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Planetary health: young academics ask universities to act



The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected societies worldwide, demanding communities to rapidly respond to the health and socioeconomic impacts of the disease. The emergence of zoonoses such as SARS, Ebola virus disease, and COVID-19 showcases the deep interconnections between human activities and the natural environment. Anthropogenic activities diminish the natural habitats of animals, leading to enhanced proximity of humans and animals, which increases the likelihood of novel viral transmission from animals to humans.¹

Planetary health, conceptualised as the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends, reflects this interconnectedness.² It recognises that the evolution of our civilisation has relied on well-functioning natural systems. However, humanity has entered the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which human activity is the single largest driver of global changes.³ The spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 is emblematic of this era, as it is a product of these changes.⁴ There is a unique window of opportunity to respond to other global threats to human health and wellbeing.

The Planetary Health Alliance facilitates and supports the Planetary Health Alliance Campus Ambassadors, who are a collective of 39 individuals from diverse academic backgrounds, representing 31 universities from 16 countries across the world.⁵ The Planetary Health Alliance is committed to advancing planetary health in our local communities and to strengthening the global cooperation needed to address planetary health challenges.

Over the past few months, international networks of scientists have rapidly mobilised to coordinate efforts with relevant stakeholders to advance COVID-19 research and public health responses.⁶ These cross-border, cross-sectoral activities reflect the approach needed for planetary health research. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are instrumental in propagating shared visions and values among decision makers. Moving forwards, HEIs are uniquely placed to lead a coordinated scientific and educational movement to shape a future that supports both people and the planet.

On behalf of all Campus Ambassadors, we believe the disruption caused by COVID-19, alongside the resulting scientific and social solidarity, presents an opportunity

for HEIs to advance planetary health.⁷ We call upon universities and other HEIs worldwide to ensure the health of present and future generations by committing to the following five actions.

The first is to support interdisciplinary and action-oriented research endeavours. Priority should be given to research initiatives that use systems thinking approaches to address current and future planetary health challenges, particularly from a social equity lens. Interdisciplinary action should become a core feature of formative and implementation research. A strong emphasis should be placed on bridging the gap between scientific research and actionable findings that can deliver a positive impact across societies.

The second action is to ensure that planetary health curricula are embedded in all programmes and faculties. HEIs should integrate planetary health perspectives into existing programmes or offer stand-alone cross-sectional modules on the field. Integration of knowledge and skills, necessary for transformational action, is crucial to equip current and future leaders and stakeholders of various domains with planetary health knowledge. Online teaching resources have been developed by institutions worldwide, offering tools to all HEIs.⁸

The third is to join the consortium of institutions that have committed to fossil fuel divestment. Fossil fuel burning is a primary driver of environmental changes that threaten human health, such as climate change and air pollution. We call upon HEIs to withdraw all investments in coal, oil, or gas companies as a commitment to planetary health. HEIs that have already pledged to divest should be seen as exemplars of a future standard and encourage other institutions to follow their commitment.⁹

The fourth is to promote delivery and attendance of virtual education. We encourage universities to maintain structures for online teaching and virtual events developed during the pandemic, and to actively promote teleconferences and webinars instead of resuming extensive (air) travel. The current COVID-19 period has prompted many institutions to move to virtual teaching, which should be implemented into future structures. Online education opportunities also enhance equitable access to high-quality education programmes for a global audience.

The fifth action is to actively shape public discourses by effectively communicating scientific research. We encourage academic experts to advocate for evidence-based actions directed to advancing planetary health, and to communicate their findings using straightforward and compelling language. Universities should provide training and support in communications and media relations for their students and staff.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, there is a crucial need to focus on planetary health to guide our individual and collective responses to current and future global challenges. HEIs are uniquely positioned to acknowledge the complex relationships between the environment and human health through education, research, and advocacy. This unparalleled opportunity highlights HEIs' responsibility to shape a planet-sensitive society. The time to act is now.

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For more on the **Planetary Health Alliance** see <https://www.planetaryhealthalliance.org/>

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