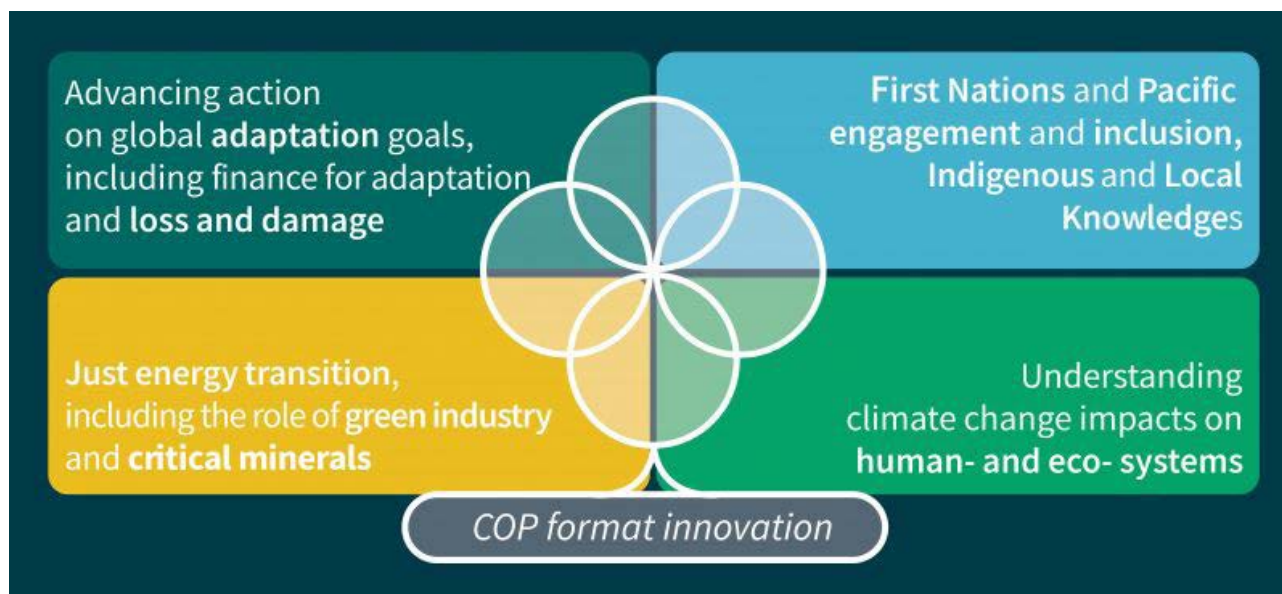
Australian climate and energy minister Chris Bowen with senior research fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs (ANU) Salā Dr George Carter, October 2024.

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 greenhouse gas emissions, the world must invest in adaptation strategies to help protect communities, economies, and ecosystems. It is also clear that some communities are already facing unavoidable loss and damage from the impacts of climate change. With this in mind, it was agreed at COP27 to establish a dedicated loss and damage fund to provide finance to vulnerable countries hard hit by climate disasters and facing irreversible impacts, such as the loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and biodiversity.

Universities help stakeholders in Australia and the Pacific Nations to work through climate adaptation challenges by providing research, advocacy, education, and direct action. They have, for example, provided expertise to assist countries in developing and implementing comprehensive National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) to help address their specific climate change impacts. In Australia, the Government with support from a number of universities is currently undertaking its first ever National Climate Risk Assessment and National Adaptation Plan (DCCEEW, 2022a). This initiative is intended to help Australian policymakers and communities to understand and build resilience to intensifying climate change impacts.

In like fashion, the Australian National University (ANU) Climate Change Institute, actively collaborates with policymakers in several Asia-Pacific countries to support the creation of NAPs. This work includes providing research-driven guidance on adaptation strategies, facilitating stakeholder consultations, and offering policy advice to ensure NAPs align with international climate commitments (ANU n.d.).

Universities support climate adaptation efforts in Australia and the Pacific, and are currently helping to develop Australia's first National Adaptation Plan.

