



HESI **HIGHER EDUCATION**
SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

Assessments of Higher Education's progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Volume 1: for creators of assessments



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The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) - a partnership between United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNESCO, United Nations Environment, UN Global Compact’s Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative, United Nations University (UNU), UN-HABITAT, UNCTAD, UNITAR and SDSN- was created in 2012 in the run-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). With commitments from over 300 universities from around the world, HESI accounted for more than one-third of all voluntary commitments launched at Rio+20. Through its strong association with the United Nations, HESI provides higher education institutions with a unique interface for higher education, science, and policy making.

All higher education institutions may join the network freely. Higher education institutions part of HESI commit to:

1. Teach sustainable development across all disciplines of study
2. Encourage research and dissemination of sustainable development knowledge
3. Green campuses and support local sustainability efforts, and
4. Engage and share information with international networks.

Register at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi>



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Foreword

Since Higher Education Institutions educate and train decision makers, they play a key role in building more sustainable societies and creating new paradigms. As educational institutions, they have the mission to promote development through both research and teaching, disseminating new knowledge and insight to their students and building their capabilities.

Education for sustainable development aims at enabling everyone to acquire the values, competencies, skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to building a more sustainable society. This implies revising teaching content to respond to global and local challenges. It should also promote teaching methods that enable students to acquire skills such as interdisciplinary thinking, integrated planning, understanding complexity, cooperating with others in decision-making processes, and participating in local, national and global processes towards sustainable development.

On the occasion of the **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development**, held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, **Chancellors, Presidents, Rectors, Deans** and Leaders of Higher Education Institutions and related organizations, **agreed to acknowledge their responsibility** that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development. They **committed** to engage a deep transformation in their own institution to provide leadership on education for sustainable development.

The **Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI¹)**, a partnership between United Nations bodies² has been launched, supported by almost 50 national and international academic networks. With commitments from over 300 universities from around the world, HESI accounted for more than one-third of all the voluntary commitments that were launched at Rio+20.

Since Rio + 20, the world has changed. Although much remains to be done, the subject of sustainable development, and education for sustainable development, has finally become a key topic. This awareness seems to be a fundamental movement, pushed not only from civil society, the business world, states and local communities but also from young generation and students in particular.

For their part, **accreditation and ranking bodies have an enormous power, and therefore a huge responsibility**, to guide the academic sector. Many of them have realized the need to change their criteria for measuring the performance of higher education institutions. Numerous initiatives aimed either at improving current standards or creating new ones have emerged.

Given the scale of the issues and the deadlines³, this is probably more of a paradigm shift than surface improvement. As with any paradigm shift, it is never easy to have a clear idea of what to do and what pitfalls to avoid.

HESI therefore tasked a multi-stakeholder working group of experts/practitioners with creating advice that would guide these assessments to best practice, and support universities and users of the assessments.

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi>

² *As of today : Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNESCO, United Nations Environment, UN Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative, United Nations University (UNU), UN-HABITAT, UNCTAD, UNITAR and Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN)*

³ *See the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>*

A first contribution is the launch of synthetic guides for these different targets. The sub-group has created three documents, one for each group:

1. Advice for **creators of assessments**
2. Suggestions for **universities who may be asked to participate**; and
3. Guidance on **interpretation by users or readers** (students, companies ...).

We hope that together they provide a useful introduction to the area. Above all, we hope that they are **practical** tools.

This volume is one of them. It was first presented at the occasion of the High Level Political Forum (HESI Special Event, July 2020), We encourage all parties to make these documents as widely available as possible, sharing in your respective networks as relevant.

These documents are intended as a starting point for the discussion, rather than as an absolute end. We recognise our own biases but hope that we have produced guidance that is fair and equitable. Corrections or comments are welcome.

The HESI Working Group

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*“Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about. “
Cooperrider and Whitney 1999*

⁴ Participants are listed alphabetically.

Creating better Assessments of Higher Education’s progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Target audience and aims

This document is for organisations and individuals who are involved in the **creation** and implementation of higher education assessments that use, or incorporate elements of, sustainability and especially the UN SDGs. This explicitly includes ratings and rankings. Elsewhere in the document we will refer to these simply as *assessments*. Organizations involved in this work may be private companies, universities, or governments.

Our goal is to ensure that such assessments provide **transparent, balanced, meaningful and objective information** that is cognizant of relevant college and university **contexts**.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

Although the SDGs are not focused on higher education, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will require all parts of society to play an active part. It will require different sectors and actors working together in an integrated manner by pooling financial resources, knowledge and expertise. This must include the resources of higher education.

To find out more about the SDGs visit <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.



Design imperatives for SDG assessments

Assessments, ratings, and rankings play a role in encouraging and monitoring progress towards the achievement of the SDGs, but bring both strengths and weaknesses to the process.

Peter Drucker stated that “what gets measured, gets managed”. By monitoring progress towards the achievement of the SDGs, many benefits can be realized, including:

- Identifying strategic goals and assessing progress over time
- Benchmarking with peers - encouraging continuous improvement
- Sharing knowledge and case studies of good practice
- Demonstrating outcomes that help in achieving SDGs
- Building positive brand and reputation (providing external validation to stakeholders - students, staff, government, funders, and local community)
- Attracting leadership attention to the SDGs
- Embedding or linking with existing key rankings so not niche/silo - you can’t be a successful university if you are not addressing whole institution change
- Drawing attention to areas that may otherwise be missed with other assessments
- Quantifying impact
- Providing a standardised framework for institutions to work towards to improve behaviour

- Bringing focused attention to the SDGs, persuading leadership, staff and students to act or to change behaviour
- Helping students keep institutions accountable by increasing transparency
- Linking to country level Voluntary National Reviews of SDG progress - provided they complement and do not duplicate effort

Key issues to consider

These benefits will not be achieved unless the designers of assessments take into account key issues. The SDGs are uniquely complex. HESI believes that the design of any assessment must take into consideration

- **Why** the assessment is being created;
- **Who** is being assessed and **by whom**;
- **What** is being assessed;
- **Where** the assessed institutions are located;
- **When** the assessments will take place; and
- **How** assessments will be carried out.

