Towards a Net-Zero Future: The Multifaceted Role of Universities in Accelerating Carbon Neutrality and Climate Action

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Abstract

The escalating global climate crisis necessitates urgent and coherent actions across all sectors of society. Higher education institutions (HEIs), with their unique positioning at the intersection of knowledge generation, talent development, and civic engagement, are critical catalysts in the transition to a net-zero emissions future. This paper examines the multidimensional roles and strategic pathways through which universities can significantly advance carbon neutrality and climate action. By synthesizing existing literature and drawing on in-depth comparative case studies of Southeast Bangkok University (Thailand) and Beijing Jiaotong University (China), this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that positions HEIs simultaneously in four complementary roles: (1) Innovation Engines, driving low-carbon research and technology development; (2) Operational Benchmarks, demonstrating carbon-neutral campus management; (3) Educational Pioneers, leading curriculum transformation and sustainability education; and (4) Community Hubs, fostering public engagement and cross-sector collaboration.

The analysis identifies significant implementation barriers, including financial constraints, methodological challenges in Scope 3 emissions accounting, organizational inertia, and difficulties in measuring indirect impact. Moreover, the comparative cases reveal how institutional mission, resources, and regional context shape distinct but equally viable climate strategies - ranging from localized, context-sensitive approaches to technology- and policy-oriented pathways. The study concludes with strategic recommendations for policymakers and university leaders to embed carbon neutrality into institutional cores, emphasizing the necessity of context-specific strategies that leverage institutional strengths and foster collaboration between research-intensive and regional universities. This research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of comprehensive climate action in higher education globally, offering a refined framework for designing, evaluating, and scaling university-led initiatives in support of a net-zero future.

Keywords: Carbon neutrality; Climate change; Higher education institutions; Sustainability governance; Climate action; Net-zero transition; University leadership

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อนาคต Net-Zero กับบทบาทหลากหลายของมหาวิทยาลัยในการเร่ง ความเป็นกลางทางคาร์บอนและการขับเคลื่อนการรับมือการ เปลี่ยนแปลงสภาพภูมิอากาศ

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บทคัดย่อ

วิกฤตการณ์สภาพภูมิอากาศโลกที่ทวีความรุนแรงขึ้นนั้นเรียกร้องให้มีการดำเนินการอย่างเร่งด่วนและสอดคล้อง กันในทุกภาคส่วนของสังคม สถาบันอุดมศึกษา (HEIs) ซึ่งมีสถานะพิเศษอยู่ที่จุดตัดของการสร้างองค์ความรู้ การพัฒนา บุคลากร และการมีส่วนร่วมทางสังคม ถือเป็นตัวเร่งปฏิกิริยาที่สำคัญในการเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่อนาคตของการปล่อยก๊าซเรือน กระจกสุทธิเป็นศูนย์ บทความนี้จะตรวจสอบบทบาทหลายมิติและแนวทางเชิงกลยุทธ์ที่มหาวิทยาลัยใช้เพื่อขับเคลื่อนความ เป็นกลางทางคาร์บอนและดำเนินการด้านสภาพภูมิอากาศได้อย่างมีนัยสำคัญ ด้วยการสังเคราะห์วรรณกรรมที่มีอยู่และการ ใช้กรณีศึกษาเชิงเปรียบเทียบเชิงลึกของมหาวิทยาลัยกรุงเทพตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ (ประเทศไทย) และมหาวิทยาลัยเจียวทง บักกิ่ง (ประเทศจีน) การศึกษานี้จึงได้นำเสนอกรอบแนวคิดแบบบูรณาการที่วางตำแหน่งให้สถาบันอุดมศึกษามีบทบาท เสริมซึ่งกันและกันสี่ประการพร้อมกันดังนี้ (1) เครื่องยนต์นวัตกรรม ขับเคลื่อนการวิจัยและการพัฒนาเทคโนโลยีคาร์บอน ต่ำ (2) มาตรฐานการดำเนินงาน แสดงให้เห็นการจัดการมหาวิทยาลัยที่เป็นกลางทางคาร์บอน (3) ผู้บุกเบิกทางการศึกษานำการปรับเปลี่ยนหลักสูตรและการศึกษาด้านความยั่งยืน และ (4) ศูนย์กลางชุมชน ส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของสาธารณะ และความร่วมมีอข้ามภาคส่วน การวิเคราะห์นี้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงอุปสรรคสำคัญในการนำไปปฏิบัติ ซึ่งรวมถึงข้อจำกัดทางการเงิน ความท้าทายด้านระเบียบวิธีวิจัยในการบัญชีการปล่อยกำชเรือนกระจกประเภทที่ 3 ความเฉื่อยขององค์กร และความ ยากลำบากในการวัดผลกระทบทางอ้อม กรณีศึกษาเปรียบเทียบเผยให้เห็นว่า ภารกิจของสถาบัน ทรัพยากร และบริบท ระดับภูมิภาค มีส่วนกำหนดกลยุทธ์ด้านสภาพภูมิอากาศที่แตกต่างกัน แต่สามารถนำไปปฏิบัติได้จริงไม่แพ้กัน ซึ่งมีตั้งแต่ แนวทางที่เน้นบริบทเฉพาะที่ไปจนถึงแนวทางที่เน้นเทคโนโลยีและนโยบาย

