

# Greening in European higher education institutions

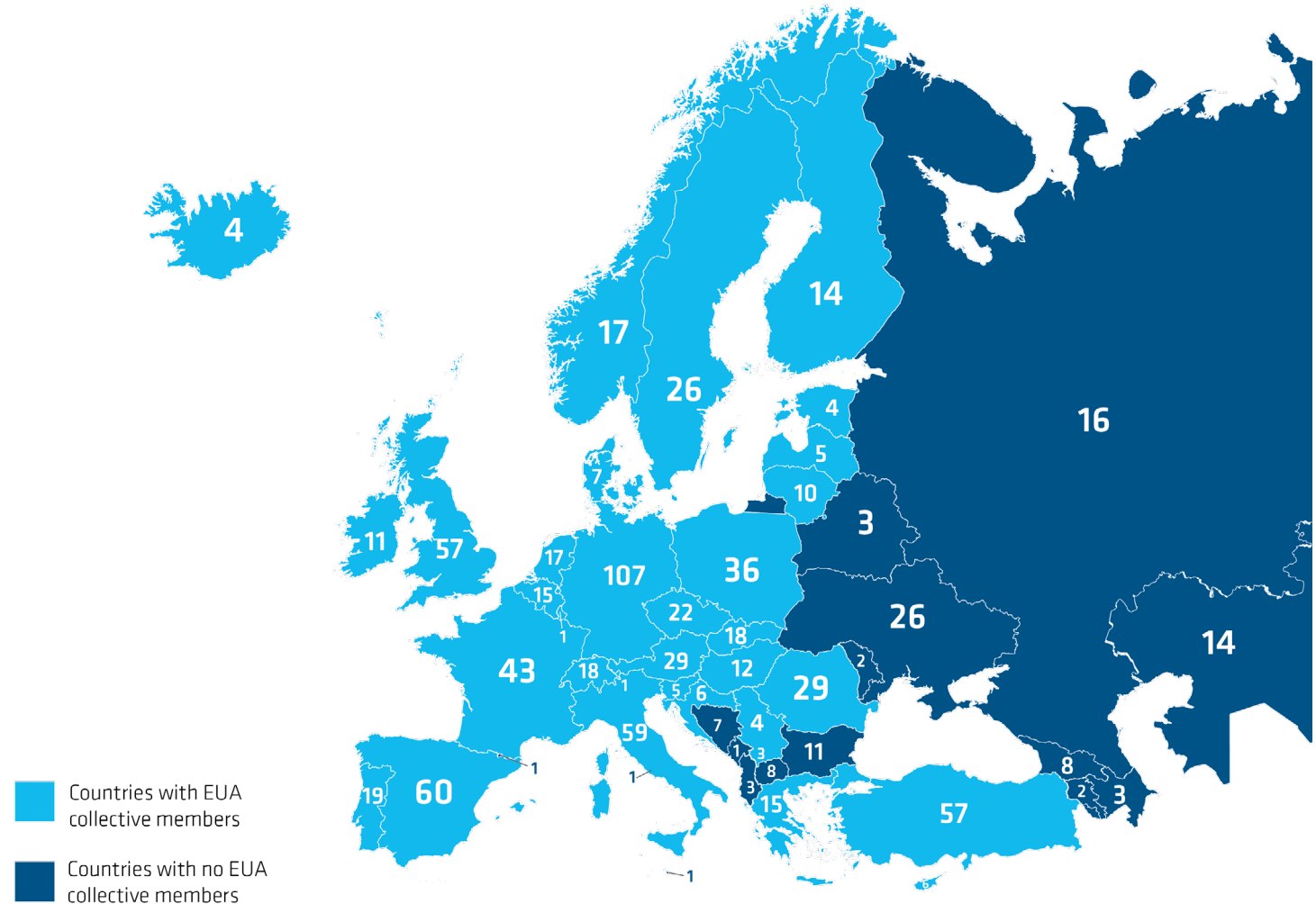
**EUA survey data**

September 2021

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**The European University Association (EUA)** represents more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Through continuous interaction with its members and a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard.



## SURVEY BACKGROUND

The EUA survey<sup>1</sup> on greening at higher education institutions is the first ever survey conducted among higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) on greening and environmental sustainability.

Set against the backdrop of numerous policy initiatives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Green Deal, as well as global pressure to tackle climate change and enhance sustainability, it was carried out as an initial scoping exercise to gather evidence of institutions' diverse activities on and approaches to greening. It aimed to collect good practices and inspiration for other institutions to follow suit, to identify opportunities and challenges, and generally to explore the scope for collective action, and policy advocacy by EUA.

The online questionnaire was open to all higher education institutions in the EHEA and EU partner countries in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (former Tempus countries) from 15 March to 9 April 2021.

In the context of this work, *greening* is defined as increasing awareness and taking concrete action towards a green, environmentally-friendly and resource-efficient university. This may address the university's mission and campus, and its members, but also entails a contribution towards its larger community and surroundings. It may or may not be part of a broader approach to address the SDGs and contribute to the [2030 Agenda](#).

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1 The [survey questionnaire](#) is available online.

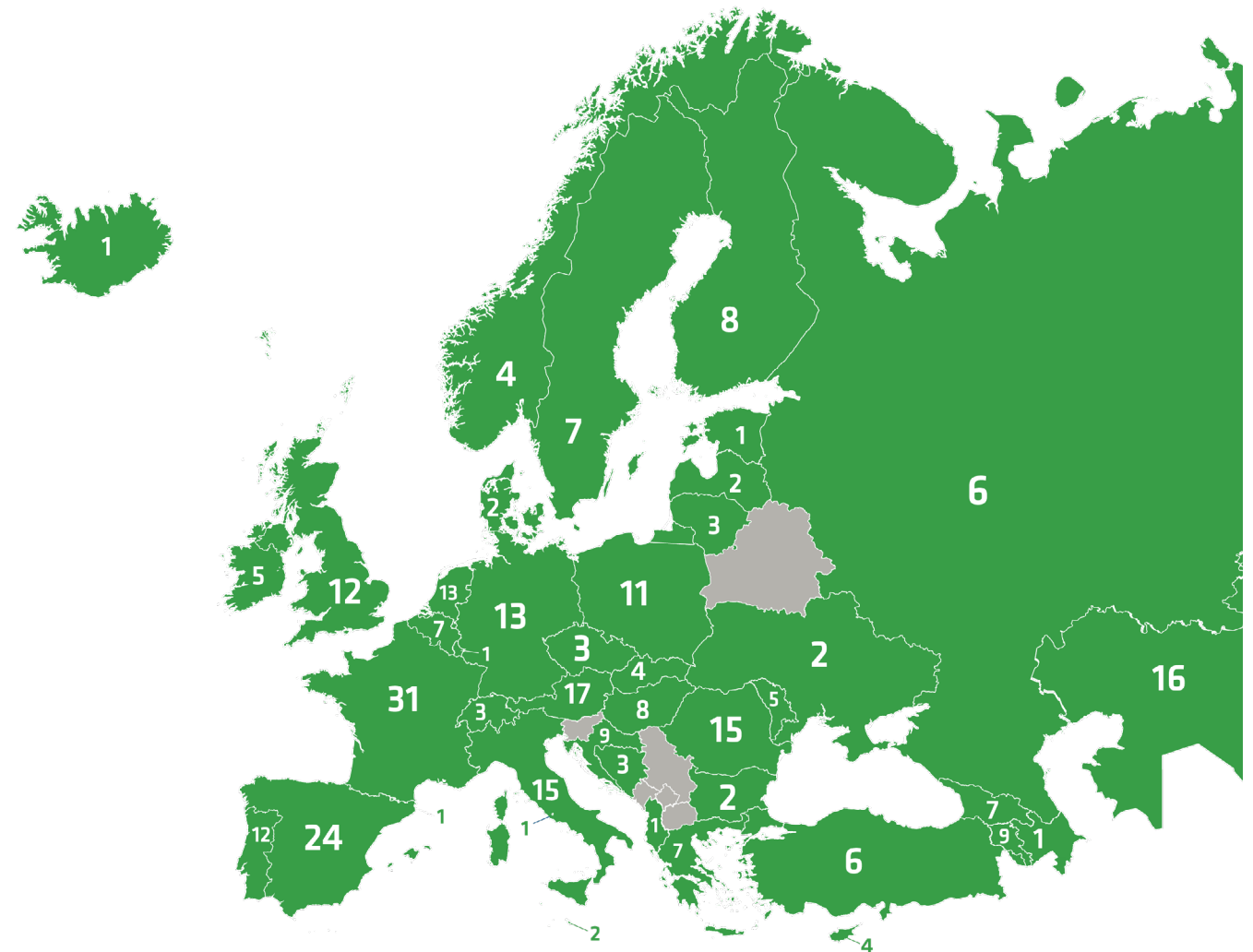
## THE SAMPLE

372 higher education institutions from the EHEA participated in the survey, 305 of which had greening measures and initiatives in place and were considered for the evaluation<sup>2</sup>.

