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International Association of Universities (IAU), founded in 1950, is the leading global association of higher education institutions and university associations. It convenes and connects 600 Members from around 130 countries to identify, reflect and act on common priorities.

IAU partners with UNESCO and other international, regional and national bodies active in higher education **and serves as the Global Voice of Higher Education.**

**TRANSFORMING
OUR WORLD:
SHAPING THE PATH
FORWARD**

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL



**Dear Members of the IAU,
Dear Readers,**

This year, the International Association of Universities (IAU) proudly celebrates 75 years of fostering cooperation in higher education. Founded under the auspices of UNESCO in 1950, the IAU has been committed to building bridges between higher education institutions across the globe. Our mission is to transcend borders, overcome siloed approaches

to teaching, research, and community engagement, and to bring UNESCO's vision of "building peace in the minds of people" to life at the level of higher education.

Over the decades, we have guided our work through a series of strategic frameworks. In 2022, the IAU Board adopted an eight-year strategic plan that places globally engaged leadership, fair and inclusive internationalization, the role of higher education and research in sustainable development, and digital transformation at the heart of our activities. In the pages that follow, you will learn more about these key thematic areas and their continued relevance today.

Our work would not be possible without the dedication of the IAU Administrative Board, working groups, expert teams, Secretariat staff, and most importantly our institutional and organizational Members worldwide. Together, we reaffirm the essential role of quality higher education in shaping inclusive, sustainable societies, within the global academy, at the national level and at the United Nations. We develop initiatives to enhance the capacity of higher education leaders, academic and administrative staff, and students—empowering them with the knowledge and skills needed to address the complex geopolitical and sustainable development challenges of our time.

Following our previous In Focus section in *IAU Horizons*, which explored how universities both shape and are shaped by values, this issue turns its attention to higher education's role in advancing sustainable development—and how this can illuminate the path forward for our societies. We are grateful to all contributing authors for their insightful and thought-provoking perspectives.

Today however, we find ourselves in an increasingly volatile world—marked by violent conflict and wars, global instability, climate and sustainability crises, and the transformative impact of digital technologies. In this environment, the very foundations of higher education are being questioned by students, parents, policymakers, and the broader public. That is why this year we convene our International Conference with the theme "Building Trust in Higher Education". How can we uphold the intrinsic values of higher education in an era where science is questioned, truth is challenged, and trust is fragile? The conference will be hosted by the University of Rwanda in Kigali, from 21-23 October.

With millions of students embarking on higher education journeys each year, we must confront the challenge of rebuilding trust and strengthening the foundation for meaningful, high-quality global partnerships. The IAU's original vision—to build peace in the minds of people through education—is more vital than ever. We call upon university leaders, academia and student organisations to join the conference and take part in these important conversations.

We invite you to join us in our mission. Together, let us amplify the global voice of higher education and shape a future grounded in knowledge, inclusion, sustainability, and peace.

Hilligje van't Land, PhD
IAU Secretary General

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Highlights from the IAU 2024 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

by Meg Harris, Trine Jensen and Andreas Corcoran

The IAU 2024 International Conference was hosted by Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan and it convened more than 300 participants from some 80 countries to discuss the theme: *University Values in a Changing World*.

The conference was framed around key questions around values, including if they are in fact shared universally around the world, or if academic values, such as university autonomy, academic freedom and research integrity, are at risk of being subverted by political pressures, or to what extent values play a role in upholding integrity and trustworthiness in society.

This article presents the main outcomes of the three plenary sessions of the conference enriched by complementary sets of conversations and presentations made during the breakout sessions.

Plenary I: Universality, Diversity and Interdependence

In opening Plenary I, session chair **Nana Amfo**, *Rector of the University of Ghana*, elaborated that universality, diversity, and interdependence are not merely academic concepts, but the theoretical structures around which the lived experiences of students, faculty, staff and the community are framed. They are central tenets to the mission of the university, and she reminded the audience that understanding the interplay between these concepts is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable education spaces. Universality – shared principles and values that transcend cultural and geographic boundaries – manifests itself in the context of the university through the commitment to knowledge creation, pursuit of truth, and the promotion of critical thinking. However, while universities are bastions of universal values, they are also constantly challenged by diverse cultural contexts. In order for university values to be universal, Amfo claimed that they must embrace local diversity. Diversity, she argued, is “a vital source of enrichment that enhances the learning experience for all students.” It prepares students—and the community at large—to thrive in a globalized world with critical skills such as empathy, cultural competence, and adaptability. Building true diversity, however, requires intentional efforts to remove systemic barriers which impact historically marginalized nondominant groups. In order to break down these barriers, Amfo embraced interdependence which, she claimed, reinforces



the need for collaboration amongst individuals, communities, and nations. Through intentional collaborations, dynamic research partnerships, and transformative student exchanges, universities drive the spirit of interdependence and empower students and faculty to become engaged global citizens. With this claim, Amfo opened the floor for speakers to address the complexities of these themes.

Bringing an empirical perspective, **Simon Marginson** outlined major trends in global higher education and identified common values. True to the theme of the session, he noted diversity and universality as historically integral values at higher education institutions worldwide. He called upon the diversity of the higher education sector, developed independently but congruently: from institutions in imperial China and Ptolemaic Alexandria to Madrasas in Damascus and medieval European universities with secular autonomy. Across the world, these institutions independently developed shared values: learning, teaching, and certification; embracing knowledge and commitment to serving their communities. In many ways, Marginson noted, these critical features are still the defining features of higher education today.

While higher education has historically developed independently and diversely across the world, Marginson observed that over the past 40 years, much of modern university development has been shaped by neocolonial American norms and models. However, he argued that the reemergence of a multipolar global order is reshaping this landscape, with profound implications for the diversity of higher education and production of knowledge worldwide. In particular, scientific and research advancements in the global south—particularly in East and Southeast Asia, where total scientific paper production in English is soon expected to exceed all of Europe and North America—has already begun to trigger a defensive response





in parts of the West. Marginson emphasized that broad Western support for internationalization, previously grounded in a commitment to interconnectedness, has eroded and even evaporated in recent years. As governments around the world are asserting greater control over higher education and science, universities are increasingly viewed either as tools for advancing national competitiveness or as risks to state authority — a distinction that, in practice, leads to similar outcomes. As a result, interventions in academic freedom and student mobility are more common. In this shifting environment, Marginson calls for a return to the vision of higher education as a source and driver of the common good, rather than merely an individual investment for economic and social advantage. In the face of global challenges such as climate change, food and water insecurity, and the regulation of artificial intelligence, he insists that universities must embrace the interdependence of a global society—not only a positive force, but a practical necessity in addressing shared global challenges. In closing, Marginson reiterated his central point: universities around the world are built on shared values, and it is the responsibility—and imperative—of the higher education community to lead in advancing the right to free inquiry, academic exchange, cooperation, and open publication.

Quoting Brazilian President Lula da Silva, **Sandra Almeida**, *President, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil*, reminded the audience that despite grand talks of universality, diversity, and interdependence, “we are only scratching the surface of the profound challenges the world faces.” In

highlighting issues such as hunger, poverty, climate change, inequities in scientific production, gender and racial inequality, and the need for ethical governance of technologies like AI, Almeida emphasized that leaders—of both federal and state universities alike—bear the responsibility to foster a more just, equitable, and sustainable society. She underscored the strategic alignment between the global challenges cited by President Lula and the ethical imperatives facing universities today.

Reflecting on the core values associated with universities—including diversity and universality—Almeida pressed the audience to reflect critically on how the concepts of universality, diversity, and interdependence must be understood not as competing forces, but as mutually reinforcing. In particular, she stressed that while universalism in higher education was conceived to promote international cooperation and the realization of human rights without discrimination, it must also recognize cultural diversity and embrace equality as essential to achieving true justice. Equal treatment alone, she argued, is insufficient; universities must adopt a commitment to equity, ensuring that unequal conditions are addressed proportionately and fairly.

In this spirit, Almeida emphasized that while universities must safeguard their independence and academic autonomy, they are increasingly interdependent in a globalized world that demands collaborative knowledge production and community engagement. Interdependence, she noted, is not a loss of

autonomy, but a relationship based on reciprocal respect, solidarity, and shared responsibility. Calling on the notion of “hopeful realism,” Almeida encouraged university leaders to remain clear eyed about the profound challenges that lie ahead while staying committed to the values that can transform society for the common good.

Patrick Deane, *Principal and Vice Chancellor, Queen’s University, Canada*, opened his intervention by acknowledging the present moment as one in which universities around the world are struggling to maintain their privileged role in society, despite the prevailing belief that the values they uphold are universal and timeless. He questioned how, in an era of political discord, it is realistic to talk of a universal--or near universal--consensus on values such as universality, diversity, and interdependence, as well as how these values, historically rooted in a particular sociocultural context, could ever have been considered truly universal. Referencing the *Declaration of the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU)*, Deane acknowledges a “universalisation” of Western values in academia. In recognising this shortcoming, he notes that the vision for higher education that guided the post-war academic consensus and which was defined in the MCU Declaration is not divinely ordained. Rather, he noted that it arose “from a particular sociocultural milieu at a particular historical time and at the interface between a number of different cultures and countries.” As a result, it is implicit, he argues, that changes in the social milieu will necessarily cause changes in the role and conditions of the university in society.

In acknowledging this changing reality, Deane highlighted increased governmental encroachments in university autonomy. While university autonomy over the past 40 years has been respected nearly universally, he noted that the universities’ “right to exist in privileged isolation from society is [now]...a thing of the past.” In this way, he argues that the role of the university is undergoing a fundamental change: while the democratic and civic mission of universities has long been acknowledged, it has traditionally been framed within the idea of “universal and timeless” values. Now, however, Deane stressed, the importance of recognizing universities as deeply embedded in the political and social fabric of society, and he warns that it is naïve to imagine that a university’s commitment to its social mission leaves it unaffected by society’s own ambitions for the role of universities. Deane argues that defending the value of universities by appealing to supposedly timeless, transcendent, and universal principles is ultimately futile, as these ideas are inevitably shaped by society — and societal values may not always align with them. In closing, Deane argued that rather than defending universities on the basis of supposedly timeless values, higher education institutions must work together to develop philosophically diverse organizational frameworks and norms capable of supporting globally interdependent institutions in a changing world.

Plenary II: University Values and Digital Innovation

The Chair of session, **Fanta Aw**, *CEO of NAFA, USA*, stressed the importance of a global dialogue on the interplay between university values and digital innovation. She argued that rapid developments – most particularly Artificial Intelligence – require to question what the core values are, what the mission of the university is, and how these factors can contribute to the framing and shaping how technological advances are impacting higher education worldwide. She invited the speakers to reflect on these questions.

Jekuk Chang, *President, Dongseo University, South Korea*, opened with the question of how human values bear on technological progress is both fascinating and critical in today’s world. With Artificial Intelligence (AI), universities are once again faced with the onslaught of rapid transformation. While students are quick to embrace AI, there are ethical questions to be considered by the universities and outlined what he sees as the main challenges, followed by a set of potential solutions.

Instant access to information and knowledge is the main game changer. Information and knowledge is everywhere, at any given time, and accessed by tools in sizes that fit one’s pocket. Online learning platforms are competing with universities, thus raising a fundamental question about the very necessity for universities.

The Decline of the Humanities is another important challenge. AI can now perform some of the tasks that students were previously interested in, such as language acquisition, driving students to opt for practical and technical fields of study to the detriment of the humanities. With increasing reliance on AI, there is a risk of sidelining investigations into the core aspects of critical thinking and what it means to be human: are we headed for a world in which students read AI-generated summaries of Shakespeare or Hemmingway and what would such a sad scenario mean for our world?

Financial constraints in conjunction with demographic factors is another important challenge in South Korea where universities have seen capped tuition fees for 16 years. A rapidly declining population is placing additional strains on universities, intensifying competition while weakening competitiveness to cope with the rapidly changing environments impacted by the rise of AI.

In this challenging context, it is important to view the current crisis as an opportunity in disguise.

Upholding the value of humanity becomes essential and while machines may bring dramatic efficiency, they cannot replace the social qualities unique to human beings. If universities have traditionally focused on imparting knowledge, it is time to concentrate more on teaching social skills to help students navigate relationships with others. Universities must allocate

more resources to cultivating human compassion and character ensuring that the value of humanity is upheld.

Broadening accessibility to higher education is another opportunity to avoid being perceived as an exclusive offer to the elite. Universities can help students identify and develop their talents and what they do best whether it is as gamers or other professions that arise. To this end, Dongseo University has set up a dedicated office to support students in identifying and cultivating their true talents.

Universities are increasingly forced to *explore how to provide high quality education at a lower cost* as the current financial structure is becoming unsustainable and leaving students in debt upon graduation. In this context, technologies like AI can play a crucial role in reducing cost by streamlining administrative functions as well as course related costs.

Finally, digital tools enable an opportunity to *intensifying international collaboration* where Korean universities can expand their reach beyond national borders, ideally supported by nationally negotiated collaboration with different countries. Regional alliances of universities also allow to collaborate and share resources and courses. This type of collaboration can contribute to heightening the quality of curricula at an affordable price which would simply not be possible without technological advancements.

Chang concluded by stating that striking the right balance between embracing innovation while preserving our humanity will not only make universities survive, but thrive. If we manage to keep human values at the heart of education, we can aim for a brighter future.

Rajani Naidoo, *Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People and Culture, University of Exeter, UK*, reminded the audience that technology has enabled academia to live up to many of its values. It contributes to enhanced research and education, it widens participation for people with special needs and it is a means to offer higher education in conflict zones.

At the same time, she stressed several of the multi-faceted consequences resulting from the speed and constant pressure of having to adapt to technological innovation.

Universities with resources already offer courses to students on AI, to learn about its potential and to highlight dangers such as algorithmic bias and the opacity of machine learning. Students are already using technology in their learning process to tackle the big challenges facing society in support of a greener, fairer and healthier vision through education and research.

While the latter is positive, the question that remains is whether we are putting too much faith in technology. Do we sufficiently ask students to consider the limits of technology, and the boundaries between humans and machines? Are we gradually letting technology become an oracle in the very shaping of our future?

Shannon Vallor argued that if we rely predominantly on technology, it will result in our past being projected onto our future on a global scale, as our future will be based on the patterns that are already engraved in our recorded data. These patterns are based on the values of humans, defined by a small minority of powerful humans who have resources to shape our world – a world heading towards a social and climate catastrophe. Vallor calls it innovation, where the past eats the present. It is also an existential issue as relying on technology diminishes the space for human wisdom and for genuine choice.

A culture which seeks its authority in technology will make us believe that we are at our best when we act like machines according to Neil Postman. If we compare ourselves to the machines that we make, we will be too slow, too messy, too outmoded, and we will no longer have the belief and the confidence to shape our own future.

Maybe we need a course to understand what it is that we value. Words such as transformation, innovation, being entrepreneurial, etc. are often empty vessels to which we can attach different and often conflicting values. We need to discuss with students the purpose of innovation, the goal of transformation. How do we reconcile the drive to push forward what is technically possible, while limiting it to what is socially desirable? What do we mean by excellence in higher education? This question has come to the fore when students are protesting, about war, about climate change. They are amazing students, but instead of appreciating their excellence, they are too often seen as problems, as unruly, while they are fighting for the values that we ourselves purport to believe in. While it is incredibly challenging, we need to listen and collaborate with our students who care so much. The point is to learn from the past and steer technology in line with values.

A second area of concern is how to deploy technology for enhanced personalized learning. Students learn at their own pace, and they can make learning very enjoyable. However, if we do not get the balance right between the technology and peer learning and relationships, we risk students not being able to navigate real world relationships. If we combine this with the conception of the student as a consumer to satisfy, then these approaches can lead to a loss of personal responsibility, the need for instant gratification and shrinking knowledge horizons. What also raises concern is that using technological models as predictions, that place students very early on in hierarchical tracks of achievement, might negatively define their whole life journeys.

The final concern outlined by Naidoo is the collaboration between the universities and the tech giants. The pandemic paved the way for these corporations to enter universities as new territory for profit, accepting their narrative that regulation is an enemy of innovation while they themselves indulge in anti-competitive behaviour, making them extremely powerful. Moreover, technological innovation is an area in which

universities compete and rely on services from tech giants at the same time, who have already proved to be extremely bad actors when it comes to equity and sustainability. Instead, universities should be working collectively to get better deals for the sector as a whole, rather than entering individually into such deals with no leveraging power.

In conclusion, technological innovation offers both incredible potential to realize academic values, but it also comes with the risk of eroding them. The aim must be to work more proactively, collectively, politically, and to think about what it means to be a human and how to preserve human flourishing for future generations.

Tshilidzi Marwala, *Rector, United Nations University, Tokyo and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations*, began by stressing that we are living in very dangerous times because of the threat to peace and security, the issue of climate change, the rapid development of technology and its unpredictability in how it intertwines with values. As a United Nations representative, he stressed that the core human values are laid out in the UN Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights.

The first important issue when discussing the interface between education and technology, is the question of truth, as the outputs of AI often suggest something different. Engineers talk about accuracy, and while accuracy is a condition for truth, it does not mean that it is truth. This becomes a problem when digital technologies are based on accuracy, while the users are basing their expectations on truth.

This leads to another concern of safety and security. If we rely on technological gadgets that are generating 'stories' that are not necessarily true, how secure is the world we are actually trying to build with the information we derive from these technologies?

Transparency is another important issue, as the users do not necessarily understand how AI is building its outputs. AI is trained on the maximization of likelihood principle, this means that it basically gives you an answer that is calculated as being the most likely answer.

Marwala also pointed to the paradox that pursuing certain values leads to the compromising of other values. For example, when making algorithms transparent, they become less secure and more vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Thus, as universities, we need to assess and balance the relationship between transparency and security, and the same goes for the issue of transparency and accuracy. When you make these systems more accurate, they tend to become less transparent.

Eliminating algorithmic bias was also stressed as important, yet there are both avoidable and unavoidable algorithmic biases. He used his first language – Tshivenda – as an example, recognizing that this language will never be equally represented in large language models (LLM) when you compare it to English

simply because it is a minority language. Roughly 60% of all the material in the digital platforms is in English, which implies that these tools will always work better for English speakers than for other language users. Thus, we need to raise awareness of these biases and balance opportunities with the risks.

Finally, he recalled that these tools tend to use a common database and overdependence on these technologies is actually taking away our ability to differentiate ourselves, because we are using the same type of algorithms that – based on probability – are using common data, where certain languages and cultures will be more represented than others. That is why the human aspect and wisdom remain essential, so that we are able to make ourselves distinct from these devices.

To address these challenges, Marwala, stressed the importance of multidisciplinary, in brief: "science for the humanities and social sciences" and "humanities and social sciences for science and technology", because it is essential that engineers understand the societal impact on their developments and in the same manner, that students in humanities and social sciences understand technological developments and possibilities.

In conclusion, Marwala stressed that education is also about shaping human behaviour and inculcating values into our work. The task of educators is to go beyond the discipline and ensure that graduates have a mindset that will support and respect the values laid out in the UN Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights.

Plenary III: Fostering Equity, Human Dignity, and a Culture of Peace through Higher Education

In his introductory remarks **Andrew Deeks**, *IAU President and Vice-Chancellor, Murdoch University, Australia*, stressed that the universities stand at the forefront of shaping the minds and values of future leaders in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. University's mission extends beyond mere transformation of knowledge. It compasses the cultivation of a socially responsible and morally grounded citizen. This session aimed at exploring how higher education institutions can embody these principles and translate them into tangible actions at a time when geopolitical tensions are rising and societal divides are becoming more pronounced. It is in this context that our role as educators and academics takes on even greater significance. How can we equip both our students and our staff to become agents for change, capable of countering these trends and fostering a more equitable and peaceful world?

Borhene Chakroun, *Director, Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, UNESCO Education Sector*, addressed the IAU conference by underlining the important convening power of the IAU to be able to reach out to universities globally, thus functioning as an important partner complementing UNESCO's

work. This was especially important for the efforts in fostering a culture of peace, and recognizing the important role of higher education in this regard, and the conference was thus a befitting endeavour in these times of violent conflict and geopolitical antagonisms exacerbated by hate speech. The world requires inclusive, holistic and participatory governance and the role of higher education is essential in this, in its educational mission including the unrestricted circulation of knowledge and interconnection through academic and professional mobility.

David Quigley, *Provost and Dean of Faculties, Boston College, USA*, acknowledged a context of growing politicization of higher education and made reference to the recent elections in the United States which has shown an intensifying turn on higher education institutions and their values.

He recalled Patrick Deane's message about how universities are prisoners of their local, regional, civic context which is critical in all engagements, and attempts to reach across various societal divides.

In addition to the geographical dimension, he added the generational layer that also shapes higher education. Referring to his own trajectory in the 80s and 90s, he experienced a sense of inevitability, of (perhaps unwarranted) optimism about the course of history, forces that were driving a certain set of configurations, openings and collaborations. Yet, he recognized that a generational shift is currently taking place. The question is what the new regime is going to look like, and how this new ecosystem and environment is going to come together.

So much is driven by the history of universities. Boston College has been around for 150 years and is rooted in a 500 year old tradition of Jesuit education. In IAU, some institutions span a millennium while others a decade. History has a hold on us, but it is also a resource for possible recovery, renewal, giving new life to academic values. He emphasized that bringing imagination to bear in giving full life to the values of our individual institutions and of our sector requires a creative blending of the richness of that heritage and tradition and the possibilities of the moment of time. There are a number of ways in which the founding of our institutions were grounded in a particular worldview, a particular set of values. How much should be brought into the 21st century and what can be left behind? Some of the richest possibilities of advancing human values has come out of our engagement with heritage and tradition, giving new sense to our lives in the 21st century.

