

Business as usual but greener? Confronting colonialism in university responses to the climate and nature emergency

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Abstract

This article critically examines how Canadian universities address the climate and nature emergency (CNE) through their sustainability and climate action strategies. Using thematic analysis, the study analyzes U15 university strategies to assess how these institutions conceptualize the CNE and the extent to which they reproduce or challenge the modern/colonial system in which universities are embedded. While the colonial foundations of the modern university are well-documented, this article identifies the institutional mechanisms through which coloniality is reproduced, solidified, and in rare cases, contested, in response to the CNE. Findings reveal that universities predominantly frame the CNE as a technical problem solvable through Western scientific innovation and greening operations, often overlooking the deeper systemic and colonial dimensions that drive ecological destruction and destabilization. By reinforcing the modern/colonial system, these approaches risk perpetuating the very dynamics that create unsustainability. The article calls for a shift towards more reflexive, responsible, and reparative responses to the CNE that confront colonial complicity, honour Indigenous sovereignties, and move towards justice-oriented approaches to sustainability.

Résumé

Cet article examine de manière critique la réaction des universités canadiennes à la crise climatique et naturelle (CCN). Il présente une analyse thématique des stratégies de durabilité et d'action climatique des établissements membres de U15 Canada. L'étude examine leurs conceptualisations de la CCN, et dans quelle mesure celles-ci reproduisent ou remettent en question le système moderne colonial dans lequel les universités s'inscrivent. Les fondations coloniales de l'université moderne sont bien documentées. Cet article s'intéresse toutefois aux mécanismes institutionnels qui permettent la reproduction et la solidification, ou, dans de rares cas, la contestation. Les résultats montrent que les universités conçoivent la CCN surtout comme un problème technique qui peut se résoudre par l'innovation scientifique occidentale et un certain virage vert, tout en ignorant les racines systémiques et coloniales de la destruction et de la déstabilisation écologiques. Ces conceptions, qui renforcent le système colonial moderne, risquent de perpétuer les dynamiques aux origines de la non-viabilité du monde actuel. L'article appelle à se tourner plutôt vers des réponses à la CCN réfléchies, responsables et réparatrices, qui expriment le refus d'être complices du colonialisme, honorent les souverainetés autochtones et privilégient des approches de la durabilité ancrées dans la justice.

Keywords: climate and nature emergency, higher education, climate coloniality, decolonial, thematic analysis, climate justice

Canadian universities have increasingly positioned themselves as catalysts of climate solutions and sustainability transitions in response to what some describe as the climate and nature emergency (CNE) (IPPR Environmental Justice Commission, 2020). According to Universities Canada (2024), a membership organization made up of university presidents, “Canada’s universities have long been leaders in sustainability and are committed to helping the country achieve its climate targets” (p. 2). Yet, the language of “crisis” and “emergency” that often anchors these institutional commitments is a site of significant theoretical and historical contention. As Kyle Whyte (2018b, p. 226) contends, many Indigenous communities have navigated ecosystem collapse and species loss since the onset of colonialism and do not view the current socio-ecological reality as a contemporary novelty. The popular language of climate crisis and emergency overlooks these colonial histories and how they shape the present, suggesting we are facing a temporary disruption that can and should be resolved rather than reaching the limits of an inherently harmful and unsustainable system. We nonetheless use the term CNE in this article as it reflects the dominant institutional language through which many universities frame their current sustainability efforts. By adopting the sector’s own terminology, we can more clearly map the dissonance between institutional claims to sustainability leadership and the endurance of underlying modern/colonial dynamics.

To help solidify their claims to sustainability leadership over the past decade, many institutions have developed their own sustainability and/or climate action policies, strategies, or plans. Through these documents, universities curate their public-facing values and contribute to mainstream cultural understandings of the CNE, including assumptions about its root causes and solutions. These policies often function to preserve institutional authority while avoiding difficult confrontations with the colonial foundations of the university itself (Stein, 2019).

This pattern of universities responding to the CNE in ways that seek the continuity of the status quo relates to a broader critique articulated by a growing number of scholars and activists: mainstream responses to the CNE often fail to identify the systemic causes of the CNE, and therefore generate solutions that are grounded in, and inevitably reproduce, the same unequal and unsustainable system that has created the CNE in the first place. In the context of what is currently known as Canada in particular, there is concern that responses to the CNE will reproduce the underlying settler colonial dynamics that naturalize Indigenous dispossession and extractivist logics grounded in a presumed separation between humanity and other-than-human beings and the presumed supremacy of Western knowledge and governance systems (Hunt, 2022; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Reed et al., 2021; Stein & Hare, 2023; Wale & Huson, 2024).

