



Impact Rankings 2023: Australia and Canada set pace for sustainability

As Australia and Canada lead the overall table, *THE* data show universities worldwide grappling with the affordable housing crisis and demands to divest away from fossil fuels

June 1, 2023

[Patrick Jack](#)

Twitter: [@paddywjack](#)



Source: Getty

[Browse the full Impact Rankings 2023 results.](#) To participate in next year's Impact Rankings, [email us](#)

Australian and Canadian universities lead the sector-wide drive for sustainable development, dominating the uppermost tier of *Times Higher Education's 2023 Impact Rankings*.

This year's top 10 features three institutions from Down Under, with [Western Sydney University](#) once again taking the overall Impact title, the [University of Tasmania](#) in fifth position and [RMIT University](#) in joint seventh place.

There are also four universities from Canada – [Queen's University](#) (third), the [University of Alberta](#) (joint seventh), the [University of Victoria](#) (joint ninth) and [Western University](#) (joint ninth) – in the top 10, with one university from the UK, one from Malaysia, one from the US and one from Denmark.

Among the top 100 institutions listed in the [only ranking assessing universities' contributions to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), UK universities claim the most spots, 26, followed by Canada (16) and Australia (15). New Zealand and the US have seven top-100 universities each.

Impact Rankings 2023: results announced

Universities can submit data to be measured against any of the goals, and any university that provides data on [SDG 17 \(partnerships for the goals\)](#) and at least three other SDGs is included in the overall ranking.

A university's total score in a given year is calculated by combining its score in SDG 17 with its top three scores out of the remaining SDGs.

The score for the overall ranking is an average of the last two years' total scores.

[Western Sydney University](#) chalked up a near-perfect score of 99.4 out of 100, repeating last year's chart-topping showing by outperforming more than 1,500 universities ranked overall.

According to Barney Glover, its vice-chancellor and president, Western Sydney's location gives the university first-hand experience of many of the sustainability and resilience challenges of the 21st century, such as rapid urban growth, urban heat and entrenched inequalities.

If these are to be solved, Glover says, universities must play their part – providing access to life-changing education opportunities as well as advancing social and economic well-being for regions and communities.

"Increasingly, students, staff and community partners want to be associated with a university that is committed to our planet.

"The clock is fast approaching 2030, and we are taking bold steps to meet the urgent need for sustainable development as well as fostering the next generation of...leaders," Glover says.

In defending its title as impact champion, Western Sydney topped three of the 17 individual rankings – [SDG 5 \(gender equality\)](#), [SDG 12 \(responsible consumption and production\)](#) and SDG 17 – and placed among the top 10 of six others.

Western Sydney is the fifth-highest rated university on [SDG 11 \(sustainable cities and communities\)](#), a focus of the UN's High-Level Political Forum in July, after the organisation highlighted its importance post-Covid.

As part of its examination of sustainable practices, *THE's* Impact Rankings revealed that 77 per cent of universities globally said they provided affordable housing for students in 2021 (the last year for which universities provided data), and 48 per cent provided funding for housing, including bursaries.

Meanwhile, 54 per cent of universities said they had lower-cost accommodation for staff, and 35 per cent offered their employees financial support.

Housing is obviously a key issue for students, who tend to have limited resources and earning potential, but it is also important for university employees, says Robert Silverman, professor of urban and regional planning at the [University at Buffalo's](#) School of Architecture and Planning.

Those who have worked at universities for years often see their income grow only slightly, with negotiated contract salary rises usually well below cost-of-living increases, while newer staff typically are paid less than they could earn in the private sector, he says.

There tends to be less university support for accommodation in North America, where affordable housing is provided to just 25 per cent of employees and 70 per cent of students.

By comparison, 57 per cent of staff and 89 per cent of students in Europe benefit from it.

Behind this disparity between students and employees is the US' lack of a social safety net, Silverman says.

"US universities are profit-making machines and do not see investing in faculty housing, or faculty in general, to their long-term advantage."

However, the lowest rates of budget accommodation for both categories were in South America. According to Danny Dorling, a professor of human geography at the [University of Oxford](#), this reflects the fact that countries with high income inequalities tend to have severe housing problems.

He argues that perhaps the most sustainable and environmentally conscious solution to housing students is for them to live at home with their parents, a common practice in Europe.

"Universities need housing to be well managed by the state, as much as they need healthcare to be – they cannot become their own local states," he said, adding that in a well-functioning society, a university should ideally not have to provide any housing for staff or students.