He also underlined the disciplinary perspective. In a recent initiative at Boston College for the launch of a engineering program, it was deliberately decided to emphasize human-centered engineering, trying to foreground the ethical dimensions across the curriculum, and to integrate different forms of knowledge and habits of mind shaped by explicit linkages to the liberal arts mission. This move towards interdisciplinarity, towards collaboration, towards bringing the university together, is rooted in a value that goes back to the

founders of Jesuit education, placing the human at the center to confront the consequences of our technological age of progress, the elevation of fundamental, humane and humanistic values is paramount.

However, the current century has been marked by a discourse among policy makers and funders of higher education reducing the work of universities to a narrow instrumentalism measured by discrete points in a national or global scramble for the rankings, rather than about how the work contributes to advancing the common good and the lofty goals framing this session.

Higher education leaders, researchers, practitioners must therefore make a stronger case for how higher education contributes to a richer understanding of human dignity in the modern era, how it offers the basis for advancing common efforts to support a culture of peace. To translate these commitments into purposeful action, it is important to recognize the inescapable diversity of our missions and the variousness of our local and national contexts. These differences matter for how we might grapple with making our universities more human-centred and values-driven.

One way of understanding the recent elections in the USA is as a deepening crisis of confidence in the value and values of universities. Critics on both the left and the right relish their critiques of higher education as out of touch, elitist, overly expensive, operating apart from, if not in opposition to some imagined common culture. These critiques have a long history, but the novelty is the wide range of figures and movements making them.

Beyond this public decline in support for higher education, is a deepening crisis of confidence within the sector itself, we have witnessed a diminishing ability to offer public arguments for the public good that our institutions provide. Trapped in the instrumental logic of the marketplace, we have grown unaccustomed to making values-based arguments for what we do and why it matters. Restoring public confidence in our institutions requires a rebuilding of our own internal belief and faith, whatever the grounds, whatever the sources, in the work of the university. Foregrounding our discussions of humane and humanistic values and offering a richer way of thinking about the good that our institutions do is essential to meeting the pressing needs of our societies and our students.

Aisha Khurram, *Afghan Youth Representative to the UN, and student at the Hertie School of Governance in Germany*, made a compelling plea for solidarity and action to universities by sharing her experience as a student in Afghanistan.

Kaboul University was attacked by a terrorist group in 2020, killing students in the classroom. Returning for an exam one week later, the walls were painted white to cover the blood of students – as if the cover of paint could erase what had happened. In silence, students passed their exams with



trembling hands, trying to keep concentrated while thinking of their late friends. Khurram stressed how that moment shaped her, realizing that terrorists truly fear education, and moreover, the educated women of Afghanistan. Their aim was to extinguish hope, dignity and future of citizens by suppressing the right to education. It demonstrated that education was the most powerful weapon against the forces of darkness and violence. It became about resisting the dehumanization that they wanted to impose. In the face of war, terror and oppression, education became the declaration of humanity.

With the arrival of the Taliban regime in 2021, girls lost the right to education, universities were shut down. Khurram shared how she had to flee on the brink of graduation, and how difficult it was to access education as a refugee. Aside from the political challenges and excuses, education can only become a lifeline to students in crises if universities step up to their humanitarian mission. Khurram shared that she was fortunate enough to find a university that opened its doors to displaced students which allowed her to graduate. Yet, many universities still fail to rise to this challenge – at a time where the crises are increasing, our global education system is lagging behind. It is an education emergency and a global crisis of conscience – beyond the Afghan crisis. In 2024, Afghanistan is the only country where girls are banned from attending formal and informal education, where women and girls are forced to live a life of confinement and isolation. Many young girls committed suicide, and young men are trying to leave the country, while the mental and economic well-being is in decline.

This is what drives Aisha Khurram to advocate for accredited online degree programs for Afghan girls, with the support of UNESCO, to provide access to education equipping women with skills for the global online job market. It empowers them economically, but it also prepares them to eventually rebuild a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan. Adversely, where education is absent, extremism flourishes. Where girls are denied education, the entire community is deprived and denied of progress. Where universities remain silent, they enable oppression through their inaction. Universities must lead by example, not only by providing access to education, but by safeguarding academic freedom and amplifying the voices of students when they speak up for justice. You either stand for human rights or you deny it. You either empower students to seek truth and justice, or you suppress them through censorship and indifference.

Aisha Khurram made a plea to universities to rise to their ideals and the values discussed during the conference by opening their doors to displaced students. Create flexible programs that can reach the unreachable. Amplify the voices of those who are silent. Do not just teach about human dignity, defend it. Universities are not just institutions of learning, they are custodians of human dignity. The actions or inactions of universities will determine the future of countless of lives. Education is not a privilege, it is a basic human right. It is the foundation of peace, progress and human dignity. Every time a university fails to act, it forfeits its responsibility to humanity.



universities were founded to uphold. Universities are changing free speech rules, , forbidding open dialogue and debate, and national courts (e.g., the US Supreme court) declaring efforts at making room for the underrepresented illegal.

This shows how the whole idea of global citizenship, human dignity, cultural diversity, equity and peace, are gradually being eroded. Universities must return to these cherished values.



Abdoul Rasheed Na'Allah, *Former Vice-Chancellor, Abuja University, Nigeria*, underlined the importance of remembering the history of universities to understand where we are coming from and to inform the way forward.

He cited some of the world's earliest universities, including Al-Qarawiyyin (859), Sankore (12th century), Bologna (1088), and Oxford (1096), emphasizing the fundamental values they inherently promoted: cultural diversity, equity, inclusivity, peace, and intellectual honesty. These institutions upheld ethics of compassion, responsibility, and human decency, fostering a spirit of inquiry among philosophers, scientists, and scholars of law, literature, language, and linguistics. Regardless of gender, religion, or belief, scholars championed these ideals, advancing humanistic and philosophical thought. At their core, these universities sought to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of humanity through cultural and ethnic diversity.

Fostering global citizenship has long been a cornerstone of university tradition. However, today, this commitment is increasingly undermined. The pursuit of fundraising and competition for global rankings threaten these core values. Wealthy donors wield influence by leveraging the threat of withdrawing funding, public universities face political interference, with governments and legislatures pressuring leaders into resigning for their insistence on academic freedom. Donors demand the suppression of cultural diversity, the expulsion of students with dissenting views, and even dictate curriculum changes, compromising the very principles

International forums and associations of universities such as the IAU and national accreditation agencies, he maintains, should include values in their assessment of qualifications for membership, and universities with a history of promoting bigotry, and abusing and supporting the abuse of human dignity should be denied accreditation/membership, and such organizations/forums should take the discussion and promotion of true university values as part of their core duties. Global rankings boasted by donors should be challenged by global humanistic values, hence the importance of this conference. There is nothing more important today than bringing to the fore our values. He further suggested how to implement these.

Some contemporary university programs should be reoriented towards "University Value Programs (UVP)" or "University Value-Building Programs." Similarly to how general education or general studies courses have historically fostered cultural awareness and interdisciplinary thinking, such programs would instil core university values, broaden perspectives beyond the core discipline. Universities should promote a new kind of activism across policy, branding, curriculum development, and programming, focusing on: social entrepreneurship as a core value to promote wealth sharing and poverty eradication; embedding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in university curricula to familiarize students with these global objectives and inspire diverse implementation strategies; advancing humane AI development that reflects diverse cultural values worldwide and critically assess AI's impact across disciplines, fostering a tradition of challenging the use of technology through rigorous ethical and philosophical inquiry.

He concluded the conference by stressing that university value—if rooted in equity, human dignity, and peace – will necessarily find expression in all outputs of universities, and thus inform also social entrepreneurship, equitable citizenship and sustainable development, and not least the development of humane AI.

The conversations held and debates sparked at the 2024 conference will continue to inform our work and set the stage for further dialogue at the 2025 IAU International Conference in Kigali.

IAU 2025 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The IAU looks forward to convening its Members and the higher education community during the upcoming International Conference hosted by the University of Rwanda in Kigali from 21-23 October 2025.

BUILDING TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The university, in its corporate structure, is one of very few institutions in global history that have survived the passing of time. Ideally, universities are marked by unique ethical commitments that enhance their trustworthiness. The idealized view of academia stresses its openness, its universality, its institutionalized procedures for self-criticism and self-correction, being a force for good across all its missions.

But what is challenging higher education as we know it is that it has become increasingly harder to convincingly demonstrate its merits and benefits. Given the growing influence of technology and commodification of universities, it is being asked whether the university is still one of the most suitable institutions to provide the skills and competences the labour market requires and if a university degree is still key to personal and collective economic growth and societal advancement.

In epistemic terms, universities are confronted with an expanding scepticism, causing a breakdown in the semantic acceptance of reason and fact. Universities are faced with a growing gap between their scientific understanding of how humans process and understand information and the vulnerabilities to misinformation and propaganda they endure when they fail to leverage this knowledge in communicating scientific findings and principles, especially in the age of generative AI.



In social and moral terms, the university is being challenged along questions of political and cultural interference while having to reconcile an array of societal expectations, which, in conjunction with populist and nationalist policies, is casting doubt on the validity and relevance of higher education as a cultural pillar of society.

Ideally, universities serve as trusted and independent institutions that critically accompany and scrutinise the forces of politics and the market. After all, universities have such influence that, whether through action or inaction, they shape the society around them as much as they are being shaped by it. For universities to sit passively as the political, social and economic structures necessary for their mission degrade around them, would have drastic consequences for their role in building societies and fostering democracy.

Given the inextricable relationship between universities and trust afforded to them over time, this conference wishes to ask what it is that creates trust in higher education? What must universities do to retain it across all their missions? Their governance, administration, research practices, teaching methods and learning processes, admissions procedures, and knowledge-sharing approaches? How can they strengthen their engagement with the dynamic and diverse world beyond their institutional boundaries to build better and just societies? After all, it is trust in higher education where it starts and ends.

Take part in these global conversations!

Discover the programme and all practical information here

www.IAUKigali2025.net



Discover the topics of the plenary sessions:

Plenary I: Trust and Distrust in an Age of Turmoil

Trust in higher education is not a natural or inherent reality. It is, in essence, culturally construed and socially upheld. Higher education depends on the trust and goodwill of its stakeholders. This social contract, however, is increasingly being questioned from various angles with diverse agendas. Its critics portray higher education as out of touch with both the labour market and people's everyday experience, elitist, not worth the investment culturally unhinged and overly politicized. While such points of criticism are not new, are they becoming more widespread, dominant and consequential? And if so, why?

Beyond the public's declining support for higher education, is the sector itself experiencing a deepening crisis of confidence? Trapped in the instrumental logic of the marketplace and extrinsic values, has it lost its ability to articulate its core mission in terms of values rather than mere utility? Is there a need to restore internal belief and faith – whatever their foundations and contexts – in the role and significance of the university? This session aims to take stock of current trends and gauge the level of trust in higher education.

Plenary 2: Trust in Science

Most of our knowledge and what we hold to be true about the world is based on hearsay of our teachers and textbooks and not on personal experience. In securing knowledge about the world, we routinely and unavoidably rely on the testimony, findings and competence of others, giving trust its social texture. The credibility of scientific knowledge is deeply tied to the integrity of its processes – rigorous methodologies, disinterestedness, verifiability, and ethical standards but above all, a shared commitment to facticity. If society though is transgressing from a "culture of fact" into a "post-factual era", in which objective facts are becoming less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief, universities, by the same coin, are faced with a growing gap between their scientific understanding of how humans process and understand information and the vulnerabilities to misinformation, distortion, and propaganda they endure when they fail to leverage this knowledge in communicating scientific findings and principles, especially in the age of generative AI. How can we thus devise novel and more impactful ways of bringing academic expertise into greater contact with citizens and institutions? How can universities safeguard and restore their role as trusted places and producers of knowledge?

Plenary 3: Nurturing Minds, Building Societies

The first plenary session aims to explore and understand dimensions of trust and distrust in higher education. This session in turn seeks to recalibrate and articulate the value proposition of universities within society. What is the essence of higher education today and how must we adapt? How can we conceive a compelling narrative that addresses and restores trust in higher education? Can we envision a shared understanding of the global academy, despite its vast diversity that characterizes the higher education landscape? What common principles bind us together, and how can this diversity be transformed into a collective voice to foster a better understanding of higher education in society?

About the host: University of Rwanda



The University of Rwanda, established in 2013 through the merger of several higher education institutions, is the largest public university in the country. From its inception, it has been dedicated

to offering a comprehensive and inclusive education with a focus on innovation and research. The university promotes programs that cater to the developmental needs of Rwanda and the wider region, positioning itself as a leader in science, technology, agriculture, and health sciences.

Through collaborations with international partners and the establishment of centers of excellence, the University of

Rwanda is committed to advancing the country's vision of becoming a knowledge-based economy. With approximately 31,042 students across six colleges, the university offers a diverse academic environment that encourages global perspectives and cross-cultural exchanges.

The University of Rwanda supports educational mobility by providing programs taught in English and French, spanning disciplines such as business, engineering, medicine, and environmental studies. Its commitment to research and community engagement makes it a vital contributor to Rwanda's socio-economic transformation and development.

IAU ACTIVITIES RELATED TO ITS STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



Values-based Leadership

BUILDING CAPACITY TO LEAD

by Andreas Corcoran

Leadership in higher education today must be more than managerial expertise or technical know-how. While such skills remain essential for institutional continuity, they do not suffice in an environment marked by volatility, disruption, and rising expectations from society. Leaders are increasingly called upon to be strategic thinkers, ethical decision-makers, effective communicators, and collaborative change agents. They must be able to cultivate trust, navigate competing interests, and articulate not just what their institutions are good at—but what they are good for.

Higher education institutions are embedded in complex and interdependent systems, facing demands for greater inclusion, accountability, innovation, and relevance. In this context, leadership is not a static role but a dynamic, evolving practice rooted in reflection, responsiveness, and a capacity to connect values with action. The call is not only to manage systems efficiently, but to lead them with purpose, courage, and clarity.

The IAU Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) was developed in response to these very challenges. It provides a structured yet flexible learning journey that empowers both current and emerging leaders to reflect on their roles, enhance their capacities, and engage more confidently with the realities of institutional transformation. The ELP is grounded in the IAU's global mission and draws on the collective knowledge of international higher education leaders, while recognising the unique contexts in which institutions operate.

The ELP is now in its second year and continues to gain momentum, having engaged forty university leaders from twenty-five countries across all five regions. As registration opens for its third cohort, the programme reaffirms the IAU's commitment to equipping higher education leaders with the capacity to respond to the sector's growing complexity and the evolving responsibilities of higher education institutions.

The programme unfolds across twelve modules, organised into three interrelated dimensions: relational, operational, and transformational leadership. Each module pairs theoretical reflection with practical learning, creating space for dialogue, self-assessment, and peer to peer exchange.



▼ First cohort of ELP in Doha, Qatar 2023

The relational dimension addresses the human and cultural aspects of leadership. It supports leaders in developing inclusive leadership styles, fostering institutional cultures built on trust and engagement, and managing stakeholder relationships with empathy and strategic intent. Participants explore how to build effective teams, navigate intercultural dynamics, and establish productive and respectful relationships to advance the university's mission. The modules in this area also reflect on the changing mission of the university—encouraging leaders to examine how their institutions contribute to the public good and how academic leadership can support justice, ethical action, and societal relevance and engagement.

The operational dimension focuses on the mechanics of institutional leadership. It explores governance structures, risk management, strategic planning, and financial stewardship—key competencies for navigating increasingly complex policy environments and resource constraints. Participants are guided through approaches to mission-driven budgeting, sustainable income generation, and resilient administrative models. This strand also includes a critical examination of the digital transformation of higher education, offering frameworks for leveraging technology and AI to enhance



▼ Second cohort of ELP in Tokyo, Japan

learning and institutional performance while staying rooted in academic values.

The transformational dimension invites participants to see themselves as drivers of change. It encourages leaders to reflect on how change happens in institutions—how to observe, mediate, and influence it effectively. Leaders are challenged to consider how to foster innovation, promote equity, and communicate the university's role in society in ways that resonate across sectors and communities. These modules focus on building multi-stakeholder partnerships, shaping inclusive institutional narratives, and creating the conditions for sustainable, future-oriented leadership.

The ELP begins and concludes with in-person meetings held alongside the annual IAU International Conference, offering participants the opportunity to engage face-to-face with a diverse group of peers from around the world. These gatherings bookend a year-long journey that continues through online modules, combining synchronous and asynchronous engagement, and reinforcing learning through regular interaction.

Each module includes both a thematic workshop and an action learning session—enabling differentiated learning between experienced and emerging leaders and reinforcing the value of peer-to-peer exchange. Throughout, the ELP maintains a focus on context-sensitive leadership, recognising that while core challenges may be shared globally, their manifestations—and the appropriate responses—are shaped by local histories, policies, and institutional realities.

The IAU Executive Leadership Programme has been called into life as more than a training initiative. As one of many engagement points for university leaders, including the IAU

Presidents Forum at the IAU conferences, it is a space for reflection, learning, and transformation—a platform for global dialogue and leadership renewal marking their commitment to leadership that is ethically grounded, globally minded, and socially responsive.

The Executive Leadership Programme will start on 24 October 2025 in Kigali, Rwanda, following the IAU 2025 International Conference.

GET INVOLVED

🔗 **Learn more about the ELP programme, potential funding, and the application process on the IAU website**
<https://www.iau-aiu.net/Leadership>.

For more information on the IAU Presidents Forum on 22 October, see the IAU 2025 International Conference programme at www.IAUKigali2025.net

For more information, please contact:
Andreas Corcoran at a.corcoran@iau-aiu.net



Internationalization

Internationalization of higher education is an inevitable process in the era of globalization and a deliberate strategy for improving quality and relevance of higher education and research. IAU focuses on the academic rationales, the equitable and collaborative nature of the process and aims to minimize the adverse effects of international interactions when these take place in highly unequal and diverse contexts among HEIs with different resources, needs and interests.

THERE WILL BE NO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT INTERNATIONALIZATION

by Giorgio Marinoni

Introduction

At first sight the title of this article might sound exaggerated, but the aim of this article is to show that it is not.

According to the United Nations "Sustainable development is how we must live today if we want a better tomorrow, by meeting present needs without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their needs". In 2015, the leaders of the world agreed on a common agenda for sustainable development introducing 17 specific but interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be reached by 2030. Education plays a fundamental role in achieving the SDGs. Quality education is one of the SDGs (SDG4), but education's role is not limited to that, it is paramount in achieving all other SDGs. It is education that provides the new generations with a mindset that put sustainable development at the centre, it is education that foster tolerance, mutual understanding and peace. Education also allows people to live healthier, to escape poverty and to become the leaders of tomorrow, the innovators who will find solutions to tomorrow's challenges.

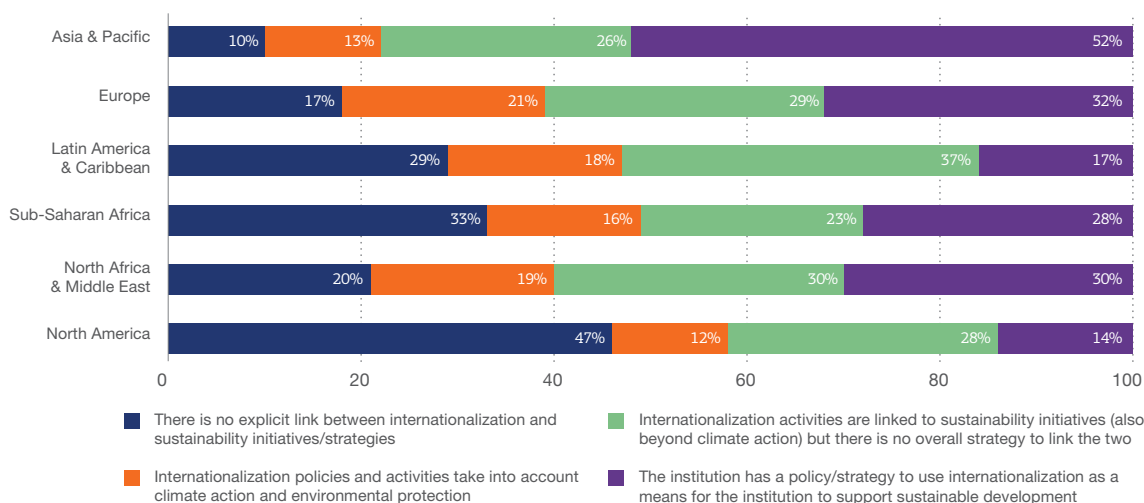
Role of higher education for sustainable development

Higher education, as an integral part of the educational journey, is particularly relevant. Contrary to other levels of education, higher education includes research and societal engagement, functions that are critical for sustainable development. Through research, higher education investigates and expands the frontier of knowledge; through societal engagement, it makes sure that both education and research are relevant for societal needs. New relevant knowledge generated through research co-created with society will help overcoming present and future challenges and make sustainable development a reality.