The geographical spread is uneven and does not correspond to the size of the higher education sector in individual countries. France, Spain, Austria, Kazakhstan, Romania and Italy – in this order - had the largest response rates.

The majority of feedback was gathered from respondents at comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities (57%), followed by universities of applied sciences and university colleges (16%), and technical universities (13%).

<sup>2</sup> Overall, the survey gathered 390 responses from 56 higher education systems, including 18 responses from institutions in EU partner countries in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (former Tempus countries) that are outside the EHEA. A separate analysis was carried out for former Tempus countries in the context of the [SPHERE project](#) (Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts). Please see [here](#) a list of contributing higher education institutions.



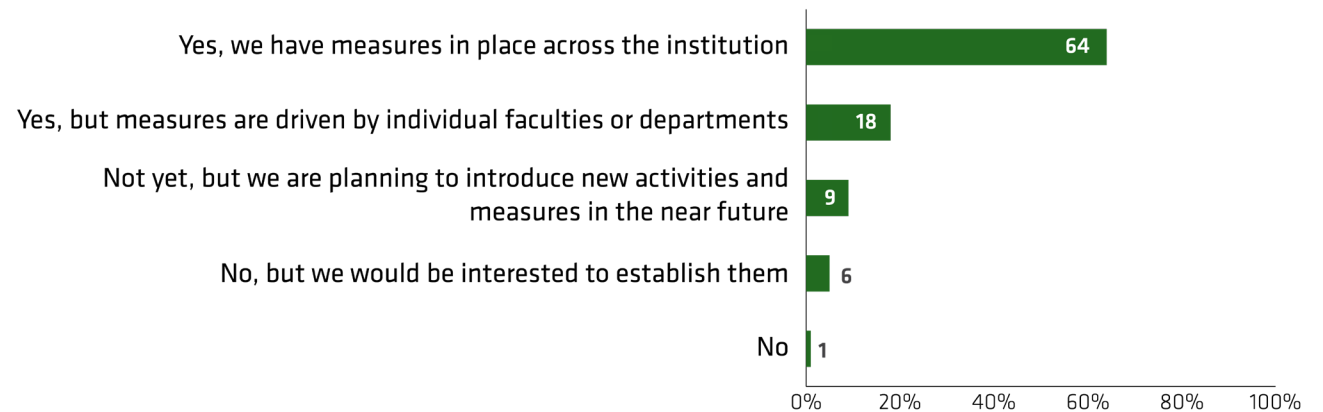
Q2: Please select your country/ higher education system.

## GREENING MEASURES AND ACTIVITIES

64% of institutions have greening activities in place across the institution, whereas at 18% measures are driven by individual departments or faculties. A further 14% are considering the establishment of such measures in the future.

### MEASURES AND ACTIVITIES

Higher education institutions are addressing greening and, more broadly, sustainability through a large range of diverse measures and activities. They also showcase different ways of taking these measures forward: Some institutions provide activities only, others back them up with concrete policies and regulations, and make them standard or compulsory. The following graphs provide some examples.



N=372. Q5: Does your institution have any greening measures in place? Please select one option.

## GREENING MOBILITY

Mobility and commuting are addressed at almost all institutions through different initiatives.

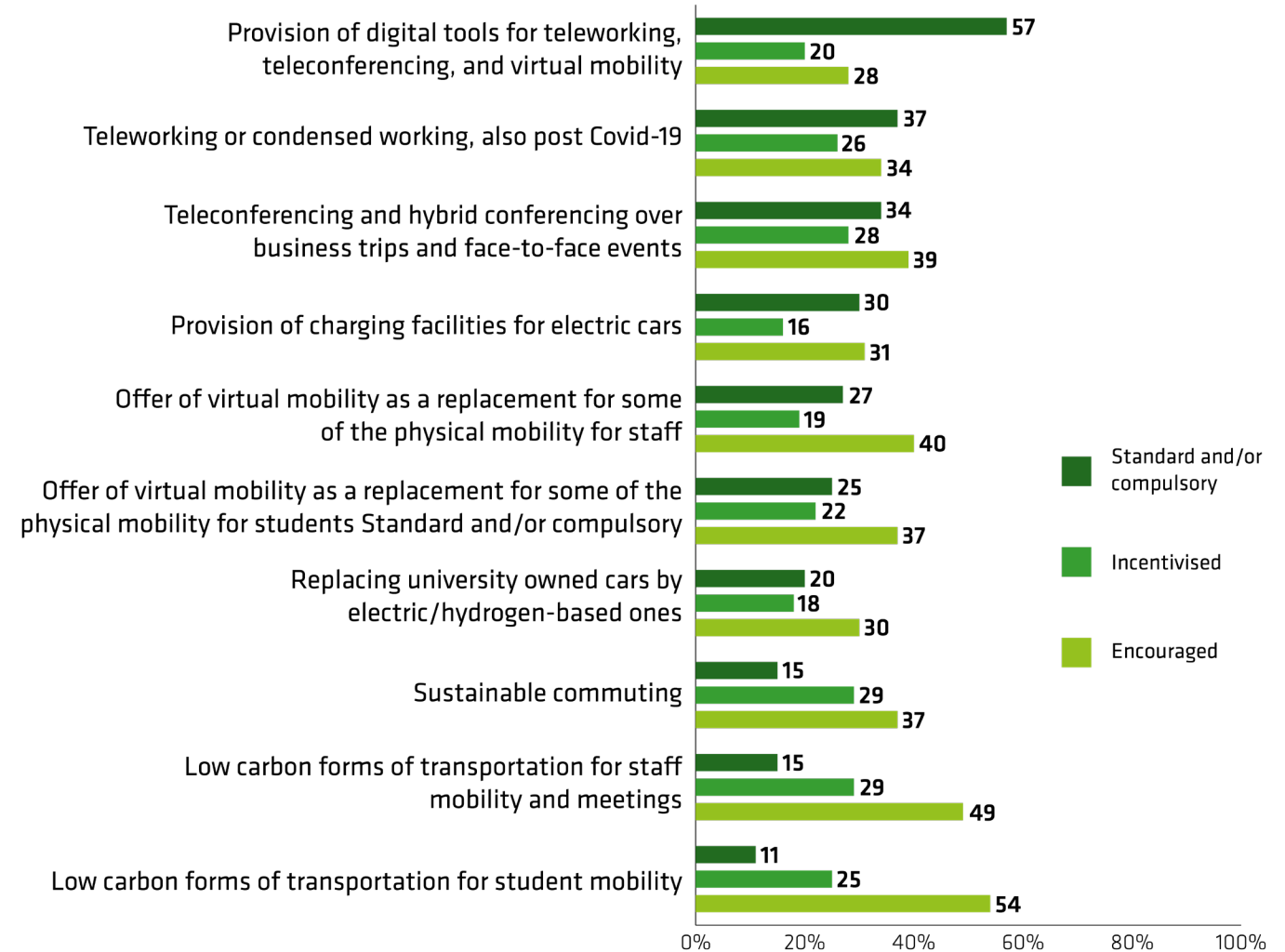
For most answer options, 80-90% of institutions have measures in place. But this area also provides an interesting example of how institutions make some measures compulsory and standard, and encourage or incentivise others. Standard or compulsory measures regarding digital tools and virtual forms of learning, working and mobility, do not really come as a surprise, given the ongoing pandemic. However, the example of teleworking or condensed working<sup>3</sup> confirms that these are to be continued for reasons other than the sanitary situation.

A quarter of institutions also offers as a standard the option of virtual student and staff mobility as a replacement for physical exchanges.

Measures in the area of sustainable transport and commuting<sup>4</sup> are more likely to be encouraged, rather than compulsory or standard. For instance, around half of institutions encourage low carbon forms of transport for mobility and meetings.

3 i.e., a work arrangement that allows employees to work fewer days, while still covering the same number of hours per week as the employee would, when working a standard work week

4 e.g., measures to change the travel habits of employees by reducing their reliance on private cars in daily commuting and to persuade the use of alternative, sustainable means of transportation, such as public transport, carpooling, car sharing etc.



