THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Becoming familiar faces:

How universities can become allies in community-based responses to climate disasters

A Policy Report by the Sydney Policy Lab and Sydney Environment Institute

Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Sydney's Camperdown and Darlington main campus is built upon the lands of the Gadigal people, with other campuses, teaching and research facilities also built on the lands of the Gamaraygal, Dharug, Wangal, Darkinyung, Burramadagal, Dharawal, Gandangara, Gamilaraay, Barkindji, Bundjalung, Wiradjuri, Ngunawal, Gureng Gureng, and Gagadju peoples. Sovereignty was never ceded – these lands and waters always were and always will be Aboriginal – and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

The research team expresses our gratitude to everyone who participated in the community workshops and policy roundtables for this project. We acknowledge that your time is valuable and that the work in disaster recovery, preparation, and adaptation in your communities remains ongoing. Special thanks go to Maddy Braddon, Anne Parnham, Rebecca McNaught, Zoe Morrison, Behnaz Avazpour, Sarah Bailey, Melinda Dewsnap, Emma Bacon, Meru Sheel, Ollie Jay, Kat Carrick, Catherine Bateman and Vi Girgis for their guidance and contributions throughout the project. We are deeply grateful to The Adaptation Game Pty Ltd – especially Ben Pederick, Hailey Cooperrider, Jason Tampake, and Kiri Bear – for their exceptional expertise and warm collaboration in co-designing our community workshops and the localised game kits. Finally, thank you to Dennis Glover and Sarah Marsden for their exceptional work in finalising and designing this report.

This project was catalysed by Emma Johnston when she was Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of Sydney, before she became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne. The questions Emma encouraged us to ask in this project are many of the same that colleagues and she took up at Melbourne and sought to answer in their University of Melbourne Strategy 2030: Resilience. That she passed away so soon is an unfathomable loss to her family, friends, colleagues, and the larger world. She looked forward to sharing stories of our resilience in action in 2026. We dedicate this report in her memory, as a fine example of taking action and leaving a continuing legacy. We know there will be many more.

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Cover Image: The Northern Rivers Community Resilience Alliance introducing their disaster preparedness containers to fellow community members in Murwillumbah, NSW. These containers stockpile tools and protective gear for future emergencies such as major floods. Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

Contents

In memoriam

Emma Johnston

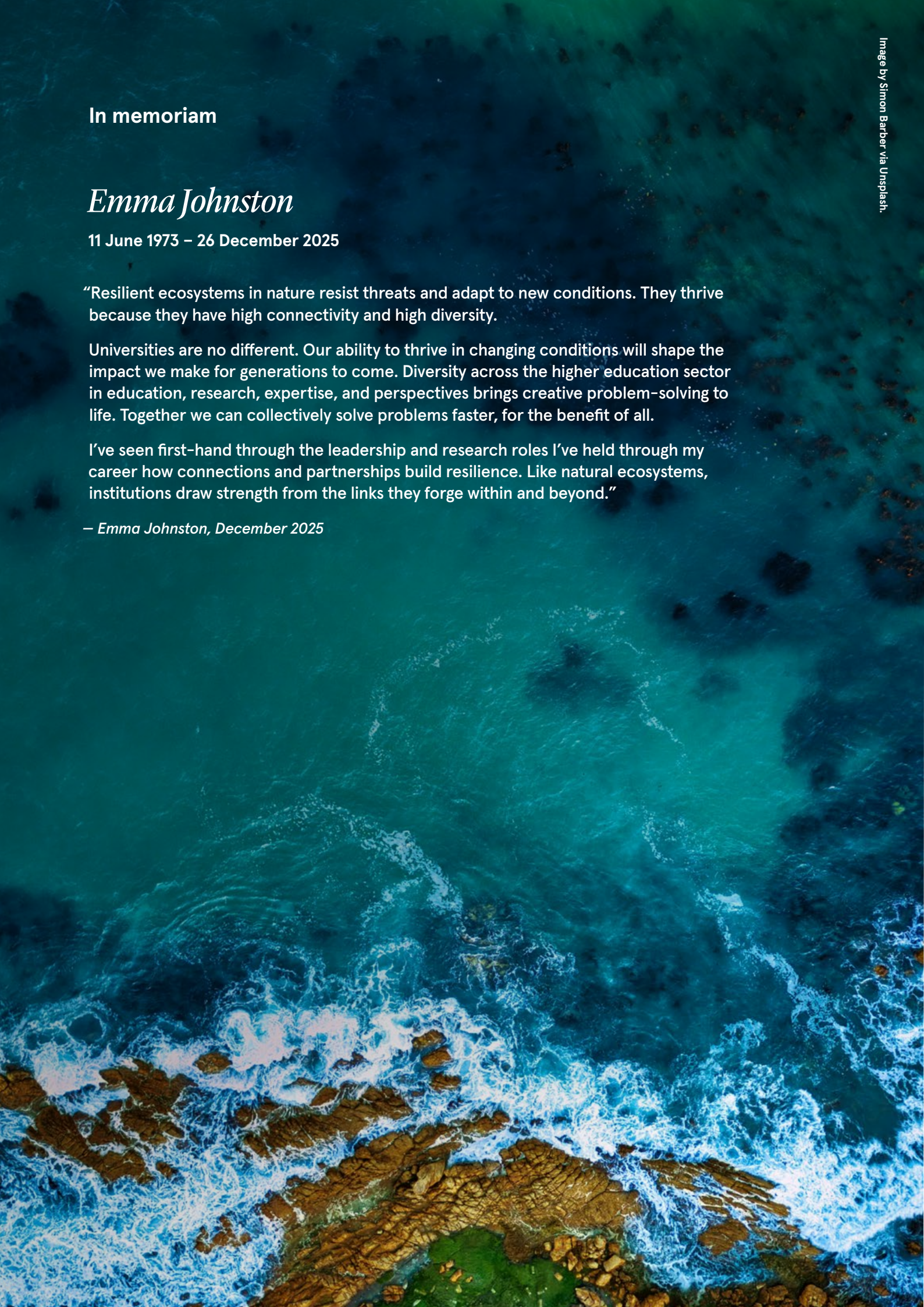
11 June 1973 – 26 December 2025

"Resilient ecosystems in nature resist threats and adapt to new conditions. They thrive because they have high connectivity and high diversity.

Universities are no different. Our ability to thrive in changing conditions will shape the impact we make for generations to come. Diversity across the higher education sector in education, research, expertise, and perspectives brings creative problem-solving to life. Together we can collectively solve problems faster, for the benefit of all.

I've seen first-hand through the leadership and research roles I've held through my career how connections and partnerships build resilience. Like natural ecosystems, institutions draw strength from the links they forge within and beyond."

— Emma Johnston, December 2025



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Executive summary

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to consider how the University of Sydney can work alongside the communities within which we operate to prepare for and respond to potential catastrophes, including extreme weather events, climate induced disasters, and infectious disease outbreaks. These specific disasters are part of and exacerbated by a wider 'polycrisis' that encompasses housing, economic, and health related inequalities as well as social polarisation and increasing political authoritarianism.

We believe the university and its host communities can best face these growing dangers by working together and we see our role in this as central to our evolving educational mission as a "public university" with a mission to serve the public good.

These dangers must be tackled through a true partnership, with the university and community complementing each other's capabilities to increase community resilience, adaptation, and disaster response.

A fast-emerging policy context

In recent years, several major inquiries and a Royal Commission have taken place, highlighting the vital role of local communities in disaster response and calling for the better integration of local knowledges and grassroots community actions within formal emergency management.[1]

The findings have highlighted important policy trends relevant to the work of universities and the communities in which they are embedded, including the need to:

- shift from crisis response to long-term community resilience and climate adaptation
- advocate shared responsibility principles and collaborative governance processes across sectors
- emphasise community-led place-based adaptation that uses local knowledges, including First Nations knowledges
- promote person-centred, capability-focused, and inclusive disaster risk reduction policies
- build community connections to increase ongoing economic and social resilience
- recognise the unequal experiences of individuals and groups that have been made disadvantaged.

1. Ahmed I and Ledger K, 2023, 'Lessons from the 2019/2020 'Black Summer Bushfires' in Australia', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 96.

   McNaught R, Nalau J, Hales R, Pittway E, Handmer J, and Renouf J, 2024 'Innovation and deadlock in governing disasters and climate change collaboratively – lessons from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 26.

   Mortimer A, Egbelakin T and Sher W, 2023 'Drivers, services gaps and improving disaster management for displaced people: a case study of prolonged displacement following the 2022 floods in Lismore, Australia', In: Ahadzie D.K., Proverbs D, Soetanto R, Oladokun V.O.e. (Eds.), *Handbook of Flood Risk Management and Community Action: an International Perspective*, Routledge, p. 19.

   NSW Independent Flood Inquiry 2022, *NSW Flood Inquiry: Volume One, Summary Report*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2022-08/VOLUME_ONE_Summary.pdf> accessed 4 February 2026.

   Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/natural-disasters/report> accessed 4 February 2026.

The broadening role of universities

Some Australian universities are making early advances towards disaster resilience, adaptation, and response. Initiatives include emissions reductions targets, circular economy initiatives, sustainable building design, and community-engaged resilience initiatives.[2] Climate-based regulatory expectations of universities are also increasing.

The University of Sydney is involved in this process. Our greater Sydney campuses are located within the region supported by the *Resilient Sydney Strategy for 2025–2030* and the *Greater Sydney Heat Smart City Plan 2025–2030*.[3] Our academics have contributed to both plans, though the university is yet to officially link its own climate disaster response planning to these strategies.

We are making strong progress through our new climate-related financial risks disclosure policy and our *Climate and Nature Transition Plan 2026–2032*, which represents a crucial development in systemic climate adaptation planning and resilience building at the university.

Image by Don Ricardo via Unsplash.

How this report was developed

This report is the result of an innovative consultation process that brought together members of the university's internal communities and of the communities within which we are embedded, employing the principles of inclusiveness and innovation that are a hallmark of the work of both the Sydney Environment Institute and the Sydney Policy Lab.

The deliberative process included four layers:

1. The formation of an advisory group to discuss scenario planning around likely local climate-induced disasters and extreme weather events
2. Preliminary conversations involving key knowledge holders
3. Participatory workshops involving a broad range of internal and external community members to produce initial recommendations
4. Policy roundtables with a stronger focus on subject matter experts and institutional actors responsible for implementing the suggested actions.

At every stage, community, local government, university staff and student participants were given equal standing, with the aim of decentring the university, making the wider community the major focus, and enabling the internal and external university and community members to get to grips with each other's diverse perspectives, needs, and expertise.

Six **community workshops** were held across two rounds, focusing on two university sites: the Camperdown/Darlington main campus and the Westmead Innovation Centre. Workshop deliberations were supported by *The Adaptation Game* – an award-winning 'serious game' tool that immerses players in personalised scenarios of climate disasters in their local area and assists them to generate practical responses.

Five **policy roundtables** were then held to discuss and develop the key ideas raised in the community workshops. The roundtable design was inspired by the Rockefeller Foundation's 17 Rooms initiative, full details of which can be found in the body of this report.