Role of internationalization for sustainable development

The above demonstrates how higher education contributes to sustainable development through education, research and societal engagement, but what about the role of internationalization? One could argue that the three missions of higher education can be accomplished strictly at national level, yet this approach will not lead to sustainable development. The core reason is that the challenges to sustainable development are global in nature, and they can be overcome only through a global cooperative approach. A national education based only on a particular form of knowledge, would be biased and insufficient to understand the

Internationalization and sustainable development by region



complexity of the world. It will also hinder mutual understanding between different countries and cultures, which, in the worst-case scenario, would lead to mistrust and conflict. In research, purely national approaches will lead to inequality. The world of research is already profoundly unequal with high-income countries having more resources than low-income countries, both in terms of research production and dissemination. It is no mystery that the majority of scientific publishers are based in high-income countries and that most scientific articles are produced by researchers in high-income countries. In a world where research would be mainly national, disparities between countries will only increase. In societal engagement, a purely national approach will overlook the fact that issues affecting local communities are often global in nature and therefore only offer partial solutions that will not solve the root causes of the problems. Therefore, a purely national approach to higher education can only lead to unequal and unsustainable development.

Relation between internationalization and sustainable development in practice

The question that remains to be answered is: Are higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world understanding the fundamental role of internationalization for sustainable development and putting it in practice? In the 6th IAU Global Survey, HEIs were requested to reply to a question on the relationship between internationalization and sustainable development by choosing one out of the four possible options:

- There is no explicit link between internationalization and sustainability initiatives/strategies
- Internationalization policies and activities take into account climate action and environmental protection
- Internationalization activities are linked to sustainability initiatives (also beyond climate action) but there is not an overall strategy to link the two
- The institution has a policy/strategy to use Internationalization as a means for the institution to support sustainable development

It is reassuring that only 23% of HEI do not link internationalization and sustainable development at all, while

the majority (59%) link them also beyond climate action, and there is even a considerable percentage of HEIs (28%) having a policy or strategy in place to use internationalization as a means to support sustainable development. It is positive to see that the majority of HEIs have understood the importance of internationalization for sustainable development.

However, the regional analysis of the results unveils substantial variations from one region to another. Asia & Pacific is by far the most advanced region in terms of using internationalization as a means to support sustainable development, as the majority of HEIs in that region (52%) indicated that they have a policy or strategy to that end. However, in all other regions but North America, the majority of HEIs at least link internationalization and sustainable development and they do so also beyond climate action. North America is a particular case, as it is the least advanced region, with 47% of institutions indicating that there is no explicit link between internationalization and sustainability initiatives/strategies. The inequality between different regions of the world and the situation in North America are sources of concerns and show that although the link between internationalization and sustainable development is established, there is still room for improvement to arrive at a shared understanding of internationalization as a means to achieve sustainable development.

Conclusion

Overall, HEIs seem to be aware of the importance of internationalization for sustainable development and many of them already interpret internationalization as a means to achieve sustainable development. However, there are still many HEIs that do not recognize this link. Moreover, there are clear differences in interpretations and approaches towards internationalization and sustainable development in different regions of the world.

While it is positive to note what HEIs around the world have been accomplishing by linking internationalization and sustainable development until now, there is no room for complacency. The urgency of achieving the SDGs calls for further strengthening internationalization of higher education as a means to generating a development which is truly sustainable. There will be no sustainable development without internationalization.

GET INVOLVED

➞ Need support in Internationalization of Higher Education and Global Engagement? HEIAS is there to help you!

The Higher Education Internationalization Advisory Services (HEIAS) offers strategic guidance and expert assessments and enables institutions to strengthen their internationalization and global engagement. It is available to all IAU Member institutions. Learn more about how

your institution can benefit here: <https://www.iau-aiu.net/Internationalization?onglet=1>

Please note that each year, the IAU offers a HEIAS fee waiver for institutions in Low Income Countries or experiencing severe financial constraints. Stay tuned for the next call for applications, expected in 2026.

For more information, please contact Giorgio Marinoni at g.marinoni@iau-aiu.net



Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development

Universities play a key role advocating, educating and leading the way for a more sustainable future. For many years, IAU has been fostering actions for sustainability in support of *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the related Sustainable Development Goals.



IAU was part of the Global Orientation Meeting for the UNESCO Transforming Futures project in Paris in March 2025. IAU is leading the work on a publication for ESD-WIA as part of this project.

A SHARED COMMITMENT FOR THE FUTURE: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BEYOND 2030

by Isabel Toman

Sustainable development (SD) has been a key priority of higher education institutions (HEIs) for several decades, beginning with foundational milestones such as the Brundtland Report in 1987. The importance of SD was reaffirmed with the adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

As we approach 2030, the question naturally arises: what comes next? The *Summit of the Future*¹ which took place in September 2024, presented a first step towards shaping the post-2030 agenda. The outcome document of the summit, titled the *Pact for the Future* is a negotiated, action-oriented intergovernmental document, which places sustainable development alongside other global priorities such as international peace and security; science, technology, innovation and digital cooperation; youth and future generations; and transforming global governance.

Regrettably, higher education institutions are not explicitly mentioned in this process. Yet, HEIs are indispensable to the success of this agenda. They have a critical role to play in

advancing the pact's ambitions, addressing future challenges, and optimizing efforts to achieve the SDGs and beyond.

Higher Education and the Pillars of the Pact

Several core principles in the *Pact for the Future* align closely with the mission and impact of HEIs. These include:

- Promoting diversity and social cohesion across communities and institutions.
- Strengthening the link between internationalization and sustainable development in education and research.
- Reducing global and local inequalities.
- Fostering deeper and more inclusive partnerships.

At the International Association of Universities (IAU), we call on the higher education community to rise to this challenge. HEIs must not only support the existing global agenda but also lead the way in expanding its scope and relevance.

Reversing Inequalities and Reinforcing Partnerships

Article 23 of the pact reaffirms the urgent need to reverse the widening inequalities both within and between countries. HEIs

1. <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>

can be powerful agents in this effort. Through joint projects and collaborative networks, they have the capacity to build resilience within countries and to enable the exchange of knowledge, information, and best practices globally.

This approach is embedded in the ethos of the IAU Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) Cluster, which serves as a platform for collaboration between universities committed to sustainability. The activities of the Cluster Members range from exchanging best practices for ESD Teaching & Learning and strategy, to SDG research and local community engagement.

Beyond the SDGs: Reaffirming Our Values

As the 2030 deadline for the SDGs approaches, it is essential that HEIs look beyond the current framework. This is not simply because the UN's SDG framework may evolve or be replaced, but because the underlying principles of sustainability are rooted in our shared human values and collective responsibility for the planet.

Within today's increasingly complex global context, democratic systems and evidence-based decision-making are under threat in many parts of the world, and sustainability efforts—including climate action and equity—are being challenged or, in some cases, removed entirely from political agendas.

In this environment, HEIs must remain steadfast in their commitment to transformation and societal responsibility. Working with the students, for instance through capacity building programmes such as Responsible Futures, and implementing a *Whole-Institution Approach* (WIA) to sustainable development are two concrete actions that can be taken.

The Transformative Role of Universities

Universities are dynamic centers of innovation, learning, and progress. Their influence extends well beyond classrooms and laboratories. By preparing future leaders, driving scientific discovery, and tackling pressing global issues, HEIs are uniquely positioned to shape a more just and sustainable world.



▼ IAU presenting the Guidance tool on the Whole-Institution Approach developed with UNESCO and York University at the Global Orientation Meeting for the UNESCO Transforming Futures project in Paris in March 2025.

Now more than ever, it is not enough to sustain current efforts—we must strive to restore our ecosystems and transform our system to permit peaceful and equitable co-habitation to sustain the planet.

This transformation must be guided by a renewed sense of purpose and solidarity. The values we share, and the commitment we demonstrate, are as crucial to a sustainable future as any single policy or programme.

Since the early 1990s, the **IAU has advocated for the key role higher education can play for a more sustainable future**, supported by two IAU Policy Statements that translate this commitment: the [IAU Iquitos Statement on Education for Sustainable Development](#) (2014) and the [IAU Kyoto Declaration on Sustainable Development](#) (1993). The Association supports and informs the *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and is part of the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development (ESD for 2030) initiatives. Through engagement with Members at events, through publications, and providing tools and visibility through the [IAU HESD Global Portal](#), a platform collecting higher education's actions for Sustainable Development (SD) since 2012, learning opportunities, momentum for change, and positive impact for SD are created.



GET INVOLVED

and support IAU HESD:

➡ **Contribute to the IAU Global Portal on HESD and share your initiatives with the global higher education community!**

www.iau-hesd.net

➡ **Learn more about the IAU HESD Global Cluster:** <https://www.iau-hesd.net/index.php/IAU-Global-HESD-Cluster>

➡ **Find out how to join the Responsible Futures International Programme to embed sustainability at the heart of learning and meaningful student engagement:** <https://www.responsiblefutures.org.uk/international-programme>

For more information, please contact:
Isabel Toman at hesd@iau-aiu.net



Digital Transformation of higher education

The digital transformation of society is inevitably reshaping the higher education sector and it impacts the way HEIs operate at all levels, from governance to teaching and learning, from the content of curricula to knowledge production and research activities. The IAU supports institutions in this process of transformation that higher education institutions are reacting to, interacting with and shaping to remain relevant in increasingly digitalised societies.

SHAPING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

by Trine Jensen

With just five years remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the UN Agenda 2030, the world faces a turbulent time marked by the accelerating impacts of climate change, the erosion of democratic institutions, rising conflicts and instability, and growing skepticism toward multilateral cooperation. In such a fragmented and uncertain landscape, imagining how the negotiation of a shared global agenda beyond 2030 will unfold, becomes increasingly worrisome.

In addition to the challenges already mentioned, the world is also grappling with rapid technological advancements – including Artificial Intelligence – which add yet another layer of complexity to an already fragile global context. In this article, I would like to discuss how these technological developments can contribute to our shared pursuit of sustainable development, if they are used *for good*.

Technological developments are in many ways a silver lining that comes with a dark cloud. It comes with new opportunities and possibilities, but also with risks and negative consequences. Throughout history, humanity has harnessed technology to advance knowledge production and dissemination, both of which are fundamental to societal development. From Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 15th century to the creation of the Internet and the World Wide Web at the close of the 20th century, each leap forward has reshaped how we share and build knowledge. Now, a quarter into the 21st century, the new pressing challenge lies in guiding the development and use of Artificial Intelligence to serve humanity while thoughtfully addressing the significant risks it poses.

In 2022, the International Association of Universities (IAU) adopted a policy statement titled *Transforming Higher Education in a Digital World for the Global Common Good*². This statement sets out the core principles and values that should guide the digital transformation of both higher education and society to

ensure it serves the greater good. As the preamble emphasizes, "It is essential to build a humanistic, ethical, inclusive and purpose-based digital transformation...". Placing focus on the aim of digital transformation is essential, as technologies are merely tools – it is ultimately up to humans to guide their use in ways that benefit humanity. The policy statement informs the IAU's work in digital transformation, and I would like to highlight two specific topics addressed by IAU, illustrating how they are intrinsically connected to the broader goal of sustainable development.

1. Building a Global Knowledge Stream – the Quest for Open Science

As stated in the policy statement, the IAU is committed to supporting the *UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science*³ – a globally recognized normative instrument. To do so, the IAU convened an Expert Group on Open Science to examine the critical role universities play in advancing the principles outlined in this Recommendation. Bringing together expertise from all world regions, the group explored how universities can contribute to its implementation and identified key challenges they face within the broader scientific ecosystem. The initiative also aimed to raise awareness of how certain approaches to Open Science in one context may have unintended consequences elsewhere. The work of the Expert Group has led to the publication *Open Science: The Challenge for Universities*⁴, a report that underscores the pivotal role of higher education institutions, outlines the obstacles to be addressed, and offers recommendations to the higher education sector in support of the transition toward Open Science.

Building on the insights from the report, the IAU has initiated the development of a position paper on Open Science, led by a drafting group composed of IAU Administrative Board members. In parallel, the Expert Group continues to convene to explore how best to support universities in navigating this important yet complex transformation.

Open Science is, at its core, a recognition that scientific knowledge is fundamental to societal development, serving as the basis for critical thinking, innovation, and informed

2. https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_policy_statement_dt_2022.pdf

3. <https://www.unesco.org/en/open-science/about>

4. https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/os_the_challenge_for_universities.pdf

decision-making. Rooted in rigorous inquiry and scientific integrity, Open Science promotes intellectual advancement across disciplines and supports a transparent, inclusive, and equitable approach to understanding the world through science. By harnessing the power of digital transformation, it expands access to and participation in the global flow of knowledge, accelerating scientific discovery and empowering societies to tackle complex global challenges. As such, Open Science is vital to building more sustainable and resilient communities, making it essential to the pursuit of sustainable development.

2. The Academic responsibility for Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already an integrated part of our everyday life, and its continual development is spurring a broad spectrum of visions in terms of impact ranging from utopian ideals to dystopian scenarios. While it is unlikely that we are headed for either, it is already having important impacts for teaching and learning and research.

Universities carry a significant responsibility to empower citizens worldwide with the skills to navigate both the opportunities and challenges of AI. They must be at the forefront of research efforts that uncover the often hidden impacts of AI and drive informed global dialogue. Ideally, this will help us recognize that AI is not merely another commercial product. It is rather tools operating on the basis of large databases of our common digital imprint of information and thus inevitably contributing to shaping our understanding of the world. Consequently, the design and governance of AI should not be left solely in the hands of a few private-sector players driven by economic interests in a limited number of countries. Instead, it should be a shared human endeavor that transcends national boundaries, in a fair and inclusive manner. The imperative for universities to champion these values has become ever more important in the current geopolitical context that deprioritizes values and shared human interests.

Several initiatives have been launched to support global dialogue about the impact of AI. The IAU has partnered with UNESCO to launch an online lectures series with the purpose of discussing the impact of AI on higher education. This year, IAU is convening the Institutional Site Visit with particular focus on AI and its impact on higher education. The site visit is hosted by Beijing Normal University (BNU) in China, and it represents an opportunity for leaders of higher education to come together, gain insights in the experience of BNU while discussing with peers what is at stake for higher education when it comes to the rapid developments of AI. Finally, the IAU has also started initial conversations about potentially establishing a global expert group on AI and higher education to ensure that the perspectives of all regions of the world are considered.

As every other important technological development, AI holds important potential to support human intelligence in knowledge

production and dissemination, but it depends on how it is used and that the regular users and learners understand both the potential and limitations of these systems. It comes with new opportunities as well as many challenges which impacts traditional systems and operations, yet, if harnessed for good, again it can be an important development that can contribute to the pursuit of sustainable development.

Defining our common vision beyond 2030

Given the profound impact of rapid technological developments on societies, human behavior, and the ways we communicate and interact with knowledge and information, it is crucial that the next global agenda recognizes how digital transformation can underpin and contribute to the pursuit of the common goals. It remains a priority to address the persistent digital divide – not only in terms of online connectivity, but also in equitable access to knowledge and information – ensuring that the opportunities offered by technological advancement are shared more equally across all communities.

It is encouraging that the UN Pact for the Future recognizes science, technology, innovation, and digital cooperation as one of its five key thematic pillars. This focus will be essential in shaping the commitments that chart the path forward. If humanity is to rise to the challenge of harnessing technological progress for the global common good, this principle must underpin and support all thematic objectives set for the post-2030 agenda.

In the meantime, the IAU will continue to bring universities together for global dialogue on advancing the transition toward Open Science and the free flow of knowledge, both of which are critical to achieving the SDGs. It will also maintain its focus on exploring the implications of AI for higher education, emphasizing how universities can contribute through education and research to build citizens' capacity to understand both the potential and limitations of AI and to conduct research on AI's societal impacts to inform global governance that is rooted in a human-rights and values-based approach.

Let us therefore leverage the potential of digital transformation for the common global good and to foster sustainable development.

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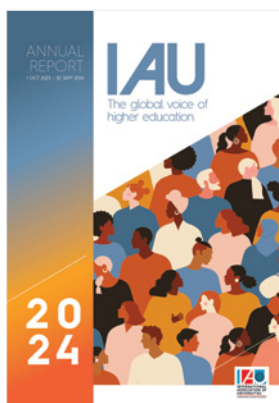
Open Science: The Challenge for Universities



The IAU convened an international expert group on open science to identify the challenges and opportunities for universities in the transition toward Open Science which has led to the report entitled: [Open Science: The Challenge for Universities](https://www.iau-aiu.net/Publications). The report emphasizes the crucial role universities play in advancing Open Science, outlining four key priorities: maintaining scientific

integrity, fostering open collaboration, engaging with society, and building an international Open Science community. It also highlights several challenges and tensions which need to be addressed to bring down certain barriers for Open Science, including the need for reforms in scientific publishing. Finally, it proposes recommendations as for why and how universities can play a leadership role in supporting and shaping a new era of open science. <https://www.iau-aiu.net/Publications>

Annual Report 2024



The Annual Report offers a comprehensive summary of projects and activities undertaken in 2024 with key facts and figures. It showcases the IAU's commitment to its global membership through a focus on four key strategic areas: Values-Based Leadership, Internationalization, Sustainable Development, and Digital Transformation. It presents details on the 2023

International Conference, the latest IAU publications, and recent opportunities for engagement. Additionally, the report provides an overview of the Association's membership and state of financial affairs. Download the report here: www.iau-aiu.net/annual-reports

Higher Education Policy (HEP)

HEP 37/4 – December 2024



The latest edition of 2024 of HEP brought us a diverse collection of papers, looking at themes such as the employability of public and private university graduates in Spain, the development of policy and practices in trans-national higher education in China, post-Covid 19, actions taken by two local higher education institutions in Portugal to address the employability agenda, and the historical and

institutional roots of oppressive mechanisms employed by the Islamic Republic in Iranian universities since the 1979 revolution. <https://link.springer.com/journal/41307/volumes-and-issues/37-4>

HEP 38/1 – March 2025

The first edition in 2025 of Higher Education Policy published a number of articles dealing with topics such as the pay of chief executives of higher education institutions in the UK, how Covid-19 impeded teaching and research and how to prevent this happening in the future, how education policies have been manipulated in a number of African states, and trends in the increasing participation of Palestinian Arabs and Jews in academic education in Israel. <https://link.springer.com/journal/41307/volumes-and-issues/38-1>

NEW

IAU Members can now access HEP via a new URL referral system.

➡ To do so, please go to https://www.iau-aiu.net/connexion_springer.php and use your WHED login details to connect. Once connected you will be able to access the entire collection of HEP, including online first articles (papers that have been accepted and are awaiting publication in an issue of HEP).

If you have not received your WHED login details, or have lost them, please contact Nicholas Poulton at n.poulton@iau-aiu.net

IAU WORLD HIGHER EDUCATION DATABASE (WHED)



In collaboration with:



WHED – contributing to the global recognition of qualifications

The *World Higher Education Database* (WHED) is crucial for the application of the *UNESCO Global Convention on the recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*⁵. Adopted in 2019 as the first UN treaty on higher education with a global scope, the Convention establishes universal principles for the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications, as well as the qualifications giving access to higher education. As of June 2025, 38 States have ratified it, bearing witness to the growing interest of countries to promote the mobility of students, faculty members, and researchers as well as support greater inclusion, access, and trust in higher education.

The second session of the Intergovernmental Conference of States Parties to the Global Convention on Higher Education⁶ taking place in June 2025. There will be Operational Guidelines are expected to be adopted, which will provide a common understanding of the Convention and assist in its implementation, as a tool for practitioners. This conference aims to promote the application of the Convention and oversee its implementation by adopting recommendations, declarations, models of good practices, or any relevant subsidiary text at the global or interregional level. It will also kick off important discussions, including:

- developing a new guide for countries on the relationship of the Global Convention to the regional recognition conventions;
- turning new research into guidelines for countries in quality assurance in higher education, including that of transnational education;
- examining how to support the recognition of refugees' and displaced persons' qualifications and the development of complementary pathways.

The *IAU World Higher Education Database* (WHED) is essential for the Global Convention and its need of a registry of all accredited and recognized higher education institutions in the world. What is more, IAU has, since its inception, been collecting information on higher education – the structure and

degrees of national higher education systems and recognized institutions, and this aids users in understanding the education systems in place in each country; it also assists credential evaluators in the recognition process of overseas credentials. The WHED thus facilitates a more fluid circulation of knowledge and talent, especially within the framework of the Convention. Moreover, the Global WHED ID – a unique identifier for each institution listed in the WHED – facilitates identification and thus recognition of institutions globally.

In addition, the WHED is also an important resource for research, as the data contained within can offer useful insights into tracing and mapping the past and present-day knowledge systems, as well as disciplinary and innovative developments. Data from the WHED has been used for research into how economic growth is linked to the numbers of HEIs in a particular region over time, or the development of health and health-related subjects at global level.

Next to the stakeholders such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and others, the IAU is currently consulting the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN OHRLLS). For this project, the WHED data is being used as a unique dataset to map the STEM education in the different world regions and benchmark it against the LDCs to inform the UN how they can contribute to bridging the current divide in STEM education. This analysis showed that the 44 LDCs account for only some 5% of the overall number of STEM degrees offered by higher education institutions worldwide. This is merely one example of how the WHED data can be used to inform decision-making, as it offers multiple entry points for analyzing and understanding the higher education landscape.

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If you are interested in using the WHED data for research purposes, please reach out.

You are also welcome to check the data we have on file for your institution and let us know of any changes to update.

➔ **Learn more:** <https://whed.net/About.html>

For more information, please contact:

Andreas Corcoran at a.corcoran@iau-aiu.net

5. <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention>

6. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/second-session-intergovernmental-conference-states-parties-global-convention-higher-education?hub=70286>

IAU Membership News

IAU is pleased to welcome 31 new Members from 25 different countries into its global community. We are grateful to all our Members for their incredible support and engagement.