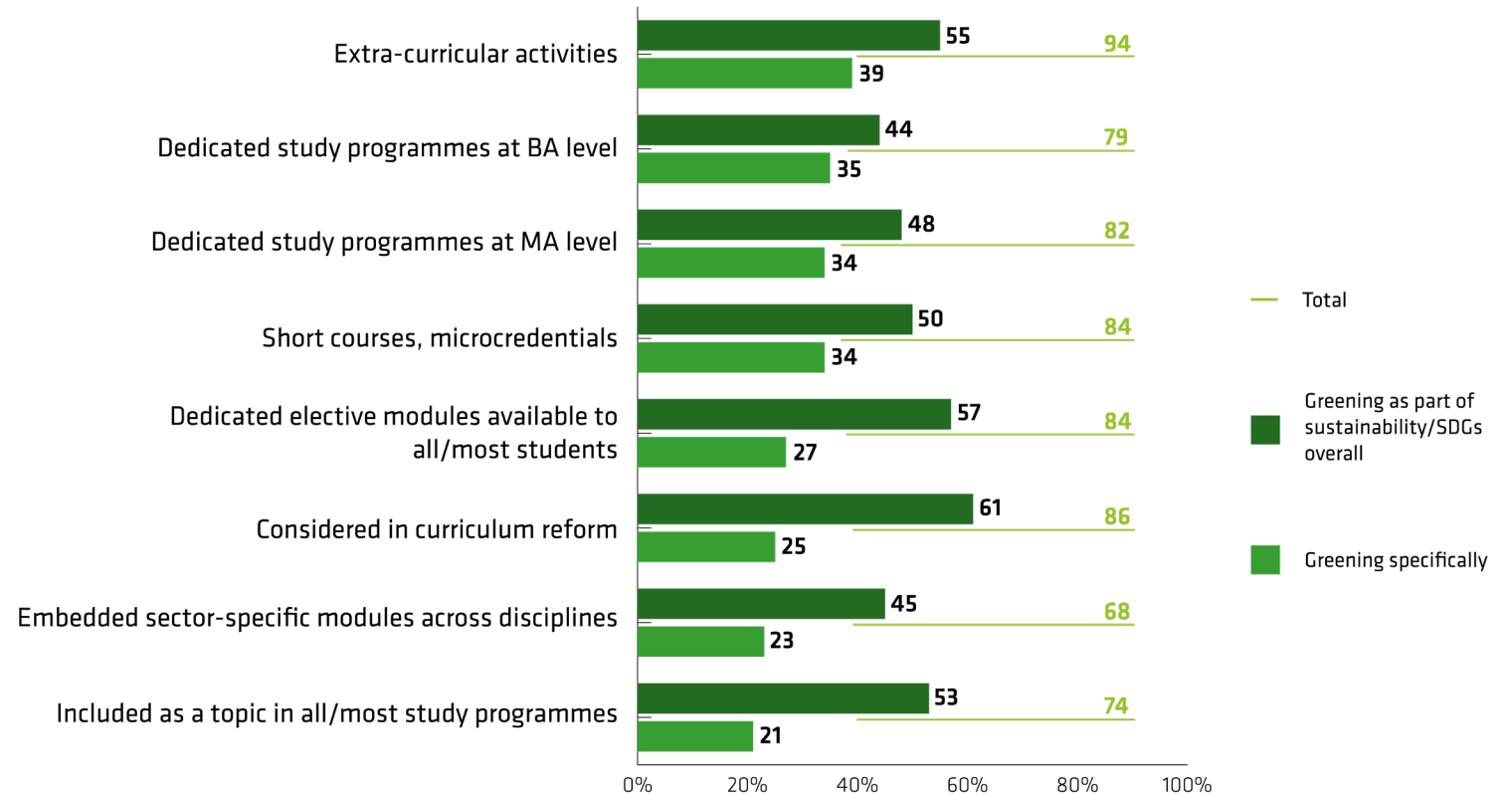
N=305. Q6: Which of the following activities and measures take place at your institution? Please select all that apply in the following categories.

## LEARNING AND TEACHING

Greening is a topic of high interest in the area of learning and teaching – around 80% or more of institutions consider greening in their offer of extra curricula activities (94%), in their study programmes (79% BA, 82% MA), in dedicated elective modules (84%), and in their curriculum reform (86%).

However, institutions are more likely to frame their greening activities in the area of learning and teaching as part of the broader concepts of sustainability and the SDGs.

For instance, 61% of the participating institutions have measures in place to consider greening as part of sustainability in their curriculum reform, whereas greening specifically is considered in curriculum reform by another 25%.



N=305. Q6: Which of the following activities and measures take place at your institution? Please select all that apply in the following categories.

## RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

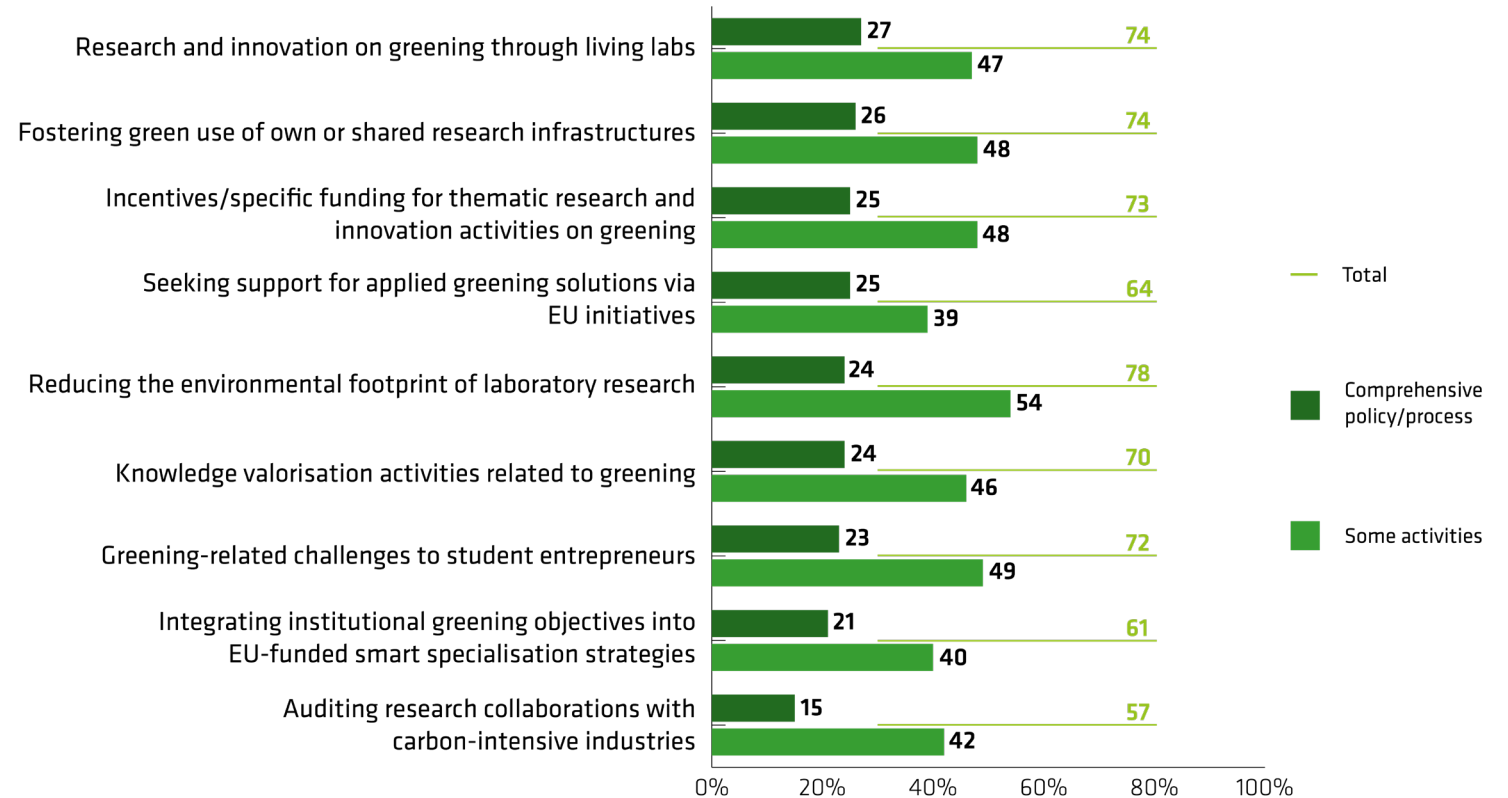
About 70% of the institutions have greening measures and activities in the area of research and innovation, for example through living labs<sup>5</sup> (74%), to foster the green use of shared research infrastructures<sup>6</sup> (74%), and by providing incentives or dedicated funding for R&I activities on greening (73%).

At about a quarter of the institutions, these activities are based on comprehensive policies. For instance, whereas about three quarters of institutions work on reducing the environmental footprint of laboratory research<sup>7</sup> (78%), or pose greening related challenges to student entrepreneurs (72%), 24% and 23% have dedicated policies and process for these activities respectively.

5 e.g., using buildings/sites for energy/environment-related research as testbeds for sustainable solutions/technologies

6 e.g., major scientific equipment or instruments, computing systems, communication networks, archives or collections

7 e.g., substituting hazardous materials with less- or non-hazardous alternatives, limiting the environmental impact of cold storage



N=305. Q6: Which of the following activities and measures take place at your institution? Please select all that apply in the following categories.



