

The following letter is open for additional signatures from full-time and contract faculty members, librarians and archivists, as well as postdoctoral visitors from across the university. To add your signature, please contact Jody Berland jberland@yorku.ca or Ricardo Grinspun ricardo@yorku.ca.

MEMORANDUM (draft)

To: York University Senate Executive and members of Senate

From: YUFA Climate Emergency Committee (YCEC)

Re: UAP renewal input: Adopt climate change as grand-challenge

Date: XX March 2020

Dear York senators,

This letter offers input regarding ongoing consultations on the 2020-2025 University Academic Plan (UAP). It follows verbal input provided in various fora, including Senate. It is a revised version of a letter submitted on February 5 to Senate's Academic Policy, Planning and Research Committee (APPRC),

We are conveying the passionate belief held by wide sectors of faculty, librarians and archivists, students, staff and families from all sectors of York University that the University should adopt a plan for addressing the climate emergency as an organizing pillar for academic planning.

Senate should adopt climate change as the grand challenge of the new UAP.

The collective challenge

The world's leading climate scientists [have warned](#) that we have at best until 2030 to take significant action so that global warming is kept to a maximum of 1.5C. Missing this target by even half a degree will significantly worsen the already great risks of drought, fire, floods, heat, extreme weather events, melting of glaciers and polar caps, loss of freshwater sources, rise in sea levels, loss of island nations and coastal cities, ecological degradation, mass biological extinction, diminishing food supplies, population displacement, increased violence and conflict, and ill health and poverty, for billions of people. More recently, 11,000 scientists from around the world have [declared](#) unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency. With current atmospheric feedback loops threatening to exceed all recent forecasts and to bring us beyond the 1.5C temperature rise sooner than anticipated, [scientists caution](#) that rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society are required to reach the target.

The big turnaround within the next decade must include transitions in land use, energy, industry, finance and investment, buildings, transport, cities and the regulation of natural resources. Global net human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) need to fall by about 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching 'net zero' around 2050. Achieving this goal is affordable and feasible but it requires extraordinarily [ambitious goals and action](#). Responding to this climate crisis will require major social and political mobilization and substantial economic costs; however, the social and economic costs of *in*action are unimaginable.

Can York have an impact?

York University must become a leader in facing the challenge of climate action. The moral challenge is paramount: If an institution purports to educate the younger generation for a brighter future, it cannot be part of societal lethargy that is literally destroying that future. There is a major capacity for action and influence in this university. York is an institution with a billion dollar budget, two major campuses, and the size of a small city with more than 60,000 people who work and study here. It is a major higher education hub in the Greater Toronto Area whose population of six million makes the most sizeable contribution to Canada's economic output. The City of Toronto, which harbours vast resources in social activism, scientific endeavour, industrial innovation, and political action, has declared a Climate Emergency. The cultural, intellectual and economic diversity of York University, embodied in its faculty, librarians and archivists, staff, students and families, presents an ideal site to test ideas, to understand and explain the complex realities of climate justice, and to help bring about rapid transformation. York is already a leading institution on teaching and research in sustainability and social justice, with an unmatched record of excellence in the interdisciplinary research needed to provide leadership in this crisis. The influence will not remain local; students from around the world enrolled at York will bring back to their countries lessons and experiences from this city and this university.

Is climate change a suitable thematic focus for the university?

It is hard to conceive of a more suitable choice for a grand challenge for the UAP. The extraordinary resonance of climate change and ecological crisis at local, national and global scales cannot be exaggerated. What climate change entails for their future is at the forefront of concern for the young generation we mentor and serve. When the public demonstrates its concern, politicians, policymakers, governments and granting agencies follow; the demands for academic input and the resources required will grow exponentially.

Climate change is arguably the most complex and impactful interdisciplinary academic problem that has ever existed. For the interdisciplinary university, it means that virtually every corner of the university is called to attention. There is no need to explain the role of scientists and engineers, mathematicians, ecologists and environmentalists in tackling the massive challenge of a warming world – there are already dozens of them enlisted already at York as researchers, teaching faculty, postdoctoral visitors, and graduate students, and many more are needed. These scientists are involved with multidisciplinary research on, for example, the interactions of climate-change related stressors such as temperature, humidity and habitat fluctuations, with

biotic components such as plant and animal life in extreme environments. With the cross-disciplinary affordances emerging within the natural sciences and engineering, together with programs like science and technology, health, environmental and urban studies, information technology and disaster management, York has a strong foundation for developing collaborative academic programs and resources concerned with climate change.

Social science and humanities scholars grapple with wrenching societal transformations resulting from ecological disruption, and their impacts on culture, media, public policy, labour, politics, government, geographies, fine arts, and social relations. Climate change is radically altering weather patterns with more storms, floods, droughts and fires. This in turn is leading to crumbling infrastructure, coastal degradation, forced displacement, heightened geospatial and racial inequalities, the demise of small island nations, and disrupted agriculture and food supplies. These transformations are fanning political extremism, hate, conflict, competition for resources, as well as threatening institutions of democratic governance and social solidarity. Such challenges are exacerbated by the costs of adaptation to and mitigation of climate change and the required shift to a low carbon economy. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities bring expertise on narrative structures and conflicts of meaning that organize our relations with each other and with the natural world. They address the political, ethical, moral and philosophical underpinnings of rapid and disruptive change in the environment and their expression in literature, popular culture, social media, music and other forms of cultural expression.