While it is increasingly established that the modern university is a colonial entity (Patton, 2016; Stein, 2022; Yang, 2017), there remains a significant gap

in understanding the institutional mechanisms through which coloniality is reproduced and solidified in responses to the CNE. In this article, we address this gap by analyzing the primary sustainability or climate action document from each of the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities. Our thematic analysis examines the extent to which these documents may reproduce or interrupt colonial dynamics. Our inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the climate and nature emergency (CNE) conceptualized as a problem(s) in terms of its primary features, root causes, and current and future implications?
2. What is the university's proposed response or solution to the CNE?
3. To what extent do the conceptualization and proposed responses to the CNE challenge and/or reproduce the modern/colonial global system in which universities are embedded?

We find that the sustainability/climate action documents of the U15 universities are largely focused on “greening” campus operations and promoting research and teaching focused on guaranteed solutions to narrowly framed climate-related problems, such as minimizing carbon emissions. These mainstream approaches reduce the CNE to a technical and informational problem that can be solved primarily with more (Western) scientific innovation and greater literacy about climate science. By promising we can reform our existing system to make it more sustainable, these approaches preclude deeper examinations of the systemic, relational, and cultural root causes of climate change and biodiversity loss, in particular colonialism, capitalism, and consumption. These approaches also tend to flatten the highly uneven impacts of the CNE on different communities and obscure the disparate historical responsibilities for its creation. Thus, these approaches invisibilize more critical and complex approaches to sustainability, including approaches that question the sustainability framework itself or gesture beyond it.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the colonial foundations of Canadian universities and on university responses to the CNE. As part of this review, we offer a social cartography that maps three different approaches to sustainability: mainstream sustainability, critical sustainability, and beyond sustainability (Stein, 2024). Next, we conduct a thematic analysis of the U15 sustainability/climate action documents. After reviewing the central themes that emerged within the documents, we ask how these documents map onto our social cartography of sustainability, and what this tells us about the complexities and contradictions that emerge when universities promise to “accelerate the societal transition toward sustainability,” (Jones, 2012, p. 631) yet fail to address how they contribute to *unsustainability*.

Literature Review

Modern/Colonial Roots of the CNE

To examine Canadian university responses to the CNE, it is vital to recognize that higher education in so-called Canada is constituted through ongoing settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a “persistent social and political formation” (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 12) that structures the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of land across generations. Within this formation, Canadian universities are built upon and often reproduce these colonial logics, including through the selective inclusion and instrumentalization of Indigenous knowledges that leave Eurocentric and capitalist epistemic frames intact (Ahenakew, 2016). Indigenous peoples have long contested the colonial foundations of higher education, having always maintained their own sophisticated systems of higher learning, while also demanding both access to and transformation of higher education. Indigenous advocacy has at times led to the creation of spaces within settler-dominated institutions where Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies can be engaged on their own terms rather than subsumed within dominant institutional paradigms, although such spaces often remain precariously funded (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Stein, 2020).

This coloniality is constitutive of the conditions that produce and sustain the CNE. More specifically, settler colonialism can be understood as part of a wider modern/colonial system in which colonialism is not an aberration but the condition of possibility for modern institutions and ways of life (Stein et al., 2020), including presumed entitlements to moral and epistemic authority, unrestricted autonomy, arbitration of justice and commonsense, and accumulation of wealth and power. From this perspective, colonialism is inherently extractive and unsustainable, and thus the ecological crises of the present are not external failures, but expressions of the system’s underlying logics. Despite vocal commitments to sustainability and climate action, Canadian university responses to the CNE remain limited, often reflecting rather than challenging these underlying logics, and prioritizing the management of the physical campus environment over institutional responsibilities such as research and pedagogy (Henderson et al., 2017; Lidstone et al., 2014; Vaughter et al., 2016). More broadly, these responses often presume the continuity of existing social, political, and economic structures that many Indigenous and global South scholars understand as inherently unsustainable since they are premised on modern promises that are subsidized through ongoing colonial costs to both systemically marginalized communities and the Earth itself (Davis & Todd, 2017; Hunt, 2022; Sultana, 2022; Whyte, 2020). In many of these Indigenous and decolonial analyses, an imposed separation between humans and nature is a foundational division of the modern/colonial system. This denial of interdependence (Machado de Oliveira, 2021) allows the system to offer modern promises – infinite economic growth, state security, and

Western knowledge – that are subsidized by colonial costs such as extraction, land dispossession, and epistemicide. While this system is treated as natural and normal, its expansion is taken for granted, as its colonial costs remain largely invisibilized.