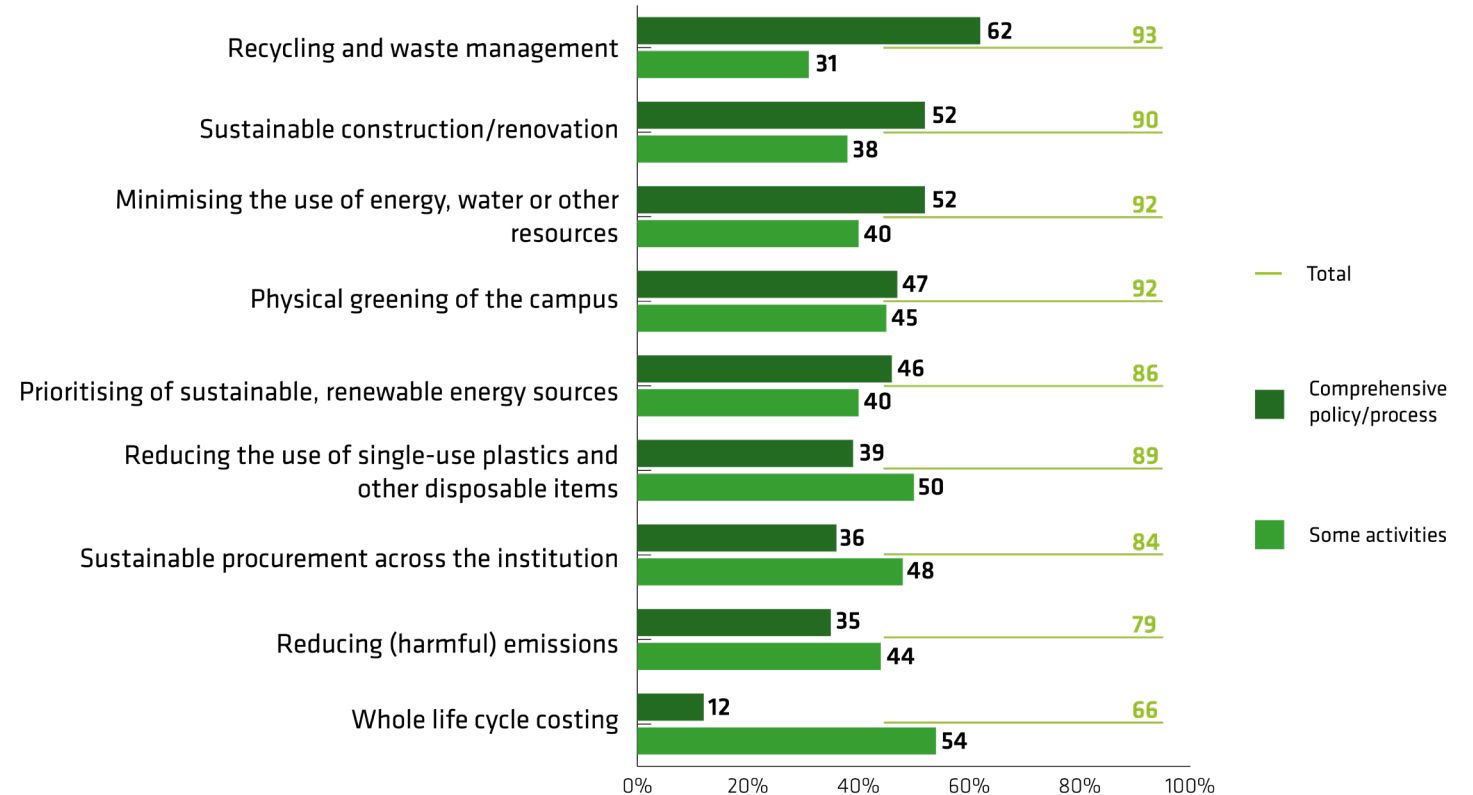
## GREEN CAMPUS

The vast majority of institutions addresses recycling and waste management (93%), sustainable construction and renovation<sup>8</sup> (90%) and the use of resources (energy, water etc., 92%) through at least some activities, and more than half of them also have comprehensive policies and processes in place in these areas.

Likewise, almost all institutions have measures in place to physically green the campus<sup>9</sup> (92%), either as part of a comprehensive approach, or at least with some activities.

<sup>8</sup> e.g., insulation or energy efficiency for new buildings and refurbishment

<sup>9</sup> e.g., greening the landscape



N=305. Q6: Which of the following activities and measures take place at your institution? Please select all that apply in the following categories.

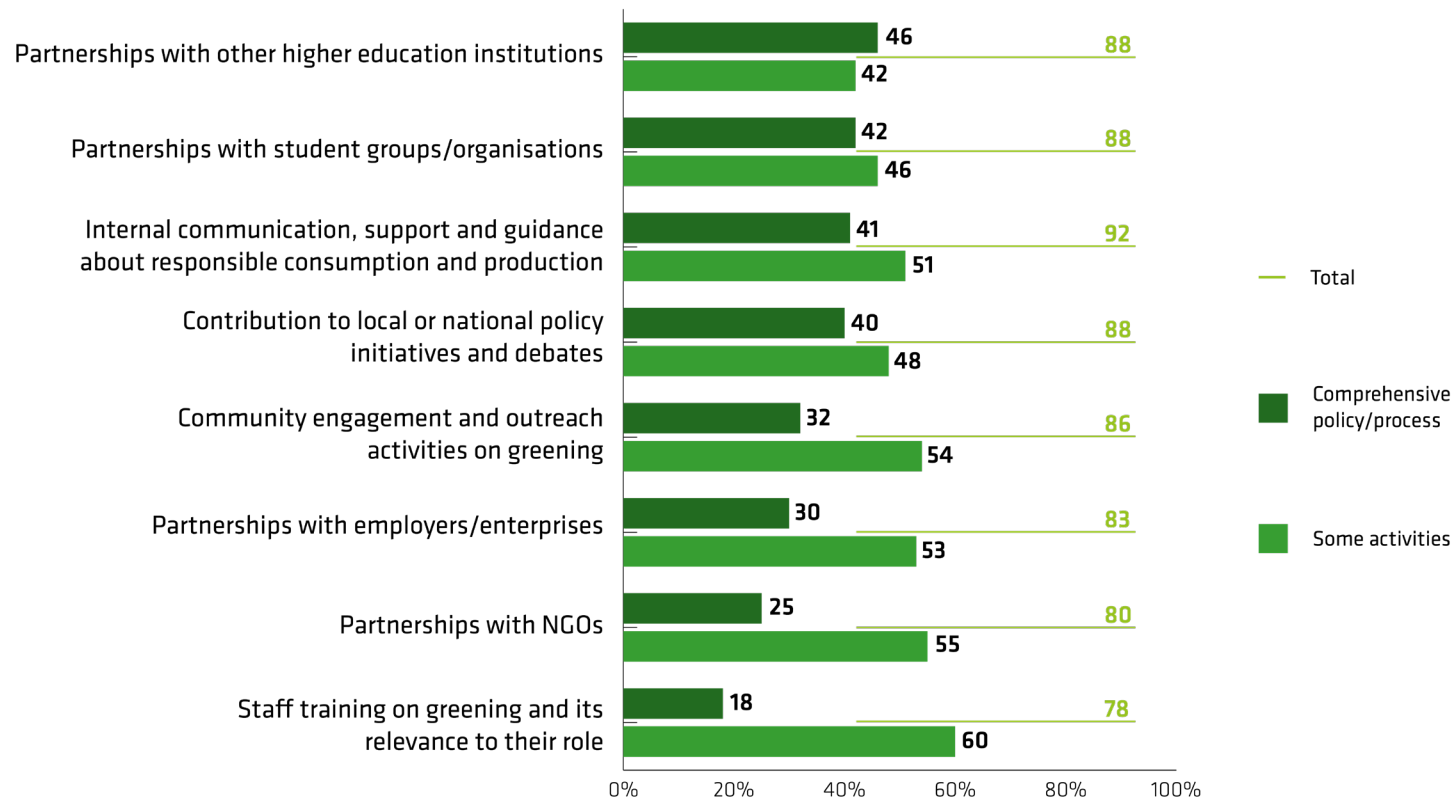
## ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Greening is a topic that invites collaboration and partnership, within the institution and beyond.

Most institutions engage with partner institutions (88%) and student groups and organisations (88%), and close to half even have a comprehensive policy or process in place for these activities.

Institutions are highly engaged in their local communities (86%), with employers and enterprises (83%) and NGOs (80%), and they frequently contribute to policy initiatives (87%) in the field of greening.

About a third or more even have concrete policies and processes in place for contributing to local policy initiatives or debates and overall community engagement and outreach activities on greening, and cooperation with industry.