Each discipline or area has a role to play in understanding these transformations and supporting positive change. Health researchers identify new global health determinants such as the expansion of mosquito-borne diseases in a warming climate, or the psychological and emotional consequences of “eco-anxiety.” Educators seek to instill a sense of a viable future in young minds affected by such phenomena, at a time when students from elementary school to our own classrooms are actively calling for change. Economists and policymakers tackle the uncharted challenge of transforming a fossil fuel-driven economy into a low carbon economy within the span of a single generation. Business plays a central role in facilitating a low-carbon economy and decentralized sources of renewable energy. Accountants need to consider the valuation of stranded assets in fossil fuels; legal scholars need to deliberate on the changes that ensue in “soft” and official legal frameworks in national and international law as a result of such transformation.

York’s tradition of concern for social justice is central to this endeavor. Equity scholars need to engage with the growth of the “care economy” so that the low carbon jobs of the future are fairly valued in light of contemporary patterns of precariousness, women’s oppression, and racial and other forms of discrimination. Achieving “climate justice” means tackling the challenges of climate change without shifting the burden onto the weak, poor, sick, vulnerable, marginalized and oppressed. York’s commitment to reconciliation means learning from Indigenous peoples’ “low-carbon” traditional ways of life and their respect for Mother Earth.

York has identified experiential education as a central pillar of teaching and learning. There is wide potential for experiential education opportunities in the academic program sketched above,

as heightened social concern brings practical opportunities in the nonprofit, for-profit and governmental sectors. York has also placed emphasis on start-ups, entrepreneurship, social enterprises and social innovation, all essential to the bottom-up nature of the low carbon economy and the decentralized and democratic society that is in the making.

Concluding remarks

We call on York University to become a leader in facing the challenge of climate action. We have sketched out an ambitious university-wide agenda engaging all aspects of university life, including academic planning – teaching, research and service – as well as non-academic support mechanisms (see the Appendix). Operational aspects of the University – such as heating, transportation, and building maintenance – should be addressed as part of a broader plan of action for a carbon-free university by 2030. The necessary lifestyle, cultural, operational and physical changes within the university will involve multiple ambits, such as the shift to renewable energy, evolving our food culture, expanding our reliance on Indigenous knowledge, and the development of a ‘climate solutions park’ at Keele campus. These changes provide wonderful opportunities for experiential education, and join the academic and non-academic sectors of the university in an all-encompassing institutional mandate.

We foresee this memo as an initial contribution to Senate’s long range planning deliberations. We would like to provide more detailed feedback as plans develop for the new UAP. We are at your service if Senate organizes a consultation on climate change as a thematic focus. We would also welcome an opportunity to speak directly to APPRC, Senate Executive and Senate members in future meetings.

This memo is written and submitted by members of YCEC, but it reflects the views and aspirations of broad sectors of the campus community. Members of the university administration as well as the Board of Governors have expressed individual views aligned with these goals. The York community knows that the next decade – and the “big turnaround” described above – will take all our imagination, effort and commitment. We share the aspiration that York University will step up to the challenge.

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The YUFA Climate Emergency Committee (YCEC) is an open committee of about 35 full-time faculty members, librarians, archivists and postdoctoral visitors from across the university. It aims to educate and mobilize for a climate-crisis-ready university and to ensure that York University supports the limits and goals outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. YCEC works collaboratively with other groups, such as Carbon Free York (a student group).

YCEC invites full-time and contract faculty members, librarians and archivists, as well as postdoctoral visitors from across the university to endorse this letter. For the current list of signatories, see next page.

Appendix

A Sketch for York's Climate Change Declaration: A Strategy for a Carbon-Free York University 2020-2030

The multi-pronged strategy should include actions and goals in the following areas:

- Immediately sign the Climate Emergency Declaration, joining seven thousand other higher education institutions around the world;
- Set a carbon-free York target by 2030 as a central organizing challenge of the 2020-2025 University Academic Plan and an organizing principle for all other major planning, policy and branding activities;
- Establish targeted goals to achieve carbon-free campus operations by 2030 in areas such as heating, maintenance, construction, and transportation.
- Strengthen York's leadership in curriculum and research on sustainability and climate change;
- Transform campus life to meet climate challenges, such as promoting sustainable food, values of Indigeneity and respect for Mother Earth, the pursuit of decent work, and social justice;
- Divest university finances from fossil fuels and withdraw the social license from polluting and high carbon footprint industries;
- Pursue a major initiative to launch a climate solutions park at Keele Campus; and
- Build alliances within and beyond York to broaden the struggle for ecological sustainability and climate justice.

Signatures can be found here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Dv3axTpFeVBWmN-ZS3L3_PO2SvcZ4r9IqEXNvEEpQRo/edit?usp=sharing