THE's figures show that Europe had the biggest gap between the proportion of institutions saying they provide affordable student housing and the proportion that have actually evaluated how affordable it is.

Sir Anton Muscatelli, principal and vice-chancellor of the [University of Glasgow](#), says access to accommodation remains a challenge for universities in cities across the UK and around the world.

“As the cost of living continues to rise globally, housing is one factor that could create new constraints on the growth of higher education by limiting the access of students and researchers from diverse backgrounds to universities.”

Stanimira Milcheva, professor of real estate finance at UCL, says housing issues will prevent universities from attracting and retaining top academics in London, where rents and property prices are famously high, unless institutions offer additional help.

“Other [sectors] might offer more affordability and a better cost of living,” she said. “Some elite universities have understood this dynamic and are trying to provide incentives, but in most cases, those are not really feasible incentives.”

The problem is a global one – universities in Australia are also feeling the housing squeeze. There, the lack of student accommodation is a massive issue, exacerbated by the lack of rentals available in the private real estate market, says Steven Rowley, professor in the School of Accounting, Economics and Finance at [Curtin University](#).

He warns that the issue is starting to hamper growth as international students in the country struggle to find accommodation, and those considering it as a destination could be put off by stories of their plight.

An obvious solution is for universities to secure more space, but that is easier said than done. Even [UNSW Sydney](#), which is among the top 10 globally for the indicator, says providing affordable housing options represents a large economic commitment and is not possible for all universities.

Bruce Watson, its acting deputy vice-chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, says switching to online learning is another potential solution, but it comes with a sizeable downside: remote platforms are no replacement for living in and being part of a learning community.

“Finding suitable accommodation has a significant impact on our students,” Watson says.

“Many must find part- or even full-time employment to pay for accommodation, which can be very expensive in large urban areas. The need to work has an impact on students’ capacity to study and attend classes.”

Oceania outperforms other continents on divestment

Analysis of *THE's* Impact Rankings 2023 shows that 61 per cent of universities worldwide had a policy on divesting from carbon-intensive energy industries, namely coal and oil, in 2021.

However, the geographical distribution of institutions with divestment policies – which takes in 812 universities across six continents – shows that enthusiasm for divesting varies significantly by region, from 86 per cent in Oceania to 33 per cent in South America.

In Australia, which is a big consumer of coal, 14 of the 15 institutions (93 per cent) participating in this rankings indicator had divestment policies, giving it one of the highest rates of all countries.

Divest Princeton, one of the sector's leading voices on the issue, says the disparities between countries might be related to how much influence fossil fuel companies have within a given political and social system.

In the US, where just 48 per cent of participating institutions have divestment policies in place, fossil fuel companies are major research donors. Their influential position can make many universities reluctant to pull their money out of fossil fuels, Hannah Reynolds, emeritus co-coordinator of Divest Princeton, tells *THE*.

"Fossil fuel divestment lies largely on the will of institutions, which can easily be influenced by politics, financial incentives or a lack of social acceptance."

Of those universities in Oceania that have a policy, 94 per cent had created or reviewed it within the past five years.

By contrast, just 68 per cent of South American institutions had done the same.

Reynolds says divestment within higher education is essential – the reputation of universities and their authority on climate science mean that their decisions to divest can be really significant for the movement and can encourage others to follow suit.

"The more institutions and people divest, the more we revoke the fossil fuel industry's social licence to operate, putting our money where our mouth is and supporting change," she adds.

In Europe, two-thirds of institutions had a divestment policy, but just 79 per cent had created or reviewed it recently – one of the lowest rates among regions.

Zak Coleman, campaign manager at Invest for Change, says divesting – which more than 100 UK universities have now pledged to do – is "more than a moral statement".

“This spurs desperately needed, and currently absent, government intervention to rein in an industry that has proven for decades it will not halt its destructive activities voluntarily.”

Universities taking part in the rankings are not always representative of their wider regions. For instance, just seven of the 30 Brazilian universities – 23 per cent – could point to such a policy.

The [University of Central Lancashire](#) (Uclan), which recently became one of the UK universities to commit to divesting, says students, staff and stakeholders are concerned about their social, environmental and sustainability impacts.

George Charles, Uclan’s chief finance officer, says: “Sustaining and enhancing the well-being of people, places and the planet are among the most important challenges we face today.”

patrick.jack@timeshighereducation.com