Sign up for the Newsletter and follow IAU on social media to receive updates from IAU on activities and to be informed of opportunities for engagement. Make sure to share news or updates that would be of interest around the world to be published in the News from Members section on the IAU website.

For questions about membership, contact membership@iau-aiu.net

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IN FOCUS

Transforming Our World: Shaping the Path Forward

By **Hilligje van't Land**, Secretary General, and **Isabel Toman**, Senior Programme Officer, Sustainable Development, IAU

A decade ago, the United Nations set a bold and inclusive vision for global transformation with the adoption of the *UN Agenda 2030 – Transforming our World* and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a holistic framework built on 5 pillars, environmental, social, economic dimensions, and peace and partnerships as key enablers for this much needed progress. It acknowledged the essential contributions of all sectors, yet, while higher education was recognized as a stakeholder, its pivotal role in advancing the SDGs was not given the centrality it deserves.

Now, with just five years to 2030, it is urgent to accelerate progress, particularly in a context in which the goals and the Agenda 2030 are being challenged – at times even overruled. The world faces complex crises - from climate change and multiple conflicts to growing inequalities and backsliding of democracy; this calls for renewed commitment and innovative approaches to sustainable development. The UNESCO Future of education Initiative, the UN 2023 SDG Summit, in New York, the Pact for the Future adopted at the UN in 2024, and upcoming discussions at the 2025 UN High-Level Political Forums all in which the IAU is strongly involved, underscore the pressing need to reflect on what has worked, what has not, and what must come next.

In this critical moment, this issue of *IAU Horizons* is devoted to the topic ***Transforming Our World: Shaping the Path Forward***. It is an invitation for the members of the higher education community to reflect on their engagement with the SDGs and to share insights on both the achievements and shortcomings of the current agenda. More importantly, the aim is to steer a forward-looking discussion on the evolving role of higher education in driving transformation beyond 2030, framed by the following questions:

- What changes are needed to accelerate progress toward sustainable development?
- How can universities contribute more effectively, and should their role be redefined?
- What are the lacunas of the current Agenda 2030, is there a need for new goals or refined objectives?

The 25 articles in this issue provide thought provoking ideas about how to reimagine and reinforce the transformative role of higher education towards a more sustainable future. The collection also shows the diversity of actions that are already being taken at universities.

We hope these insights will serve as a catalyst for deeper engagement, bolder ideas, and lasting transformation in shaping a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world—now and beyond 2030.

We also welcome your future continued or new engagement with the work that the IAU has championed over the last three decades and in particular with the IAU Higher Education and Research Global Cluster work presented on page 16-17. Together we can engage more strongly with the goals and reaffirm the key role of the sector for the future.

The time to act is now.

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Chairholder of the Chair of "Fondation Diane", **Salim Daccache s.j**, Rector, Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ), Lebanon

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01 A reflection on the path towards a new global agenda “leaving no one behind”



by **Jouhaina Gherib**, *Former President, University of Manouba, Tunisia, UNESCO Chair on Higher Education for Sustainable Development in Africa, IAU Vice-President, IAU Chair of the HESD Working Group*



The University of Manouba is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

While “only 17% of the SDGs are on track, nearly half showing minimal or moderate progress and over one third stalled or even regressed by 2024,” one may wonder whether the UN Agenda 2030 and its related action plan and challenges set to transform our world were realistic (UN 2024). One may likewise question the usefulness of defining a new global agenda beyond 2030 or whether to extend the timeframe of the current agenda.

However, as this milestone is approaching, critical reflection is needed to inform and improve the future agenda, and the university, by virtue of its *raison d'être*, is in a good position to contribute to this important exercise. Bringing a critical perspective from the Global South, the following reflections try to provide some food for thought and suggest a direction forward.

It is worth recalling the genealogy of the UN Agenda 2030, proposed as an action plan organised around the “5 Ps” of Planet, People, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Succeeding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) specifically targeting the Global South, the SDGs were set out as a merger of previous global agendas for Sustainable Development (SD) and development cooperation. The slogan to “*transform our world, leaving no one behind*” comes in line after the principles of the 1987 Brundtland report, outlining planetary limitations and the needs of the present and future, emphasizing the most disadvantaged groups of society. The 2030 Agenda attempted to lay the foundations for intergenerational solidarity, while embedding the essence of the development thinking and the aspirations of the countries of the Global South for greater well-being. Yet, while the needs of future generations are systematically addressed in the discourse, the focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged groups is often neglected. Therefore, one might say that we have failed to deliver on the promise “*to leave no one behind*”.

Bearing in mind that discourses are never neutral--they are charged with norms, values, and ideologies and derive from the legitimacy of those who convey them--it is theoretically recognized that the United Nations system, with its multiple

organizations, enjoys universal legitimacy. The approach adopted to define the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs was, moreover, inclusive through a multi-layered consultation process. This made it possible to emphasize the urgency of collective action, to promote a common understanding of SD issues and to offer the various stakeholders involved a unifying and mobilizing framework for action, with targets and indicators for monitoring progress clearly defined. For example, UNESCO is in charge of the monitoring for SDG 4: Quality Education and the mechanisms in place to do so.

However, the inability of this same UN system to act to resolve certain conflicts, to adopt binding resolutions, or to enforce commitments, places important constraints and difficulties in advancing the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. Despite numerous meetings and summits, this lack of progress and inefficiency casts a doubt on the sincerity of the commitment of the countries and key stakeholders to the objectives laid out in the agenda.

Another issue at stake which contributes to undermining this ambitious agenda, is that it is based on paradigms and assumptions of the orthodox dominant development models. These models tend to erase the differences between the center of the capitalist system and its periphery, between the economies and societies of the Global North and those of the Global South, presenting them as subject to the same constraints of global economic and financial interdependence. By consecrating the progression of markets at the expense of states, these models reduce the room for maneuver by any national economic policies, particularly in the poorest countries. This in turn fuels disarray in the face of contemporary economic and social challenges, limits the ability to combine the local and the global, and annihilates all critical thinking and emancipatory vocation.

To “start with the needs of the most disadvantaged” and “leave no one behind” requires a change of course, and even a paradigm shift. Other paths are possible. Transforming the world through the emancipation of individuals, institutions, and societies could prove the most viable. The next Agenda would thus benefit from being based on global solidarity around the priority of education as a public good. Building on intra- and inter-generational solidarity could pave the way for a future that is fairer, more equitable, and more respectful of diverse cultures. It could also give young people, especially those in countries with a high birthrate, the financial, intellectual and theoretical means to fulfill their legitimate ambitions,

“The next Agenda would thus benefit from being based on global solidarity around the priority of education as a public good. Building on intra- and inter-generational solidarity could pave the way for a future that is fairer, more equitable, and more respectful of diverse cultures.”

and lead them to chart their own paths, linking a sovereign, global, and coherent development strategy with a project for social transformation.

If we are to define and implement this new agenda effectively, we also need to change the players involved. The higher education and scientific research system – hitherto (self) isolated – will have to be recognized as a major actor, leading by example and stepping up its involvement. Universities have made great progress towards achieving the 17 SDGs, and the sharing of experience and partnerships under the aegis of the IAU's work are tangible proof of this. These efforts must be supported and disseminated to inspire others and combat the competitive spirit induced by the race for rankings. Universities are also called to take a critical look at their own practices and continue to stimulate debate to deconstruct dominant discourses.

They are also called to provide knowledge about the transformative dynamics of their social responsibility and their role in developing awareness of a fairer, more sustainable world. For a new Global Agenda to succeed, the academic world needs to strengthen its scientific diplomacy efforts to inform public decision-making, while remaining neutral and independent and proposing an alternative project for transforming the world, centered on education. In my view, this is an avenue worth exploring, and the IAU – as the global voice of higher education – is well placed to advocate for this to become a reality.

02 Caring for others, with others, as a common agenda in international Higher Education



by **Miki Sugimura**, President, Sophia University, Japan and UNESCO Chair on Education for Human Dignity, Peace and Sustainability



Sophia University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

In this tumultuous era, there has never been a time when it has been more challenging to address the question of how to redefine the role and effective contribution of higher education in advancing sustainable development. Universities, which are responsible for the creation of knowledge and the development of human resources, are influenced in various ways by geopolitical factors. These influences affect the content and processes of education and research, the use of knowledge

“Our thinking and actions should be driven not by calculated assessments of cost-effectiveness or efficiency but by a shared ethical sense of how far we are willing to go to support others, regardless of whether or not such actions align with our own interests.”

generated as outputs and outcomes, and the governance systems that steer these elements. What is particularly concerning is that these changes often occur invisibly or unintentionally.

Internationalisation and globalisation of higher education have led to the movement of students and researchers, along with the cross-border mobility of programmes and organizations beyond the confines of nation-states. This shift has occurred as governments have moved from promoting general international understanding to establishing international exchange hubs and formulating education policies aimed at attracting and developing talent. Additionally, rising demand for higher education has expanded mobility, driven in part by the increasing number of privately funded international students. This trend has resulted in a diverse range of joint degree programmes and the introduction of new systems such as credit transfer schemes and micro-credentials. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of online and virtual education, reshaping mobility patterns and transforming the notion of studying abroad. Consequently, higher education regions that transcend national borders are now visible not only in Europe but also in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, global challenges have increased the demand for international joint research through cross-sectoral, multilateral collaboration.

However, geopolitical influences are increasingly casting a significant shadow over the development of international higher education. Internal and international factors both have a significant impact on higher education. The competition to secure human resources affects the development of future generations who will contribute to sustainable social progress. In addition, research security issues--namely dual-use of knowledge and technology, unintended technology transfer issues, and intellectual property protection--are increasingly shaped by geopolitical considerations, particularly regarding how technologies and research outcomes are utilised. Amid calls for international joint research to solve global issues, there are concerns that such issues may hinder research cooperation. Moreover, new issues have arisen around the use of AI, which has recently surged into prominence, including questions surrounding its appropriate use and renewed scrutiny of researchers' ethical responsibilities.

With only four years remaining until the target year of the current Agenda 2030, the situation is proving even more severe than previously anticipated. Education is recognised as a key driver for achieving the SDG goals, particularly through the

lenses of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education, and its role in international higher education is receiving heightened attention. However, the development of human resources and the creation of knowledge—originally defined as public goods—and the research outcomes supporting them are increasingly being appropriated for geopolitical strategies and conflicts.

In light of this situation, when attempting to answer the question, “What are the lacunas of the current Agenda 2030? Is there a need for new goals or refined objectives?” I would like to propose the addition of “ethics surrounding ‘caring for others with others.’” This principle serves as a foundation shared across all forms of policy planning, the implementation of specific actions, and educational practice. While ethics may not necessarily be positioned as a goal in itself, its presence becomes vital as geopolitical demands grow increasingly complex and as conflicts intensify. Debates over the legitimacy of national policy principles alone can no longer resolve the problems we face. At the same time, the urgency of addressing global issues prevents us from postponing action. In these circumstances, our thinking and actions should be driven not by calculated assessments of cost-effectiveness or efficiency but by a shared ethical sense of how far we are willing to go to support others, regardless of whether or not such actions align with our own interests.

This shift will necessitate a transformation in the approach to international higher education in terms of education, research, and societal engagement. In other words, where the focus was once on developing human resources for the benefit of the state or particular communities—through targeted programmes and research initiatives—it will become essential to adopt a more multifaceted perspective on what constitutes usefulness and to prioritise equity rooted in caring for others with others.

03 A Perilous Moment for the Planet: A Moment for the SDGs



by **Roger A. Petry**, Professor of Philosophy, Luther College, University of Regina, Canada



The University of Regina and Luther College are part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

While our political focus is often drawn to large superpowers making their interests forcefully known on the global stage, the majority of the world’s population resides in small and

“Yet as our global ecological, social, and economic systems become more constrained, powerful economic elites and dominant state superpowers have a desire to break this global unity of purpose.”

medium-sized states (SMSs). For some, it is an “inconvenient truth” that the interests of these states are, for the most part, in developing a stable, orderly, rule-based world that follows general principles of justice, due process, civil discourse, and free (if not fair) economic exchange. This gets expressed in international forums where the interests of SMSs are recognized, most especially the United Nations. When we look at the achievement of the UN’s member states in agreeing to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), it is hard not to see the interests of SMSs at work.

Yet as our global ecological, social, and economic systems become more constrained, powerful economic elites and dominant state superpowers have a desire to break this global unity of purpose.

Large global firms seek to monopolize global transactional spaces with minimal oversight, dividing the world into regionally competitive blocks. This ‘divide and conquer’ strategy weakens all states who now must compete for investments from a few wealthy firms and who are unable to act with unity in the face of exploitative practices. Dominant states with large economies and militaries also weaken their smaller neighbours in many ways: whether election interference, enforced trade agreements in the interests of the dominant power (a form of regulated extortion), or military invasion. SMSs become vassal states or face annexation and the loss of their people’s wealth.

This unequal power balance between dominant states and SMSs ironically make the world unstable for business. While bolstered by a neo-classical market ideology favouring small government, low taxes, and deregulation, increasingly authoritarian, business sponsored governments no longer bring the rewards to investors they historically have done. Each surgery to the old state order moves the system from manageable risk to growing uncertainty: an unpredictability inhibiting new investment. Stock markets tumble. Businesses become beholden to rulers of their home country. The loss of basic citizen rights, in turn, means a real loss of corporate rights (where corporations traditionally held the status of citizens under the law). High tariff walls force global businesses to localize production, abandoning fixed assets and traditional cost advantages from globally sourced inputs. Tariffs, much to businesses’ chagrin, are the one tax not easily passed on to consumers; ironically, tariff revenues go to the very governmental structures they sought to minimize.

Scholars, too, are increasingly constrained by such authorities who restrict disciplinary hirings, funded research, and what is

taught. This includes legalized suppression of ideas whether about justice, EDI, minority or Indigenous rights. However, the discourse of sustainable development (SD) is resilient in the face of such suppression. Its peculiar language engages markets directly: we invest (through education) in human capital; we seek to live off the interest of our natural resources; we derive goods and services from our ecosystems; we maximize quality of life. Finally, we encourage all types of development (both market and non-market) for current and future generations. This strategic discourse is the linguistic sword and shield for scholars in times such as these.

As countries increasingly restrict the flow of goods and services across borders, the (g)localization of our economies and networks means a new kind of trade. Scholars need to continue to share knowledge globally in the general citizen interest. However, this will be by sharing “recipes” of production across man-made borders, with most inputs, where possible, substituted by locally available materials. Mobilizing the knowledge for generating regional abundance in the face of uncertainty requires highly participatory systems. Such participation enables a profound knowledge of local ecosystems within the context of global limits, a sensitivity to the social capital embedded in our local organizations and cultural patterns, development of appropriate/intermediate technologies, and shared equipment that generates sustainable livelihoods. This requires a gentle leadership that lifts up those without power, including other species—the antithesis of “might makes right.” The resulting regional abundance can, in turn, melt the manufactured social divisions fuelled by fear of scarcity that currently cripple our political systems.

The scholarly retreat to our campuses (while remaining globally united) is necessary. Sustaining academic freedom means we can no longer rely on traditional patrons of government and industry who reject this academic pillar. Instead, universities must become increasingly self-sustaining while extending the scholarly protections of the Ivory Tower to citizen-scholars, organizations with broad public accountabilities, and those with structural commitments to SD.

Fortuitously, this scholarly strategy supports SMSs in the current predatory climate by preventing the flight of industries to larger states. SMSs need to support innovation for business and business models that prioritize local and regional trade integration. This innovation, however, is the knowledge for SD being pioneered on campuses and by community practitioners. A business dependence on these new local models also allow substitutions for what is priced beyond reach or prevented due to global trade disruptions.

The political realities of the day have created the necessary and sufficient conditions for regional innovation for SD. No longer simply an ethical imperative or global aspiration, SD is the one viable strategy for SMSs seeking not only to survive as autonomous democratic states but wanting to build planetary abundance.

04 Driving the SDGs: Reimagining Universities for a Sustainable Future



by **Hicham El Habti**, *President of University Mohammed VI Polytechnic (UM6P), Morocco*

In 2015, the United Nations launched Agenda 2030, a global commitment to tackle poverty, climate change, and

conflict through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Universities were named partners, their potential implied but not defined. Yet, as we near the midpoint of this transformative Decade, progress is uneven.

According to the 2024 Sustainable Development Report, only 16% of global SDG targets are currently on track, with the remaining 84% either stagnating or reversing due to COVID-19, conflicts, and climate shocks (SDSN, 2024).

The SDG framework, with its structured yet often prescriptive approach, has encountered limitations in fully addressing the complexity of these challenges. This underscores the need for a more inclusive, bottom-up approach—one that actively integrates local knowledge systems. Leveraging institutions like universities could further catalyze systemic transformation. The question, then, is what role universities, particularly in Africa, must play in this process?

At UM6P, our approach is guided by the belief that transformation begins with redefining the very purpose of universities. As institutions at the intersection of research, education, and impact, we must act as engines of change, integrating sustainability into our core strategies. This vision is founded on three pillars: redefining purpose, fostering innovation, and building bridges.

Redefining Purpose

Universities have long been seen as reservoirs of knowledge, producing research that often circulates within academic circles. Today, especially in Africa, they must become engines of action, not just reflection. The continent’s most pressing challenges demand solutions that go beyond theory and connect to societal needs.

Consider food security. Africa is endowed with the land, the talent, and the knowledge to feed itself, yet 282 millions of its people are undernourished. The issue is not a lack of resources but a systemic one. The missing link is not knowledge but the ability to translate it into scalable, localized solutions. Universities have a key role to play – not in isolation, but as part of broader innovation ecosystems.

“Universities are uniquely positioned to facilitate global cooperation. Through research networks, academic partnerships, and policy advocacy, universities can act as bridges between diverse actors, fostering collaboration that leads to sustainable outcomes. This is especially important in Africa, where financial, technological, and infrastructural gaps constrain the capacity for development.”

At UM6P, this principle is embedded in initiatives like the African Sustainable Agriculture Research Institute (ASARI), which focuses on developing climate-resilient crops and sustainable farming practices tailored to arid regions, ensuring research drives tangible progress.

Transformation is also about people. Africa’s population is set to reach 2.5 billion by 2050, with over 60% under 25. This youth bulge represents immense potential, but only if universities step up. Education systems must go beyond conventional learning models by shaping graduates who can think critically, adapt rapidly, and build solutions that matter.

Fostering Innovation

Innovation drives progress, yet too often, it remains trapped in academic silos—circulating in journals, confined to labs, and disconnected from real-world challenges. Universities must bridge this gap, ensuring breakthroughs in research do not end at this discovery stage but translate into tangible solutions.

At UM6P, we believe innovation must be tested, refined, and scaled in dynamic ecosystems. Our Living Lab fosters collaboration among researchers, students, communities, and industry, ensuring that ideas are not only groundbreaking but also practical and responsive to real needs.

This approach is particularly crucial in the Global South, where universities have the potential to serve as Research and Development hubs, but innovation without local capacity-building remains unsustainable. Agriculture exemplifies this challenge.

Africa holds immense potential, yet smallholder farmers—who produce 80% of the continent’s food—lack access to modern irrigation and scalable solutions. Addressing this gap requires more than technology; it demands training, entrepreneurship, and adoption pathways that align with national development priorities. At UM6P, innovation is action.

Through UM6P Ventures, we invest in startups tackling SDG challenges in agritech, renewable energy, and sustainable materials—ensuring research fuels impact, not just ideas.

Building Bridges

No institution, no matter how visionary, can achieve the SDGs alone. The challenges we face are too complex, interconnected, and global. Collaboration is not just an option, it is imperative.

In this context, universities are uniquely positioned to facilitate global cooperation. Through research networks, academic partnerships, and policy advocacy, universities can act as bridges between diverse actors, fostering collaboration that leads to sustainable outcomes. This is especially important in Africa, where financial, technological, and infrastructural gaps constrain the capacity for development.

UM6P exemplifies this collaborative approach through partnerships with industry, governments, and other academic institutions. Our collaboration with industrials on sustainable agricultural practices demonstrates how cross-sector cooperation can drive impactful change, benefiting communities across Africa.

In conclusion, universities must reimagine their role as dynamic, action-oriented hubs of innovation and collaboration, bridging knowledge and practice to drive the systemic transformations needed to achieve the SDGs and secure a sustainable future for all.

05 Transforming Forward: Shaping the Sustainable Future We Want



by **Jacobus Bracker**, Head of Section for Culture, Education for Sustainable Development, and Student Affairs, **Maike Land**, Project manager for Education for Sustainable Development and **Dorit Schumann**, Vice-President for Transfer and Sustainability, the German Rectors’ Conference, Germany

The milestone year for the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is approaching and it is crucial to assess both progress and shortcomings in achieving these ambitious targets. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have played an instrumental role in this journey, leveraging research, partnerships, and institutional transformation to advance sustainability. The German Sustainability Strategy explicitly recognizes this important role [1]. However, progress towards sustainability remains fragmented, and without a

concerted effort to accelerate change, the transformative potential of HEIs risks being underutilized. To truly shape the “future we want” as stated already in 2012 at the Rio+20 UN Conference for Sustainable Development, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) must become the cornerstone of institutional strategies, equipping all learners—students, faculty, leaders, and administration alike—with the necessary skills and perspectives to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world [2].