While it is increasingly accepted in mainstream research and discourse that colonialism is a driver of the CNE, including an acknowledgement in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2022), few universities address colonialism in their sustainability/climate initiatives (Stein & Hare, 2023). Even fewer consider how their own complicity in colonialism is linked to the CNE. Yet as Hunt (2022) notes, “Without confronting colonial norms within our institutions and disciplines . . . climate action risks replicating the oppressive structures of power that got us into this mess in the first place” (p. 136).

Sustainability in Canadian Higher Education

University responses to the CNE have increasingly aligned with international discourses of sustainability, particularly following the 2015 launch of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the subsequent “Decade of Action” (United Nations, 2020). Heavy reliance on these discourses reinforces a view of universities as leaders and accelerators of societal transitions (Jones, 2012). Meanwhile, it instates a top-down, managerial approach to change that tethers climate action to global institutional alignment rather than local ecological responsibility.

Even as “sustainability” has increasingly become a buzzword on university campuses, there is rarely critical engagement with the different meanings of this term and its origins. Few of the plans reviewed in this article explicitly define sustainability. The ones that do tend to defer to the most mainstream versions and often reduce sustainability to sustainable development by highlighting commitments to the UN SDGs. Two of the strategies reference the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which defines sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 15). However, this is not the only possible approach to sustainability.

Below, we briefly review three different possible approaches to sustainability that reproduce and/or seek to interrupt the modern/colonial system to varying degrees: mainstream sustainability, critical sustainability, and beyond sustainability (adapted from Stein, 2024) (See Table 1). In addition to our thematic analysis of the sustainability/climate action strategies, we assess the extent to which each of these approaches to sustainability is present in the strategies. We note, however, that this is only one way of mapping sustainability, and is not intended to be a totalizing description of reality nor exhaustive of all possible approaches.

Mainstream sustainability seeks to balance “people, planet, and profit.” In higher education, this approach may improve basic awareness of climate change on campus and support research in pursuit of science and technology-based solutions to the CNE. However, it generally fails to address its deeper social and ecological root causes (Hopwood et al., 2005) and remains within a Western paradigm that naturalizes anthropocentrism and the continuity of “‘business-as-usual’ but greener” (Baskin, 2019, p. 165).

Critical sustainability challenges the mainstream approach, framing it as inadequate for addressing the complexities and uneven systemic power relations that characterize the CNE and responses to it. It emphasizes the need for major reforms of the current social and economic system and a (re)distribution of risks and benefits in sustainable transitions. In higher education, critical sustainability seeks equitable representation and the power of diverse perspectives and knowledges – especially of systemically marginalized communities – in teaching, research, and public engagement (Stein et al., 2023). This approach prioritizes people and the planet over profit (Rose & Chachelin, 2018), but it often still operates within a Western paradigm that centres the agency and protagonism of individuals, naturalizes linear and teleological approaches to change, and treats nature as something separate from humans rather than as a living system that humans are also part of.

Beyond sustainability understands the current social and economic system as inherently harmful and unsustainable – thus, it seeks to move *beyond* simply continuing that system. As Whyte (2018a) notes, “It is not a given that today’s social-ecological systems are ones that are important to conserve” (p. 299). Therefore, rather than reforming the existing system, this approach focuses on confronting individual and systemic complicity in systemic violence, learning from inherited mistakes, repairing the harm caused by this system (including material, epistemic, and relational repair), and clearing space for new possibilities to emerge without overdetermining them (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Instead of narrowly focusing on transmitting knowledge about climate science or climate justice, beyond sustainability teaching prioritizes developing students’ capacity to responsibly face and metabolize the limits and harms of the existing system and its institutions (including the university itself) with maturity, discernment, and responsibility, without becoming overwhelmed or seeking quick fixes (Stein et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2024). Beyond sustainability research is not primarily interested in academic impact (e.g. citations), but rather social impact, and is often community-engaged/-led, transdisciplinary, and seeks to coordinate the gifts of multiple knowledge systems while recognizing the complexity and power dynamics involved. Rather than seeking simple or predefined solutions, beyond sustainability approaches encourage an open-ended process of collective, critical self-reflexive inquiry, and experimentation with different possibilities oriented by intergenerational responsibility and relational rigour.