2. See: (1) the Melbourne University Sustainability Plan 2030, (2) the University of Technology Sydney Sustainability Strategy 2023–2027, (3) the Monash Circular Economy Framework, (4) the Monash Nature+ Strategy 2025, and (5) the University of Tasmania Strategic Framework for Sustainability 2020.
3. Resilient Sydney 2025, *Resilient Sydney Strategy 2025–2030*, April 2025 <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/governance-decision-making/resilient-sydney> accessed 4 February 2026

Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

How we should approach the future together

The consultation processes strongly supported an expanded role for the university in disaster resilience and adaptation at the local, state, and national level.

While several areas of university expertise were identified for action, participants examined not just *what* the university might do, but *how* it might do it. Crucially, it was agreed that all university and community joint action should be undertaken through truly collaborative, long-term governance and planning processes that respect several basic principles: familiarity, humility, partnership, flexibility, responsibility, and trust. The idea is for the university and communities to become "better neighbours" – true equals respecting what each can already bring to the task rather than reinventing the wheel.

At the heart of what we repeatedly heard is that building and sustaining good relationships is critical for climate disaster resilience, adaptation, and effective responsiveness. These are relationships between institutions and the communities they serve and between people dwelling in place. Our own research (and a growing body of international work[4]) reveals how fostering strong relations is vital for building the trust necessary for working together in high-pressure situations, for implementing plans and actions, and for facilitating the knowledges (professional, skilled, academic, and place-based or local) and resources between the diverse groups of people needed for taking community-led action in emergencies.

4. Aldrich, D 2023, 'How social infrastructure saves lives: a quantitative analysis of Japan's 3/11 disasters' *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, pp. 30 – 40.

   Choo, M and Yoon, D.K. 2022, 'Examining the effects of the local communities' social capital on disaster response capacity in Seoul, South Korea', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 75.

   Nakamura, N and Kanemasu, Y 2020, 'Traditional knowledge, social capital, and community response to a disaster: resilience of remote communities in Fiji after a severe climatic event.' *Regional Environmental Change*, vol. 20, no. 1.

   Robinson, S, Dolan, M, Bouton, E, Roberts J.T. and Carlson, D 2026, 'Beyond projects: Relational durability and the measurement of climate adaptation success in practice', *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 96, pp. 1-13.

   Webster, S, Pittaway, E, Gillies-Palmer, Z, Schlosberg, D, Matous, P, Longman, J, Howard, A, Bailie, J, Viney, G, Verlie, B, Celermajer, D, Naderpajouh, N, Rawsthorne, M, Joseph, P, Iveson, K and Troy, J 2024, 'Self-Organising Systems to Minimise Future Disaster Risk - Findings Report', *Sydney Environment Institute*, March 2024.

What we must do together

We have organised the many suggestions that were made into seven main categories.

1. **Suggestions for direct university action**

Four suggestions for direct university action were highlighted, including:

- partnering with existing Local Community Resilience Alliances, or developing such alliances where they do not already exist
- the university adopting a more responsible climate footprint
- the use of university buildings as cool refuges and food relief hubs for the broader community during crises
- the incorporation of climate resilience and community needs into (1) the next iteration of the university's Campus Master Plan led by University Infrastructure, and (2) the university's broader *Climate and Nature Transition Plan 2026-2032* currently being developed by the Office of Sustainability.

2. **Proactively build closer relationships and trust with proximate communities and partners well ahead of disasters.**

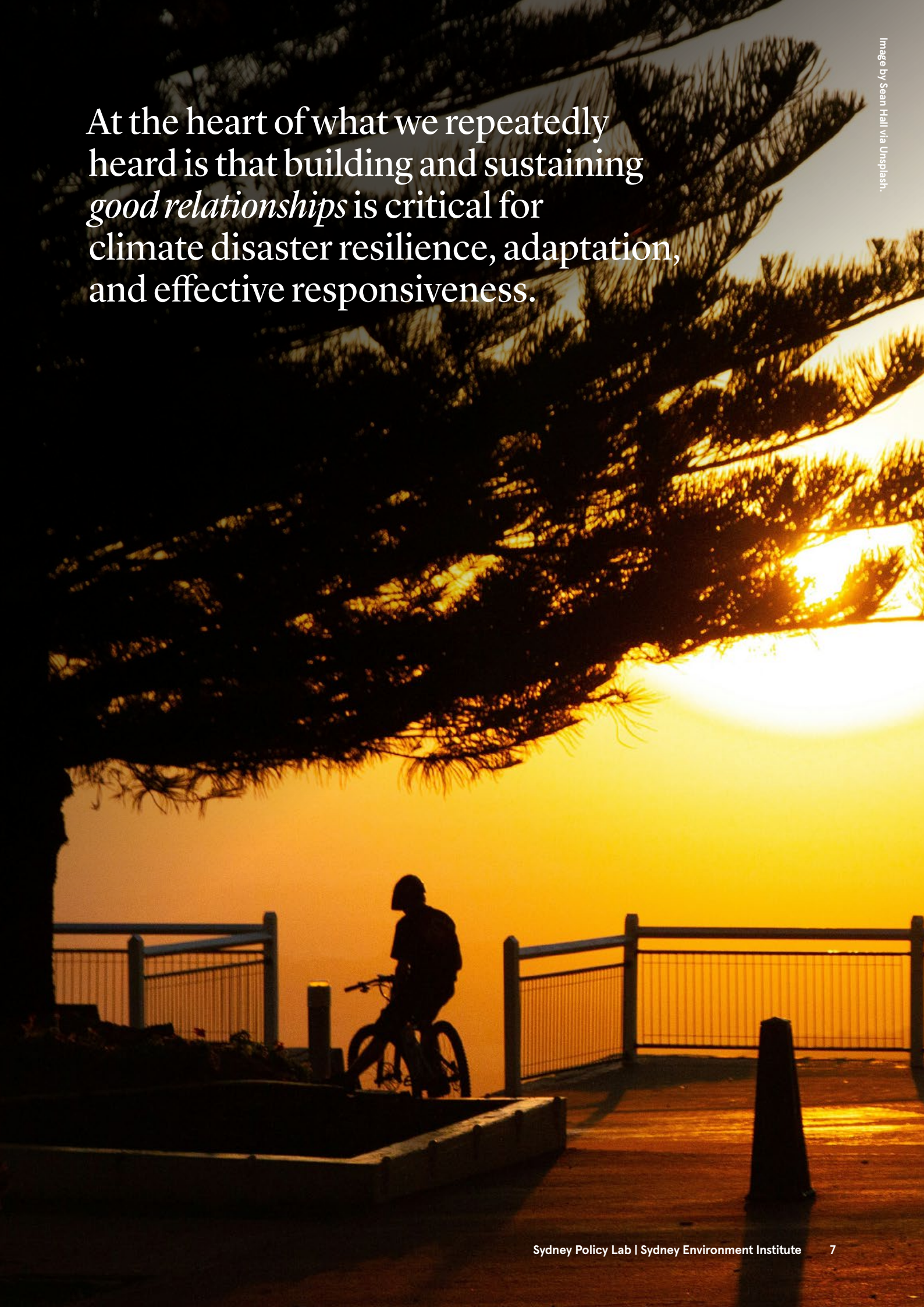
3. **Connect with and strengthen existing local resilience and adaptation planning, rather than "reinventing the wheel".**

4. **Go beyond 'static' planning to adopt a more dynamic, responsive, and "anti-fragile" approach.**

5. **Gain greater understanding of how staff and students are embedded within their own communities and determine how to harness this precious resource.**

6. **Develop and clarify well-established, fit-for-purpose frameworks for risk, liability, and insurance management.**

7. **Make disaster-related policies and procedures "widely and well known" to all actors and the public in advance of potentially dangerous events.**



At the heart of what we repeatedly heard is that building and sustaining *good relationships* is critical for climate disaster resilience, adaptation, and effective responsiveness.

Image by Sean Hall via Unsplash.

Introduction

Purpose and scope

This report considers how the University of Sydney can work alongside its host communities to prepare for and respond to potential catastrophes, including extreme weather events, climate induced disasters, and infectious disease outbreaks. In the era of climate change, global contagion and heightened international conflict, this is an increasingly urgent task.

The question this report seeks to answer is therefore: How can we activate our people, networks, resources and infrastructure to work alongside existing bodies to increase community resilience, adaptation and disaster response?

This report sets out how the university and its partners came together to approach disaster preparedness and response, the policy and organisational context in which this will take place, and a principles-based framework to inform the next stages of our resilience building and disaster planning efforts. It ends by summarising some of the standout ideas and recommendations gathered from the consultation process.

This report is intended as a disaster planning resource for local communities and the university itself. We offer its methodology freely to our communities and staff.

How can we *activate* our people, networks, resources and infrastructure to work alongside existing bodies to increase community *resilience*, adaptation and disaster response?

Image via Adobe Stock.

Image via Unsplash.

Working together

We believe the university and its host communities can best face potential disasters by working together. We see this as a central part of the University of Sydney's mission and an important way to demonstrate the full value of universities to contemporary society.

We aim to become a fully "public university" – by which we mean a university that not only educates local communities and applies knowledge and research to address local needs, but one that embraces its intergenerational responsibilities, harnessing its extensive resources to tackle shared social, economic, and environmental challenges. Becoming a "public university" in this way recognises and repays the significant contributions students, community organisations, businesses, and all levels of government make to our work. In an era where trust in institutions, including universities, has eroded, we need to do the real work to redress our past failures and demonstrate a sustained and practical commitment to supporting the flourishing of all the communities who lend us our legitimacy. Practices of commitment form a sound basis for sustainable trust.

In this sense, developing disaster preparedness and responsiveness must be a true partnership. Our host communities already have strong leadership and expertise in disaster planning. Our goal is not to replace what already exists but to add our resources to existing efforts in a way that benefits all. The better we get to know each other, the more effective we will be.

Like all major universities, we have considerable assets to offer: knowledge, research, training, human resources capacity, risk management expertise, planning ability, procurement, communications and more. All of these capacities can be brought in to strengthen and nourish good relationships.

In this spirit, this report is dedicated to the many individuals and organisations that participated in its creation through the workshops and policy roundtables held at our Camperdown and Westmead campuses. You gave your time extremely generously and we hope this account of these historic interactions does justice, not just to your contribution to our project, but to the many years of disaster-related planning you have undertaken.

The context

Climate change is already affecting New South Wales, placing many communities in the path of potential and imminent danger.

The University of Sydney's campuses and host communities are no exception. The *National Climate Risk Assessment* and AdaptNSW warn us that heatwaves and heavy rain are likely to become increasingly frequent, posing dangers to our health, well-being, and environment.[5] Already disadvantaged communities are particularly at risk.

But potential climate-related disasters are just one – albeit major – problem among many. Our society faces what some have called a 'polycrisis' – which occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled, producing harms greater than their sum had they occurred in isolation.[6] The increasing reality of overlapping and compounding crises encompasses environmental degradation, housing availability, economic inequalities, health system weaknesses, and increasing political authoritarianism and intolerance. Ideally, a resilience-focused response to polycrisis goes beyond an attempt to address each issue independently, and focuses on the reality of complexity and interdependence. Such an approach fosters well-being, equity, and dignity as central to weathering such intersecting crises.

Confronted with problems like this, communities surrounding the university's campuses have in recent years developed community resilience organisations and put resilience and adaptation plans in place.

The University of Sydney is involved in this process. Our greater Sydney campuses are located within the region supported by the *Resilient Sydney Strategy for 2025–2030* and the G*reater Sydney Heat Smart City Plan 2025–2030*. Our academics have contributed to both plans, though the university is yet to officially link its own climate disaster response planning to these strategies.