A Whole-Institution Approach (WIA) is vital in embedding sustainability across all facets of HEIs— Teaching, Research, Knowledge Transfer/Community Engagement, Governance, and Campus Operations. This approach recognizes that sustainability is not an isolated endeavor but a systemic challenge requiring interdisciplinary collaboration. By fostering environments where sustainability in its ecological, social, and economic dimensions is integrated into academic and administrative frameworks, HEIs can become living laboratories for innovation. This means not only teaching sustainability but embodying it in institutional practice, from carbon-neutral campus initiatives to research-driven partnerships that address real-world environmental and social challenges.

Interdisciplinarity lies at the heart of effective ESD. The challenges faced by humanity—climate crisis, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, social inequities, and rising authoritarianism—are not confined to a single discipline, nor can they be solved within the silos of traditional academia. HEIs must break down these barriers, fostering collaboration between sciences, technology, arts, and humanities. This integration is crucial to bridge the gap between technological advancements and ethical, social, and cultural considerations. Without this holistic perspective, sustainability efforts risk becoming technocratic exercises that overlook the human context and impact. Germany's diverse higher education landscape plays a pivotal role in sustainability transformation by uniquely blending cutting-edge technical expertise with social and policy-oriented research, creating innovative, holistic solutions. This synergy between fields like sustainable urban planning, social justice, and inclusive economics enables groundbreaking approaches to societal challenges such as equitable resource distribution and fostering resilient communities.

By creating interdisciplinary environments where learning is sustainability in action, HEIs—as centers of innovation—act as living laboratories for transformation, co-creating,

“By creating interdisciplinary environments where learning is sustainability in action, HEIs—as centers of innovation—act as living laboratories for transformation, co-creating, testing, and scaling solutions with societal partners.”

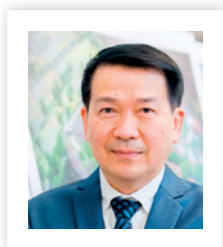
testing, and scaling solutions with societal partners. By fostering collaboration between academia, practice, and society, emerging technologies can be developed and deployed ethically, aligning with long-term social and environmental goals. HEIs are uniquely positioned to catalyse innovation that aligns technological advancement, industry needs, and global injustice. Furthermore, by equipping students with a combination of disciplinary expertise and future skills, HEIs prepare future leaders to guide industries toward low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially just practices. Scientific contributions are essential to shaping resilient economies, otherwise the transition to a truly sustainable and equitable economy will remain fragmented.

Despite the progress made, the SDG framework has not sufficiently emphasized the role of science and culture in driving sustainable development. To unfold scientific innovation as a powerful tool for addressing environmental and societal challenges, it is important to connect it to cultural narratives and values that shape behavior. Similarly, the arts and humanities play a critical role in shaping public consciousness and fostering an ethical approach to sustainability. Creative disciplines have the power to inspire change, challenge prevailing paradigms, and imagine alternative futures. By incorporating these dimensions into sustainability education, HEIs can cultivate a generation of changemakers who are not only technically proficient but also ethically and culturally aware.

HEIs must recognize their role as catalysts for broader systemic shifts, ensuring that the knowledge and practices developed within academic settings translate into real-world impact. Going further than the institutional level, the Whole-Society Approach calls for HEIs to extend their influence beyond academia, actively engaging with communities, policymakers, and industries to co-create innovative solutions. This requires rethinking traditional university-community relationships, combining knowledge dissemination and knowledge co-creation. By partnering with local and global stakeholders, HEIs can help implement scalable solutions that drive sustainable change at multiple levels.

As we look beyond 2030, HEIs should sharpen their mission as drivers of systemic transformation. Strengthening ESD, fostering interdisciplinarity, and embracing cultural engagement are fundamental to this vision. HEIs must continue to move beyond their traditional role as knowledge providers and become enablers of action, preparing students, faculty, and partners not just to understand sustainability but to practice it in diverse settings. The future we want is not predetermined; it is shaped by the decisions and commitments we make today. HEIs have the responsibility and opportunity to take part in this transformation and to give strong impulses, ensuring that sustainability is not an aspirational ideal but a lived reality for the present and generations to come.

06 Higher Education: A Force for Change



by **Piyamitr Sritara**, *President, Mahidol University, Thailand*



Mahidol University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

As we approach 2030, higher education plays an increasingly vital role in sustainable development. Universities serve as catalysts for transformation—bridging research, policy, and community engagement to create real-world impact. While significant progress has been made in integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), challenges remain. Accelerating progress toward sustainability is both urgent and necessary. A paradigm shift is needed to enhance efforts, as fragmented implementation and limited community engagement continue to hinder progress. Higher education institutions must drive systemic, multi-sectoral, and science-based change. To be effective, global goals must be adapted to local realities, ensuring solutions are research-backed, culturally relevant, and economically viable.

To create a profound impact, universities must go beyond traditional research and focus on real-world implementation by bridging knowledge with action. This includes action-oriented curricula, expanded field-based learning, and equipping students with problem-solving skills. Real-world applications should extend to policy advocacy, influencing sustainability at national and global levels through research and evidence-based insights. An African proverb states, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” True progress requires strong multi-stakeholder collaboration. Governments, private sectors, and academia must work together to scale impact. A collaborative approach ensures that knowledge is not confined within academic institutions but is actively applied to benefit society at large.

To effectively contribute to sustainable development, universities must integrate sustainability into all core functions—education, research, operations, and capacity building. Leadership, clear direction, and effective communication are essential to embed sustainability in institutional frameworks. Redefining education models by integrating the SDGs into interdisciplinary curricula fosters hands-on, project-based learning. This bridges theory and practice, enabling students to develop prototypes and policy recommendations that drive innovation. Universities should

also encourage entrepreneurship by supporting students in developing start-ups focused on sustainability solutions.

Research should address both immediate and long-term societal challenges by advancing community-based innovation. Universities must align projects with pressing local issues, ensuring academic knowledge translates into actionable solutions. Digital transformation plays a crucial role by expanding access to expertise through open-access platforms. Before extending their impact beyond campus borders, universities must first lead by example through sustainable operations. This includes minimizing their carbon footprint, implementing zero-waste initiatives, and adopting green building standards. Becoming sustainability hubs means pioneering innovations in renewable energy, urban planning, and conservation efforts. Universities can further enhance their impact by forming regional sustainability alliances and collaborating with other institutions and industries to develop large-scale solutions.

Through the *Empowering Climate-Resilient Communities and Livelihoods* project, Mahidol University collaborates with philanthropic organizations to provide renewable energy solutions, promote sustainable agriculture, and deliver green skills training. Initiatives such as converting waste into biogas to improve waste management, transforming waste into fertilizer to support local farming, and introducing alternative farming techniques help communities reduce costs and generate income. This project exemplifies a vision that unites experts across disciplines, translating research into action while fostering community-driven enterprises for economic sustainability.

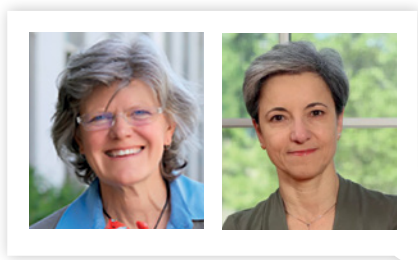
While Agenda 2030 provides a strong foundation, refining its approach post-2030 is essential for a more effective sustainability framework. Enhancing communication among stakeholders, clearly defining sector roles, and ensuring long-term community engagement must be priorities. Government policies and university research alone cannot guarantee success—strong partnerships, steady funding, and sustained community involvement are key to meaningful progress. Sustainable livelihoods must be central to future SDGs. Building trust and engaging key community members ensures long-term commitments. Strategies should be adaptable, supported by tangible models that strengthen local economies and encourage self-sufficiency. To meet evolving challenges, universities must adopt flexible, interdisciplinary education models that empower students to develop sustainable solutions tailored to regional needs.

“While Agenda 2030 provides a strong foundation, refining its approach post-2030 is essential for a more effective sustainability framework. Enhancing communication among stakeholders, clearly defining sector roles, and ensuring long-term community engagement must be priorities.”

Measuring impact requires a holistic approach that goes beyond traditional metrics. Current indicators often focus on quantitative outcomes rather than systemic change. The refined agenda must integrate qualitative impact assessments, particularly in areas like capacity building and behavioral transformation, for a more comprehensive evaluation of progress. Universities should work with global sustainability organizations to standardize measurement frameworks and create benchmarks for meaningful impact.

As we shape the path forward, we invite universities worldwide to embrace their role as agents of transformation. The time for action is now. Through deeper collaboration, redefined priorities, and a commitment to knowledge-driven impact, we can collectively build a sustainable future beyond 2030. By fostering innovation, encouraging interdisciplinary cooperation, and embracing digital advancements, higher education can continue to drive positive global change. The journey toward sustainability is not just an academic endeavor—it is a shared mission that requires unity, resilience, and unwavering commitment.

07 Beyond sustainable — imagining a regenerative future



by **Teri C. Balser**, *Professor of Sustainability and former Provost*,
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University of Calgary, Canada



**The University of Calgary is part of the
IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 2:
Zero Hunger**

Approaching 2030

As we approach the renewal/end of the UN Agenda 2030, we have an opportunity (and responsibility) to reflect on the past and consider the future. The Agenda and its attendant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were intended to move us from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) toward a broader consideration of sustainable development. However, while comprehensive and important, they have been met with minimal success to date. Critiques have included concerns about unrealistic breadth, a lack of embedded accountability, and inadequate consideration of the rights and needs of Indigenous peoples.

“We need to question whether western economic norms focused on “development-as-growth” should be a global aspiration. Any future Agenda or Goals must recognize biological reality and planetary limits.”

Perhaps even more concerning is that our ideas about sustainable development have been built on an assumption of unlimited growth as desirable, and neglect the inherent and historical tensions between economic growth and ecological integrity. We need to question whether western economic norms focused on “development-as-growth” should be a global aspiration. Any future Agenda or Goals must recognize biological reality and planetary limits.

Two needs

We propose two critical needs for the next Agenda to consider: 1) the need to intentionally transition from goals focused on sustainability and sustainable development to goals focused on “regenerativity” and regenerative development; and 2) the need to develop and engage a next generation of leaders who can assume the mantle of responsibility for sustainability and global regeneration and imagine different futures. We share an example of bringing the two needs together using a pedagogical model and university learning experience that asks students to imagine a future that moves us beyond the SDGs and toward a set of real-world “regenerative development goals” that call for us to not just sustain, but to actively improve ecosystems, food production, waste management, energy generation, and social systems.

Imagining a regenerative future

As we move into an increasingly uncertain and volatile future, we need the ability to imagine a regenerative future. Toward this end, we developed a course—The Future of the Global City—to guide 55 second-year undergraduate students on a journey to imagine the far-future and enlisting their help in devising solutions for the challenges we will face. The course uses active and project-based learning to challenge the students to envision cities 50 years from now and consider how we will address issues such as population, waste, food, transportation, energy, water and housing along with associated social challenges and change. They were given three interrelated projects to complete during an academic semester. First, we presented them with a scenario proposed by Ricky Lanusse [1], set in the year 2075, about apocalyptic collapse after we use the last drop of oil. We asked them to imagine a different story, following a different trajectory. They chose between “return to Gaia” (ecological solutions) or “technological salvation” (technological solutions) as the basis for how humanity survives past collapse. Second, we challenged them to tackle the idea of regenerative versus sustainable development and draft the next generation of goals for the United Nations. We asked them to analyze both the

MDGs and SDGs and propose a set of Regenerative Development Goals (RDGs) based on life-cycle analysis, circular economy, and ecosystem regeneration principles. Finally, we asked them to revisit the city they imagined in their post-collapse scenario and, using their RDGs, draft a “Regenerative Development Plan” for that city, offering a blueprint for how to take a place from the brink of collapse to one that is alive and thriving.

What we learned

As expected, our brilliant and creative students openly and enthusiastically tackled the challenge we gave them. Yet, we also saw how they can be constrained by social norms and status quo. Their ideas were innovative and hopeful, although many struggled to think beyond incremental changes to what we have now and see transformative possibilities for a future arriving decades from now. There was an –perhaps very human– attachment to current trajectories versus novel solutions, even if only speculative ones.

In the end, this first offering of our course has reinforced for us the idea that speculation is central to conceptualizing a regenerative future, and in our work as university professors and academic leaders we need to develop student capacity to imagine the far-future, and engage our learners in articulating alternative pathways into, through, and out of global social, environmental, and economic collapse. We believe that it is entirely possible to expand students’ capabilities and train them to see beyond the near future or today. It will take consistent and deliberate effort, but when we believe in them, they can do it!

08 The Role of Higher Education in Accelerating Sustainable Development: A Critical Reflection



by **Mark Manns**, Project Officer, and **Julia Heiss**, Chief of Section for Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO

Halfway through the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the ambitious targets remain largely unmet, with only 17 % of SDG targets being on track as of today, and growing recognition that bold and transformative actions are needed if the goals are to be achieved.

One crucial area where progress has been insufficient is in the integration of higher education into the global sustainability

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agenda and vice versa. While the SDGs acknowledged academia as a key partner in driving sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022), they did not place sufficient emphasis on the transformative role of higher education in this process.

The Role of Higher Education in Driving Change

Higher education has long been recognized as a critical vehicle for innovation, research, and the development of knowledge and skills necessary for addressing the complex challenges of sustainable development. Universities serve as transformative spaces where students are equipped with the knowledge, values, and competencies needed to act as responsible global citizens, who are capable of driving sustainability in their future careers and communities.

The UNESCO led Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda, framework and Roadmap, emphasizes the pivotal role higher education institutions play in educating for sustainability – not only in research and innovation, but more importantly by integrating sustainability into teaching and learning practices, curricula, and supporting community and local engagement. It further highlights that higher education should lead by example, demonstrating sustainability in their campus operations, and social responsibility initiatives (UNESCO, 2021; 2022).

However, the integration of ESD into higher education has been inconsistent. Many universities still treat sustainability as an isolated topic rather than embedding it across their curricula, research, and institutional policies (UNESCO, 2017; 2022). This fragmented approach limits the transformative potential of higher education and underscores the need for a more comprehensive, whole-of-institution approach to sustainability. Universities must be proactive in embedding ESD principles into all aspects of their operations—from the classroom to campus sustainability practices and community engagement—if they are to contribute meaningfully to the SDGs.

Rethinking the Role of Universities in Achieving the SDGs

Universities must realize their role not only as places of learning but also as **active agents of change within their communities and societies**. Research and innovation should generate knowledge and solutions that can be applied to real-world sustainability challenges. This requires a shift in the way universities engage with sustainability—moving beyond piecemeal initiatives to comprehensive, integrated

strategies that address sustainability at every level of the institution.

The role of HEIs is not confined to higher education exclusively. In practice, the contribution of HEIs is quite **significant to creating a continuum between all levels of education** to ultimately improve the educational experience and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2022). This ranges from training future and current teachers, making curricula adjustments and developing new curricula, nurturing ideas and new pedagogical approaches, instilling fundamental values through various learning methods and platforms, and cultivating innovations -including technological ones.

Moreover, universities must work in partnership with other stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, and local communities (UNESCO 2021, 2022). The 2030 Agenda calls for collaborative action across sectors, and **higher education is uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between these actors**, facilitating dialogue, knowledge sharing, and the co-creation of sustainable solutions. UNESCO's ESD networks and partnerships, such as the ESD-Net and the Greening Education Partnership, leverage HEIs, particularly the UNESCO Chair and UNITWIN programmes to offer a blueprint for how universities can contribute to global sustainability efforts.

Greater collaboration between universities and local communities can offer critical expertise and support to local ESD initiatives and enable cross-cultural knowledge sharing. The Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) on ESD network of 190 institutions coordinated by the United Nations University (UNU) is a good example of such a collaboration. These RCEs focus on advancing ESD locally, addressing sustainability challenges through research and capacity building, and adapting the global goals to local contexts.

The Path Forward: A Call for Action

As we approach the final years of the 2030 Agenda, universities must be empowered to play a central role in the implementation of ESD and other sustainability initiatives, both within their institutions and in their communities. If universities are to fulfill their potential as catalysts for sustainable development, they must move beyond traditional academic silos and embrace a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to education. This includes integrating sustainability into university governance, policy, and practice, as well as strengthening the capacity of educators and students to engage with sustainability challenges.

This potential to drive transformative change requires a renewed commitment to integrating sustainability across all aspects of academic and institutional life. The ESD for 2030 roadmap offers a valuable framework for this transformation, but it is up to universities and their leaders to take the necessary steps and demonstrate the important role of universities to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 and beyond.

09 Research-based teaching for critical thinking skills



by **Margareth Hagen**, Rector, **Sigrunn Eliassen**, Vice-dean for Education, and **Øyvind Fiksen**, Vice-dean for Ocean, University of Bergen, Norway



The University of Bergen is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 14: Life Below Water

Universities persist through shifting political landscapes. An enduring goal for universities is to nurture critical thinking and to connect teaching and learning with research. To empower our students, we need to include them in the act of doing research, to let them do what scientists do, as an integral part of courses and programs we offer. This is important for students to value scientific knowledge and build capacity to find solutions and reach the SDGs. Even if most of our students never become researchers, these skills are transferable to other parts of civic and personal life. Opening gates to active research experiences strengthens curiosity and self-determination in students – and the Agenda 2030 at the same time.

Agenda 2030 and the UNESCO roadmap towards Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) have been sources of inspiration and a call to action for universities around the globe. Higher education institutions have embedded SDGs into curriculum, established courses, educational programs and degrees, engaged with international organizations and initiated change towards sustainability at our own campuses. We build traction and competence as we go and gradually improve our approach to teaching and learning within ESD. Here we point to an element that deserves more attention – the research-teaching nexus, and the link between Agenda 2030 and our teaching practices.

Universities teach and do research, and both should be further integrated at undergraduate levels. Naturally, curricula and

“Opening gates to active research experiences strengthens curiosity and self-determination in students – and the Agenda 2030 at the same time.”

teaching are based on research, most teachers are active researchers, and we often talk about research in classes. However, only close contact with the research process itself can show how reliable, trusted knowledge is created in communities of researchers through asking questions, perform experiments, and how important a culture for open discourse is for the whole process. With first-hand research experiences, students become better able to understand the complexity and connectivity of the SDGs, and at communicating trade-offs and solutions to achieve the goals.

Thinking like scientists requires skills like asking relevant questions, knowing how to turn them into testable hypotheses, how to confront hypotheses with data and identify reliable information. These skills are essential not only for those entering research, but to everyone wrestling with wicked, interconnected and complex problems like the SDGs.

Our students' ability to use tools and technology make them capable to set up experiment and analyse the results. These skills strengthen employability, entrepreneurship and innovation, and prepare them for civic- and real-world sustainability problems, gives them deep-dives into complexity and radical or incremental improvements of society- it empowers them to drive meaningful change.

All active participants in society – not only researchers must communicate – through use of credible, scientific literature, feedback from others and sensitivity to evidence, acknowledging uncertainty, and being open to change their views based on numbers, logic, and rationality. Education with active research elements stimulates these values in communication, critical thinking and self-awareness of biases. This also illustrates how science contributes knowledge, and how it is challenged and discussed in the research community.

What does this mean for education at universities, in practice? First, it is not enough to have a scientific curriculum. We need to engage students in inquiry-based activities, become more process oriented, and give students authentic research experiences, as pointed out by for instance Griffiths (2004) and Healey (2005). Universities can deepen students' learning experience by making them active partners rather than passive recipients. This involvement can take various forms, such as being part of research projects, problem-based learning, research placements, or more structured course-based undergraduate research experiences (CURE).

As an example, the University of Bergen has introduced [a student journal](#) (1), and student conferences, featuring [talks and posters](#) (2), for students to present their research findings and engage in scholarly discourse with peers. These events foster a sense of community and encourage students to develop their ability to think, act and communicate like scientists. Also, it gives an opportunity to build their CV or portfolio during their education and showcase concrete projects to future employers.

Universities can advance sustainable development by equipping students with the skills and mindset necessary to address complex challenges. With this type of research-active teaching, we empower the next generation to drive meaningful change and create sustainable solutions for the future.

10 Backsliding while accelerated advancement is needed



by **Michael Gaebel**, *Director of Higher Education Policy, European University Association (EUA)*

In 2021, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, the European University Association (EUA) surveyed the higher education sector regarding their policies

and actions towards greening and the SDGs [1]. Responses came promptly and in large numbers, confirming a high and rising commitment. However, since then, the world has changed significantly, and a recent follow-up survey aims to assess how this has impacted the commitment of higher education institutions. Here are a few reflections based on the results of the first survey.

The nearly 400 responses showcased that institutions were addressing environmental sustainability in their education and research missions and were actively involved in a broad range of forward-thinking activities—both to reduce their own institutions' environmental footprint and to contribute to society. The survey deliberately focused on greening, as this seemed easier to assess, but it also addressed the broader concept of sustainability and the SDGs—which turned out to be the common approach (69%) for institutional strategies. Responses were almost evenly divided between those offering only some activities and those with a comprehensive institutional policy in place, with a trend toward the latter.

When asked why they engaged, responses highlighted institutional values, engagement with students, staff, and the wider community, as well as the third mission. Institutions confirmed concrete impacts, particularly a better social climate on campus, but also noted that many of their actions were too recent to be fully assessed.