	Mainstream Sustainability	Critical Sustainability	Beyond sustainability
Diagnosis of the root cause of the CNE	The current system is threatened by technical inefficiencies and ignorance about ecological impacts (it requires minor reform)	The current system is dominated by political and economic elites oriented by profit (it requires major reform)	The current system is inherently harmful and unsustainable (it is therefore beyond reform)
Orientation of sustainability	Make the current system greener through innovations of Western science and technology; balance people, planet, and profit	Transform the current system to make it more inclusive and fairer; prioritize people and the planet over profit	Accept that we cannot make the current system sustainable; minimize harm, gesture beyond it toward other possible futures
Guiding questions	How can we more sustainably and efficiently balance the needs of people, planet, and profit?	How can we ensure equity and (re) distribute the risks and benefits of sustainability transitions?	How can we learn to relate with more responsibility and reciprocity toward each other and to the living planet we are part of?
Perceived role and responsibility of the university	Create universally relevant knowledge about the CNE; plan for continuity; advance reputation, rankings, and resources; seek solutions for achieving “happier, healthier, and wealthier” campuses and societies	Highlight the voices of students, systemically marginalized communities, and those on the frontlines of the CNE; mobilize power-conscious climate action; imagine alternatives	Denaturalize the dominant system; recognize the gifts and limits of all knowledges; enact repair for historical and ongoing harm; operate from intergenerational responsibility
Examples	Align strategic plans with UN SDGs; greening the campus environment; green rankings and ratings; carbon offsets; net zero campus; campus as a living lab	Divest endowments; refuse fossil fuel funding; climate emergency declarations; no-fly pledges/policies; flexible learning structure	?

Table 1. Different Approaches to Sustainability in Canadian Higher Education
 Note: Adapted from Stein (2024)

Thematic Analysis

While examining the themes of university policies alone does not enable us to assess how the document translates into practice, these texts nonetheless serve as powerful indications of institutional commitments and priorities.

The most recent study of Canadian university sustainability-related policies and strategies took place in 2017, and concluded, “While some institutions have engaged the issue at a holistic level, the overwhelming response is one of modifying infrastructure and curbing energy consumption and pollution” (Bieler & McKenzie, 2017, p. 21). Since then, several universities have revised or introduced new sustainability/climate action documents, but these have received limited scholarly analyses.

We analyzed the most recent sustainability and/or climate action strategies of the U15 Canadian Research Universities as of March 2024. These are the most research-intensive universities in Canada and are widely understood as the country’s “top-tier” universities. While we recognize the risk that focusing on the U15 universities will reify the competitive, elitist, and hierarchical dynamics of the higher education system, we chose to analyze them because, as a collective, the U15 seeks to “drive the national policy agenda and provide critical advice and analysis” (U15 Canada, n.d.). However, there is also a need for a wider examination of the policies of other universities, colleges, and institutes within the Canadian higher education sector. Furthermore, although we identified one document as the most salient for each institution, at most institutions, there is a wider ecology of policy documents related to the CNE, analysis of which could be undertaken to achieve a more layered, complex, and textured understanding of a specific university context.

We undertook a thematic analysis of the strategies, grounding our coding in a critique of the modern/colonial system as the primary driver of the CNE. Specifically, we examined the extent to which these documents naturalize or challenge the reproduction of this system in how they represent and pledge to respond to the CNE. As Clarke and Braun (2017) pose, thematic analysis is compatible with theoretical frameworks that critically examine the implications of emerging themes, rather than simply report them. Qualitative thematic analyses also recognize the researcher(s)’ role in the process of coding and thematic development. We acknowledge that our perspectives and previous knowledge as researchers shape the knowledge we produce, as well as our positionalities as a racialized settler and a white settler in what is currently known as Canada. In particular, our decision to read the strategies through a critique of the modern/colonial system means that our thematic analysis focused on certain themes and neglected others. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, it is important to “acknowledge these decisions and recognize them *as* decisions” (p. 80).

To conduct a thematic analysis of the sustainability or climate action strategies of U15 Canadian Research Universities, we first visited the public-facing sustainability web pages of each university. From this landing page, we identified the most recent and salient sustainability and/or climate action strategies. We specifically sought documents that comprehensively addressed multiple facets of sustainability or climate action initiatives on campus, rather than strategies that focused on individual aspects like “waste management” or “student response.”

In instances where the most recent and pertinent strategy was either expired or not visible through the public website, our research team reached out to the university's sustainability office, or other relevant departments, via phone or email to ascertain the existence and implementation of such documents. We excluded institutions with expired strategies (Université Laval, University of Alberta, University of Western Ontario) or those where sustainability is integrated into a general strategic plan (University of Ottawa).