N=305. Q6: Which of the following activities and measures take place at your institution? Please select all that apply in the following categories.

## NETWORKS

Higher education institutions do not pursue greening in isolation. Participation in thematic networks on greening, at the national as well as the international level, are fairly common, and obviously an important strategy to enable and enhance the institutions' work on greening.

Less than a quarter stated that they were not involved in any network.

In addition to dedicated networks, rectors' conferences and university associations, including EUA, were frequently mentioned by respondents as programmatic actors on greening and environmental sustainability, and as facilitators for interinstitutional exchange and collaboration. Some institutions also pointed to the added value of the European University Alliances, in which they participate.

## EXAMPLES OF NETWORKS

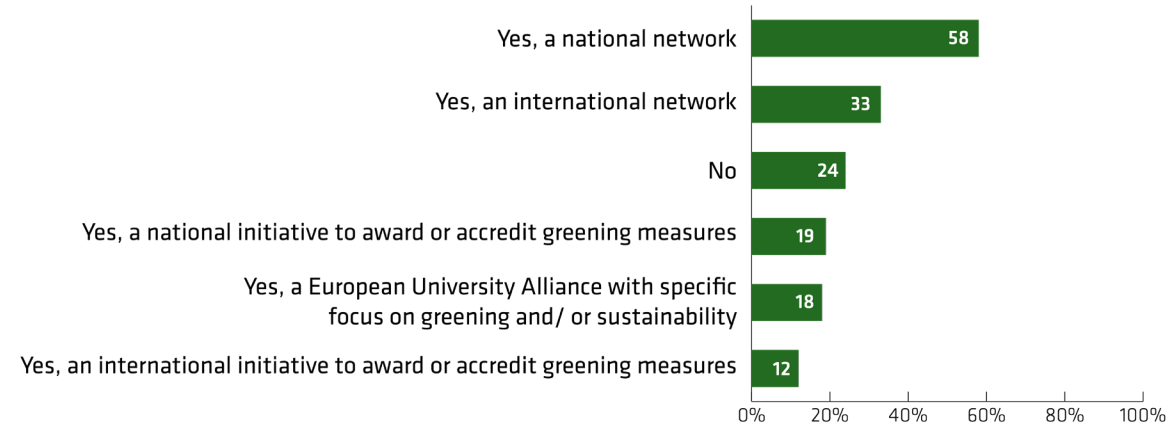
Individual responses mentioned a total of 83 networks, either dedicated to environmental sustainability in general, or to some fairly specific thematic issues such as green energy, water management practices, etc. Most of these are not specific to higher education but have a broad membership. However, 35 networks focus on the contribution of the higher education sector

to fostering environmental sustainability, targeting higher education institutions, but also often involve other actors.

These networks, which can be found in [this overview](#), cover activities such as exchange and coordination between institutions, best practice sharing, data gathering, and the development and implementation of environmental policies and processes at the institutional level. Frequently addressed topics are new degrees and courses, community engagement, the reduction of the carbon footprint/emissions on campus, waste

reduction, energy consumption reduction, plastic use reduction and green mobility modes. Some networks also offer evaluation or review processes of the institutions' greening measures and performance.

N=175. Q8.1 If yes [Q8 - Are you part of any networks or working groups on greening], please provide the name(s) of the network(s) and, if applicable, please share relevant weblinks.



N=305. Q8: Are you part of any networks or working groups on greening? Please select all that apply.

## STRATEGIES

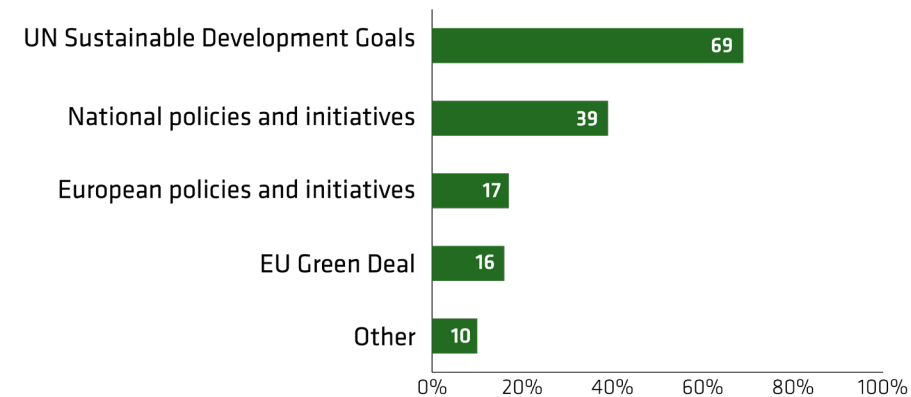
Greening is frequently considered in the institutions' strategy: 61% address it either through their overall strategy or through a dedicated one, another 25% has plans for such under preparation.



N=305. Q8: Are you part of any networks or working groups on greening? Please select all that apply.

## LINKING POLICIES TO STRATEGIES

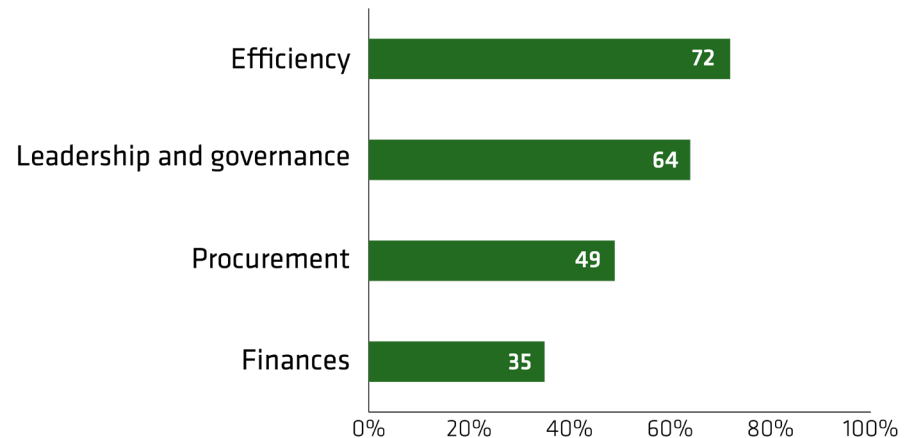
The majority of institutions relate their strategies to the SDGs, and about a third also do so to national policies and initiatives. Compared to European policies and initiatives in general, which seem to be of limited importance (17%), the EU Green Deal has already received a considerable amount of interest (16%), given that it does not specifically address universities and was only launched at the end of 2020, a few months before the survey.



N=185. Q9.1: If yes, does your strategy explicitly relate to any of the following? Please select all that apply.

## ASPECTS COVERED BY GREENING STRATEGIES

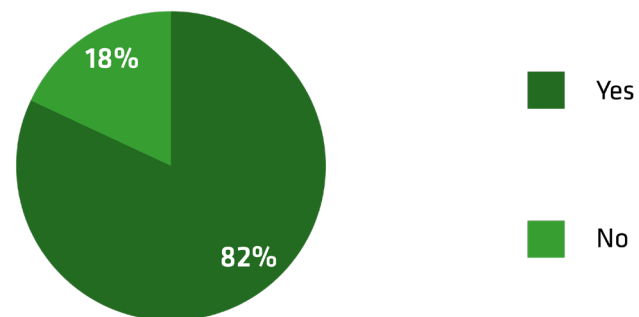
The majority of institutions indicate that their greening strategies address institutional governance matters and efficiency or relate to them. About half of them include a link to procurement policy.



*N=185. Q9.2: If yes, does your strategy explicitly connect to any of the following institutional aspects? Please select all that apply.*

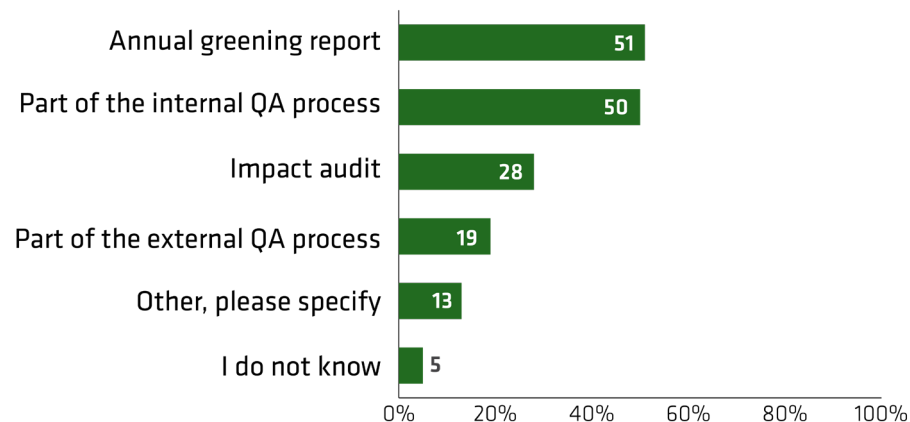
## MONITORING

More than 80% of the strategies include concrete goals, targets and indicators to monitor progress on greening.