At the time of the first survey, 2030 was “just a decade away”, there was a sense of urgency about stepping up action, if not to achieve the SDGs, but at least to fail them as closely as possible. And while the overall situation was becoming increasingly alarming—with rising consumption, carbon emissions, and climate change—developments in public policy appeared promising: The European Union launched its European Green Deal [2] with the promise to become the first climate neutral continent. Between 2019 and 2021, green parties and topics enjoyed their highest levels of support

“Partnerships with municipalities, communities and companies can bring concrete improvement to the local society and economy. This can also help to convince and involve those who feel threatened by sustainable development – which is a considerable part of the population.”

ever in the EU parliamentary and several EU member state elections. Importantly, young people took to the streets on Fridays, concerned about their future, and there was also some militant action—highly contested but at least as visible and disruptive as the farmers’ protests over European subsidies. For society at large, greening and sustainability had become more accepted long-term goals, and a sentiment of engagement and urgency spread.

While COVID-19 led to a temporary reduction in carbon emissions due to decreased mobility, its overall impact on most SDG goals was significantly negative—especially regarding poverty, health, the economy, and education, with the greatest impact on disadvantaged and marginalized groups. As the pandemic was fading, Russia launched its war against Ukraine, with devastating consequences for the country and its citizens. Beyond the immense human loss and suffering, with so many people killed, injured, displaced, and living in constant fear, the war also resulted in an estimated \$1.1 trillion loss in capital and GDP for Ukraine [3]. An analysis illustrates how the conflict has affected each of the SDGs, from SDG 1, with the poverty rate rising from 5.5% in 2021 to 24% in 2024, to SDG 4 Education, and SDG 13 Climate action in a country increasingly devastated by war. It also highlights the fact that peace appears only towards the end of the SDG list. War may have appeared as a declining phenomenon, in the overly optimistic era when the SDGs were established. Importantly, regarding SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals, the analysis underlines that “*Navigating an uncertain, conflict-ridden, ‘deglobalized’ world in order to achieve progress on SDGs could be nearly impossible.*” [4]

Indeed, in times of geopolitical tensions marked by real and trade wars, the already fragile narrative of global unity striving for common goals seems increasingly out of place. The U.S. recently rejected the SDGs, and exited the Paris Agreement, to focus on MAGA (Make America Great Again) and DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency). To be seen what direction Europe will take under its new Commission focussing on competitiveness; its key documents, such as the recently published Competitiveness Compass and the Communication on a Union of Skills, reference social inclusion, cohesion, and the green transition, which is good, but not the SDGs. In the recent European and several member state level elections, the emphasis has been on defence, lowering energy and consumer costs, and restricting migration, with almost no mention of sustainable development, climate and environment – in sharp contrast to the previous round.

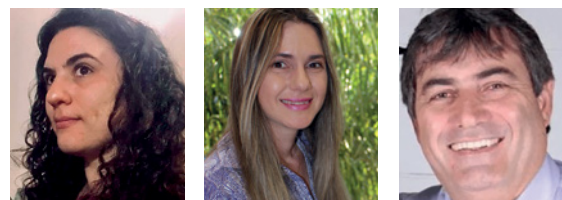
How does this shift impact the agendas of higher education institutions? Back in 2019, the International Association of Universities (IAU), together with other sector-representatives, made a strong case at the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF): *None of the 17 SDGs can be achieved without the contribution of higher education and research.* But what is the scope for it, given that big politics focus on other, seemingly more urgent goals, such as outpacing one another in defence, energy, and trade?

A possible development could be that institutions sustain their activities on campus, and in the regional and local context, and play a more important role than the ambitions set at European-level and in national policies and guidelines. Partnerships with municipalities, communities and companies can bring concrete improvement to the local society and economy. This can also help to convince and involve those who feel threatened by sustainable development – which is a considerable part of the population.

But would universities have the necessary resources? Already in 2021, one in two institutions reported the lack of resources as the biggest obstacle. Since, the situation has not improved, given rising costs, and funding cuts. In addition, attention is likely to shift to the new funding priorities, more in line with competitiveness. It is therefore important to contribute to the ongoing discussions on Europe’s future, to underline that investment in the SDGs to achieve long-term sustainability, resilience and prosperity, forms part of enhancing Europe’s competitiveness.

EUA together with members and partners intends to explore these and other questions in a “Spotlight on Sustainability” year, which started in April 2025, with its [Annual Conference “Connecting the dots on sustainability and resilience”](#) [5], and the follow-up survey.

11 Leave no one behind: the UNICAMP’s experience in transforming society



by **Thalita dos Santos Dalbelo**, Coordinator of Sustainability, **Juliana Aparecida Fracarolli**, Assistant professor, School of Agricultural Engineering, and **Ariovaldo José da Silva**, Dean of the school of agricultural engineering (2023-2027), School of Agricultural Engineering, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil.



UNICAMP is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 1: No Poverty

Progress toward the 2030 Agenda remains insufficient. The world faces pressing challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, and resource depletion, requiring transformative actions beyond conventional approaches (Lozano, 2011; Lipschutz, 2016). Higher education institutions, especially universities, play a pivotal role in addressing these issues by advancing knowledge, fostering sustainability, and preparing future leaders (Cortese, 2003; Marcovitch, 2012). This article explores how universities can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting necessary transformations and showcasing how innovative institutional practices – such as UNICAMP's Ecological Corridors project – can accelerate sustainable progress.

Achieving the SDGs requires systemic transformations across sectors. Governments and institutions must enforce sustainability policies effectively, ensuring transparency in achieving targets (Dalbello, 2021). Investments in renewable energy, circular economy models, and sustainable infrastructure need to increase, supported by public and private sectors (Lozano, 2014). Solutions must be interdisciplinary and collaborative, integrating expertise across fields and fostering partnerships among academia, industry, and society (Bizerril, 2018). Education for sustainable development is essential, requiring curriculum reforms that promote critical thinking and equip students to address global challenges (Cortese, 2003). Inclusivity and social justice must also be prioritized to ensure no one is left behind, with policies advancing gender equality, social inclusion, and equitable resource distribution.

Universities are central to sustainable development through research, innovation, and serving as sustainability models. Beyond traditional education, universities must actively contribute to societal transformation. UNICAMP has made notable progress by integrating sustainability into campus operations, such as emission monitoring, renewable energy adoption, sustainable drainage systems, and expanded green spaces (Ávila et al., 2017). Active mobility and circular economy initiatives further demonstrate its environmental commitment. UNICAMP also promotes inclusivity, welcoming refugees, Indigenous students, and individuals with disabilities, reflecting the principles of "Transforming Our World" and "Leave No One Behind." This approach ensures higher education is accessible to all, aligning with broader social sustainability goals.

Among its most innovative initiatives is the Ecological Corridors project [1], designed to connect preserved areas within the Zeferino Vaz campus and Fazenda Argentina to surrounding ecological fragments. This initiative aims to reduce the isolation of native vegetation patches, enhance genetic flow of flora and fauna, and increase species survival by enabling seed dispersal and animal movement. It also includes 217,000m² of

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ecological corridors, 92 meters of fauna crossings, 6,500 meters of fencing, and 300,000m² of agroforestry planting zones used as living laboratories. These corridors help reduce roadkill near ecological crossings and improve biodiversity indicators, while reinforcing the role of the university as a living model of sustainable land management. With a budget of R\$ 6.2 million, the project exemplifies how universities can integrate teaching, research, community outreach, and conservation into a single transformative effort.

Universities can also serve as hubs for knowledge dissemination, linking research to practical applications. Collaborations with local communities, policymakers, and industries enable universities to address real-world challenges and implement innovative solutions. Research initiatives should focus on renewable energy, water management, biodiversity conservation, and resilient urban planning (Alshuwaikhat, 2008), generating knowledge and driving policy recommendations and technological innovations for a sustainable future. International cooperation is crucial, as demonstrated by UNICAMP's participation in global networks like the International Association of Universities Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development Global Cluster (IAU-HESD Global Cluster), the International Sustainable Campus Network (ISCN), and the Universitas GreenMetric, fostering knowledge-sharing and collaboration worldwide. Strengthening such partnerships allows universities to collectively advance sustainability through shared expertise and resources.

12 Reclaiming Education's Central Role in the SDGs



by **Jacob Blasius**, Executive Director, Global Student Forum

An unsafe geopolitical climate – rife with conflict and economic uncertainty – has put global cooperation at risk. Against this tense backdrop, civic freedoms are eroding worldwide at the

very time we need more engagement, not less. Today, 72.4% of the world's people live in highly repressive countries, and only 40 out of 198 nations have open civic space [1]. In many

places, even minor dissent is brutally punished. This shrinking civic space directly threatens education: student activists are censored, campus debates curtailed, academics face harassment. When students and scholars are silenced, society loses critical watchdogs and innovators. Dialogue and discovery are stifled – precisely when collective problem-solving is most urgent.

More than halfway to 2030, the world is far off track on SDG 4: Quality Education. If current trends continue, one in six children will still be out of school by 2030 – a true global learning crisis. Education underpins all the SDGs, yet it remains underprioritized. As UNESCO warns, if we fail to achieve SDG 4, none of the other global goals will be achieved. Indeed, the UN's progress report shows only 17% of SDG targets are on track [2]. In such a context, neglecting education is dangerously short-sighted.

Now is the time for the academic community to unite and assert its role. Launched in 2013, the UN's Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) brings together education NGOs, teacher associations, and student organizations, giving our sector a collective voice in global processes. Through this platform, academics and students champion education, academic freedom and knowledge-sharing in the SDG agenda. Such unity is powerful: by presenting a united front, the education community can push back against policies that restrict academic freedom or undercut education funding and advocate for opening civic space and investing in learning.

As the 2030 deadline nears, a rapid acceleration of effort is needed – especially in education. At the same time, we must already plan for what comes after 2030. The UN is looking ahead to the next chapter of global goals, and it's vital that the education sector helps shape that future agenda to ensure knowledge remains central.

To truly transform our world, we need to build concrete mechanisms that empower students, academics, and higher education institutions as active and equal contributors to sustainable development efforts. This goes beyond symbolic invitations to conferences – it requires structural change in how we collaborate.

Here are a few steps in that direction:

- 1. Institutionalize Representation:** Include student and faculty voices in decision-making on sustainable development at all levels, from campus committees to international councils.

“When students and scholars are silenced, society loses critical watchdogs and innovators. Dialogue and discovery are stifled – precisely when collective problem-solving is most urgent.”

- 2. Protect Academic Freedom and Civic Participation:** Firmly uphold the rights of students and scholars to speak, protest, and research freely. Campuses must remain safe spaces for debate and innovation, so that academic communities can continue to generate the ideas and social movements that drive progress.

- 3. Forge Partnerships for Innovation:** Treat academia as an equal partner in co-creating sustainable solutions, translating research into on-the-ground impact – from community health initiatives to green technology development, and share knowledge globally.

Despite the challenges, I remain optimistic about the education community's collective power. Across the world, students are marching for climate justice and scholars are turning research into solutions. This energy must be harnessed. By reclaiming civic space and prioritizing education now, we can still rescue the SDGs and carry their vision forward.

This path forward demands courage and unity from higher education leaders. We must speak up for truth, defend the exchange of ideas, and insist on long-term investments in education. Our message to governments and international forums is clear: education is not peripheral – it is central to solving global crises.

Now is the time to act; with only a few years left until 2030, every decision counts. Let us – the global education community – be bold and united. By empowering students, scholars and institutions as full partners, we can achieve the 2030 goals, laying the groundwork for an even more ambitious agenda beyond. In an uncertain world, doubling down on cooperation, knowledge and inclusion is our best path forward. Together, we can transform our world – but only if we prioritize and unleash the power of education.

13 Reflections on Education for Sustainable Development



by **Sunungurai Dominica Chingarande**,
Vice Chancellor, Women's University in
Africa, Zimbabwe

Our understanding of sustainability is built on the early Brundtland statement that sustainable development is meeting present needs without compromising the ability future generations to meet their own needs (1987). Sustainable Development is a response to environmental challenges and changes, implying that environmental sustainability is interdependent with social sustainability, and vice versa. These two also intersect with the economic and political sustainability that are themselves linked. Within the discourse of sustainable

“Countries are measured on whether ESD concepts are present in policy, curriculum, teacher education, and student assessments, rather than on whether the inclusion is relevant for engaging in climate action (Kwauk, 2020). The analysis of 47 country Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) from 2019 suggests that countries are not proactively engaging with these targets.”

development, UNESCO emphasises new educational eco-systems including the changing role of education institutions in mentoring students, rather than just teaching in a traditional sense of imparting knowledge, through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD empowers learners with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to make informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society. It is a lifelong learning process and an integral part of quality education. It enhances the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of learning. It is holistic and transformational, and it encompasses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy, and the learning environment itself. This opinion piece presents reflections on ESD as a critical tool for sustainable development.

Framework for ESD Measurement

SDG 4 is monitored using as the indicators that were set out in the SDG Agenda at 4.7.1. These are (i) global citizenship education and (ii) ESD are mainstreamed in: (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment. This goes beyond curriculum reform, for instance aiming at adding climate change content into existing curriculum to identify various pathways to the deeper ontological transformation of education. For example, by empowering learners with skills for the green economy, universities could ensure that their graduates can contribute to the green transition and find employment. In order to reach the full transformative potential of SDG Target 4.7, building bridges and overcoming silo-thinking is of importance. Education should provide people with the knowledge, skills, and values they need to take part in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st century (UN Secretary-General, 2012). It is no longer enough for education to provide basic literacy and numeracy; it should equip individuals to be agents for sustainable change and to be able to tackle the global challenges. Recent discourses on the purpose of education have raised the concept of ‘regenerative education’ that frame education as an important tool to forge a path towards a more sustainable and just future (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021).

Of particular relevance for ESD monitoring are the following sub targets of the SDGs to be achieved by 2030:

- 4.5 – eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- 4.7 – ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through [ESD] and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.
- 12.8 – ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature,
- 13.3 – improve education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning.

It is important to note that the measurement framework for these targets is not focused on substance but on prevalence. For example, countries are measured on whether ESD concepts are present in policy, curriculum, teacher education, and student assessments, rather than on whether the inclusion is relevant for engaging in climate action (Kwauk, 2020). The analysis of 47 country Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) from 2019 suggests that countries are not proactively engaging with these targets. For example, less than half of VNRs’ education discussions referenced sustainable development.

Conclusion

ESD empowers people to change their thinking and approaches towards a sustainable future. This can be facilitated by enhancing opportunities for quality education focused on sustainable development. For this to promote social transformation, it calls for the redesign of educational pedagogies and empowerment of people to build knowledge, skills, values and behaviours critical for sustainable development. It also underscores the need to integrate sustainable development themes, such as climate change, gender equality, and health, among others, within formal, non-formal, and informal education, strengthening skills relevant to sustainable development and promoting collaboration of diverse stakeholders on this agenda.

14 Commonwealth Universities and the UN Sustainable Development Goals



by **Colin Riordan**, *Secretary General, Association of Commonwealth Universities*

'The United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and it will no longer reaffirm them as a matter of course.' This unequivocal statement by the United States Mission to the UN, made at the 58th Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly on 4 March 2025, is a serious blow to the prospects of making a reality of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted — with strong United States support — on 25 September 2015. This comes in addition to the disappointing progress made over the last decade, which makes a successful conclusion to Agenda 2030 appear further away than ever. Whether the inadequacy of resource and lack of binding commitments are to blame, or whether the project itself was too diffuse and excessively ambitious from the start, the fact remains that there are few areas where a clear track record and route to success in 2030 are evident. Climate change in particular — which the Trump administration rejects as a concept, let alone a policy driver — proceeds on its apparently inevitable course despite the many meetings, conferences and resolutions that are intended to slow and reverse it.

Yet universities exist to solve difficult and intractable problems, both through leading-edge research and through educating the work-force of the future. The 400 members of the Association of Commonwealth Universities across more than 40 countries remain committed to deploying the SDGs as a roadmap to addressing the grand challenges that confront humanity in the coming decades. Whilst 65% of them are based in developing countries, our members' concerns go beyond their immediate national priorities.

Research conducted by the ACU with the British Council has shown the manifold ways in which universities support sustainable development through international collaboration. Fostering and supporting equitable research partnerships is

“The complex interlinking of the SDGs means that an international, interinstitutional, interdisciplinary approach is likely to be more successful both in contributing to the required knowledge base and to the implementation of any proposed solutions.”

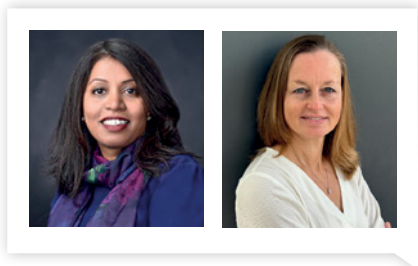
a key part of that process, for which the ACU has produced a toolkit that helps institutions overcome the most common hurdles. The report finds that the SDGs often form part of these partnerships even when they are not explicitly included, creating a virtuous circle where institutional and global strategies for achieving development goals are aligned. Greater awareness among universities in high income countries of the challenges faced by those located in middle- and low-income countries benefits all parties. Moreover, the complex interlinking of the SDGs means that an international, interinstitutional, interdisciplinary approach is likely to be more successful both in contributing to the required knowledge base and to the implementation of any proposed solutions.

International higher education partnerships in themselves are, therefore, a key underpinning for the SDGs. Yet the Commonwealth offers distinctive advantages to this kind of co-operation. As a values-based organisation, the Commonwealth in its Charter recognises the importance of sustainable development. There is even an explicit reference to being 'guided by internationally agreed development goals.' In fact, the Commonwealth Charter (agreed three years before the SDGs) looks in many ways like a blueprint for them. The threads of the SDGs, then, are woven into the very fabric of the Commonwealth. If the UN had not already done so, the Commonwealth would have needed to invent such a framework, or some similar method of achieving the aspirations set out in its Charter. As the ACU works with our member universities we are inspired by the values and ambitions set out in the Charter and guided by the SDGs in putting them into practice.

Working within the Commonwealth framework confers other benefits on our members in their commitment to the SDGs. As the accredited voice of higher education for the Commonwealth, the ACU can in principle work with all 56 member governments, and does indeed do so on the various issues that arise. The Commonwealth Charter stresses the value of diversity, shared culture and language, and the rule of law, all of which is reflected in ACU member universities. When tackling global problems as delineated by the SDGs, the ability for these extraordinarily diverse institutions to work together on a common basis is hugely beneficial.

In a world where US leadership in international development has been replaced by denunciation, defunding and disruption, the post-war consensus has collapsed. Old alliances are rent asunder and friends must be found where they can be. The Commonwealth, and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, can continue to provide a delivery framework for a revised, better focussed set of goals that have a clearer path to implementation. Despite the abolition of USAID and funding reductions in the UK and elsewhere, this can continue to give us hope for the future.

15 Responsible global engagement for transformative journeys



by **Vinitha Gengatharan**, former Assistant Vice-President, Global Engagement & Partnerships, and **Katrin Kohl**, Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education towards Sustainability, York University, Canada



York University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 4: Quality Education

Internationalization in universities is often associated with student mobility, research collaborations and partnerships, incorporating global perspectives in the classroom, most recently a focus on delivering programs in countries prioritized for student recruitment or establishing branch campuses abroad. However, universities must critically reassess their global engagement models in an era of climate urgency, geopolitical shifts, and digital transformation. In Canada, internationalization faces additional challenges, particularly with new immigration rules prompted by a housing crisis and the rising cost of living. In a world, characterized more by divide than unity, global engagement is essential in promoting and accelerating progress towards the SDGs and fostering a truly interconnected global community. Drawing from the priorities outlined in the United Nations Pact for the Future (2024) – namely sustainable development and financing, peace and security, digital and technology cooperation, inclusion of youth and future generations, and reform of global governance – all reflecting a dire need for equitable global collaboration, this piece explores reflections on the crucial yet evolving role of universities and their future priorities in implementing responsible internationalization for global change.

Financing of responsible universities

Universities in Canada have been underfunded for years. With tuition freezes, and rising operational costs, many Canadian universities logically turned to international students as a source of income. However, with the recent limits on international student visas combined with increased financial requirements, Canada is becoming less attractive as a study destination. While the new regulations appeared sudden and unjustified to many universities that pursued responsible international student growth, universities must now turn this internationalization challenge into an opportunity.

“Offering opportunities to experience global community on campus and to study abroad teaches students to value diversity and recognize the need for collective and equitable actions. It also moves forward the understanding that education is vital for individual success, societal betterment, and global peace.”

As quantitative growth is currently limited, this is the time to reflect on study programmes' future orientation and transformative potential. Programmes, addressing global and local sustainability challenges and preparing for a changing world, offer innovative opportunity for real-world and purpose-driven engagement. With a diverse student population learning together and from one another in inter- and transdisciplinary curricula, programmes can enhance intercultural understanding. This will allow universities to seek the best talent from within and outside Canada, to rethink educating future leaders and future-ready graduates, to develop research and science to tackle global sustainability crises and simultaneously continue to enhance the workforce in Canada.

Education shapes societies. At the same time, global problems are complex and multilayered, and countries generally agree in cooperative problem solving. University graduates regularly take positions of societal influence or become decision makers. Additionally, professors and other university representatives are often perceived as honest brokers of information. Therefore, universities must continue to advocate for policies that provide sufficient funding to allow affordable access for all, broaden the diversity of learners and scholars, and secure epistemic pluralism in research to address global challenges.

Contributions to peace

UNESCO prominently articulates in its constitution that peace must be constructed in the minds of humans. Younger generations today are facing unprecedented levels of climate anxiety and geo-political strife. Addressing youth anxiety by striving for diverse communities and voices must be a priority for universities. Singling out one particular group and limiting immigration leads to the stigmatization of international students and scholars as “the other”. As much as no group causes the global problems, no one group can solve them alone. Educating students about sustainability challenges and the value of diversity in perspectives can empower them to act responsibly and become global citizens. Offering opportunities to experience global community on campus and to study abroad teaches students to value diversity and recognize the need for collective and equitable actions. It also moves forward the understanding that education is vital for individual success, societal betterment, and global peace.