Australian and international studies have found adaptation planning in the higher education sector to be relatively undeveloped, despite the lead role universities have played in developing human understanding of the causes, nature and consequences of climate change.[7] When it comes to climate change there is a profound disconnect between the academic work and the practices of universities and this is impairing our wider society's capacity to adapt.[8]

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5. Australian Climate Service 2025, *Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment*, 15 September 2025, <https://www.acs.gov.au/pages/national-climate-risk-assessment> accessed 4 February 2026.

   Adapt NSW 2024, *NSW councils see a sharp rise in climate impact and action, survey finds*, 13 March 2024, <https://www.climatechange.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources-and-research/nsw-councils-see-sharp-rise-climate-impact-and-action-survey-finds> accessed 4 February 2026.

6. Lawrence M, Janzwood S and Homer-Dixon T 2022, 'What Is a Global Polycrisis?', *Cascade Institute Discussion Paper*, v. 2, 2022 <https://cascadeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/What-is-a-global-polycrisis-v2.pdf> accessed 21 October 2025.

7. Denham T, Stokes A, and Rickards L 2025, 'How well are universities adapting to climate change? Insights from Australia', *Climate Policy*, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 1192–1206.

   Kautto N, Trundle A, and McEvoy D 2018, 'Climate adaptation planning in the higher education sector', *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Educatio*n, vol. 19, no. 7, pp. 1259–1278.

8. Winkler K. J., Bennett E, and Chestnutt H. R. 2021, 'Mapping social structures for sustainability transformation at McGill University, Canada', *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 1209–1228.

Existing responsibilities and frameworks for action

The primary responsibility for preparedness, response and recovery rests with state and territory governments. Their remit covers the most crucial operational and on-the-ground systems, services and decisions, including fire and emergency services, land-use planning, building regulation, most health and community services, and place-based community funding through local councils.

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for setting national policies and frameworks, applying international frameworks, coordinating between states and territories, and supporting states during large emergencies.

Local governments are often the closest point of contact for communities. They run community centres, provide local services, manage infrastructure, and work with communities on local preparedness, resilience, and adaptation planning, risk awareness, and grant schemes.

They also appoint Local Emergency Management Officers, who provide executive support to Local Emergency Operations Controllers and Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs), with responsibilities that include:

- Organising LEMC meetings
- Coordinating updates to the Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMPLAN)
- Ensuring the Local Emergency Operations Centre is operationally ready when required (with locations specified in the LEMPLAN).

For an outline of the responsibilities of each level of government, see Table 1.

Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

Communities *surrounding* the university's campuses have in recent years developed community *resilience* organisations and put resilience and *adaptation* plans in place.

Table 1: Summary of government functions

Function	Local government (councils)	State Government (NSW)	Federal Government
Immediate emergency response	Supports through local facilities, staff and community networks; activates local plans	Leads and manages operational response through state emergency services	Supports when asked, coordinates national assistance
Warnings & evacuations	Shares warnings with communities; helps with local logistics and evacuation centres	Issues official evacuation orders and emergency warnings	Bureau of Meteorology provides national hazard data and forecasts
Fire, flood, SES & health services	May provide local resources, facilities, volunteers	Runs NSW RFS, Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW SES, NSW Health emergency response	Provides national capabilities (e.g., Australian Defence Force, national aerial firefighting)
Disaster preparedness & community resilience	Local community engagement, preparedness programs, local risk awareness	State strategies, statewide preparedness & capability building	National risk reduction frameworks and funding programs
Land-use planning	Local Development Control Plans (DCPs), zoning decisions, integrating hazard and climate considerations	State planning laws, policies, guidance, strategic planning frameworks	Sets national building code; provides hazard data
Infrastructure & the built environment	Manages local roads, drainage, coastal assets, community facilities; leads local resilience upgrades	Major state infrastructure, building regulations and standards	Funds major resilience investments, national infrastructure programs
Climate adaptation planning	Local adaptation plans, coastal management, heatwave plans, green infrastructure	State climate adaptation strategies and sector plans	National Climate Risk Assessment, Adaptation Strategy & Plan
Recovery & rebuilding	Local recovery centres, community support, waste management, reconstruction of council assets	State-wide recovery coordination, support to councils, major rebuilding	Co-funds recovery payments and long-term reconstruction
Funding	Applies for state and Federal grants; allocates local rates to resilience activities	State grants & programs, joint funding of disaster assistance	Major resilience and recovery funding; disaster assistance

Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

State and national policy has developed rapidly since 2020 following multiple disasters and public inquiries, including:

- the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements
- the 2020 NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
- the 2022 NSW Independent Flood Inquiry
- the 2022 Midterm Review of the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

For a full list of relevant inquiries and reviews, see Appendix 2.

The knowledge gained is now being integrated into new policies and frameworks at all levels. But it is crucial to understand that during actual disasters local communities very often fill the gaps where none of these levels of government meet the need. Recent catastrophic climate events revealed some of the failures and limitations of formal disaster arrangements. For example, during the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires and the 2022 Lismore flood, local communities were forced to fill gaps left by official disaster agencies, effectively becoming their own first responders. These experiences highlighted the importance of grassroots collective action in disaster response, insights that have since been integrated into new policies and frameworks at all levels.[9,10]

9. Ahmed, I, and Ledger K, 2023, 'Lessons from the 2019/2020 'Black Summer Bushfires' in Australia', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 96.

   Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/natural-disasters/report> accessed 4 February 2026.

   Mortimer A, Egbelakin T and Sher W, 2023 'Drivers, services gaps and improving disaster management for displaced people: a case study of prolonged displacement following the 2022 floods in Lismore, Australia', In: Ahadzie D.K., Proverbs D, Soetanto R, Oladokun V.O.e. (Eds.), *Handbook of Flood Risk Management and Community Action* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 66–84). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003315247-8

   NSW Independent Flood Inquiry 2022, *NSW Flood Inquiry: Volume One, Summary Report*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2022-08/VOLUME_ONE_Summary.pdf> accessed 4 February 2026.

   Vardoulakis S, Matthews V, Bailie RS, Hu W, Salvador-Carulla L, Barratt AL, and Chu C, 2022, 'Building resilience to Australian flood disasters in the face of climate change', *Medical Journal of Australia,* vol. 217, pp. 342–345.

10. Webster, S, Pittaway, E, Gillies-Palmer, Z, Schlosberg, D, Matous, P, Longman, J, Howard, A, Bailie, J, Viney, G, Verlie, B, Celermajer, D, Naderpajouh, N, Rawsthorne, M, Joseph, P, Iveson, K and Troy, J 2024, 'Self-Organising Systems to Minimise Future Disaster Risk - Findings Report', *Sydney Environment Institute*, March 2024.

In NSW, the Reconstruction Authority's *Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines* of 2025 stressed the vital role of local communities in disaster response and called for the better integration of local knowledges and grassroots community actions within formal emergency management frameworks[11]. Other work to date on local community involvement includes important work by Resilient Sydney – a collaborative regional resilience program involving all 33 local councils across Greater Sydney:

- *the Resilient Sydney Strategy 2025-2030* collaborates to manage risk and build resilience in Greater Sydney through knowledge sharing, capacity building, and planning for our communities, infrastructure, and natural environment. This includes developing dignity principles for resilience practices such as co-designed structures, inclusive preparedness and response planning, and actions that affirm identity and empower people (e.g., provision of prayer rooms, language support, accessibility measures).
- *the Greater Sydney Heat Smart City Plan 2025-2030* – an Australian-first in community-led, coordinated planning for extreme heat. A joint initiative with the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC).

Some of the important policy trends from these reports of particular relevance to this project and its recommendations include:

- a shift from 'crisis response' to 'long-term community resilience and climate adaptation'
- advocating 'shared responsibility' principles and 'whole of society' approaches across sectors
- increased emphasis on 'community-led place-based adaptation' that uses local knowledges, including First Nations knowledges
- a turn to 'person-centred', 'capability-focused' and 'inclusive' disaster risk reduction policies
- building and strengthening community connections to anchor ongoing economic and social resilience
- recognising the unequal experiences of individuals and groups that have been made disadvantaged.

Image by Olivia Katz Photography.

11. NSW Reconstruction Authority 2025, N*SW Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines*, August 2025, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-08/disaster-adaptation-plan-guidelines-aug-25.pdf> accessed 4 February 2026.

It is crucial to understand that during actual disasters local *communities* very often fill the gaps.

Image by Fredrick Shaw via Unsplash.

The university context

The emerging policy frameworks outlined in the previous section provide a strong basis for the University of Sydney's disaster planning efforts.

Some Australian universities are making early advances towards disaster resilience, adaptation and response. Initiatives include Net Zero emissions targets, circular economy initiatives, sustainable building design and community-engaged resilience initiatives.[12]

Climate-based regulatory expectations of universities are also increasing – including the NSW Treasury's new climate reporting requirements (TPG24-33)[13]. And both NSW DCCEW and Reconstruction Authority are developing disaster and adaptation plans[14].

Image by Yq Tiam via Unsplash.

The University of Sydney is making strong progress in some areas:

- In 2024 we became the first Australian university to voluntarily disclose its climate-related financial risks.
- Our *Climate and Nature Transition Plan 2026-2032* is now embedding climate resilience into the planning, design and operation our campuses.
- Outside these formal processes, university staff and students have long supported local, place-based climate adaptation action (often without financial or administrative support). Our regional and rural campuses have routinely activated their research, education, and partnership networks for recovery and resilience efforts – as happened in our responses to bushfires and floods in Camden, floods in Lismore, and drought and extreme heat in Broken Hill.[15]

The guiding framework for disaster management at the university is its *University Emergency Response Policy*. The policy focuses on the protection of physical infrastructure and facilities and the implementation of formal emergency management policies and procedures. Its scope extends to all activities taking place in university facilities and all staff, students, affiliates and visitors on university lands. Figure 1 shows how the UERP fits within national, state and Sydney emergency planning. While the UERP is crucial and necessary work, our research and engagement shows that university and surrounding communities would like collaborative and ongoing planning for action on local resilience and adaptation building, particularly in the preparation and recovery phase.

12. See: (1) the Melbourne University Sustainability Plan 2030, (2) the University of Technology Sydney Sustainability Strategy 2023-2027, (3) the Monash Circular Economy Framework, (4) the Monash Nature+ Strategy 2025, and (5) the University of Tasmania Strategic Framework for Sustainability 2020.

13. Deloitte, 2024, *Australian governments require public sector entities to disclose climate-related financial risks*, 19 Dec 2024, <https://www.deloitte.com/au/en/services/audit-assurance/analysis/australian-governments-require-public-sector-entities-disclose-climate-related-financial-risks.html> accessed 4 February 2026.

14 NSW Department of Climate Change, the Environment and Water (DCCEW) 2024, *NSW Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan* 2025-2029, <https://www.climatechange.environment.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/NSWClimateChangeAdaptationActionPlan2025-2029.pdf> accessed 4 February 2026.