Overall, our analysis included the 11 sustainability or climate action strategies of the following U15 institutions: Dalhousie University, McGill University, McMaster University, Queen's University, Université de Montréal, University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, University of Manitoba, University of Saskatchewan, University of Waterloo, University of Toronto. We first sought to identify the common themes that emerged within the documents in response to our research questions. In conducting our thematic analysis, both authors separately generated initial codes for the documents guided by our core research questions. Specifically, we analyzed how the climate and nature emergency (CNE) is conceptualized, what the university's proposed response entails, and the extent to which these frameworks challenge or reproduce the modern/colonial system. After this initial stage, we came together to discuss these codes and collectively develop overarching themes. We then checked these themes against the texts to ensure they accurately reflected the data before engaging in the final revisions and refinements of our findings.

Results

Across the U15, the prevailing narrative remains "business as usual but greener." Overwhelmingly, the strategies favour simplistic, technical solutions to the CNE that narrowly focus on campus operations and presume the perpetuation of the modern/colonial system while failing to acknowledge the university's role in the CNE. Central themes we identified are: university as a benevolent/exceptional actor; lack of substantive engagement with colonialism; techno-solutionism; sustainability as a marketing tool; and tokenistic commitments to EDI.

University as a benevolent/exceptional actor

Many of the strategy documents position the university as an exceptional and benevolent social actor that is uniquely suited to create and disseminate knowledge and lead climate mitigation and adaptation. Dalhousie University (2022) positions itself as "an institutional model for reducing greenhouse gases and exploring carbon sinks, implementing adaptation strategies, and increasing knowledge of climate change issues of students and employees" (p. 11). Meanwhile, the University of Waterloo (2017) boasts that its "graduates will become entrepreneurs and thought leaders, taking their knowledge and

experience from the campus across the globe. Its faculty members will advance the technologies, systems, policies, and social shifts that will transition the world onto a sustainable pathway” (p. 10).

These examples illustrate a general pattern of “higher education exceptionalism” (Stein, 2022) that frames universities as moral and intellectual leaders of society. Such celebratory approaches to the university and assertions of its central role in responding to the CNE leave little room for self-critical reflexive analyses of the university’s contributions to creating the CNE, and thus also create a risk that its proposed “solutions” will leave the CNE’s underlying root causes untouched. Illustratively, the University of Calgary implicitly acknowledges its location within a fossil-fuel-producing province, yet it pivots away from direct confrontation with this complicity. Instead, it uses its proximity to the energy industry as a marker of unique relevance, claiming that “innovative industry partnership, as well as academic endeavours” will address climate change (University of Calgary, 2018, p. 5).

Effectively, universities position themselves as benevolent problem-solvers, rather than complex, complicit, and contradictory actors. As a result, universities rarely account for their role in not only producing knowledge that has been used directly to develop practices of “natural resource” extraction and industrial production and pollution but also the full spectrum of knowledge that has naturalized humanity’s separation from and domination over nature, as well as separations and racial hierarchies within humanity. There is also little space for questioning the role of university education in normalizing modes of knowing, being, and relating that are premised on infinite economic growth and consumption on a finite planet. Researchers and instructors are also not invited to understand their systemic role in contributing to the CNE and instead are encouraged to see themselves as individual champions, leaders, innovators, etc. contributing to solutions.

Through the use of celebratory language and a failure to ask critical questions about institutional and individual complicity in the CNE, the U15 sustainability/climate action strategy documents operate to deflect or delegitimize critiques of the institution while also creating the conditions through which the institution can easily and unknowingly repeat colonial patterns in its efforts to “solve” the very problems it has helped create in the first place (Hunt, 2022).

Lack of Substantive Engagement with Colonialism

A significant theme we identified was the absence of acknowledgement of the university’s historical and ongoing complicity in colonialism. Several of the strategies begin with a formal land acknowledgement of Indigenous territories where the university is located, yet beyond this tokenistic gesture, they do not engage deeply with the implications of this acknowledgement: that through their occupation of Indigenous lands, universities are complicit in violent social and epistemic relations, land dispossession, and environmental degradation,

and that they, therefore, have a responsibility to interrupt colonialism and repair harm. In many climate/sustainability strategies, the land acknowledgement is the only mention of the university's responsibility to Indigenous Peoples, and the word "colonialism" or "colonization" is absent from almost all strategies.

