

# POLICY BRIEF:

## Integrating Climate Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing into Higher Education

This policy brief presents the rationale, structure, and practical value of the RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework. It shows how universities can move beyond awareness-raising towards sustainability education that supports students emotionally, empowers them to act, and prepares them to engage constructively with climate-related challenges. The brief calls on higher education institutions, educators, and policymakers to recognise climate resilience and emotional sustainability as essential components of future-oriented higher education.



### Executive Summary

Climate anxiety is an emerging concern among young adults in higher education, with growing evidence of its impact on student engagement, mental health, and learning outcomes. While sustainability has been integrated into many university curricula, the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of the climate crisis remain insufficiently addressed.

The RISE UP project responds to this gap by adapting the European GreenComp Framework for higher education. The RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework introduces twelve sustainability competences enriched with psychological, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions. It provides a structured approach for integrating climate resilience, emotional literacy, and wellbeing into higher education curricula and institutional practices.

This policy brief outlines how the RISE UP Adapted Framework can inform policy development, curriculum reform, and professional training to equip educators and students with the competences needed to navigate the emotional and cognitive challenges of the climate crisis.



### The Challenge

Across Europe, university students report increasing levels of eco-anxiety, grief, and powerlessness in response to global environmental change. Existing sustainability education primarily emphasises knowledge acquisition and behavioural change, but it rarely incorporates strategies to support emotional coping, self-regulation, or resilience.

Findings from the RISE UP field research indicate that higher education professionals acknowledge the urgency of climate education but often lack the tools to address its psychosocial dimensions. Students who are exposed to alarming climate data without guided reflection or emotional support experience disengagement rather than empowerment. This situation necessitates educational policy that integrates sustainability competences with emotional and psychological preparedness.

#### RISE UP Field Research: HE Professionals

Higher education professionals across six countries acknowledged the urgency of climate education but consistently identified the lack of tools to address its psychosocial dimensions. The RISE UP Framework and Toolbox directly respond to this institutional gap with a pedagogically informed, ready-to-use approach that has already been piloted in university settings.

#### Pilot Evidence: Students

Across 127 students in Poland and Spain, RISE UP workshops increased emotional literacy, critical thinking under climate stress, and hope-oriented engagement. 82% reported a stronger ability to remain calm and think critically when confronted with alarming climate information. Impact was observed consistently across diverse disciplines and backgrounds.