การศึกษานี้ได้สรุปด้วยข้อเสนอแนะเชิงกลยุทธ์สำหรับผู้กำหนดนโยบายและผู้นำมหาวิทยาลัย เพื่อฝังความเป็น กลางทางคาร์บอนให้อยู่ในแกนหลักของสถาบัน โดยเน้นย้ำถึงความจำเป็นของกลยุทธ์ที่จำเพาะเจาะจงกับบริบท ซึ่งใช้ ประโยชน์จากจุดแข็งของสถาบัน และส่งเสริมความร่วมมือระหว่างมหาวิทยาลัยที่เน้นการวิจัยกับมหาวิทยาลัยในระดับ ภูมิภาค งานวิจัยนี้มีส่วนช่วยทั้งความเข้าใจเชิงทฤษฎีและการนำไปปฏิบัติจริงของการดำเนินการด้านสภาพภูมิอากาศ อย่างครอบคลุมในระดับอุดมศึกษาทั่วโลก โดยนำเสนอกรอบแนวคิดที่ได้รับการปรับปรุงสำหรับการออกแบบ การประเมิน และการขยายผลโครงการริเริ่มที่นำโดยมหาวิทยาลัยเพื่อสนับสนุนอนาคตสุทธิเป็นศูนย์

คำสำคัญ: ความเป็นกลางทางคาร์บอน, การเปลี่ยนแปลงสภาพภูมิอากาศ, สถาบันอุดมศึกษา, ธรรมาภิบาลความยั่งยืน, การดำเนินการด้านสภาพภูมิอากาศ, การเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่สุทธิเป็นศูนย์, ความเป็นผู้นำของมหาวิทยาลัย

Introduction

The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) issues a stark warning: only immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. In response, achieving net-zero emissions has emerged as a paramount global objective that requires transformative changes across all societal sectors. Within this context, higher education institutions represent both significant contributors to climate change and essential agents of solution.

HEIs collectively influence over 250 million students worldwide (UNESCO, 2021) and possess substantial carbon footprints through their campus operations, research activities, and supply chains. Simultaneously, they hold unique capabilities to drive climate action through their educational mission, research expertise, operational scale, and community engagement. While many universities have made voluntary commitments through initiatives like the Talloires Declaration and Second Nature's Climate Commitment, systematic implementation of comprehensive climate strategies remains inconsistent and often fragmented across the sector.