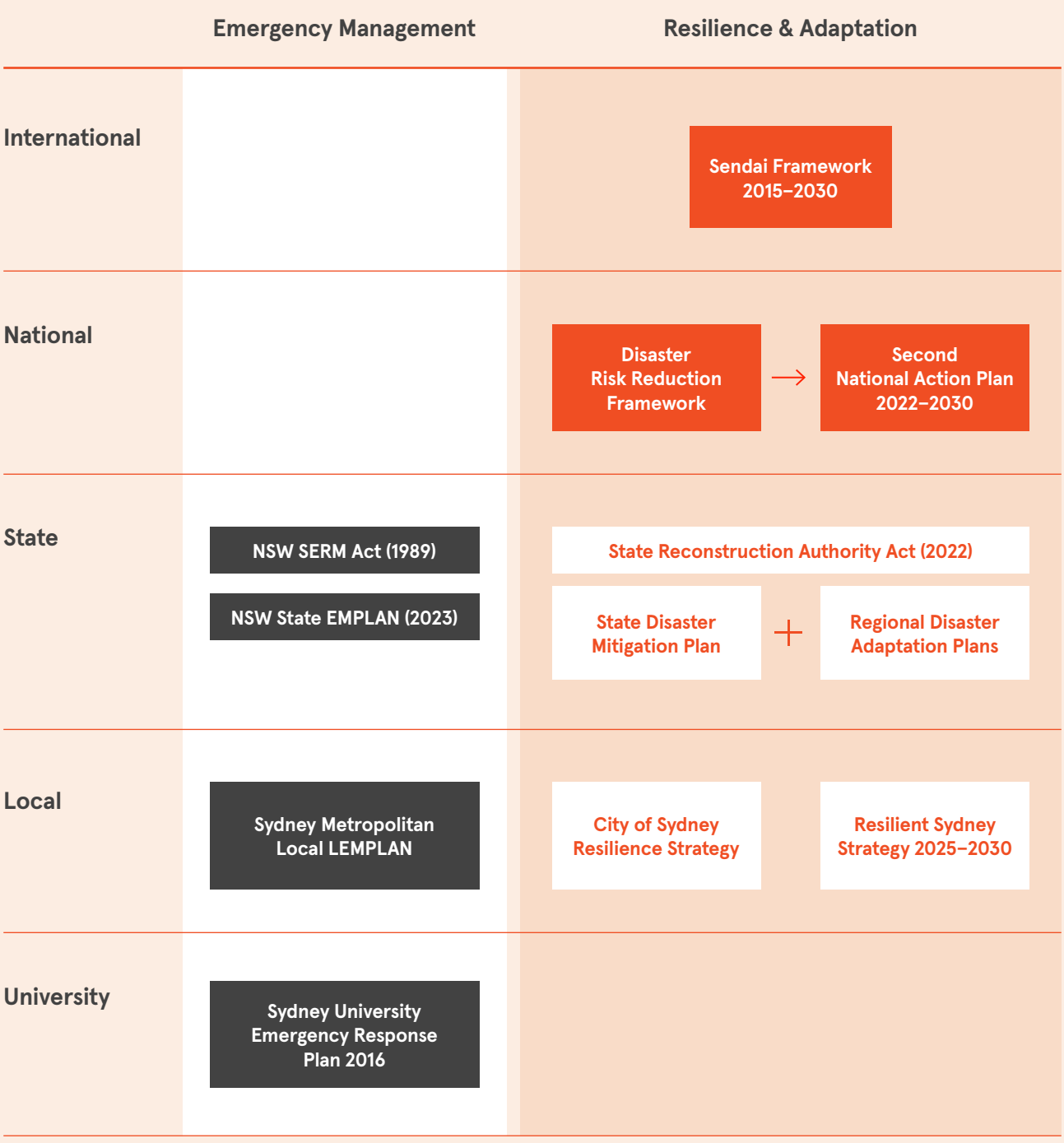
NSW Reconstruction Authority 2025, *NSW Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines*, August 2025, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-08/disaster-adaptation-plan-guidelines-aug-25.pdf> accessed 4 February 2026.

15. Bailie J, 2022, 'Letter to the Editor: Supporting students in the aftermath of a weather-related disaster', *Focus on Health Professional Education*, vol. 23, no. 1.

Balie J, Izzat H, Scott K.M., Ahern C, and Bailie R 2025, 'Impact of weather-related disasters on medical student rural placements: Implications for clinicians and medical schools', *Public Health*, vol. 249.

University of Sydney 2019, *Update: Camden campus to reopen on Friday 13 December*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2019/12/05/camden-and-molonglo-campuses-evacuated-due-to-fire-danger.html> accessed 4 February 2026.

Figure 1: The Policy Landscape



The university–community context

Camperdown campus and its surrounds

The 51-hectare Camperdown-Darlington campus is the university's original site and the core campus for its 70,000 students and 9,900 staff.[16] Situated on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, its grounds encompass several architecturally significant buildings, research facilities, museums, libraries, and sports fields.

The campus's neighbouring suburbs – Camperdown, Darlington, Redfern, Glebe, Forest Lodge, Newtown, and Annandale – are home to diverse communities and have been historically significant public housing sites. Redfern is of course a central site for Aboriginal culture, resistance, and activism, especially since the 1970s. The relatively transient population of these suburbs leaves its people vulnerable to social isolation, and many are experiencing the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

As one of Sydney's earliest colonial settlements, the area is typified by ageing infrastructure that can hinder climate adaptation. The combination of unsuitable Victorian building design and modern heritage protections makes many homes, schools, and public buildings poorly suited to Sydney's changing climate risks, including extreme heat, flash flooding, power blackouts, and transport disruptions. This is exacerbated by interventions in landforms (such as the destruction of wetlands) and forms of land management practiced by Aboriginal peoples. The colonial built landscape renders everyone who lives here today vulnerable, particularly renters, public housing tenants, low-income earners, people with low mobility, older people, people with disability, women, children, and recently arrived migrants. During extreme weather events, public spaces like Glebe Library and the Broadway shopping centre offer refuge, but face overcrowding, straining their resources.

As one of Sydney's earliest colonial settlements, the area is typified by ageing infrastructure that can hinder climate *adaptation*.

Image by Blake Staniland via Unsplash.

16. University of Sydney 2025, *Annual Report 2024*, April 2025 <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/annual-report.html> accessed 4 February 2026.


Image via Adobe Stock.

Westmead and its surrounds

The university's Westmead campus is situated on the traditional lands of the Barramattagal people of the Darug Nation, straddling the Parramatta River to the North and Parramatta Park to the East. It is part of the Westmead Innovation Centre – a sprawling hospital network and leading hub of medical research. Around 1000 staff and affiliates attend the campus, as well as 2000 students, many on short-term clinical placements within the hospital precinct[17].

This is one of Australia's fastest-growing local government areas and rapid urbanisation, land clearing, and climate change are accelerating its climate risks. Extreme heat poses a particular problem. Increasing riverine and flash flooding risks leave residents vulnerable to blackouts, transport disruptions, property loss, and health risks.

The area is home to a highly culturally and linguistically diverse population, more than half of whom were born overseas or speak a language other than English at home. While this promotes many rich cultural connections, it can also create disconnection from essential public services and social isolation.

Our regional, rural and remote campuses

Several clinical schools and research facilities are spread across regional and rural New South Wales. This includes an extensive network of farms and agricultural research units at Camden Campus and Narrabri and clinical schools in Nepean, Dubbo, Orange, Broken Hill and Lismore. Long-standing community partnerships mean the university's regional-rural campuses have been able to mobilise timely responses to local disasters. These have included bushfires and floods in Camden, floods in Lismore, and drought and extreme hot weather in Broken Hill.

In 2019, a university-commissioned report by ACIL Allen assessed the university's economic contribution to the state at around $5.3 billion[18].

17. University of Sydney, *Westmead: A global centre of multidisciplinary innovation for over 45 years*, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/campuses/campus-locations/westmead.html> accessed 4 February 2026.

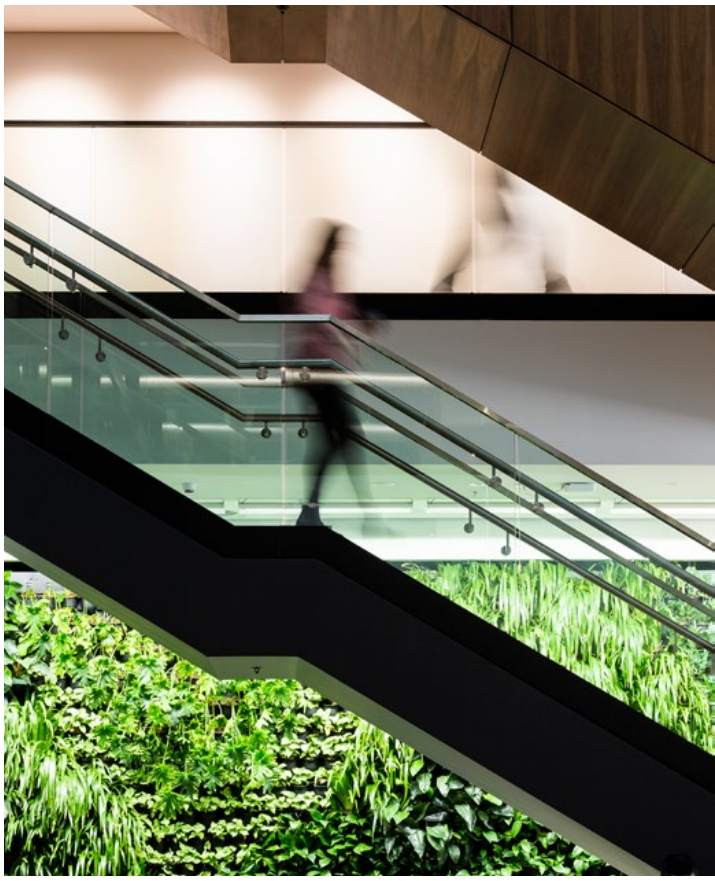
18. ACIL Allen Consulting 2020, *Economic impact of the University of Sydney*, version 1.2, 1 April 2020, <https://acilallen.com.au/projects/education/economic-impact-of-the-university-of-sydney> accessed 4 February 2026.

What do we mean by ‘the university?’

To assess the university’s potential disaster-related capacities, it helps to understand what the university is and what qualities and resources it possesses. To this end, we define the university to be the following:

- **Physical structures:** A collection of buildings, facilities, outdoor spaces, and the infrastructure which connects it all.
- **Holder of resources:** The university’s access to food and water, energy supply, equipment and other critical supplies.
- **A ‘community of communities’:** The university is an immense form of social infrastructure comprising the myriad relationships and networks among students and staff, on and off campus.
- **Sites of education and research:** The university provides education and conducts research to address skill and knowledge needs. This concerns not just ‘what’ is taught, trained, and researched, but also ‘with whom’, ‘how’, and with ‘what intended outcomes’.
- **Cross-sectorial intermediary and advocate:** The university brings together diverse peoples, institutions and sectors for collective action through different modes of engagement (research, public events, forums, committees, and more).
- **Sets of external obligations and internal processes:** The university is subject to regulatory obligations and internal processes which variably shape actions, obligations, and decision-making across different roles within the institution.

With the university’s capabilities fully understood, it is possible to assess the full range of assistance it might offer in disaster scenarios. It is important to keep in mind that the university and surrounding communities overlap, as many staff and students are local citizens as well as university members. Tapping this dual reality will be crucially important to the success of future disaster and resilience planning.