It does not appear that any strategies were created in consultation or collaboration with local Indigenous Nations. There are, however, a few examples of explicit commitments to Indigenous Peoples. For instance, McMaster University (2022) plans to "recognize Indigenous knowledge and the importance of Indigenous perspectives on campus" (p. 11). It also mentions the necessity to "respond to the ways climate change and colonization impact well-being" (p. 19), though tangible commitments and outcomes are omitted. McGill University (2020) mentions several somewhat disparate commitments, such as increasing purchasing from Indigenous businesses, supporting Indigenous-led research, and creating carbon offsetting agreements with Indigenous communities in Panama. The University of Manitoba (2019) contains the most detailed discussion of engagement with Indigenous Peoples, outlining the intention to "integrate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into campus planning and development," (p. 20), develop Indigenous partnerships on campus, and collaborate with Indigenous communities to develop culturally relevant courses.

Overall, we found a lack of deep engagement with colonialism in the sustainability policies, and a failure to recognize the importance of respecting Indigenous sovereignty and knowledges in responses to the CNE. Without acknowledging that unsustainability is a direct consequence of ongoing colonialism, there is a risk that university responses to the CNE will serve as a means of perpetuating the modern/colonial system and leave untouched the environmental degradation that sustainability strategies purportedly aim to address.

Techno-solutionism

The U15 climate/sustainability strategies primarily treat the CNE as a technical problem that can therefore be addressed through technical solutions. Most strategies focus their commitments narrowly on the campus itself, emphasizing the greening of buildings, fleet (i.e. university vehicles), travel, commuting, food, waste management, etc.

The strategies frequently employ "carbon tunnel vision" (Deivanayagam & Osborne, 2023, p. 4), overwhelmingly focusing on the reduction of carbon emissions in campus operations. Several strategies emphasize their commitment to reducing their operating "carbon footprint" and achieving campus carbon zero/neutrality, often through carbon offsets. Reducing the CNE to a question of emissions invisibilizes the wider social, political, and economic systems that drive it that are premised on unlimited consumption, extraction, and accumulation. As a result, this framing greatly oversimplifies the depth, complexity, and magnitude of the problems we face.

The University of Calgary (2018) notes that its climate action plan "is an

important tool to drive the institutional contributions to the Canadian emissions reductions targets, to help the university stay ahead of future regulation, and maintain a leadership role in energy innovation” (p. 2). Here, the institution frames itself as contributing to (narrowly defined) climate solutions and uses this as a means to assert its leadership and amplify its reputation. The cultural and relational dimensions of climate change are invisible here, as are the university’s myriad contributions to the root causes of the CNE that implicate it in systemic harm through the production of knowledge and the training of graduates that reproduce an unsustainable system.

Apart from carbon tunnel vision, many of the strategies focus on other “technological fixes” or otherwise reduce the CNE to a question of efficiency and scientific innovation. UBC’s strategy narrowly interprets the concept of “campus as a living lab” (CLL) as a scientific laboratory with anticipated advancements in “campus de-carbonization and energy efficient technologies” (UBC, 2021, p. 5). Framing CLL primarily as labs for scientific experimentation and carbon reduction strategies misses the opportunity to implement a more holistic and systemic approach to transformation. However, the CLL framework has the potential to enable experiential learning that would support deeper questioning about the CNE’s root causes and drivers. Campuses could be sites for experimentation with “beyond sustainability,” including non-extractive community-engaged/-led collaboration guided by a commitment to redistribution and reparations, genuinely equitable transdisciplinary research, complexity-informed approaches to problem-solving, non-transactional relationship-building, and conflict resolution strategies grounded in restorative justice and recognition of interdependence (Andreotti et al., 2023).

Some of McMaster’s five principles for transforming the campus into a living laboratory for sustainability could gesture in this direction, depending on how they are interpreted and implemented. This includes the principles of “We look through a lens of Indigeneity in our sustainability efforts” and “We see sustainability work as a collaborative, evolving effort” (McMaster University, 2022, p. 7). However, a “beyond sustainability” approach to the CLL model would likely go further in questioning the futurity of the university as it currently stands. This could be understood as moving from treating the campus as a *living* lab to treating the campus as a *metabolizing* lab – a place where we learn how to “compost” the modern/colonial system and nurture the soil for other possible futures.