Addressing loss and damage involves acknowledging and responding to the irreversible impacts of climate change, such as the loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and biodiversity. Here too, universities can play a significant role. For example, Griffith University's Climate Change Response Program focuses on the effects of climate change in Australia and the Pacific, particularly on loss and damage in coastal areas. This research program evaluates adaptation strategies to protect critical infrastructure and ecosystems from extreme weather events and rising sea levels (Griffith, 2022).

In the Pacific, the University of the South Pacific (USP) has been a leader in promoting climate resilience for island communities. Through its Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (PaCE-SD), USP collaborates with local communities to design and implement strategies aimed at bolstering resilience to climate-related challenges. These initiatives include community-driven adaptation projects, and integrating traditional knowledge with scientific research to enhance climate adaptation (USP 2020).


3.2 Just energy transition, including the role of green industry and critical minerals

To meet the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C a rapid global energy transition is essential. At the COP28 climate talks in December 2023 governments from nearly 200 countries agreed to accelerate the shift away from fossil fuels in their energy systems and to triple the roll out of renewable energy by 2030 (UNFCCC 2023). The clean energy transition has significant implications for Australia. Speaking at the COP28 climate summit in Dubai, Climate Minister Chris Bowen said: "If we are to keep 1.5°C alive, fossil fuels have no ongoing role to play in our energy systems – and I speak as the climate and energy minister of one of the world's largest fossil fuel exporters" (van Leeuwen, 2023).

As host of COP31, Australia can showcase our potential as a clean energy supplier helping countries in the Asia-Pacific region to cut emissions in their economy. Increasingly, market demand is shifting from coal and gas toward Australian resources used in clean energy supply chains, including critical minerals, green metals and green hydrogen. Australia can shape an 'Action Agenda' alongside the formal COP31 talks that will help to attract investment in local clean energy projects. Climate Minister Chris Bowen says COP31 is "an opportunity if we win the bid to show Australia's capacity to help the world as a renewable energy powerhouse" (DCCEEW 2022b).

Universities have a key role to play supporting a just and clean energy transition in Australia and across the Asia-Pacific. Universities provide invaluable research to support the shift to renewable energy sources, like wind, solar and storage and can support government and the private sector with the development of new clean energy industries.

Social science researchers are doing valuable work to help ensure a just transition that does not disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and that the benefits of emerging green industries are widely and equitably shared. The UNSW Australian Human Rights Institute (AHRI), for example, is collaborating with the UNSW Institute for Climate Risk & Response (ICRR) to examine the climate consequences of Australia's fossil fuel export industry and to consider pathways for a phaseout of fossil fuel production (AHRI & ICRR 2024).



Universities help Australian policymakers and industry leaders understand the risks of climate change and seize the opportunities of the energy transition.

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.

The COP31 summit will be an important moment to share this traditional knowledge, and to celebrate Indigenous leadership. Today, many First Nations communities in Australia are developing renewable energy projects on traditional land and leading the way on land management as well. For their part, Pacific Island countries have played a leadership role in the global response to climate change since a scientific consensus on the issue emerged in the late 1980s (Morgan et al 2024). Over decades of international climate talks, Pacific diplomats earned a reputation for sticking to the science. Working in a diplomatic alliance with island nations in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean, Pacific climate negotiators were instrumental in securing landmark agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

By providing an inclusive network for collaboration across Australia and the Pacific the COP31 Universities Alliance can help to ensure the agenda for an Australia-Pacific COP reflects the voices and priorities of First Nations and Pacific islanders.

Universities across Australia and the Pacific are actively collaborating with Indigenous and Pacific communities to integrate traditional knowledge into climate resilience efforts. The University of Melbourne's Indigenous Knowledge Institute, for example, partners with Indigenous communities to incorporate their perspectives into research and education, focusing on land management, cultural heritage, and sustainability (Carter 2021). Australian National University's (ANU) Climate Change Institute works closely with Pacific Islander communities on climate adaptation and resilience, emphasising the inclusion of Pacific voices in global climate negotiations (ANU n.d.). The University of Queensland engages with Torres Strait Islander communities, focusing on documenting climate impacts, exploring adaptation strategies, and advocating for the protection of Indigenous rights in climate policies (UQ n.d.).

The COP31 Universities Alliance can help ensure the Australia-Pacific COP agenda reflects the priorities of Pacific island countries and First Nations people in Australia.

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

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icrr@unsw.edu.au