How the project was conducted

Overview of engagement

The deliberative process included four layers:

1. The formation of an advisory group to discuss scenario planning around likely local climate-induced disasters and extreme weather events and to advise on project direction and community engagement
2. Preliminary conversations involving key knowledge holders
3. Participatory workshops involving a broad range of internal and external community members to produce initial recommendations
4. Policy roundtables with a stronger focus on subject matter experts and institutional actors responsible for implementing the suggested actions.

Participants in our deliberations

Community Workshops	Academics, university staff, university students, local residents and community leaders, cultural and faith groups, local schools, libraries, think tanks, advocacy groups, not-for-profits, local government staff, and local health authorities
Policy Roundtables	University strategy and operations, local government representatives, local health authorities, think tanks, and academics.

Meetings were held with a mix of on-campus and online. At every stage, the discussion leaders were careful to ensure community and university representatives were given equal standing, with the aim of decentring the university and making the wider community the major focus. A crucial aim was to enable the university and community members to get to grips with each other's needs and expertise.

Community workshops and *The Adaptation Game*

The community workshops were designed to explore peoples' experiences, responses and suggestions across various disaster scenarios. They were also designed to develop, hone and then utilise two localised versions of *The Adaptation Game* (TAG) – an award-winning 'serious game' tool produced by The Adaptation Game Pty Ltd – to enrich these discussions.

TAG uses tabletop game mechanics to immerse players in personalised scenarios of climate disasters grounded in their local area. The game draws on local knowledges combined with real climate science to build out the shocks faced in-game, imagining the next decade across three rounds of disaster shock events. Players engaged in storytelling and knowledge exchange to build connections and generated adaptation measures capable of navigating the shock impacts together, potentially leading to post-game real world actions.

As well as developing the TAG kits specifically for the local areas, the workshops combined research engagement with relationship building (between all participants and within the university) demonstrating a way universities can meaningfully contribute to local resilience building through research practice.

Six community workshops were held across two rounds, focusing on two university sites: the Camperdown/Darlington main campus and the Westmead Innovation Centre. See Figure 3.

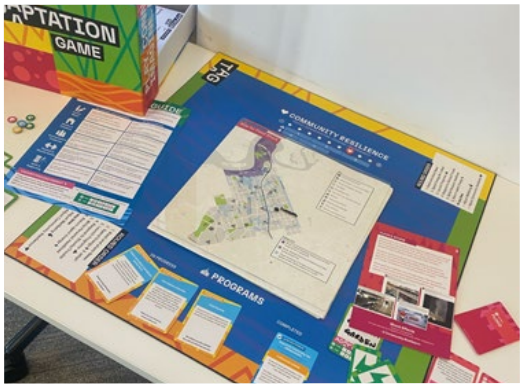
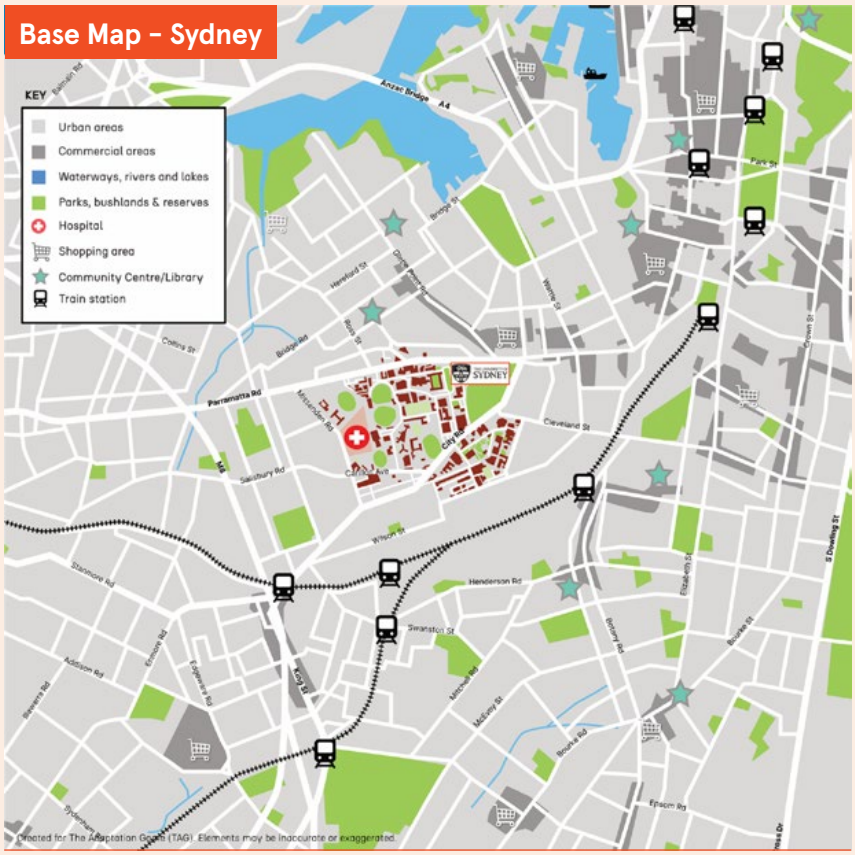
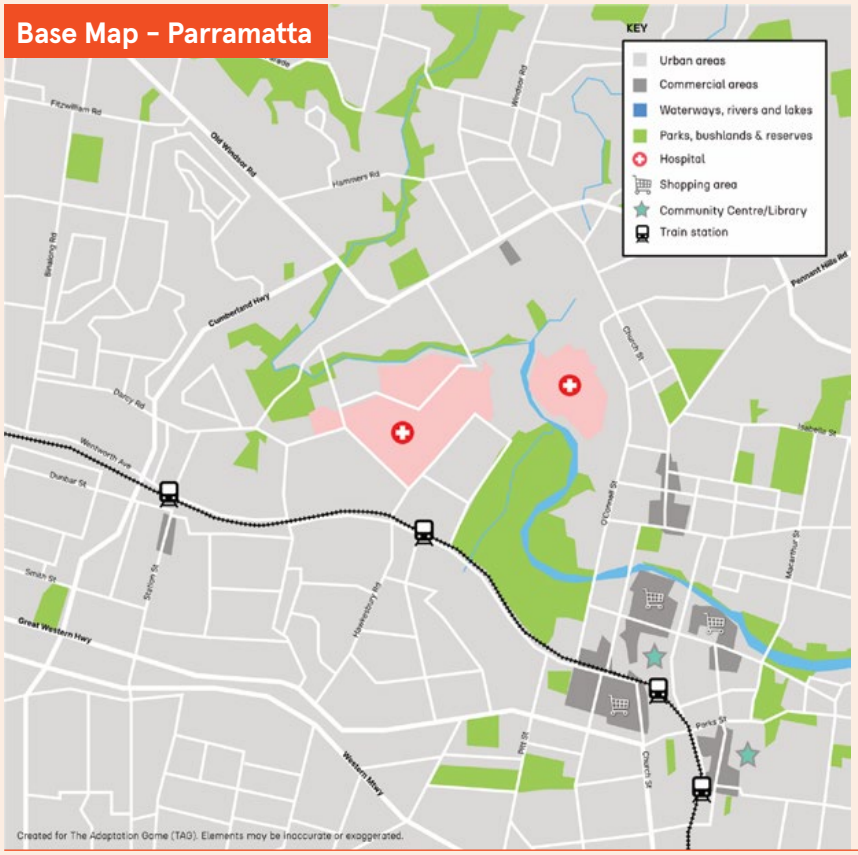


Figure 3: Community workshop locations and heat and flood maps generated by the game



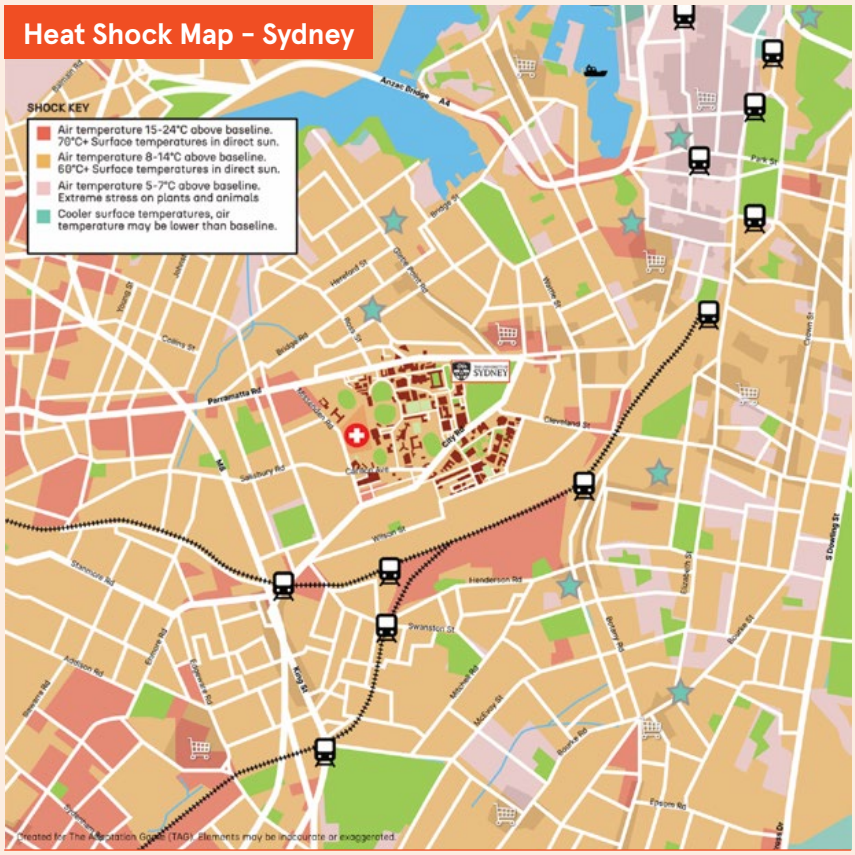
The main campus in Camperdown and Darlington entails the bulk of the University's workforce and student-base.



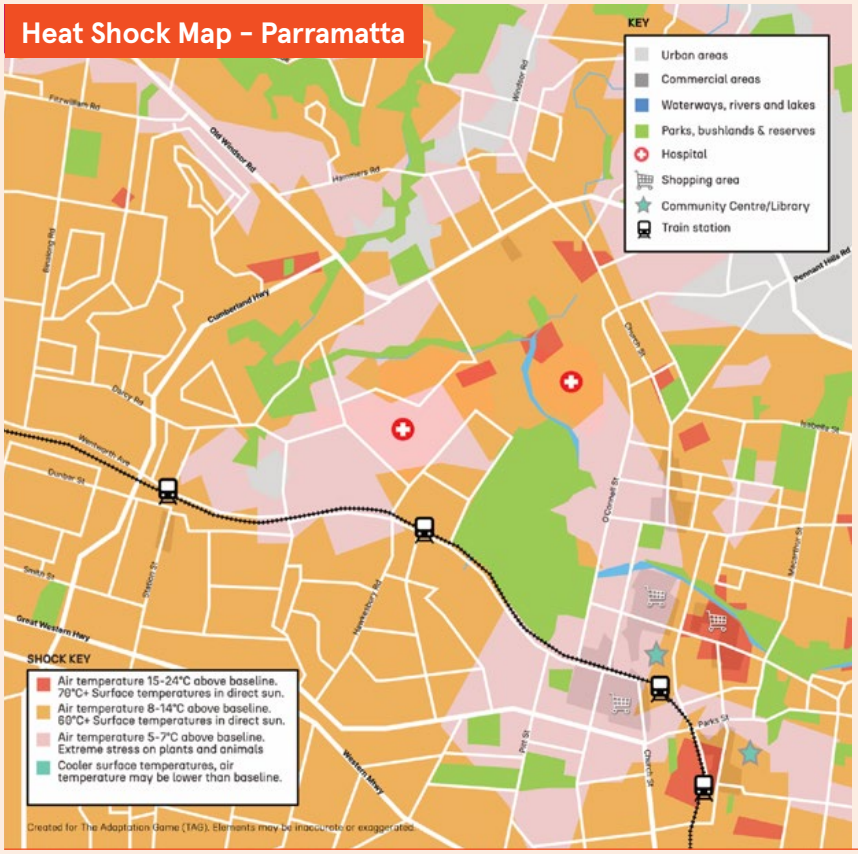
Parramatta is the major city in the heart of Greater Western Sydney. The region is an area of growth for the University while also highlighting the flows of people who travel to the main campus for work and study.