*N=185. Q9.3: If yes, does the strategic document include concrete goals, targets, indicators and/or timelines?*

Most institutions (94%) monitor the greening targets set by their strategies, through different approaches, and often in combination. Most common are annual reports and internal QA, which are in use at half of the institutions, whereas less than one third refers to impact audits and external QA processes.

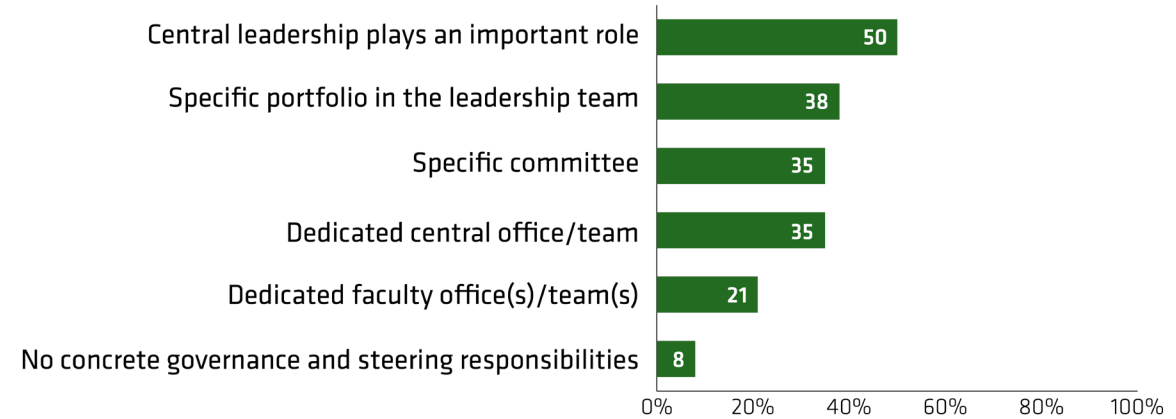


*N=141. Q9.3.1: If yes, how are they measured?*

## GOVERNANCE AND STEERING

The governance and steering approaches for greening vary between institutions:

Half of the institutions indicate that the institutional leadership plays an important role in the steering and implementation of greening measures, underlining that greening and related activities are fairly acknowledged and mainstreamed. More than a third have a specific portfolio in the leadership team, usually a vice- or prorector, a dedicated committee and central offices or teams in place. Usually, two or even more of these approaches complement each other, and only 8% of institutions indicate that they have no concrete governance or steering approach.

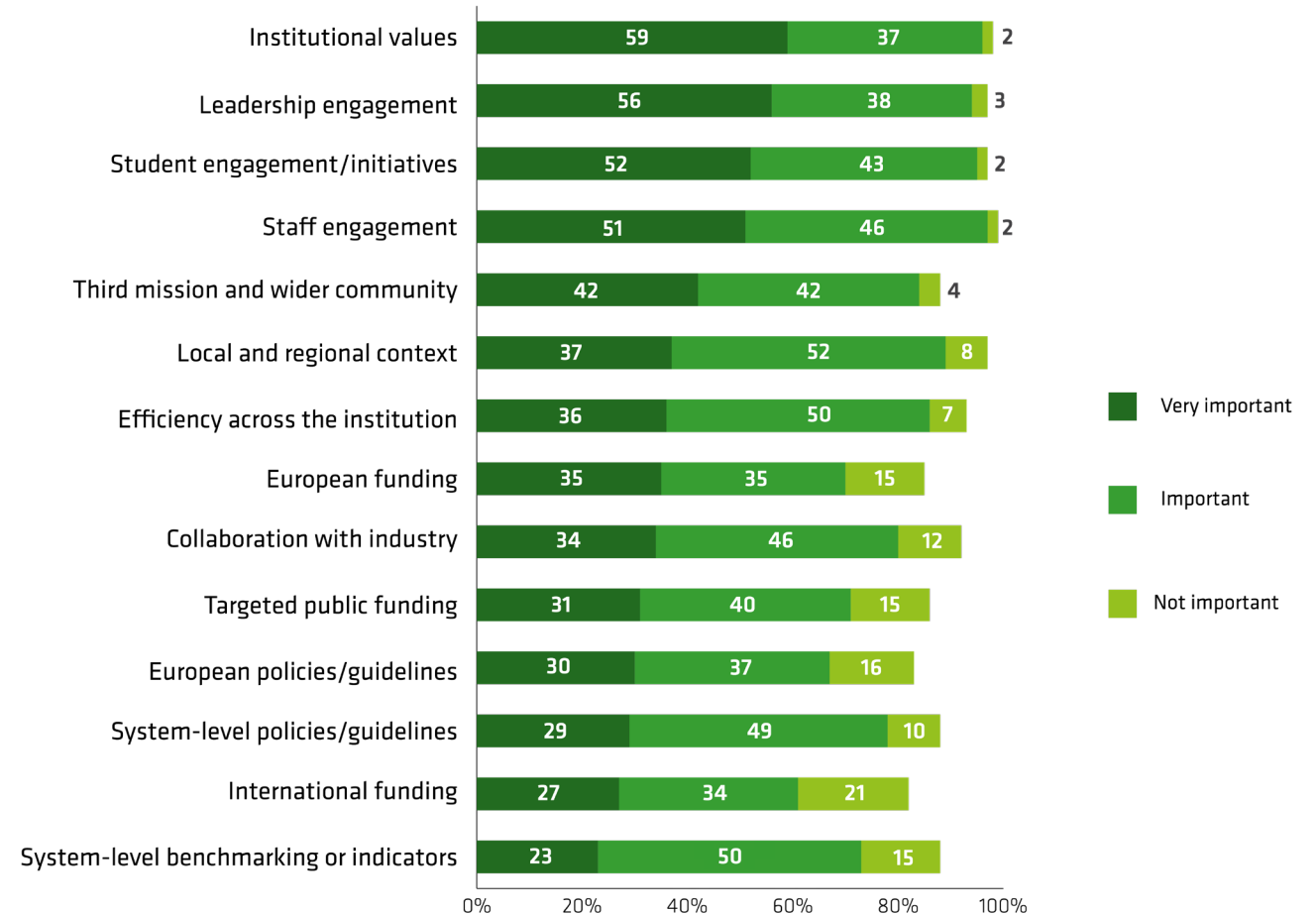


*N=305. Q10: Who is in charge of the governance and steering of your greening measures? Please select all that apply.*

## DRIVERS

What motivates and drives higher education institutions' engagement in greening? The graph displays a long list of options, which most institutions find somewhat important, ranging from 96% for "institutional values" to 61% for "international funding" and 73% for "system-level benchmarking and indicators".

The distinction between very important and important provides some detailed understanding of the levels of importance. Overall, all of these matter, and usually in combination with each other. This also underlines the complexity that greening and environmental sustainability entail.



N=305. Q11: Please rate how important the following aspects are in driving forward your institution's engagement in greening?



## EXAMPLES OF SYSTEM LEVEL POLICY

When asked about examples of system-level policies that drive institutions' greening activities, the [French environmental protection law appeared as the only national policy dedicated explicitly to the greening of the higher education sector](#). Its Article 55 on sustainable development education and training lays the basis for a number of greening measures and activities in the education sectors. One of them is the establishment of a "Green Plan" by all institutions, and the establishment of a [label system](#) for sustainable development and social responsibility in higher education.

Institutions from other countries referenced general national policies and laws for environmental protection, which address society at large, rather than higher education institutions specifically. For example:

- **Basque country:** Basque Contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlined in the [Agenda euskadi basque country 2030](#).

- **Hungary:** National Climate Change Strategy, [Második Nemzeti Éghajlatváltozási Stratégia](#), provides guidelines to harmonise climate protection with development policy.
- **Italy:** National strategy for sustainable development, [Strategia nazionale per lo sviluppo sostenibile](#), includes concrete indicators for national-level monitoring and evaluation.
- **Latvia:** Law for environment protection, [Vides aizsardzības likums](#).
- **Lithuania:** Voluntary [national review](#) on the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.
- **Netherlands:** Accord on Climate, [Klimaatakkoord](#), on electricity, construction, industry, agriculture and land use, mobility etc.

- **Sweden:** National environmental objectives system and the "generational goal" outlined in [Sveriges miljömål](#).
- **Switzerland:** National strategy for sustainable development, [Stratégie pour le développement durable 2030](#).

In addition, respondents confirmed the importance of dedicated national-level networks in their countries (see QU8.1 above).

