

**University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia 20 May 2026**

**Professor John Thwaites - Monash Business School and Chair SDSN Australia, New Zealand, Pacific and SDSN Assoc Inc.**

***Net Zero on Campus: Universities as Living Laboratories for Climate Action***

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today at the University of National and World Economy and congratulations on your 106<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It is a pleasure to be here in Sofia — and especially at a university that is already demonstrating real leadership on climate action.

I was impressed to learn about the work being undertaken here at UNWE: the solar installations generating more than half of the campus's electricity needs, the nearly zero-energy academic building, the student-led greening programs, and the integration of climate and sustainability into teaching and research.

That is exactly the kind of university leadership the world now needs.

**Museum**

Yesterday I visited the National Historical Museum here in Sofia which displays the extraordinarily rich history of Bulgaria. In the context of my talk today on Net Zero Universities, I was struck by one particular exhibit.

It described one of Europe's earliest advanced agricultural civilisations — here in what is now Bulgaria, more than 6,000 years ago.

The exhibit explained how this civilisation developed sophisticated agriculture, metallurgy, trade and organised settlements. It reached what the exhibit described as “its highest level of development”.

And then came disaster.

The exhibit described what happened:

“However, significant demographic changes due to the aridification of the climate occurred towards the end of the fifth millennium BC.”

“Reaching its highest level of development, the first European civilization slowly became extinct. Its bearers left their settlements and moved across the region with their herds.”

That is confronting.

Here was a reminder that even advanced and successful civilisations can prove vulnerable when the climate systems on which they depend begin to shift.

Climate has always shaped human history.

But today there are two profound differences.

First, the climate is changing faster than at any other time in human history.

And second, for the first time in human history, we understand what is happening. We understand the science. We know that human activity is driving dangerous climate change. And we already possess many of the technologies and policy tools needed to respond.

The question is no longer whether solutions exist.

The question is whether our institutions can respond quickly enough.

And that is why universities matter so much.

Universities are humanity's institutions for generating knowledge and transmitting knowledge between generations.

If climate change is one of the defining challenges of civilisation, then universities must be central to the response.

Not only through research and teaching — but through action.

Universities themselves must become living laboratories for the transition to net zero emissions.

### **Net Zero on Campus**

That is the thinking behind the Net Zero on Campus initiative developed through the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network — SDSN — together with Climateworks Centre and Monash University where I work.

The idea is simple but powerful.

A university campus is almost like a small city. It has buildings, transport systems, energy systems, procurement chains, laboratories, food systems, waste systems and thousands of people moving through it every day.

That means universities are not just places that talk about sustainability. They can demonstrate it in practice — turning campuses into living laboratories where students, researchers and operational staff work together on real decarbonisation challenges.

The Net Zero on Campus Guide was created as a practical resource for universities at different stages of the journey — from institutions beginning to measure emissions, to those already implementing sophisticated decarbonisation programs.

The Guide focuses on practical action — renewable energy and energy efficiency, buildings, transport, procurement, circular economy and community engagement.

One important point is that there is no single model.

Every university operates in a different context — different climates, energy systems, financial constraints and institutional cultures.

But despite those differences, universities around the world are grappling with many of the same questions.

That is why collaboration matters so much.

The SDSN initiative deliberately brought together universities from many regions of the world to inform the development of the Net Zero on Campus Guide — including

universities from Jamaica, South Africa, Spain, Pakistan, Hong Kong, India, Bolivia, the United States and Australia.

The purpose was not to create a single blueprint.

It was to create a global community of practice where universities learn from each other.

At Monash University in Australia, the campus has become a real-world testing ground for decarbonisation — including rooftop solar, electrified buildings, a wind farm and intelligent energy systems.

But the most important lesson is not the technology itself. It is the integration of research, teaching, operations and student engagement into a whole-of-institution approach.

And here at UNWE, you are already showing leadership through photovoltaic systems, low-energy buildings, climate-focused teaching programs and active student engagement.

This matters because universities do not just reduce emissions directly.

They shape future leaders.

A student who learns about carbon markets, circular economy systems or energy efficiency in the classroom — and then sees those ideas implemented physically on campus — gains a much deeper understanding of the transition.

The transition is not simply an environmental issue.

It is increasingly an economic and resilience issue as well.

This is particularly relevant for universities focused on economics, business and public policy — like UNWE.

And this brings me to my final point: the importance of international collaboration.

We are living through a period of geopolitical fragmentation and conflict.

But climate change does not recognise borders.

And one of the most hopeful things about universities is that they remain institutions capable of long-term international cooperation.

Researchers still collaborate across borders.

Students still exchange ideas internationally.

Universities still share knowledge globally.

That is why networks like SDSN are so important.

SDSN mobilises universities and knowledge institutions around practical implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

In the Net Zero on Campus initiative, SDSN is helping universities move from commitments to implementation — and from isolated projects to shared learning.

This collaboration is now expanding in Europe through the new UNICO initiative supported through the European Union's Erasmus+ program.

I think this UNICO initiative is important because it moves beyond broad aspirations and focuses on implementation.

Universities in Romania, Italy, Spain and Ireland are working together on practical decarbonisation strategies for their campuses. They are hosting transnational workshops so universities can learn directly from each other's successes and challenges.

Importantly, they are also establishing localised "Living Labs".

These Living Labs bring together researchers, students and local authorities to test practical decarbonisation solutions in real urban settings. The universities are hosting meetings with municipalities to align campus decarbonisation with wider-city climate strategies and frameworks.

I think that is a particularly important model for universities like UNWE and Monash.

Universities should not operate as isolated islands of sustainability.

Their campuses should become demonstration sites and catalysts for wider urban and regional transformation.

Another aspect of the UNICO project that I particularly like is that students are helping translate the Net Zero on Campus Guide into Romanian and Italian to make the knowledge more accessible across Europe.

Perhaps one day we will also see a Bulgarian version developed here in Sofia.

UNWE is already well placed to contribute to that European collaboration.

Through SDSN Bulgaria, your climate and sustainability programs, your student engagement initiatives and your practical campus decarbonisation projects, this university is already demonstrating many of the characteristics of a living laboratory for sustainability.

The future of climate action will depend not only on new technologies, but on whether institutions can learn from each other quickly enough and scale what works.

So let me conclude with this thought.

Six thousand years ago, climate change contributed to the decline of one of Europe's earliest civilisations.

Today we face another great climate challenge.

But unlike those earlier societies, we understand the science and possess the technologies and global networks needed to respond.

The question is whether we use them wisely and quickly enough.

Universities have a special responsibility in answering that question.

Not only to teach about the future.

But to help build it.

Thank you.