Figure 3: Community workshop locations and heat and flood maps generated by the game *cont.*

Heat Shock Map – Sydney

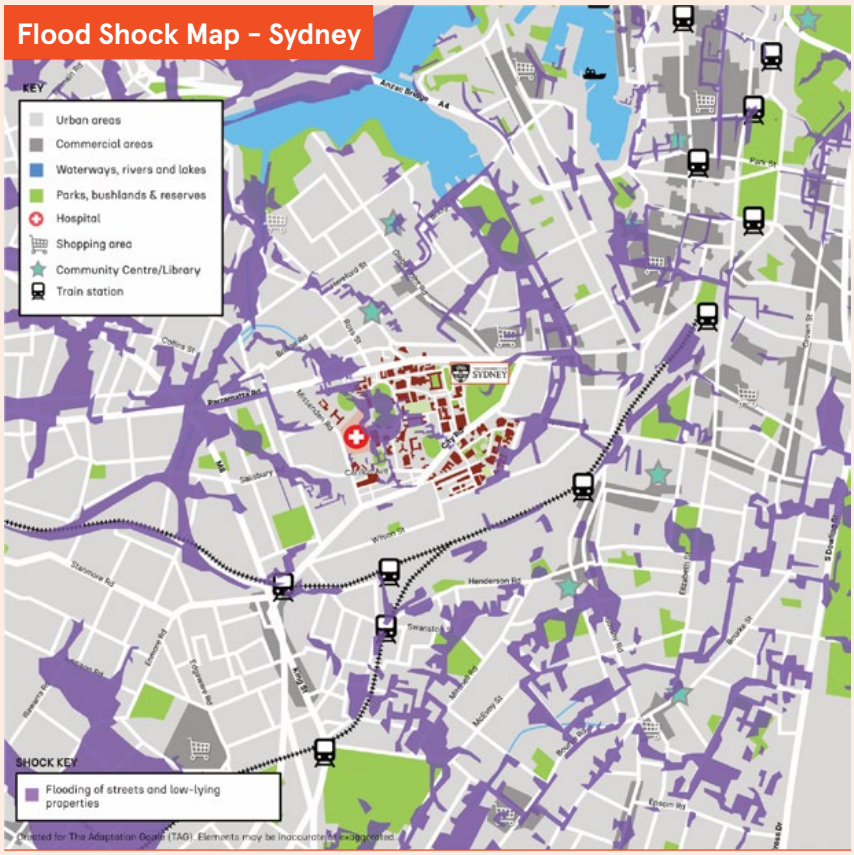


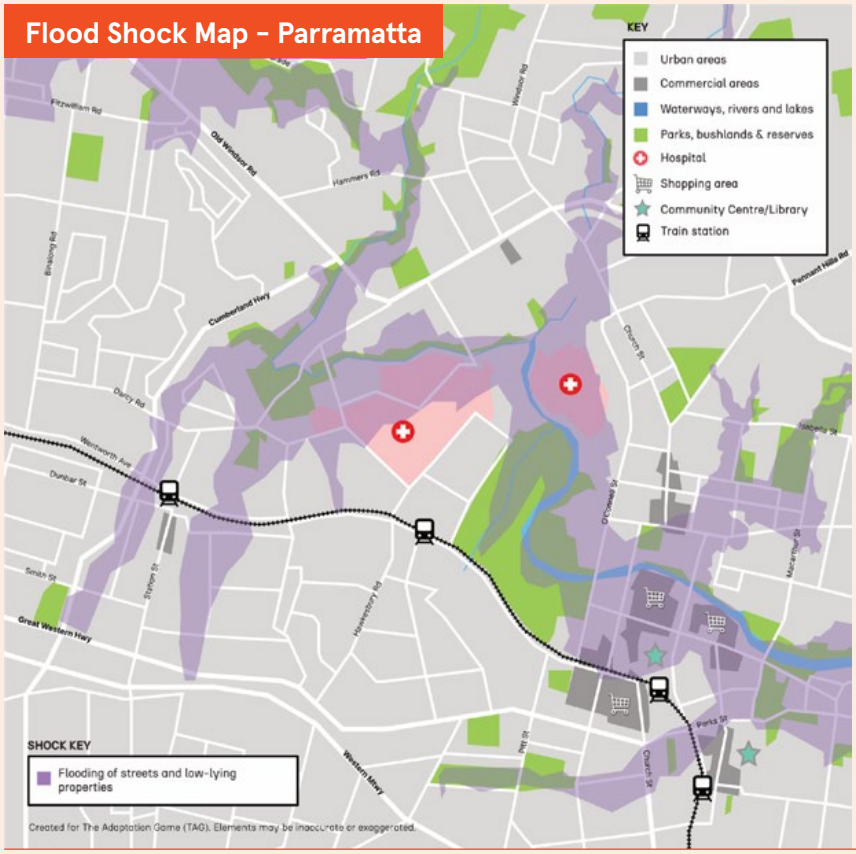
Heat Shock Map – Parramatta



The maps shown here and on the next page are the ones displayed during the workshops and in our game kits – produced by TAG's map designers drawing on climate science and resources provided by the respective local governments.

Figure 3: Community workshop locations and heat and flood maps generated by the game *cont.*





The first round – 'localisation' – engaged participants in rich discussion of how climate and outbreak shocks manifest locally. Participants were asked (1) to describe events during extreme heatwaves, catastrophic storms, flash flooding, and infectious diseases outbreaks and then (2) to identify the factors that shape or limit local actions.

The second round – 'plan and play' – trialled the TAG game materials based on the results of the 'localisation' round. Game components – 'program cards'– were tailored to present possible university actions that might help build local resilience and adaptation (see Figure 4). Program cards are implemented in-game, following a vote amongst the players, to address climate shocks identified by players and bring benefits that can help address shocks. In-game discussions and post-game debriefings are used to solidify ideas and translate them into policy recommendations.

Figure 4: Program ideas generated by the workshops

The Policy Roundtables

Five policy roundtables were held to discuss and develop the key ideas raised in the community workshops. The roundtable design was inspired by 17 Rooms, an initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation, designed by Sydney Policy lab Advisory Group Member Fred Dust at the beginning of COVID-19. The five chosen themes were broad enough to allow the particular needs of each locality to be included.

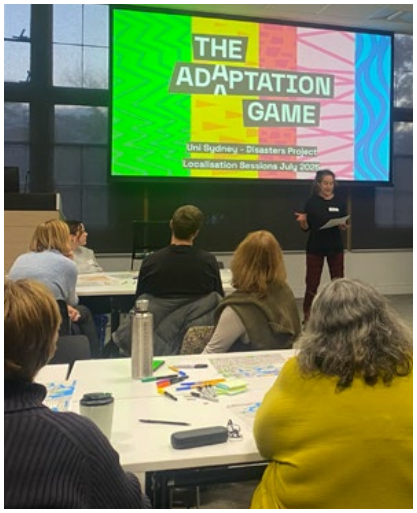
Invitees were provided with policy briefs derived from the community workshop most relevant to their subject area to assist their deliberations.

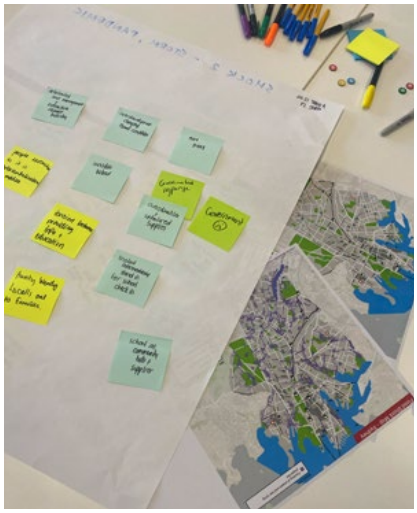
The format of each policy roundtable was as follows:

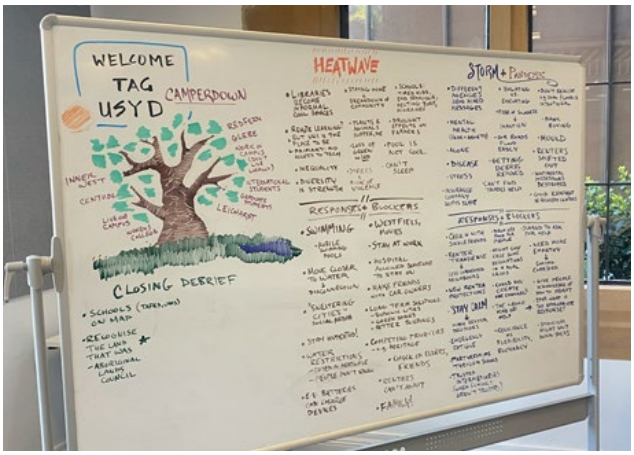
- attendees were invited to choose an idea from the policy brief and to 'complicate' or 'confirm' the idea with a piece of evidence
- all evidence was considered equal – whether personal, anecdotal, empirical, or from a peer reviewed journal
- as each topic petered out, another attendee introduced a different idea, repeating the process several times before moving to the final part of the roundtables.

This 'complicate' or 'confirm' method – known formally as 'Hunch Hour' – was also developed by Fred Dust as a way of including seldom heard voices in important deliberations.

And we concluded each roundtable by asking attendees: 'What would be needed to really land idea?'







Players engaged in storytelling and knowledge exchange to *build* connections and generated adaptation measures capable of navigating the shock impacts together, potentially leading to real world *actions*.

Findings and recommendations

Principles for future action

The workshops supported an expanded role for the university in disaster resilience and adaptation at the local, state, and national level. While several areas of university capacity and expertise were identified for action, participants drew our attention to not just what the university might do, but *how* it might do it. It was agreed that all university and community joint action should be undertaken through truly collaborative, long-term governance and planning processes that respect several basic principles:

Familiarity	The university's campuses must become "familiar faces" to their proximate communities – good neighbours who make the community feel welcome, open to requests for support. The university's disaster-related policies should be familiar to everyone and well understood and practiced, where possible, ahead of crises.
Humility	The university needs to practice respect and humility towards its partner communities and be willing to learn from and with them. This includes acknowledging its poor past record in this regard and pledging itself to move beyond the extractive, self-serving agendas that communities sometimes associate with higher education institutions. Good relationships can only be built where power disparities are acknowledged and challenged.
Partnership	Communities want the university to support and resource already existing local initiatives, becoming part of these existing processes rather than "reinventing the wheel." Existing community-led initiatives and networks should be supported and amplified.
Flexibility	Static plans should be avoided in favour of adaptive ones that evolve in response to past learnings and changing risks. Ongoing dialogue, collaboration, learning through crisis, feedback loops, and regular evaluation provide the best basis for success.
Responsibility	As a public institution, the university must fulfil its responsibilities to local communities, staff, and students affected by disasters. This responsibility includes but extends beyond risk and liability management and insurance.
Trust	The university should become a trusted partner in its local communities, forging genuinely mutually beneficial relationships, not just to advance its academic research interests or pursue public relations objectives.