Science, technology, innovation and digital cooperation

Where universities cannot achieve authentic international physical engagement, virtual mobility, online international collaborations, and digital research networks have created new possibilities. Technology offers an opportunity to dismantle barriers to internationalization by enabling students from diverse backgrounds to participate in global learning experiences. However, it is crucial to avoid carrying colonial perspectives or dominant behaviours into the digital space and to make the virtual a place of equitable and ethical collaboration with access ensured for all students, regardless of their geographic location.

Transforming governance

The future of internationalization must be inclusive, ethical, and values-driven. Universities must focus and draw understanding of success from offering equitable global learning opportunities, fostering ethical partnerships, and positively impacting the community. By shifting from a transactional to a values-driven model, universities can secure that their impact and current respected position in society will remain in the future.

In closing, universities are essential in addressing global sustainability challenges, from climate change and social inequality to peacebuilding, especially in the years as we aim to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Global engagement and dialogue are crucial factors in ensuring universities rise to this role equitably and internationalization must be more than an institutional strategy, it must directly contribute to a more just and sustainable world and shape the path forward within the priorities of the SDGs.

16 Student leadership for co-creating change and transforming higher education



by **Sonya Peres**, Senior Project Manager – Education, and **Oliver Yu Hurst**, Project Manager – Education, Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS-UK)

What role can higher education play in responding to a changing world? With five years left to Agenda 2030, the crux of this answer lies in fostering and encouraging student leadership.

Social and environmental challenges are inherently complex and entangled, and their proposed solutions tend to maintain

harmful status quos that hinder long-lasting, meaningful change. Universities, however, are well placed to address these wicked problems by facilitating genuine co-creation and whole institution approaches to respond to the 2030 Agenda.

Like the symbiotic relationship between pollinators and plants, universities can play a unique role engaging a range of stakeholders to make society more just and sustainable. Teaching, learning, and research can serve as powerful means through which to transform society. Students play an important role in ensuring their education contributes to sustainability for a number of reasons:

1. Students know the world they will be graduating into, and they understand the challenges that they will face after graduation. Therefore, they are well placed to support their institutions in ensuring their education is fit for purpose and addresses the societal challenges.
2. Young people around the world are facing high levels of anxiety related to the climate crisis (Hickman *et.al*, 2021). By working with students to transform education for sustainability, we are empowering students to take action and thus supporting students to address mental health and wellbeing.
3. Students possess important cultural and embodied knowledge, as well as lived experience, that should be included in responses to the climate crisis and recognised and valued within formal education spaces.

Responding to the need to involve students more meaningfully in these processes, the Responsible Futures programme was created in 2014 in the UK and has since demonstrated the power of students in leading Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within and beyond their institutions. Responsible Futures is a supported change programme and accreditation that partners students with their university to embed sustainability in the formal curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and campus cultures. For a decade, this programme has highlighted how student leadership is not simply about placing more responsibilities on students. It is about rethinking the student-teacher binary by recognizing students as active agents of change. Such transformative approaches to ESD reflect how universities have the potential to empower students with

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the knowledge, skills, and attributes to be the change they want to see in the world.

Collaborating with over 700 staff and students in over 50 colleges and universities worldwide, centering the student voice is the beating heart of the programme. Students partner on approaches and initiatives to embed sustainability in teaching and learning, including co-creating parts of modules, developing joint policies for sustainability, putting on events to encourage sustainability learning, using student coursework to respond to real life institutional challenges, engaging with employability staff to embed sustainability in careers programmes, and more. Students also lead audits and interview senior leadership teams to assess progress. These experiences support students to gain a behind-the-scenes understanding of what makes their education possible and provide the exciting opportunity to support their institutions to track and evaluate progress.

In 2023, Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS) and International Association of Universities (IAU) partnered to deliver an international pilot of Responsible Futures, working closely with seven selected universities and their students to design the programme and undergo student-led audits. In the pilot year, over 30 student auditors were supported to assess their institutions' progress integrating sustainability in learning. This process received positive feedback both by the institutions and the students involved.

The programme is now open to all institutions across the world and recognises the diversity of universities and their students. The programme fosters co-creation of education between students and their institutions and reflects institutional, local, national and regional contexts.

Students have been and will continue to be a force of nature in transforming education systems. The time is ripe for HEIs to ensure students are equipped to be the changemakers of today, and tomorrow.

17 Addressing Mental Health Challenges in Universities: Insights from the IAU SDG3 Cluster



by **Liv Raphael** (Head of IAU SDG3 Cluster), and **Marta Aymerich** (Director of eHealth Center), eHealth Center, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain*



This article is co-authored by members of the IAU HESD Cluster on SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, particularly among already vulnerable student populations. At the same time, institutional awareness around these challenges has increased and mental health is now high up on university agendas.

This situation has underscored the critical need for universities to reassess their role in addressing mental health challenges. Since October 2023, IAU SDG3 sub-cluster, comprising seven universities across five continents and spearheaded by the eHealth Center of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, within the IAU Global Cluster on HESD (Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development) has been exploring how higher education institutions can support both staff and students in fostering good mental health. The article looks at examples of emerging good practice, challenges, and ways forward, coming out of these discussions.

On one hand, **existing good practice** emerging from institutions included:

- Having an integrated approach to mental health by focusing on the full individual and their context.
- Conducting systematic evaluations of mental health burdens in institutions for a comprehensive understanding of current challenges in the university community, further segmented by specific collectives, such as academic staff, administrative and management staff, and students.
- Enhancing mental health literacy in the university community.
- Appreciating soft skills and their contribution to building resilience.
- And finally, going beyond providing basic psychological services towards offering more holistic, preventive, cross disciplinary and community-oriented approaches to foster health and wellbeing more widely.

On the other hand, **common shared challenges** were the following ones:

- An imbalance between the demand for mental health services and their availability, with demand for services sometimes outstripping supply due to funding constraints. In some cases, access barriers such as lack of awareness of offer, competing priorities, stigmatization, or preference for alternative support further hinder service utilization.

“As mental health challenges continue to rise in the post-pandemic era, universities must adopt a proactive and comprehensive approach. To transition from being service providers to active agents of change, universities must commit to cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustainable resource allocation.”

- Socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical factors contributing to disparities in access to mental health services, exacerbating existing inequalities.
- Focusing excessively on individual risk factors without sufficiently considering the broader social and environmental contexts, potentially contributing to further stigmatization.
- Insufficient funding and resources limiting the quality and reach of mental health support services within universities.
- Aspects of work demands, and institutional expectations can sometimes negatively impact on wellbeing and mental health problems.

Strategies for Improvement

Building on existing good practice, and considering current challenges, to enhance mental health support, universities should consider:

4. **Fomenting Preventive, Integrated and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches.** A shift towards more preventive, and integrated cross-disciplinary approaches to mental health, health, and well-being more widely.
5. **Increasing Awareness and Literacy.** Continuing to increase awareness and enhancing mental health literacy among staff and students to improve early detection and the ability to identify and seek out appropriate support.
6. **Supportive Environments.** Creating inclusive and supportive environments through well-designed physical spaces, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and integration of mental health concepts into the curriculum.
7. **Targeted Strategies.** Developing specific strategies to reach, engage and prioritize vulnerable populations and those most in need of support.
8. **Leadership and Advocacy.** Strengthening advocacy efforts to ensure mental health remains a priority on institutional and governmental agendas, securing necessary resources for sustained intervention.

9. **Measuring Impact.** Establishing key performance indicators and robust mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health initiatives, ensuring accountability and continued investment in mental health programs.

As mental health challenges continue to rise in the post-pandemic era, universities must adopt a proactive and comprehensive approach. To transition from being service providers to active agents of change, universities must commit to cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustainable resource allocation. A comprehensive university-wide approach should be paired with targeted strategies focusing on vulnerable populations. Furthermore, differentiated support should be provided for students, academic staff, management, and administrative personnel based on a characterization of the burden. A comprehensive approach to mental health should also consider the built environment and the broader community context. By prioritizing prevention, early intervention, and community empowerment, universities can become catalysts for societal resilience aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 3.4 on mental health and well-being. By embedding mental health strategies within their core institutional frameworks, integrating resilience-building into curricula, and fostering supportive social environments, universities can play a transformative role in advancing mental health and well-being and in building some of the skills and capacities required for navigating complexity. Leadership, sustained advocacy, and an ongoing commitment to innovation will be crucial in ensuring long-term management of mental health within higher education institutions. A healthy university community is, in turn a critical factor in fostering active engagement and leadership in pursuit of the broader sustainability agenda.

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18 The Green Transition and Student Agency: How Universities Can Close the Green Skills Gap for a Net-Zero World



by **Peter Kwasi Kodjie**, *Secretary General*; **Bismark Amefianu Kudoafor**, *Chief Technical Officer*; **James Kodjie**, *Senior Programmes Officer, All-Africa Students Union (AASU)* and **Emmanuel Owusu**, *National President, Graduate Students Association of Ghana (GRASAG), Ghana*.

The shift to net-zero economics requires workers with green skills who will push sustainability efforts throughout different business sectors. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) show a weak capability to fulfil this demand since they lack comprehensive sustainability competency incorporation into their educational programs. We argue that HEIs must assume a dual role: first, equipping students with competencies for a net-zero economy, and second, redefining their societal missions to prioritize sustainability.

Understanding the Green Skills Imperative

“Green skills are the necessary knowledge, attributes, and competencies to create a fairer, more sustainable future for all. Green skills are interdisciplinary and must include both technical and soft skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, systems thinking, and digital skills. Green skills are a golden thread that weave through multiple knowledge systems, including STEM, as well as the arts, humanities, and local and Indigenous ways of knowing[1].” For instance, in the energy sector, they enable the efficient integration of renewable energy sources. In the construction industry, they enable the construction of smart buildings. The financial sector requires green investment models together with ESG (Environmental Social Governance) measurement standards.

International commitments such as the Green Jobs for Youth Pact[2] supports youth and student development of green skills through enhanced collaboration between public

bodies education institutions and private enterprises. The Green Learning and Skills Observatory enables institutions to understand policy goals and labour market developments that help them adapt their curriculum to industrial requirements. SDG 4.7 and UNESCO’s Greening Education Partnership[3] advocate for integrating sustainability education across all educational levels to train learners with green economy competencies.

Most HEIs face difficulties in systematically integrating green skills approaches across disciplines; they limit themselves to standalone environmental science programs, hence failing to provide all students with the necessary competences to support a green transition as part of their job. Also, weak collaboration between educational institutions, policymakers and industry limits the workforce-readiness of graduates. Universities must implement reform which would make green skills a fundamental element of the curricula.

Challenges Hindering Green Skills Integration by HEIs

HEIs experience several difficulties when including green skills as part of their curriculum.

There is a need for capacity building of faculty as they lack the necessary competences sustainability topics and innovative pedagogical techniques which limits the HEI’s ability to integrate green skills to current curricula and thereby widening the knowledge gap and limiting effective instruction.

Rigid academic structures and bureaucracy delays in obtaining academic curriculum modifications limit opportunities to add interdisciplinary sustainability content into courses and to develop modern learning methods which properly educate students about new green competencies. Also, HEIs often maintain separate departments thus restricting valuable cross-disciplinary cooperation between fields such as economics, engineering and environmental sciences for solving sustainability problems. In effect, students lack opportunities to develop comprehensive sustainability expertise when their institution fails to support interdisciplinary programs.

The lack of funding support from both government agencies and private entities causes universities to maintain traditional educational programs instead of sustainability initiatives. Without dedicated financial support for green education programs, HEIs struggle to implement and expand their sustainability programs.

The traditional instructional approach creates difficulties in achieving hands-on experiential learning through project assignments because lecture classes with examination-based grading prove inadequate for sustainability education. Institutional learning models focused on experiences should replace traditional education methods to boost student involvement.

“The lack of funding support from both government agencies and private entities causes universities to maintain traditional educational programs instead of sustainability initiatives. Without dedicated financial support for green education programs, HEIs struggle to implement and expand their sustainability programs.”

Finally, the lack of student involvement in sustainability initiatives creates a perception of green skills as additional knowledge that does not directly align with the student's professional training.

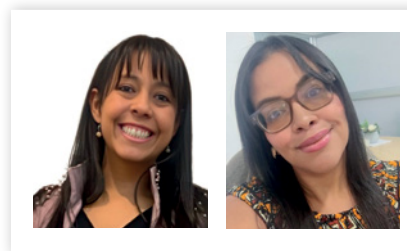
HEIs As Drivers of Green Skills: A Call to Action

1. HEIs should systematically incorporate sustainability throughout their educational strategies through official mission announcements, governance systems and strategic operational plans. HEIs should establish sustainability offices, such as the Students Organising for Sustainability International's Green Offices[4], through a dedicated funding model. This will allow the institution to coordinate their green initiatives and gradually integrate sustainability into campus operations.
2. HEIs should partner with businesses, policymakers and international organizations to create training programs that match employment needs within the emerging green job sector.
3. HEIs should expand digital learning and open learning platforms by offering more online courses, MOOCs and micro-credentials. This will open up opportunities for students in underserved regions.
4. HEIs should support student-led innovations and initiatives that drive the green transition. HEIs need to build substantial platforms that let students direct sustainability efforts through projects and research initiatives as well as policy work to demonstrate the value of green education. This can be done through mentoring services supplemented by financial backing and spaces for developing sustainable innovation.

Conclusion

Higher Education Institutions must transform from knowledge disseminators to sustainability architects because of the urgency of the green transition. The institutions must make green skills and student competency development for systemic transformation the foundation of their educational mission.

19 Colombian Universities as Global Change Agents: Bridging Territorial and Scientific Knowledge for Sustainable Development



by **Maria Claudia Coral**, Director of International Relations, Universidad Antonio Nariño in Bogotá and **Luisa F. Echeverría-King**, Director of Diplomacy and International Scientific Cooperation, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Barranquilla, Colombia



Antonio Nariño University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 2: Zero Hunger

Universities play a key role in implementing the 2030 Agenda by institutionalizing their commitment to sustainability and contributing to knowledge generation, critical citizenship, and public policy. Their impact becomes truly transformative when they bridge local action with the global agenda. To achieve this, universities must act as intermediaries between global knowledge and local needs, reforming teaching and research models to improve practical applicability and sustainability.

Institutions of higher education play a pivotal contribution to the development of our society, and they have societal responsibility, not only in training future leaders but also stimulating public awareness on sustainability. Locally tailored initiatives should integrate scientific knowledge with traditional wisdom, ensuring that research and education address real-world challenges while fostering inclusive and sustainable development. Sustainability must be embedded across research, teaching, social responsibility and community engagement. Universities must foster links between international research collaborations and local development efforts, ensuring tangible benefits for communities. However, lack of awareness, funding, and institutional support constitute main challenges. To overcome these, universities must strengthen community-based research, foster multi-stakeholder partnerships, and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Fostering international cooperation with local impact ensures research projects and global collaborations respond to local challenges. Strengthening institutional commitment to the SDGs, transforming educational models, and promoting *glocal* (willingness and capacity to think globally and act locally) collaboration will enable universities to drive sustainable

solutions and maximize their societal impact as emphasized in the National Policy Guidelines for Internationalization of Higher Education in Colombia.

This article explores two case studies that exemplify how Colombian universities are reimagining their engagement with sustainability through glocal strategies by fostering inclusive knowledge ecosystems that bridge territorial and global scientific perspectives, contributes directly to local challenges, to enhance sustainable, community-driven development.

Strategic Approaches for University-Community Engagement

Case Study 1: Universidad Simón Bolívar and the *Ecosistemas Marinos* Project

The Ecosistemas Marinos Project, implemented in the Ecoparque Ciénaga de Mallorquín, [1] aims to enhance soil resilience to salinity and drought by harnessing microorganisms native to this coastal ecosystem. Led by Universidad Simón Bolívar in collaboration with national and international partners, the project aligns with SDGs 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by developing innovative solutions to mitigate climate change effects.

Through the design of bio-enhanced superabsorbent hydrogels, the project seeks to improve soil quality, increase agricultural productivity, and strengthen resistance to prolonged droughts predicted for the coming years. Additionally, the initiative integrates real-time environmental monitoring, predictive climate risk modeling, and strategic knowledge exchange. By fostering sustainable land-use practices and strengthening marine-coastal research capacities, Universidad Simón Bolívar contributes to the long-term resilience of Colombia's vulnerable coastal ecosystems while promoting locally driven solutions for global climate challenges.

Case Study 2: Universidad Antonio Nariño and the Indigenous Guard Professionalization

The Indigenous Guard Professionalization in Caloto, Cauca, led by the Universidad Antonio Nariño (UAN), strengthens Indigenous leadership while preserving cultural identity by creating an undergrad academic program for the professionalization of the "Indigenous Guard"¹. In partnership with Universidad Católica del Maule (Chile), Universidad Veracruzana (Mexico), and Foundation Paths of Identity-

FUCAI, it aligns with SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Developed in collaboration with the Cauca Indigenous community, the program combines distance learning, in-person training, and practical experience, integrating ancestral knowledge with governance, environmental, health, and educational frameworks. By fostering glocal engagement, UAN bridges local Indigenous expertise with global academia, offering a scalable model for sustainable development in Colombia's Indigenous territories.

Conclusion

Colombian universities are increasingly positioning themselves as key actors in sustainable development by bridging global knowledge and local perspectives. However, significant challenges remain, including institutional resistance to alternative knowledge systems, limited funding for community-based international initiatives, and the need for policies that effectively connect global sustainability frameworks with local realities. Strengthening the integration of scientific and traditional knowledge is crucial for fostering inclusive and impactful research and education.

To enhance their role as global change agents, universities must deepen their engagement with local communities through long-term partnerships, interdisciplinary approaches, and structural transformations in teaching and research. The case studies presented illustrate how tailored strategies can address territorial challenges while advancing the SDGs. Future efforts should focus on expanding intercultural knowledge dialogue, developing policies that promote local collaboration, and fostering sustainable, community-driven innovation. By doing so, universities can maximize their societal impact and drive meaningful change at multiple levels.

20 Universities as Living Labs for Sustainable Development of Our Societies



by **Nomedas Gudeliënė**, Advisor to the deputy rector on sustainable development, and **Dangis Gudelis**, Professor, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

“Strengthening institutional commitment to the SDGs, transforming educational models, and promoting glocal (willingness and capacity to think globally and act locally) collaboration will enable universities to drive sustainable solutions and maximize their societal impact.”



Mykolas Romeris University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Sustainable development requires a holistic approach and calls for the update in environmental, security, economic and social life of our societies. Climate change and global ecological crises, conventional industry and business patterns, wars and social unrest, technological advancements and the rise of AI make universities worldwide rethink their role in the society. Universities need to be at the forefront for Agenda 2030, act as a catalyst and to help societies to find solutions to overcome SDG implementation gaps of binding commitments, enforcement mechanisms, and legal accountability. Traditionally centred on education and research, today universities have to focus on their social responsibility providing service to society by shifting from closed specialized knowledge hubs into experimentation and life-long learning, society problem-solving, and placing greater emphasis on security, resilience and critical thinking.

Global partnerships must shift first to secure peaceful co-living, decent work and circular economy, prioritising sustainable production and consumption patterns. Technological innovations and infrastructure need to ensure justice and democracy, and elevate the green economy focusing on renewable energy sources, sustainable urban planning as well as protection of biodiversity and restoration of natural ecosystems. Sustainable communities, ethical labour and SDG-based education have to be advanced by strengthening equal opportunities and participation, shifting to minimalistic lifestyles, consuming eco-friendly products and services, and reduction of waste.

Traditionally universities' primary mission has been to carry out research and education, but current times require universities to redefine their role in the society. Universities need to put in place a whole-institution approach to sustainable development through research and innovation, teaching and learning, community engagement and campus operations. Strengthening resilience to human-caused and natural disasters has to become an integral part of university life. Universities must shift from being knowledge centres to fostering experimentation, life-long learning and problem-solving. By integrating sustainable development in all curriculum and extra-curriculum activities, universities need to prepare students to be resilient to climate change, war and social unrest and build just societies. Sustainability needs to be integral part of higher educational, providing challenge-

based and experiential learning opportunities. Thematic research and innovation projects should contribute to solving the existing and potential sustainable development challenges and scientists should be empowered to engage in university-business-government-society cooperation.

Universities need to step up their service to society as part of their third mission. Based on their expertise in different fields of science, universities have to become catalysts of innovation and provide advice to public and private sector, engaging communities into sustainability projects, supporting students and youth in green and social entrepreneurship. Universities should become living labs and leaders for other organizations: advancing democracy, equal opportunities and inclusion, fostering green infrastructure, reducing acquisitions and waste, promoting eco-friendly and zero-waste living.

While Agenda 2030 remains relevant, there are some key gaps, such as binding commitments, legal accountability and enforcements mechanisms beyond voluntary actions. More emphasis should be placed on international peace and security as well as development of critical thinking and resilience as key skills for students to acquire, allowing them to distinguish facts from false information and greenwashing. Commitment to clear and factual information, avoiding exaggeration of the sustainability efforts, operating with real data rather than marketing them, avoiding misleading imagery and buzzwords are another current societal challenge that universities worldwide have to teach their students and other stakeholders how to cope with.