By separating the “technical” drivers of climate change from the social, cultural, and relational ones, universities recreate the divisions and hierarchies – particularly between humans and nature, and between differently racialized human communities – that have helped cause the CNE. The effect of this approach is a continued deflection of institutions’ intergenerational and interspecies responsibilities. As Nightingale and colleagues (2020) contend:

Parsing out supposedly climatic drivers of change might help make climate change a more governable phenomena in the short-term, but it leads to an impoverished

understanding of the ways that environmental change is embedded within social change . . . In particular, it marginalizes core questions of how the opportunities of the few often stem directly from the new vulnerabilities of others – including future generations and non-human species. (p. 344)

Sustainability as a marketing tool

Many of the universities use their strategies as an opportunity to amplify their “brands” and public images. This includes highlighting their alignment with widely recognized mainstream international sustainability standards, such as the Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System (STARS) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). McGill University (2020) targets “a [STARS] Platinum sustainable rating by 2030” as its priority goal (p. 11). The University of Saskatchewan (2021) also showcases its contributions to the SDGs, celebrating its inclusion among the top 100 Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (p. 4). The University of Manitoba’s (2019) strategy celebrates its designation as a United Nations Academic Impact Hub (p. 16).

Approaching sustainability as a branding tool for attracting students and funders often overshadows a deeper institutional commitment to addressing the systemic, cultural, and relational root causes of the CNE. This can therefore be considered a form of institutional greenwashing in which the university seeks to create a public image of itself as “green” and a “sustainability leader,” without fundamentally altering the underlying systemic dynamics through which it contributes to *unsustainability* (Facer, 2020). The emphasis on enhancing institutional prestige through sustainability metrics contrasts with a more justice-oriented understanding of (un)sustainability within socio-political-economic contexts that would be found in critical sustainability approaches (Kopnina, 2020), as well as an approach grounded in responsibility, sufficiency, and systemic limits that would be found in beyond sustainability approaches. Finally, this approach reifies the imperative of competition between universities, overlooking opportunities for meaningful collaboration and co-creation not premised on notions of scarcity, exceptionalism, or superiority that have contributed to the creation of the CNE.

Tokenistic EDI Commitments

The U15 strategies exhibit limited engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), often prioritizing rhetoric and compartmentalization over substantive action. This approach fundamentally misrepresents the intersectional nature of sustainability, where social, economic, and political inequities are inextricably linked to environmental degradation (Agyeman et al., 2016). While some universities have published separate EDI policies, the integration of these commitments with sustainability strategies is notable, as the CNE disproportionately affects systemically marginalized communities.

By framing EDI as an afterthought to urgent sustainability efforts, rather than a central component, these strategies exhibit a limited understanding of the interconnectedness of social and climate injustice (Agyeman, 2013).

For instance, the University of British Columbia (2021) calls for consideration of “the inequitable impacts of climate change . . . on marginalized communities” (p. 3) but offers no explicit commitments to action. Similarly, Université de Montréal (2021) promotes “diversifying excellence and promoting equity and inclusion in research” (p. 18) yet fails to provide actionable steps for substantively including systemically marginalized voices. McGill University (2020) offers the most wide-reaching recognition of EDI as a transversal link, acknowledging that “environmental problems are rooted in—and accelerate—social inequities” (p. 15). However, “climate change mitigation & adaptation” are still represented as a disparate and independent category from “equity, diversity, & inclusion,” with occasional overlap in the university’s actionable steps (p. 48–51).

This tokenistic and siloed approach to EDI risks perpetuating existing inequities and developing sustainability solutions that are neither inclusive nor effective (Maina-Okori et al., 2018). By largely failing to recognize how unsustainability on campus and beyond disproportionately affects systemically marginalized populations, these strategies risk causing further harm. The policies largely do not engage in deeper efforts toward systemic change, despite the fact that the inclusion of diverse perspectives through a robust participatory approach is essential for developing effective, equitable solutions to sustainability challenges (Barth, 2015). Tokenistic EDI commitments in sustainability/climate action strategies elide universities’ responsibility to integrate and maintain diverse perspectives throughout the strategy development and implementation process. Consequently, this approach may allow institutions to continue perpetuating institutional biases and systemic root causes of unsustainability that harm humans and other-than-humans in the name of EDI. By neglecting this crucial aspect, universities are missing an opportunity to address the complex, interconnected nature of sustainability.

Discussion

Overall, the sustainability and climate action strategies of the U15 focus narrowly on technical shifts to “green” campus operations, overlooking systemic root causes of the CNE, institutional complicity, and the responsibility for repair. Specifically, the strategies largely fail to acknowledge the role of universities in perpetuating colonialism, instead relying on symbolic gestures like land acknowledgments without demonstrating substantive engagement with or commitments to repair with Indigenous communities. The overwhelming focus on carbon emission reduction in campus operations precludes more comprehensive approaches towards systemic shifts in research, teaching, and community engagements.