Stand-out ideas and policy recommendations

The deliberative processes outlined in this report produced many standout ideas and policy recommendations. These are listed below, beginning with some practical tasks for the university itself.

A full list of the community suggestions emerging from our workshops is available in Appendix 1. While the primary focus here is the University of Sydney and surrounding communities, the ideas and policies listed contain significant implications for public policy more generally and these are discussed at the end of this final section.

1. Suggestions for direct university action

Encourage the university, in the first instance, to take up specific suggestions arising from our community workshops. These include:

- the university entering into partnership with local community resilience alliances where they exist, and working with local community and other partners to establish such alliances where they do not already exist
- the university adopting a more responsible climate footprint
- the use of university buildings as cool refuges and food relief hubs for the broader community during crises.

An important next step is to incorporate climate resilience and community needs into the next iteration of the university's *Campus Master Plan* – a process led by University Infrastructure. This work should also be used to inform the broad *Climate and Nature Transition Plan 2026–2032* for the university, currently being developed by the Office of Sustainability.

Image by Timothy English.

2. Proactively build closer relationships and trust with proximate communities and partners well ahead of disasters

> *"I really like the community resilience alliance. I think that looks like something that would be ongoing. So it's ongoing dialogue with the community. From that, you could have different initiatives. So it's not just a one-off thing. And that facilitative role, I think, would be a great use of the uni's resources."*
>
> – Research Participant

Relationships with partners should be established well ahead of disasters. This is easier said than done and requires a significant cultural change that decentres the university to focus on the needs of the wider community. It might begin through efforts to welcome community members onto the university's campuses and sites in a variety of ways tailored to each site and community.

Partnership building must shift from short-term cooperation in the immediate aftermath of disasters and from short-term project-based funding arrangements generally towards long-term investment in relationship building. The relationships and knowledge developed through community-engaged research must be supported beyond times of crisis. Without adequate funding, this effort is often shouldered by staff acting in a voluntary capacity. The relative transience caused by workforce casualisation makes long-term relationship building within and outside the university more difficult. It is hard to maintain a "familiar face" when those faces regularly change.

The way the university "shows up" is also important. Vulnerable and disaster-affected populations must be approached with understanding and respect. Trauma-informed training and support for staff and students is crucial for the success of disaster research and disaster relief.

> *"I think the biggest challenge is sort of emotional, coping with the situation emotionally."*
>
> – Research Participant

Importantly, the university must recognise the dual role that staff and students play as university members and local citizens, including the ways they might be adversely affected by disasters occurring in the local area.

Every interaction between the university and community members is an opportunity for building the trust needed to succeed in times of crisis. Good relationships are established and strengthened through repeated positive interactions. Local leaders should also be invited to co-design subsequent communication with their communities. Priority might be given to communities made most vulnerable to disasters and those with the closest and ongoing relationships with the university. At all times, these relationships must be genuine and be seen to be genuine – as any hint of university engagement as "just another PR exercise" or "a funding ploy" will reduce the likelihood of success

3. Connect with and strengthen existing local resilience and adaptation planning, rather than "reinventing the wheel"

It was strongly stated that the university should connect with and strengthen local resilience and adaptation planning, rather than simply create its own internal initiatives and processes or assume that local planning does not already exist. Where possible, the university should play a bridging and enhancing role in disaster preparedness, supplying its expertise and resources to bring relevant resilience actors together with a minimum of complexity.

> *"There are solutions out there, it's about the organisations actually finding pathways to communicate them."*
>
> – Research Participant

It was pointed out that with some 72,000 students and 8000 staff across multiple campuses with a significant collective footprint, the university is comparable in size to a small regional municipality and, like a municipality, it has a sense of its own sovereignty. While this can at times be positive – promoting action – it can sometimes duplicate initiatives already undertaken by others, wasting resources and alienating potential supporters.

The university should, by contrast, aim to be "in sync" with local communities and their actions – something that can be created through genuine partnership with local actors founded on respect and willingness to learn.

4. Go beyond 'static' planning to adopt a more dynamic, responsive, and "anti-fragile" approach

Given the increasing frequency and severity of climate-induced disasters, participants believe the university must go beyond 'static' planning and adopt a more dynamic, responsive and "anti-fragile" approach. Ongoing cross-sectoral dialogue between communities, institutions, government and the university, starting well ahead of disasters and reflecting afterwards, is also essential. Regular ongoing conversations should be organised between the university and local actors at each of its major sites to replace existing static planning arrangements.

> *"...it's not about a pandemic plan, we threw them out the window within two days. It's about the connectedness between everyone so that we can mobilise what we need when we need it, when we work out what's going on."*
>
> – Research Participant

5. Gain greater understanding of how staff and students are embedded within their own communities and determine how to harness this precious resource

Policy roundtable members expressed their delight at opportunities where they could lend their expertise to their local communities – in their dual capacity as university members and local citizens. They are both employees and embedded members of their communities. The university should explore practical ways of harnessing this potential. This was regarded as a priority by many workshop and roundtable participants. Mobilising broad staff efforts in this way was regarded as superior to establishing a small number of dedicated community engagement officers who might easily be overwhelmed in times of disaster. There were strong calls for greater flexibility and understanding of the adverse ways staff and students are affected by disasters, and calls for greater flexibility in workplace planning.

The university should therefore consider how it might best support and facilitate its staff and students as active members of their own communities, especially in ways relevant to climate-induced disasters.

One important idea was to embed resilience training and community service into the curriculum or through voluntary engagements for students – including through ongoing, robust support for existing student-led initiatives (such as the University of Sydney Community Garden). Some local councils expressed a desire for universities to develop micro credentials on resilience-building.

6. Develop and clarify well-established, fit-for-purpose frameworks for risk, liability, and insurance management

It was considered important to have systems, structures and processes in place "in peace time" – before disasters strike. Already established chains of communication and responsibility enable stronger risk management and promote greater staff, student and community safety.

> *"In terms of our relationship with communities and partner institutions, the things that we can do for them in a time of crisis will be largely the things we are doing for them in peacetime, but with tweaks to reflect the crisis. Anything we want to have capacity to do for others in a time of crisis is something we should be "drilling" by doing it as day-to-day business in peacetime."*
>
> – Research Participant

7. Make policies and procedures "widely and well known" to all actors and the public in advance of potentially dangerous events

The university's disaster preparedness and response policies, procedures, and support programs must be "widely and well-known" internally and externally if they are to work effectively. Such policies and procedures need to be designed and developed in ways that are collaborative, transparent, meaningful, and useful to both internal actors and to relevant sections of the public. Ideally staff, students, and community members should be actively involved in the development of community-facing disaster plans, to ensure they are tailored to local realities and are socialised ahead of a disaster. Importantly, each disaster event presents a valuable opportunity to reflect and refine the existing arrangements.

> *"What are the emergency response options? Where can you go? Who can you speak to?"*
>
> – Research Participant

Having well-established and well-known pathways for support for university and community members would offer significant public benefit and enable stronger and more effective risk management.

Conclusion and next steps

The conversations we have held and the ideas that have been generated represent the first step of the process required for the university to support and enable local communities in the face of ongoing climate disasters.

By building stronger relationships between the university and proximate communities, we can improve our preparedness, adaptation, and response to health and climate-related disasters. To start this, we have begun to examine the needs of the community, the capabilities of the university, and how they can best work together on and off campus.

It has been a privilege to learn from colleagues and neighbours about their exposure to climate and health risks, their first-hand experiences of disaster, and their expectations of the university. And it was heartening to hear that our neighbours want to work more closely with the university, its academics, and its professional staff.

Image by Andy Wang via Unsplash.

We heard that in addition to well-formulated policies and plans and community-based research, communities want to see long-term investment in deeper collaboration and relationship building – to make the university a "familiar face" in disaster and resilience research and planning.

University members spoke of their enthusiasm for engaging with the community but also of their need to be better supported in this task – beyond the immediate aftermath of disasters and after the conclusion of their research projects and partnerships.

There is a clear desire for the university to expand its role and responsibilities. This report begins that process. It has linked communities, built relations, and created clarity about what the university and communities can both bring to the task. Importantly, it has begun making crucial connections between the community and university offices responsible for operations, disasters, resilience, and adaptation.

In addition to the policy recommendations, the TAG kits are a tangible output that provides a tool for participants to use in their disaster-related activities. The final versions are available through local public libraries, local councils, the university library, and university teams to promote and inform planning processes. Many participants have already sought to replicate the process with games designed more specifically for their communities and local government areas.

Crucially, our University Operations and Sustainability teams have identified areas and processes where local relationship building, disaster response and resilience planning can sit. The Sydney Environment Institute and Sydney Policy lab will continue to assist, monitor, and participate in this work as it progresses.

Increasing climate disasters are inevitable, which means that making the university a centre of disaster resilience, preparedness and response is an idea whose time has come. With guidance from the university's internal and external communities, the path to cooperation has been mapped and laid.

We have begun to *examine* the needs of the community, the capabilities of the university, and how they can best work *together* on and off campus.

Image by Nick Jones via Unsplash.

Appendix 1

Table of community suggestions

The following is a summary of ideas that emerged from our workshop discussions with university staff and students, community members, and local government representatives. Each idea represents a pathway to improved resilience and adaptation for the university and its host communities. They are categorised in four core intervention areas.

The university as a community of communities

Building trust through robust partnerships and ongoing collaborations between university staff and students, local governments, and surrounding communities.

"I really like the community resilience alliance. I think that looks like something that would be ongoing. So it's ongoing dialogue with the community. From that, you could have different initiatives. So it's not just a one-off thing. And that facilitative role, I think, would be a great use of the uni's resources."

– Research Participant

Standout ideas

Platforms for cross-sector dialogue and collaborative policy development

Representatives from the community, local government and state government agencies expressed a strong desire for more collaborative, co-designed disaster planning. As intermediaries, universities were identified as well positioned to drive collaborative policy making by facilitating forums for dialogue, collaboration and policy-testing across different sectors of society. The workshops themselves were highlighted as a successful example of this. Critically, collaborative planning should happen in advance of disasters, so that trust, relationships and solutions have time to develop.

Supporting grass-roots initiatives and building community connections:

Participants told us about rising social isolation, a lack of neighbourliness, and the breakdown of community connections after the pandemic. Universities have a role to play in ensuring they continue to provide opportunities for diverse people to meet and forge connections, whether through enhancing Student Life programs, resourcing student-led social initiatives, developing and supporting "third spaces" on campus (community gardens, kitchens, libraries, markers spaces), or building robust and enduring partnerships with the community through teaching, research and external engagement activities.

Establish and support cross-sector resilience alliances, "sandpits", or innovation labs to bring together communities and relevant agencies to test dynamic, collaborative policy responses ahead of projected climate events.