To conclude, our societies facing environmental crises, wars and social unrest, technological innovations call universities globally to reconsider their role and mission. While traditionally focused on research and education, today universities need to pay more attention to their service to society and shift from being knowledge centres to become problem-solving institutions. While Agenda 2030 remains relevant, key gaps exist. There is a need for binding commitments, enforcement mechanisms, and policy coherence beyond voluntary efforts. Current global challenges call for refining the SDGs with a greater focus on international security and critical thinking to strengthen democracy, combat false information and greenwashing.

“While Agenda 2030 remains relevant, key gaps exist. There is a need for binding commitments, enforcement mechanisms, and policy coherence beyond voluntary efforts. Current global challenges call for refining the SDGs with a greater focus on international security and critical thinking to strengthen democracy, combat false information and greenwashing. ”

21 Higher Education as a Catalyst for Sustainability: The Case of Saint Joseph University's Green Transformation



by **Joudi Zein Eddine**, Coordinator and Senior Project Manager at the Chair of "Fondation Diane" for Education in Eco-Citizenship and Sustainable Development, **Richard G. Maroun**, Vice Rector for Research, **Fadi El Hage**, Delegate of the Rector and Chairholder of the Chair of "Fondation Diane", **Salim Daccache** s.j, Rector, Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ), Lebanon, IAU Board Member



Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 2: Zero Hunger

As a member of the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and the International Association of Universities (IAU), Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) integrates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its strategic vision, emphasizing sustainability and integral ecology. Amid Lebanon's economic collapse, political instability, and environmental degradation, USJ recognizes the critical role of higher education in fostering resilience and advancing sustainable development. Sustainability is embedded across USJ's academic programs, research, and civic engagement, promoting environmental awareness and responsible citizenship. To coordinate these efforts, the university established the "SDG Commission," led by the Rector.

Established in 2015, the Chair of "Fondation Diane" for Education on Eco-citizenship and Sustainable Development strengthens this commitment by advancing environmental education, interdisciplinary research, and community involvement. Despite these initiatives, progress remains challenged by limited national reforms, weak policy alignment, and diminishing financial resources.

“Higher education drives progress, especially in crisis-affected countries like Lebanon, where political instability, economic hardship, and governance challenges have strained the relationship between citizens and their environment [...]. However, without structural reforms and stronger collaboration between higher education and public policy, universities [...] will remain limited in driving change.”

Lebanon's compounded crises, including the economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion, have impacted funding opportunities and disrupted progress on sustainability goals. Nationally, structural weaknesses continue to hinder the SDG 9 and SDG 11. Despite these challenges, USJ leads by example, implementing solutions such as underground parking that reduce emissions, minimize traffic congestion, and free space for green areas.

Green energy, waste management, and sustainability research require investment, but USJ faces budget constraints and rising costs. The electricity crisis has forced reliance on expensive private power, limiting renewable energy efforts. It has also driven solar panel adoption out of necessity, not environmental concern. Despite progress in solar use, water conservation (SDG 6), and waste reduction, financial instability blocks expansion. Many campus buildings still lack energy-efficient upgrades, which remain unfeasible without external support.

USJ supports SDG 13 through environmental education, carbon footprint reduction, and climate resilience. The university advances SDG 14 and SDG 15 through biodiversity research and planting 900,000 trees with the project "Jouzour Loubnan" (Roots of Lebanon). However, Lebanon's lack of comprehensive environmental policies and enforcement hinders progress.

Civic awareness is key to driving a cultural shift toward sustainability. Education and awareness campaigns help reconnect Lebanese citizens with environment, with universities playing a central role. Through initiatives like the "Green USJ" project, the university promotes waste sorting, clean energy, and biodiversity conservation, supporting SDG 12. However, the impact of such efforts is limited by Lebanon's inadequate waste treatment infrastructure and lack of a national circular economy policy. USJ also supports SDG 1, SDG 2, and SDG 10 by offering financial aid and scholarships to over 53% of its students. Student-led initiatives like "Al Mazeed" and "Opération 7e Jour" assist marginalized communities across Lebanon. Yet, economic decline drives brain drain, weakening research and sustainable development.

Partnerships are essential for overcoming these challenges. USJ fosters collaborations aligned with SDG 17, working

with national and international organizations to secure funding, implement sustainability initiatives promoting knowledge exchange. However, the lack of strong national policies prioritizing higher education for sustainable development exacerbates challenges. Unlike universities in stable countries, USJ and other Lebanese institutions rely on international grants and private donors, making long-term planning difficult.

Despite these challenges, USJ promotes SDG 3 through medical outreach, vaccination campaigns, public health research, and healthcare innovation awards, reinforced by Hôtel-Dieu de France and its healthcare network. These initiatives have continued amid COVID-19, the Beirut port explosion, and Lebanon's political and economic crises, which have disrupted health efforts and strained institutional capacity. The emigration of doctors and healthcare workers has compounded these challenges.

USJ advances SDG 5 through women's leadership programs and gender-based violence prevention. Despite these efforts, traditional views about gender roles persist in Lebanese society. Although women's roles have evolved, significant work remains to raise awareness and shift attitudes toward equality.

Aligned with SDG 8, USJ organizes job fairs, fosters business partnerships, and provides entrepreneurship training to equip students with market-ready skills. However, financial constraints and inflation hinder these efforts, as limited funding and investment opportunities in Lebanon make it difficult for graduates to start or sustain ventures.

Its commitment to SDG 16 is reflected in civic engagement programs that encourage youth participation in policy and governance reform. These initiatives are constrained by limited institutional transparency, reduced opportunities for youth participation, lack of confidence in public governance, and judicial independence.

In conclusion, higher education drives progress, especially in crisis-affected countries like Lebanon, where political instability, economic hardship, and governance challenges have strained the relationship between citizens and their environment. These factors foster detachment and resentment, leading to behaviors that degrade the environment. USJ's commitment to sustainability through education, research, and civic engagement aims to reverse this trend by equipping students to address environmental, social, and economic challenges. However, without structural reforms and stronger collaboration between higher education and public policy, universities like USJ will remain limited in driving change. Bridging this gap through education and awareness is key to reconnecting Lebanese citizens with environment and prioritizing sustainability.

22 Transforming Our World: Shaping the Path Forward



by **Pornchai Mongkhonvanit**, *President*, and **Yhing Sawheny**, *Director, International Affairs, Siam University, Thailand*



Siam University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

The transformation of higher education is essential to shaping a sustainable and inclusive future. Part of the UN SDGs, SDG 4 Quality Education commits to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” under which target 4.7 aims to ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. As we move forward with an increasingly complex structure of higher education with Artificial Intelligence creating a huge impact, a collective commitment to equity, technology, sustainability, and leadership will define the path forward. Universities play a pivotal role in addressing global challenges, particularly those outlined in the SDGs. However, integrating sustainability into curricula, research, and institutional strategies remains a work in progress. Many universities have launched sustainability initiatives, but these efforts often remain fragmented.

Higher education faces several challenges today that impact its effectiveness and accessibility. Some issues continue to increase, notably current challenges of affordability since the pandemic, with tuition costs rising, leading to significant student debt. As a consequence, many students chose to limit their studies to the high school level or vocational colleges where applicable skills are taught, providing easier access to the job market. Another key issue is the question of equity and access to higher education where disparities are rooted in geopolitical issues, socioeconomic status, race, and geographical location. Refugees, marginalized groups, and

“Integrating sustainability into curricula, research, and institutional strategies remains a work in progress. Many universities have launched sustainability initiatives, but these efforts often remain fragmented.”

students from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are often faced with financial barriers. Siam University works with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UN-HCR) to include students who are funded and sponsored by the UN-HCR; some scholarships are provided to students to support families facing financial issues and students from LDCs.

Another current challenge is the obsolete or rigid curriculum. With the support of micro-credentials and technology, flexible learning options are provided with non-traditional learning paths such as online courses, certificates, and micro-credentials to accommodate diverse student needs and career transitions. Partnerships with industries and governments can facilitate real-world applications of sustainable solutions. This can also be implemented with lifelong learning skills and collaborating with industry leaders to develop curricula that reflect current job market needs, emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical skills. An example of this type of cooperative education is students who, for one semester, get real practical experience through Work Integrated Learning (WIL). As well, technological integration is vital. Providing robust training for both educators and students in educational technology, promoting digital citizenship, and ensuring engagement in remote learning environments is indeed critical. The role of universities is not just to impart knowledge but to empower individuals and societies to foster global citizenship.

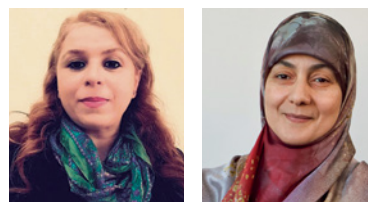
HEIs should go beyond sustainability rhetoric and embed SDG-focused initiatives across teaching, research, and operations. Establishing interdisciplinary programs in environmental science, social entrepreneurship, and climate policy can foster a new generation of leaders equipped to tackle global issues. Additionally, universities must lead actions by adopting green campus initiatives, reducing carbon neutrality by 2050, and promoting responsible consumption. This is possible with the support of the International Association of Universities (IAU), and initiatives such as the IAU Global Cluster for Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) which brings together good practices for each of the SDGs. The cluster is composed of 16 subclusters, each focusing on one of the SDGs, while IAU is leading SDG 17 on Partnerships for the goals. Siam University is leading SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities and it works with 8 satellite universities to share good practices as for how universities can contribute to SDG 11 in collaboration with their communities and students. Siam University has also embedded the SDGs in the university pedagogy and has a general education curriculum on the SDGs as a compulsory subject in line with Siam University's strategic plan where one of the important pillars is Sustainability.

Siam University is engaged in numerous projects with local communities. Examples of community engagement include cleaning wastewater canals and promoting electric boats in that area, both activities which promote sustainable tourism by bringing all international and national students and conference participants to visit those communities. Another example of community engagement is Siam University's

organisation of community flea markets to promote local products and fair pricing. Therefore, Siam University is among the only two Thai private universities whose efforts were recognised in the International Green Gown Awards in 2024 (category: "Benefitting Society"), next to the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT).

The approach to higher education in the future should be focused on adaptability and acceptance of technological disruption with a sustainable approach. Leaders, faculty members, and students should not only have 21st century skills but also resilience, in multi-stakeholders' dialogues, and co-create responsive educational systems to support the 2030 Agenda. By embracing these in their pedagogy and curriculum reform, higher education institutions supported by the IAU can reaffirm their role as a catalyst for societal growth in an increasingly disruptive world.

23 The Evolving Role of Higher Education in Achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



by **Diana Hadi**, Associate Professor and **Mageda Sharafeddin**, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Phoenicia University, Lebanon

As the world accelerates towards 2030, the urgency to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is greater than ever. Amid mounting global challenges, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must redefine their role in advancing the SDGs. Universities are not only responsible for teaching and research but also for innovation and international solidarity. They must transcend conventional roles of leadership by initiating solutions, creating partnerships, and tackling critical global problems. It is imperative that universities transform their role in sustainable development.

Obstacles to Progress

There are several barriers preventing universities from fulfilling their potential in achieving the SDGs, ranging from political and cultural to institutional and economic issues. Political instability generally restricts long-term plans or global collaboration. For example, access to overseas research papers on climate change or social justice is frequently restricted by political constraints; access to cutting-edge platforms, such

“Universities must advocate for global research access to lead sustainable development programs.”

as Graphics Processing Units (GPUs), is restricted in some countries, including ours, even for educational purposes. Universities must advocate for global research access to lead sustainable development programs. Cultural barriers also influence the way students approach issues such as gender equality (SDG 5) and social inclusion (SDG 10). At Phoenixia University (PU), student societies and the diversity in faculty members seek to empower all students regardless of gender, economic differences and backgrounds that may cause inequality. Students are encouraged to join clubs which shape their character in a supportive environment, while faculty diversity models inclusion and equality. Financial constraints worsen the problem. During the course devoted to teaching research writing on SDG 13 (Climate Action), students found it difficult to access recent research software and tools. Therefore, universities must invest in SDG-aligned research infrastructure.

Redefining the Role of Universities

To drive the SDGs forward, universities must go beyond education and research, pioneering innovation, fostering global partnerships, and engaging locally. In upper-level writing courses, PU students collaborate with engineering peers to write sustainable energy proposals. This partnership illustrates how universities combine disciplines to tackle complex global issues like SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). PU's annual idea fair empowers students to present market-driven ideas. Students from diverse majors collaborate to brainstorm, discuss business concepts, and develop prototypes. Participation is integrated into a course where they earn credit, and the event also provides opportunities to access mentors and be matched with venture capitalists.

Universities must promote community service. In a public speaking class, students discuss local SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) events, fostering engagement and global awareness. During the 2024 fall semester, all teaching in Lebanon moved online due to student displacements and security concerns. To respond to this, the university integrated community service to assignments and projects. For example, in the software engineering course, students developed websites to help place families in shelters, locate needed medications, find repair personnel, and ensure the proper distribution of incoming aid.

Closing the Gaps in the SDGs

Even though Agenda 2030 addresses a broad spectrum of global challenges, it has deficits to be worked on. There are previously less regarded challenges such as mental health and cybersecurity that should be more clearly elaborated into the SDGs. Mental health is an especially one that impacts other

SDGs, e.g. education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5). Universities can play an important role in filling this gap by incorporating research and activities on mental health in their curriculum. They should allocate dedicated staff to follow up on students' assessment results during their first year of the degree, guiding them toward majors that better suit their strengths and alleviating the pressure and stress to commit prematurely to a particular field.

Similarly, the growing threat of cybersecurity impacts multiple SDGs, including SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). PU students frequently question how the digital divide incapacitates access to education. Universities should promote cybersecurity education and awareness. At PU, we established a computer lab with its own domain and server, enabling students to acquire advanced technical skills while keeping our university systems secure. We also partnered with local businesses to offer cybersecurity workshops.

Conclusion

The mission of universities in the attainment of the SDGs is of paramount importance. They must adopt a wider mission for spearheading sustainable development by promoting innovation, developing partnerships on the global stage, and meeting local and global challenges. Higher education in itself must be transformed to have an active role. By occupying the new interstices of the agenda, e.g., by addressing mental wellbeing and cybersecurity, universities can help shape a more inclusive model for the future. The moment for change is now, and universities should take the initiative towards a sustainable and equitable future for the world.

24 Shaping the Path Forward: Advancing SDGs through Good Practices at Assam Don Bosco University



by **Joseph Nellanatt**, Pro Vice Chancellor, and **Hironmay Deb**, Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University, India



Assam Don Bosco University is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

“With students from across India and abroad, ADBU fosters a multicultural learning space. This diversity enhances peer learning, encourages inclusive dialogue, and nurtures global perspectives on local problems essential for collaborative approaches to sustainability.”

Northeast India, with its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage has the potential to be the hub for Sustainable Development in the country. It is in this context that Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU) is playing a transformative role by integrating sustainability into education, research, and community engagement.

Situated in Assam, often called the Gateway to Northeast India, ADBU recognizes that progress here has the potential to cascade across the region. Its initiatives reflect a deep alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and India's national vision *Viksit Bharat@2047*, blending technical education with social responsibility.

Empowering Communities through Skills and Innovation

Sustainability at ADBU starts with self-reliance through skill development. The “Swabalamban” initiative under the “Swajanita” programme trains youth from rural communities (panchayats) in solar energy system installation, addressing both environmental needs and employment challenges directly supporting SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

In response to pandemic-related job losses, ADBU introduced a course in Herbal Product Technology. Students learn to create eco-friendly items like soaps and teas using traditional knowledge, an example of grassroots entrepreneurship under SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

Environmental Action through Education and Research

The university embeds environmental consciousness in everyday learning. On World Animal Day, a student-led drama titled “The World is Their Home Too” highlighted animal habitat protection, while workshops on pearl farming and tree plantation drives addressed SDGs 14 and 15, promoting biodiversity.

ADBU also prioritizes practical, research-driven innovation. The Green Wall Air-Conditioner, which uses clay pots and plants for natural cooling, and Green Water, a project treating wastewater with floating plants, offer sustainable alternatives that contribute to SDG 13 (Climate Action) and public health.

Student research further explores ideas like aloe vera-coated solar panels to boost energy efficiency and IoT-enabled solar

waste bins to improve urban cleanliness direct contributions to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Education as a Catalyst for Change

Academic programs at ADBU reflect its sustainability ethos. Seminars such as “Machine Learning in Electrical Engineering for Sustainability” and “Power System Substations” introduce students to the latest tools and concepts in energy efficiency and infrastructure, strengthening regional technical capacity.

Hands-on workshops give students a platform to experiment with renewable energy models and green technologies, encouraging problem-solving rooted in local realities.

Campus as a Living Lab

ADBU's campus is designed to reflect its environmental values. With rooftop solar installations, energy-efficient lighting, kitchen gardens, and green spaces, the university demonstrates what responsible resource use looks like in practice aligning with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Outreach Initiatives and Women Empowerment

Outreach initiatives like “Swastayan” (educational support) and “Bixudha Jal Asoni” (clean water access) reach underserved communities, while vocational training programs in tailoring, handicrafts, and organic farming empower women and marginalized groups building resilience and self-reliance.

An outstanding example is “VanitAgrata,” a Computer Literacy initiative for Women under the Swajanita Programme. Led by the Women Empowerment Cell under female faculty leadership, it equips semi-literate rural women with essential digital skills. The training covers basic computer literacy, use of mobile phones, online banking transactions, internet access, and housekeeping-related technologies. These initiatives not only bridge the digital divide but also foster financial independence advancing SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Diversity and Shared Learning

With students from across India and abroad, ADBU fosters a multicultural learning space. This diversity enhances peer learning, encourages inclusive dialogue, and nurtures global perspectives on local problems essential for collaborative approaches to sustainability.

Conclusion

Assam Don Bosco University illustrates how educational institutions can drive meaningful progress toward the SDGs by combining academic excellence with social and environmental responsibility. The university has institutionalized its community engagement through service learning, which flows

from the university's vision of moulding socially committed individuals in the service of society and is aligned with community work facilitated through a participatory process.

While challenges remain, including the need for stronger research funding and wider industry collaboration, ADBU's commitment to innovation, inclusivity, and community service continues to pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable future.

25 From Vision to Practice: Embedding Sustainability in Higher Education with focus on Teacher Education



by **Alexander Siegmund**, Vice Rector for Research, Sustainability and Digitization at Heidelberg University of Education, General Director, Heidelberg Centre Education for Sustainable Development, and Chair Holder, UNESCO Chair on Observation and Education of World Heritage and Biosphere Reserve, Germany



Heidelberg University of Education is part of the IAU HESD Cluster for SDG 4: Quality Education

1. Universities as Role Models for future Visions on Sustainable Development

Universities have the potential to drive the integration of ESD and sustainable transformation. Therefore, universities can actively promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as sustainable thinking and action, in their internal and external activities. This can be explicitly stated as a target in their structural and development plans and form part of the core strategic orientation of the university rectorate, as is the case at Heidelberg University of Education (HUE). HUE aims to develop into a 'University of Education for Sustainable Development 2030', becoming a vibrant centre for ESD and sustainability. Aligned with the global sustainability goals (Agenda 2030) and the current UNESCO programme 'ESD for 2030', HUE aspires to be a national model university where ESD and sustainable development (SD), particularly in teacher training, are integrated and complement the university's other core areas, including diversity/inclusion, democracy/media education, STEM, and digitalisation and internationalisation.

Heidelberg University of Education aims not only to meet the standard requirements for the implementation of ESD and sustainability in a university context, but also to set new

benchmarks. The university intends to act as a think tank and incubator for concepts and practical measures that promote sustainable processes. In this way, the university fulfils its special social responsibility of training future teachers to disseminate ESD knowledge and skills, setting an example in the process. Building on the broad expertise of its communities (e.g. students and staff) in ESD and sustainability, Heidelberg University of Education is promoting it in regional, national and international contexts. The university is actively shaping the transformation towards a sustainable and just world.

2. Five Pillars – One Vision: Foundations for ESD & Sustainability

The sustainable development vision is based on five pillars that will be consistently developed, implemented and evaluated within the framework of an overarching ESD and sustainability strategy at HUE in the coming years. These five pillars are:

1. An integrated approach to ESD and its implementation.
2. Consistent reference to, and implementation of, the SDGs, enabling all university departments to contribute from their respective areas of expertise.
3. A comprehensive understanding of sustainable development based on the concept of strong, integrative sustainability.
4. An educational approach that combines conceptual approaches to ESD and sustainability with practical action in social responsibility.
5. A holistic approach to sustainable development via a whole-institution approach that encompasses research, teaching, knowledge transfer, operations and governance as fields of action at the university.

3. The ESD comprehensive concept – Integrating ESD and Sustainable Development

ESD has played an important role at the University of Education Heidelberg for several years. This is reflected in various research and development projects, awards and publications. Under the motto 'E:SD – Communicating, Experiencing, and Shaping Sustainability', the university will adopt an integrated

“The university intends to act as a think tank and incubator for concepts and practical measures that promote sustainable processes. In this way, the university fulfils its special social responsibility of training future teachers to disseminate ESD knowledge and skills, setting an example in the process.”

approach to ESD and sustainable development, making it the only institution in the country to do so. Various measures will be initiated through a participatory approach and taught during courses, with implementation taking place in collaboration with students and all university stakeholders.

This integrative approach aims to make sustainability processes tangible, enabling all university stakeholders to contribute

to them. It also includes key components of education and communication, which are crucial to successful implementation. ESD fosters critical thinking, systemic understanding, and transdisciplinary approaches, equipping students and staff with the tools to develop sustainable solutions.

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