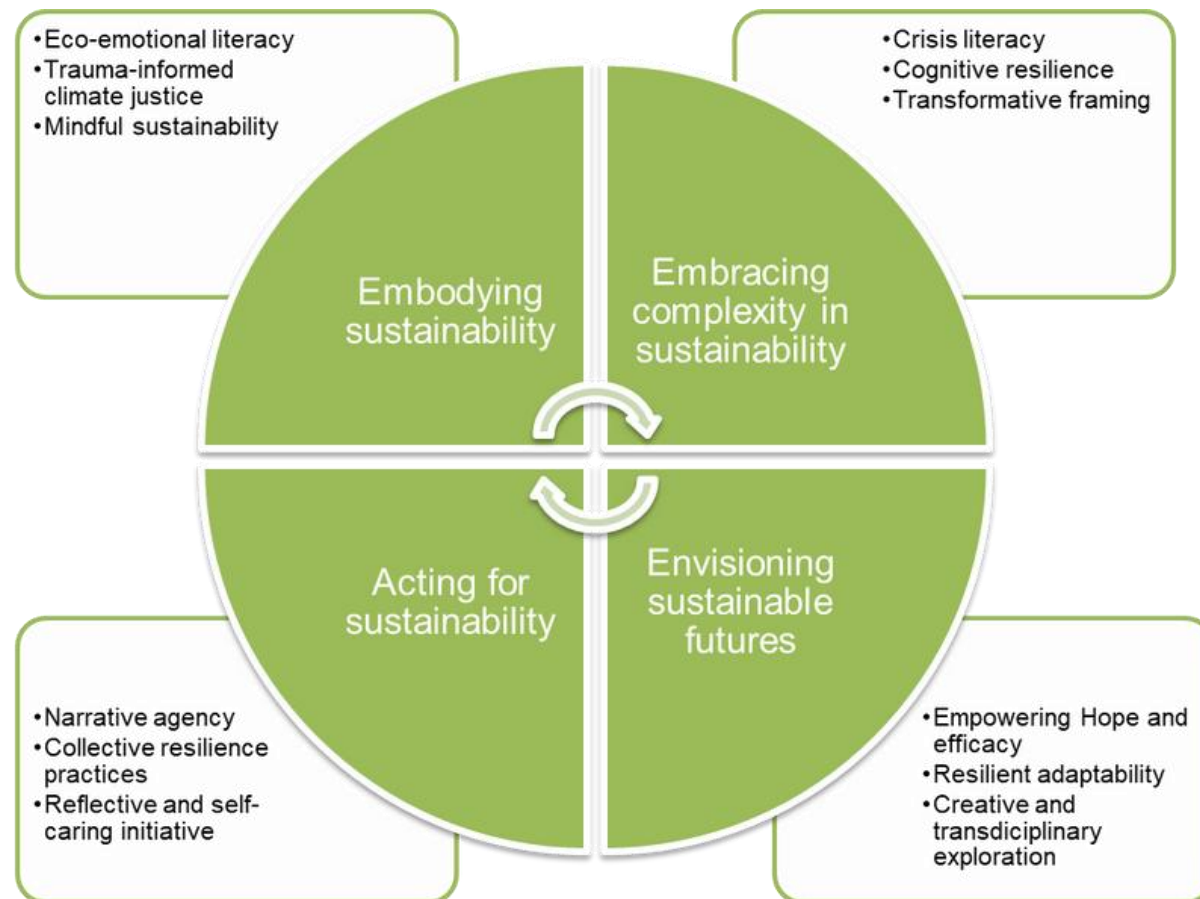


Figure 1. RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework



## The RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework

The RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework (Fig.1) translates the European GreenComp Framework into a practical tool for higher education institutions. While GreenComp offers a strong reference model for sustainability competences, RISE UP adapts it to the emotional, psychological, and relational dimensions of climate and sustainability education.

The framework can be used by universities to design courses, workshops, learning activities, staff training, and student support initiatives that connect sustainability knowledge with resilience, wellbeing, and action. It keeps GreenComp's four core competence areas — Embodying, Embracing, Envisioning, and Acting for Sustainability — and reframes its twelve competences through insights from eco-psychology, positive psychology, crisis management, and creative pedagogy.

The RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework provides higher education institutions with a structured approach to making sustainability education more emotionally sustainable, psychologically informed, and socially transformative.



## Integrating the Framework into Policy and Curricula

Embedding the RISE UP Adapted Framework within higher education policy and curricula aligns with existing European and global commitments.

Policy inclusion can occur through the following mechanisms:

- Inclusion of psychosocial sustainability competences within national curriculum frameworks and accreditation standards;
- Alignment of educator training and professional development with climate resilience and wellbeing objectives;
- Promotion of interdisciplinary and experiential learning that combines scientific, emotional, and creative dimensions of climate education;
- Integration of student wellbeing indicators into institutional sustainability performance frameworks.



## PILOT IMPLEMENTATION: Cases from partner institutions

### UNEC — University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland

The RISE UP workshops generated clear learning and wellbeing outcomes by strengthening students' capacity to understand and manage climate-related emotions. Post-workshop data showed that 61% of psychology and administration students improved their ability to identify and interpret these emotions, supporting more informed and resilient engagement with climate challenges. Beyond individual learning, the workshops demonstrated the value of integrating psychologically safe reflection spaces into sustainability education. A key impact was helping students shift from catastrophic thinking towards action-oriented concern, enabling them to approach climate issues with greater clarity, agency, and readiness to act.

### UNEAT — Universidad Europea del Atlántico, Santander, Spain

The RISE UP workshops achieved strong cross-disciplinary impact, demonstrating that climate education can be effectively embedded beyond traditional sustainability fields. Across health sciences, business, and engineering, 82% of students broadened their understanding of climate change beyond an environmental issue, also as a social and psychological challenge. The workshops strengthened students' sense of hope, agency, and motivation to engage in sustainable action. They also showed that creative and reflective learning methods can drive high levels of engagement, particularly in disciplines where sustainability is not yet a central part of the curriculum.



## Policy Recommendations

1. Adopt the RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework as a guiding model for integrating psychosocial and emotional competences within HE sustainability policies.
2. Develop national and institutional guidelines for addressing climate anxiety and resilience within teacher education and professional training.
3. Provide targeted funding to HEIs to pilot resilience-based sustainability curricula and educator training modules.
4. Embrace cross-sector collaboration among ministries of education, health, and environment to link mental wellbeing and sustainability objectives.
5. Embed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that assess both learning outcomes and emotional wellbeing in climate education.



## Implementation Pathways

Implementation can begin by embedding climate resilience into existing courses, student support services, and educator training. EU programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe can support pilot actions, including resilience hubs or transformative learning labs, where educators develop skills in addressing climate anxiety, facilitating reflective learning, and guiding students towards constructive action.



## Access the Full RISE UP Resource Package

The RISE UP Adapted GreenComp Framework, Educators' Toolbox, and Policy Brief form a coherent three-part resource package for curriculum development, faculty training, and institutional policy dialogue. The package has been co-created with educators and tested across five European countries. To access materials and their translations, visit the project website: <https://riseup-edu.org/>