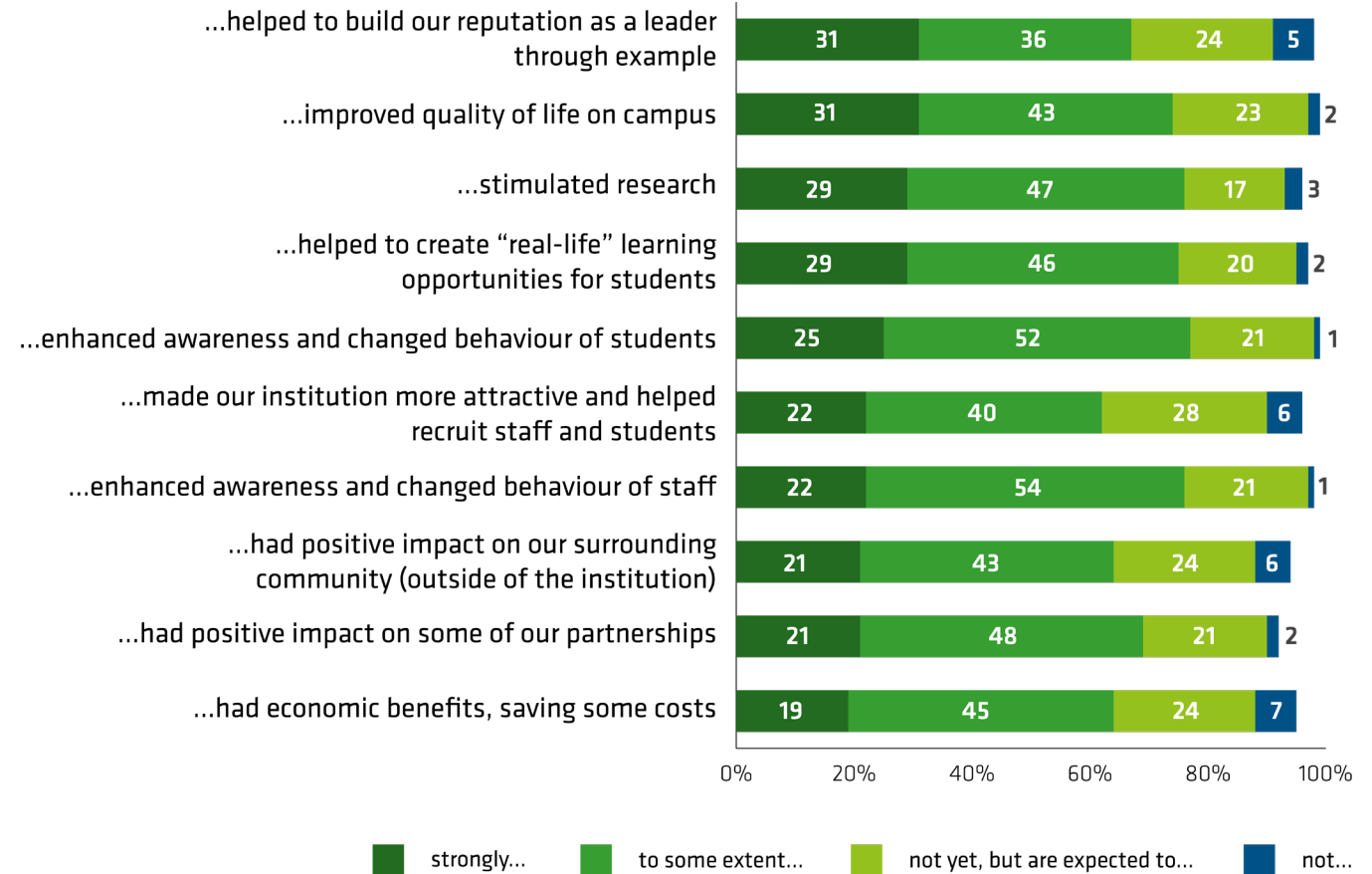
N=71. Q11.1 If system level/national policies or funding have been selected above as (very) important, please elaborate here, and share weblinks, if applicable.

## IMPACT AND BENEFITS

Institutions have observed various real and potential benefits stemming from their greening activities, regarding quality of campus life, attitude and engagement of staff and students, as well as on research. For most institutions, these benefits are already recognisable, but not yet to the fullest extent, and expectations for future impact are high.

For instance, about two thirds of institutions have observed an improved quality of campus life, an improvement of their institutional reputation by leading through example, increased research on the topic, a positive impact on the institution's partnerships and the surrounding community, and heightened awareness among staff and students. At 20-30% of institutions this is already fairly strong and visible, whereas at 40-50% there is at least some impact. An additional 20-30% expect positive impact in the future. Numbers of institutions failing to note any actual or potential impact remain well under 10% for all answer options.

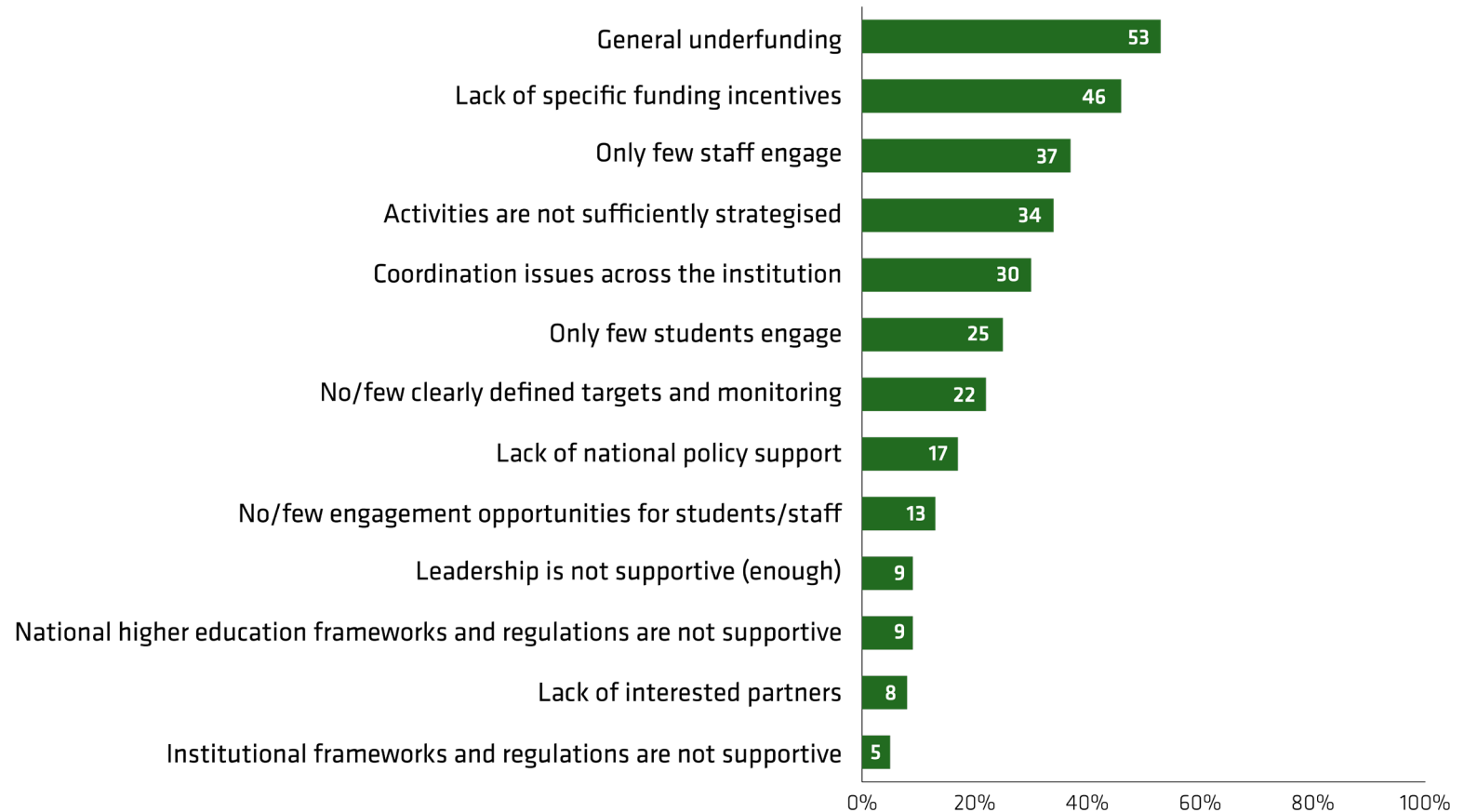
For example: 90% of respondents expect that greening makes their institutions more attractive, and supports the recruitment and retention of students and staff, an issue that has also been confirmed by several university and student representatives in a series of validation webinars.



N=305. Q11: How would you rate the impact/ benefits from your institution's greening activities? The activities have...

## CHALLENGES

Institutions confirm a broad range of challenges related to greening and environmental sustainability. The most frequently referenced ones are a lack of funding, indicated by around half, and for a third of them, a lack of staff engagement, coordination of activities and strategic support.