This paper addresses this implementation gap by developing a holistic framework for university climate action and examining its application across different institutional contexts. Through comparative case analysis, it explores how varied institutional missions and resources shape climate strategies and outcomes. The research aims to provide both theoretical grounding and practical guidance for universities seeking to maximize their contribution to global decarbonization efforts while fulfilling their educational and societal missions.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The conceptual foundation for university climate action draws from multiple theoretical traditions. Early literature on sustainability in higher education focused predominantly on environmental management systems and operational efficiencies (Shriberg, 2002; Velazquez et al., 2006). This evolved toward more strategic approaches incorporating carbon accounting and climate action planning (Levy & Marans, 2012; Klein-Banai & Theis, 2013).

Theoretical underpinnings for comprehensive university climate action include: The Living Lab Concept: This framework conceptualizes university campuses as experimental platforms for testing and demonstrating sustainable technologies and behaviors (Evans et al., 2015; Bossert et al., 2020). It emphasizes the integration of operational sustainability with teaching and research functions. The Triple Helix Model: This approach highlights the intersection of university, industry, and government in driving innovation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), particularly relevant for technology development and policy translation in climate action. Whole Institution Approach: This perspective advocates for embedding sustainability across all university functions—curriculum, research, operations, and community engagement—rather than treating it as an add-on initiative (Mader & Rammel, 2015; Sterling et al., 2013). Despite these theoretical advances, implementation remains challenged by disciplinary silos, financial constraints, and inadequate metrics for assessing impact beyond direct emissions (Leal Filho

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et al., 2019). Our integrated framework addresses these gaps by conceptualizing four complementary roles that universities can simultaneously fulfill in advancing climate action.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review with comparative case study analysis. The literature review encompassed peer-reviewed articles, university climate action plans, and international reports published between 2000-2023, identified through Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases using keyword searches related to 'university,' 'higher education,' 'carbon neutrality,' and 'climate action.'

The case study selection followed a most-different design, purposefully selecting institutions with contrasting characteristics to explore how different contexts shape implementation approaches

- Southeast Bangkok University: A regional comprehensive university in Thailand emphasizing teaching and community engagement
- Beijing Jiaotong University: A research-intensive technical university in China with strong industry and government ties

Data collection included document analysis of climate action plans, sustainability reports, and institutional websites; quantitative analysis of emissions data where available; and scholarly publications related to each institution's sustainability initiatives. All analyzed data were obtained from publicly available sources, and no confidential or sensitive information was involved, thus not requiring institutional review board approval. The comparative analysis focused on identifying common patterns, distinctive approaches, and contextual factors influencing implementation effectiveness across the four roles outlined in our framework.

Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Four-Dimensional Framework in Practice

Our analysis reveals how universities operationalize the four interconnected roles: As Innovation Engines: Research-intensive universities like Beijing Jiaotong excel in developing patented technologies (e.g., energy-efficient rail systems) and establishing specialized research centers. Regional universities like Southeast Bangkok focus on adaptive innovation suited to local contexts (e.g., tropical building cooling solutions).

As Operational Benchmarks: Both institution types face challenges in Scope 3 emissions accounting, particularly for purchased goods and capital investments. Research universities tend to invest more in high-cost technologies (e.g., geothermal systems), while regional institutions emphasize behavioral changes and nature-based solutions (e.g., constructed wetlands).

As Educational Pioneers: Effective curriculum integration requires moving beyond environmental programs to embed climate literacy across all disciplines. Southeast Bangkok demonstrates strong community-engaged learning through its 'living lab' approach, while Beijing Jiaotong emphasizes technical training and policy education.

As Community Hubs: Universities leverage their convening power differently based on institutional positioning. Research universities influence national policy and industry standards, while regional institutions serve as local demonstration centers and knowledge resources for their immediate communities.