Support for already existing community initiatives and campaigns within surrounding communities, such as:

- Participating in and promoting rallies/campaigns/other events organised by local schools, other local public institutions, and community organisations
- Donations (i.e., funding, supplies) to existing initiatives
- Inviting local community organisations to represent themselves and their projects/initiatives at on-campus events (e.g., O-Week, Community Festival, Readiness Festival)
- Promotion of local community organisations and groups, initiatives, and campaigns through the university's internal communications to staff and students as well as through social media accounts (e.g., USYD, SUPRA, USU).

Foster ongoing partnerships with relevant communities, organisations, public institutions and agencies faith groups, public schools and libraries, NGOs, Multicultural NSW), so those relationships are ready to be mobilised quickly in an emergency.

Develop student volunteering opportunities with local community organisations within courses/degrees or through facilitating partnerships between these organisations and student-led societies (e.g., helping with coordinated clean-up or preparation work around homes; food deliveries).

- Community-university relationship building requires a shift away from short-term, project-based thinking toward long-term, robust partnerships.

Use of university space for on-campus third spaces that encourage interaction between surrounding communities, students, and staff (e.g., community kitchens, libraries, gardens, makers spaces).

Ensure university operations and strategies are in sync with existing and emerging strategies/actions from respective local governments and state government agencies.

Embed trauma-informed, community co-design and co-governance principles within research conducted with disaster-affected communities, including:

- Co-designing guidelines for conducting research in disaster-impacted communities as key reference material for institutional ethics approval processes
- Integrating these principles and methods as key components within research training and study.

The university as a steward of resources

Harnessing the university's facilities, infrastructure and resources to support locally-led adaptation.

"You don't need to reinvent the wheel. The university has a lot of spaces and I think that's something that's as easy as opening the doors, which is something that I think they're really hesitant to do, but it does make a real impact."

– Research Participant

Standout ideas

Mobile Cooling Hubs

Leverage internal expertise of the Heat and Health Research Centre to host pop-up cooling hubs on campus. Already successfully piloted with City of Sydney, these pop-up cooling hubs offer the public temporary respite from extreme heat, with well-ventilated, shaded places to sit, misting stations, cold drinking water, and information about heat stress. Importantly, when opening up places of shelter to the public, the University needs to consider how people can safely get to those spaces, ensure sufficient facilities and amenities are in place, and resource front-facing staff so they can respond to community members with complex needs.

Increase awareness and accessibility of the university and nearby sites as places of refuge during extreme weather events:

- Use of university facilities, infrastructure and resources (e.g., parking lots, paddock space) by surrounding communities for evacuation, refuge shelter and temporary care (including companion animals and farmed animals)
- Establish Cooling Hubs (e.g. Heat Smart initiatives) with shaded walkways, resting stations, water access, and seating.
- Extend opening hours in cool third spaces (such as libraries) during extreme weather and equip staff with training to support visitors with complex needs.
- Recognise that "public" spaces may not feel welcoming to all and we should design inclusively. Consider practical needs: parking, transport access, crowd management, waste services, secure storage, and safety.
- Use of university facilities and resources (e.g., bed space) for patient care by local health district personnel.

Adapting built infrastructure to increasing climate risks:

- Update building regulations to support heat-resilient design: ceiling fans, ventilation, and 5-star rated public facilities. Ensure university buildings and lands are enhancing - not compromising - urban cooling and biodiversity efforts.
- Strengthen energy resilience with backup systems for blackout days.

Enhance climate resilience of the university's natural assets and outdoor domains, using nature-based solutions:

- Increase shaded pedestrian pathways and canopy coverage, more water bubblers, and drive awareness of cooler routes across campus.
- Integrate nature-based adaptations into campus landscape, such as wetlands for flood management and tree canopy coverage for urban cooling.
- Enhance biodiversity on campus: more trees, water trays for native bees and animals, plant native, heat tolerant plants.
- Prioritise timely restoration of parks, green spaces, sports fields and other public amenities after a storm. Public infrastructure, like parks, act as critical places of mental respite and social gathering during and after disasters.
- Enhance food security by planting more fruit trees for public use and supporting existing on-campus community garden initiatives.
- Cooperation between the university and proximate communities (e.g., neighbouring farmers) in hazard reduction measures.

Use of university kitchens by external partners (e.g., NGOs/charities/local community organisations) for preparing, storing, and distributing food to those in need within surrounding communities and students.

Use of university facilities and infrastructure by external partners (e.g., NGOs/charities/local community organisations) for preparing, storing and distributing necessities to those in need within surrounding communities.

Use of university resources and supplies (i.e. food, toilet paper) as donations to supplement deliveries to those in need within surrounding communities during extended lockdown periods.

Use of university spaces/resources to be guided by community need, as well as the experiences and learnings of other public institutions in an ongoing feedback loop, including how to best share the burden in future scenarios.

Empowering students, staff and the broader community with tailored information, advice and training.

The university as a knowledge broker

Empowering students, staff and the broader community with tailored information, advice and training.

"I thought it was so interesting because there was all this stuff happening in the university space that just wasn't actually reaching communities. Like, best practice, what you're researching, what is working, and what has been demonstrated to work, doesn't often reach communities"

– Research Participant

Standout ideas

Community-facing disaster plan

Communities want to be empowered with preparedness information that is accessible, actionable, and sensitive to differential vulnerabilities within the community. Universities have been identified as intermediaries that could help translate complex emergency management and disaster planning into community-facing disaster readiness plans and messaging. To ensure effectiveness, messages should be designed and delivered in close partnership with impacted communities, trusted community leaders relevant government agencies.

Student-focused preparedness campaigns

Ensure disaster messaging is "student-focused" by partnering with student groups (USU, SUPRA, SRC), student influencers and ambassadors, and other trusted intermediaries to deliver disaster preparedness awareness campaigns, as well as rapid response communications. Importantly, universities must consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of students, particularly international, interstate and rural students. Integrate existing resources and internal expertise, for example expertise from the Heat and Health Research Centre, Heat Watch app, RedCross 'Get Prepared' app.

Develop resilience education and training

Acknowledging that climate resilience and adaptation will be a core capability required for all professions, there were suggestions to embed resilience training into curriculum across diverse fields and/or through community-engaged service learning or internships for students, as well as better supporting existing student-led adaptation and resilience initiatives on campus (such as the USyd Community Garden). Local government representatives also expressed a desire for resilience and adaptation micro-credentials and courses for professionals.

Drive research, education and awareness of differential vulnerabilities and place-based risks in and around university campus sites.

Greater emphasis on research translation, so that best practice on disaster preparedness, adaptation and resilience is integrated into both university operations and into practice in the community.

Develop and deliver resilience and adaptation courses and training for students, including micro-courses tailored to the needs of professionals across diverse sectors.

Work with relevant agencies to streamline and coordinate public health messaging.

Increase awareness and accessibility of the University of Sydney and nearby sites as places of refuge during extreme weather events.

Ensure messaging is designed with, and delivered by, trusted community leaders and ambassadors – especially within CALD communities, who may be disconnected from mainstream "public" agencies.

Collaborate with existing student and community channels (e.g. SUPRA, USU, SRC) to share public health messaging and resources, and roll out student-focused preparedness campaigns.

Develop a community-facing disaster plan tailored to specific scenarios with ongoing consultation, reflection and debriefing involving key stakeholders.

The university as a set of operational processes and cultures

Embedding ongoing, person-centered adaptive planning into university processes and cultures.

"I think if there's anything that can help, it's all of these situations where all of the people involved get to know each other and understand each other's functions."

– Research Participant

Standout ideas

Preserving social connections during disasters

Universities can also play an important role in preserving social connections during disasters, by continuing to deliver essential services, facilitating structured opportunities for social connection and providing pastoral care to students and staff. Representatives from the residential Colleges spoke of the critical importance of facilitating structured opportunities for social connection during the pandemic, whether door knocking, structured check-ins or informal social gatherings. Similarly, universities could act as "community hubs" during disasters, connecting the community to essential services, information and resources when critical infrastructure and services are disrupted

Enhance dynamism of the institution by increasing connectivity across university units, and with internal communities and the broader public:

- Create opportunities for cross-functional collaboration during "peace time", to develop organisational trust and familiarity.
- Streamline 'who to contact' registers, so staff, internal communities and the broader public can easily connect with relevant teams for practical support in a crisis.

P-CEP (or 'person-centered emergency planning') and inclusive principles to best address differential vulnerability for staff and students.

New funding models that allow for long-term investment in recovery and preparedness, with a willingness to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to evolving constraints and needs on the ground.

Moving beyond mandates and rigid emergency planning measures, towards "dynamic capability".

Considering the unique needs and vulnerabilities of international students, rural and regional students.

Develop more "student-focused" emergency and adaptive planning:

- Considering the unique needs and vulnerabilities of different student groups, particularly international students, interstate students, and regional students.
- Identify ways to mitigate known inequities related to remote learning and study for students (i.e. technological access and quality of access; partial lockdowns across different LGAs).
- Nurture partnerships and streamline operations across core service units – COS, faculty, library, infrastructure, professional services - to improve service delivery in emergency contexts.
- Don't reinvent the wheel; programs and supports exist within and beyond the university, use existing student communication channels to increase awareness of these services and supports.

Explore opportunities for the university to learn from how rural/regional sites have adjusted their internal processes and procedures following recent disaster events, and integrate this into wider disaster planning.

Align work, study, and recreational schedules with seasonal climate realities (for example, Welcome Week in the middle of February).

Promote flexible working hours and online engagement options to empower individuals to make safe, context-sensitive decisions.

Embed robust supports to help students, staff and local communities manage the psycho-social impacts of disasters, before, during, and after the event.

- Allow policy flexibility so individuals can respond to their specific, local needs.
- Protocols for student volunteers (i.e., medical students) including ongoing mental health wellbeing support.
- Ensure public-facing staff are resourced with mental health first aid training and support, and embed community leaders or social workers in public spaces, to safely respond to complex needs.
- dentify ways to sustain and foster social connections between internal community members during prolonged social distancing and shelter-in-place orders

An after-action review of the University's COVID-19 pandemic response to inform the development of an 'all hazards preparedness plan'.

Clarify operational procedures for student accommodation including specifically how social distancing and shelter-in-place orders apply to different building types.

Appendix 2

Policy landscape – developments

Public inquires (Federal & State)

2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

2020 NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

2022 Australia's Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

2022 NSW Independent Flood Inquiry

2023 NSW Planning and Managing Bushfire Equipment Audit 2023

2023 NSW Bushfire Recovery Grants Audit 2023

Policy developments (Federal & State)

2016 Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) established

2018 Resilient Sydney launches first city-wide resilience strategy

2019 National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework launched

2020 First National Action Plan to implement National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework launched

2021 National Recovery and Resilience Agency established

2022 National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) established, replacing National Recovery and Resilience Agency

2022 Second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework launched

2022 Federal Disaster Ready Fund established

2022 NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 legislated

2022 NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) launched

2023 First National Forum on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction, held at the University of Sydney

2023 First National Indigenous Resilience Summit, hosted by the Fire to Flourish program at Monash University

2024 First NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan launched

2024 First NSW State Disaster Adaptation Plan framework launched

2025 Resilient Sydney Strategy 2025-2030 launched

2025 NSW Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines launched

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