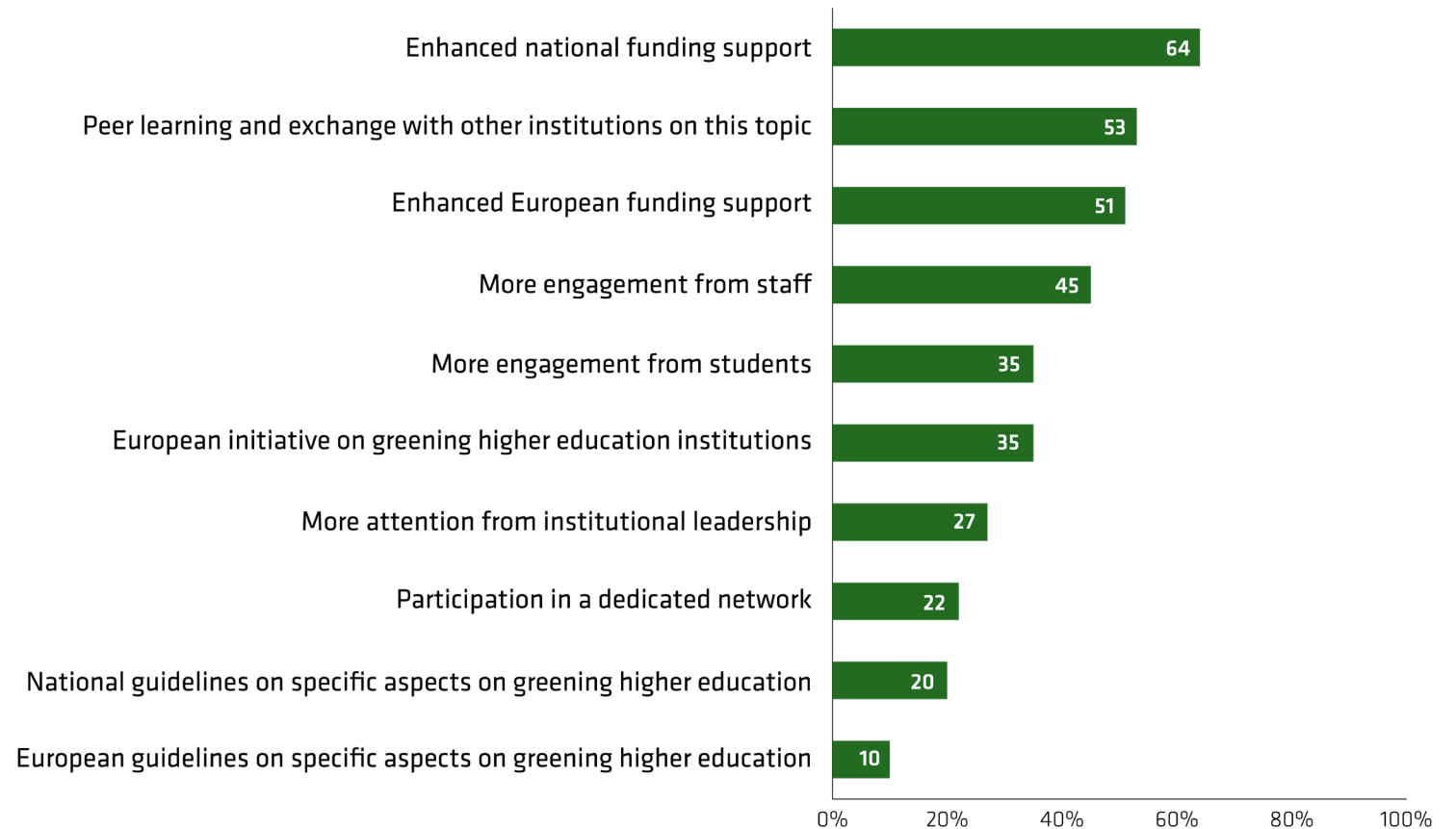


N=305. Q13: Which barriers does the implementation of greening measures face at your institution? Please select up to five barriers.

## ENABLERS

As a means to overcome the previously indicated challenges (Q13), institutions refer to additional funding from the national and European levels to realise greening measures, but also to peer-learning and more engagement with actors across the institution and exchange with other institutions.

A third state that a European initiative on greening in higher education would be helpful to support such activities.

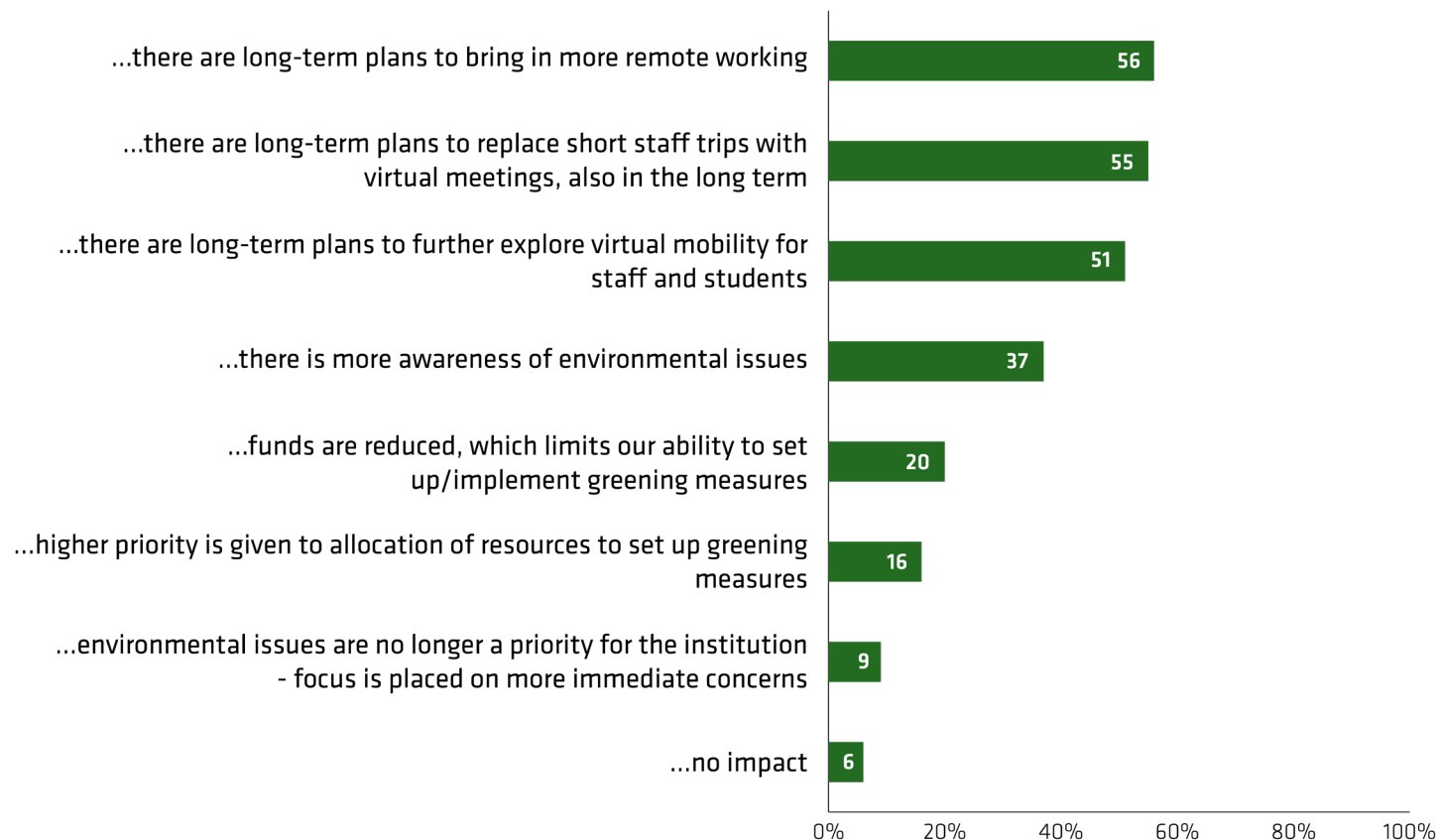


*N=305. Q14: What would be helpful for the future advancement of greening activities at your institution? Please select up to five enablers.*

## IMPACT OF COVID-19

After switching to online working, learning and teaching during the pandemic, more than half of the institutions report that there are also plans post Covid-19 for remote working, replacing short-term meeting trips with virtual formats, and to further explore virtual mobility for students and staff.

A third also reported that due to the Covid-19 crisis, there is now more awareness of environmental issues.



*N=305. Q15: Has there been any impact of the Covid-19 crisis on any of the above-mentioned work on greening? Due to Covid-19... Please select all that apply.*

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The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

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