4.2 Case Studies: Comparative Analysis

Southeast Bangkok University exemplifies a context-sensitive, localized approach to climate action. The university has implemented several innovative measures including photovoltaic systems that serve dual purposes of clean energy generation and educational tools, passive cooling architecture adapted to tropical conditions, and constructed wetlands for stormwater management and biodiversity enhancement. These efforts reflect a resource-conscious model that combines operational sustainability with pedagogical innovation, positioning the institution as a community-engaged sustainability demonstrator.

Beijing Jiaotong University demonstrates a technology- and policy-oriented approach. Its comprehensive strategy features building-integrated photovoltaics (BIPV), geothermal systems utilizing ground-source heat pumps, and a sophisticated smart energy management platform. Leveraging its specialized expertise in transportation, the university has pioneered energy-efficient rail technologies and intelligent scheduling algorithms that have been adopted nationally. The establishment of a Carbon Neutrality Research Institute fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and aligns campus initiatives with national carbon targets.

Table 1 Comparative Case Analysis: Southeast Bangkok University and Beijing Jiaotong University

Dimension	Southeast Bangkok University	Beijing Jiaotong University
Energy &	PV installations, passive cooling,	BIPV, geothermal systems,
Infrastructure	ecological wetlands	smart energy management
Research Emphasis	Tropical sustainability; ecological	Low-carbon transport; smart
	engineering	grids; industrial application
Governance	Cross-functional working groups	Dedicated research institute;
Approach		technical offices
Community	Local demonstrations; community	National policy advice; industry
Engagement	partnerships	collaboration

4.3 Implementation Barriers and Enablers

Common barriers across institutions include:

- · Methodological challenges in Scope 3 emissions accounting and reporting
- · Financial constraints limiting capital-intensive investments
- Organizational silos hindering cross-functional collaboration
- Measurement difficulties in assessing educational and research impact on emissions reduction Key enabling factors identified:
 - · Leadership commitment from senior administration and governing boards
 - Stakeholder engagement involving students, faculty, staff, and community partners

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- · Strategic alignment with institutional mission and core functions
- External partnerships with government, industry, and peer institutions

Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrates that universities can effectively contribute to climate action through four complementary roles: as innovation engines, operational benchmarks, educational pioneers, and community hubs. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, institutions should develop context-specific strategies aligned with their distinctive missions, resources, and contexts.

Theoretical Implications: Our integrated framework advances theoretical understanding by synthesizing previously disparate strands of literature on university sustainability. It provides a coherent conceptual model for analyzing and designing comprehensive climate action strategies across diverse institutional contexts.

Practical Implications: For university leaders, our findings highlight the importance of:

- Developing comprehensive carbon accounting that includes Scope 3 emissions.
- Creating interdisciplinary structures to bridge operational, educational, and research functions.
- Leveraging institutional strengths rather than replicating approaches from dissimilar universities.
- Building long-term partnerships with community, industry, and government stakeholders.

Policy Recommendations: For policymakers and higher education associations:

- Develop standardized methodologies for measuring and reporting university emissions, particularly Scope 3.
- Create funding mechanisms specifically for university climate infrastructure and research.

Incorporate climate action metrics into university accreditation and quality assurance frameworks

- Facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing across different types of institutions to enable learning across diverse approaches.

Limitations and Future Research: This study's limitations include its focus on two case institutions and reliance on publicly available documents. While this approach provides rich qualitative insights, the findings may have limited generalizability to all types of higher education institutions, particularly small private colleges or vocational schools. Future research should expand to include more diverse geographic and institutional contexts, investigate longitudinal impacts of climate initiatives, and develop robust methods for quantifying universities' indirect contributions to societal decarbonization. Additionally, further investigation into the implementation challenges and failures that may not be captured in publicly reported data would provide a more comprehensive understanding.

As institutions dedicated to knowledge generation and societal improvement, universities have both the responsibility and capability to lead in the global transition to a net-zero future. By fully embracing their multifaceted roles, they can significantly accelerate climate progress while fulfilling their educational missions.

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