Indeed, discussions of the role of research and instruction in sustainability efforts are thin, despite these being the primary activities of most universities. The reliance on rankings and branding naturalizes an imperative of competition and detracts from commitments to transformative climate justice and collaborations. Lastly, few integrate EDI principles in a meaningful manner, thereby ignoring the university's responsibility toward addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on systemically marginalized communities.

When we reviewed the strategies against the three different approaches to sustainability we mapped – mainstream, critical, and beyond – we found that mainstream approaches were overwhelmingly dominant across each of the strategies. This means that the strategies are largely oriented toward the continuity of our existing modern/colonial system – the very system that some have identified as the source of today's ecological crises. A few of the strategies gestured toward critical perspectives, however, even these strategies were still dominated by a mainstream approach overall. For instance, UBC's strategy devotes a page to the importance of climate justice (p. 14), yet this affirmation is not accompanied by specific institutional commitments, and it does not seem to significantly shape the remainder of the strategy.

We were unable to identify any efforts within the strategies oriented toward beyond sustainability approaches. This approach is largely unintelligible within prevailing discourses and can also be perceived as threatening, in that it questions the foundational assumptions, values, and even the presumed futurity of the "university as we know it". This does not mean beyond sustainability approaches are not present, but rather that they are generally happening within the "cracks" of these institutions, led by individual students and faculty, often in collaboration with communities, with little institutional support.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that current institutional responses function primarily to stabilize a leaning ivory tower: an institution attempting to preserve its social and epistemic authority as the colonial and ecological ground beneath it shift (Stein & Andreotti, 2025). By maintaining "business as usual," while adding a green twist, institutions disavow their structural entanglement with systemic social and ecological harm by externalizing colonial costs and naturalizing their own continuity.

Moving forward, we suggest the importance of engaging more diverse perspectives on imagining and enacting sustainability in higher education, particularly those informed by the insights and experiences of the communities most affected by the CNE. One possible means of doing so is to move beyond a narrow focus on institutional preservation by shifting how we relate to the university: moving from the image of the exceptionalist, ivory tower toward that of a nurse log. By relating to the university as a nurse log, we may recognize

how it is also embedded in cycles of life and death, and consider composting old institutional habits into nutrients for the undergrowth of more relationally accountable futures (Stein, 2025; Stein & Andreotti, 2025). This relational shift can be supported through more critically engaged and complexly informed questions about the role of universities in the CNE (Stein, 2024). These questions might include:

1. How might sustainability and climate action strategies shift if they fully acknowledged unsustainability as a direct consequence of colonialism and affirmed Indigenous sovereignty and the importance of Indigenous knowledges in responses to the CNE?
2. How can universities confront their complicity in climate injustice, rather than positioning themselves solely as benevolent social actors?
3. What would a more reflexive, responsible, and reparative approach to research and teaching about climate change adaptation and mitigation look like?
4. How might we rethink the campus as a “metabolizing lab,” deeply engaging with the roots of the CNE and confronting the limitations of technical solutions and systemic reforms?
5. What might a genuinely collaborative, transdisciplinary, and justice-oriented approach to sustainability that commits to addressing the systemic, cultural, and relational causes of the CNE look like, and how would this approach redefine universities’ competition-driven priorities?
6. How might universities more fully embrace climate justice, and how might this transform their role in addressing the CNE? What are the primary barriers to this shift?

These questions challenge us to question whether our universities are truly prepared to address the CNE and drive systemic shifts toward climate justice. And if not, how might we repurpose existing institutions toward greater intergenerational and interspecies responsibility?

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Appendix

U15 Sustainability and Climate Action Strategies

Dalhousie University – *Climate Change Operations Plans 2020–2030 (3rd ed.) – 2022*

McGill University – *McGill University Climate & Sustainability Strategy 2020–2025 – 2020*

McMaster University – *McMaster's Sustainability Strategy: A Living Laboratory for Sustainability 2022–2026 – 2022*

Queen's University – *Climate Action Plan: Building a Sustainable Future* – 2016
Université de Montréal – *Sustainable Development at L'Université de Montréal: Strategic Plan 2021–2023* – 2021
University of British Columbia – *Climate Action Plan 2030* – 2021
University of Calgary – *2019 Climate Action Plan* – 2018
University of Manitoba – *Sustainability Strategy 2019–2023* – 2019
University of Saskatchewan – *Critical Path to Sustainability: University of Saskatchewan Sustainability Strategy (2021–2030)* – 2021
University of Toronto – *A Climate Positive Campus* – 2019
University of Waterloo – *Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2017–2025* – 2017