Why are you creating the assessment?



Recommendation

Be clear about your rationale for creating the assessment. Be honest in how it may be used, both positively and negatively. Think about how you can use the data to improve the sector and drive change. One of the key goals of the SDGs is to encourage cooperation to achieve the goals - can you use case studies of those doing well as exemplars to encourage good practice?

Who is involved in the design of the assessment?

Where the team involved in the assessment design and creation has a broad base of experience you will better reflect the global nature of the Goals.

- **Diversity and Inclusivity.** Ensure diversity of persons and institutions and organizations involved in the design and development of the assessment methodology
- Ensure you have legitimacy, **credibility and transparency** for the assessments you create
- Pilot or test the assessment with institutions prior to launch to ensure fit for purpose

Who is being assessed? Adapting framework design for context

Not all institutions are the same. Organisations must design their assessment to ensure that they are comparing like to like. Sustainability priorities and achievements can vary widely based on factors including, but not limited to:

- Institutional size
- Population
- Demographics
- Geography
- Governance structures
- Funding sources, for example, private versus public institutions
- Mission or objective, for example, research intensive versus teaching intensive institutions

If your assessment is to be used across multiple geographies, or in locations where there are multiple languages, you must take care to ensure that the assessment is equally understood in all relevant **Languages** - be sensitive to regional differences in interpretation



Recommendation

Be clear on who, either an individual or team, is being asked to complete the assessment - and if this is on behalf of a part of the institution or the whole institution. Be clear that the person completing has the authority to respond on behalf of their institution. Encourage collaboration within the institution to complete the assessment - where relevant, provide tools and easy collaboration methods to do this.

What is being assessed?

A danger of assessments - particularly those that are narrowly focused on just a few dimensions - is that they value some aspects of the university over others. This may result in unintended consequences:

- Many assessments prioritise the measurement of research outcomes above those of teaching, community engagement and organizational practice. This can have an impact on funding and resource allocation.
- More generally, universities may redirect resources from some areas to others just in order to perform well in the assessment. They may be able to perform strongly in the assessment without delivering on the SDGs across the whole organisation.
- Assessments that encourage this are potentially damaging but can still incentivise changes by the institution. In certain circumstances, therefore, this can be beneficial if designed judiciously.



Recommendation

Do not miss the main point - make sure you are asking the right questions and that they can't be interpreted wrongly. For example: if you want to determine if senior leadership use public transport, do not ask if the institutional leader has a company car – this may provide a misleading and unhelpful answer.

Where possible focus on outcomes, not outputs - outputs alone may not be supporting the institution to achieve the SDGs. For example: having a policy on gender pay equity does not guarantee that pay equity has been achieved.

It is important to be clear on the scope of the assessment: **what** is being assessed, the relevant **time period** that relates to the assessment, and the **level of the institution** which is being assessed. For example, assessing institutional level, program level, course level or students would require different approaches and data collection.

Moreover, Drucker's statement of "what gets measured, gets managed" is **often misquoted** as 'you can't manage what you don't measure'. Sustainability is inherently complex, and while individual elements can be measured, they will not necessarily capture the full picture.

With these points in mind it is useful to consider:

- Be confident that all institutions can accurately and efficiently provide the requested information.
- Reliable, quantitative data is more likely to be available in institutions with well-established analysis and planning departments, supported by a commitment to data management and an IT infrastructure.
- Qualitative information is often more available than quantitative data and **can provide more value** than is often assumed.
- Not everything can be quantified: quantitative data can be more appropriate for systems where the causal connection between action and result can be reasonably expected.
- **Be aware of the difference between inputs, outputs and outcomes when deciding what to measure.**

**Examples:**

The [International Development Research Centre](#) uses outcome mapping as an alternative form of assessment, which “debunks many of the myths about measuring impact [, and] will help a program be specific about the actors it targets, the changes it expects to see, and the strategies it employs and, as a result, be more effective in terms of the results it achieves”.

The [Global Reporting Initiative](#) requires that reporting organizations consider materiality in deciding what to include in their report. As part of this assessment organizations should consider including all SDGs - all are relevant.

Where are institutions located?

Be clear on the region and locality of the institution that is completing the assessment to ensure that the assessment is equitable and inclusive. There will be differing issues if an assessment is focussed on a specific region or country or if it is international.

- Be aware of cultural differences, even within a single country or region.
- Take account of the impact of geographical and political differences on perceived performance: institutions may be exemplary performers due to external factors, rather than their own actions – for example, being located in an area rich with renewable energy, or in a jurisdiction that mandates parental leave, health care and other employee benefits.
- Consider how to account for differences in economic development. Are they in an area that is more developed (for example OECD countries) or are they developing? Assessments should be structured to provide a pathway for all institutions towards achieving material sustainability outcomes.

When are institutions assessed?

Give adequate time for institutions to collaborate internally and complete data provision - they will have competing demands on their time. Be aware of:

- Impacts of differing reporting periods, for example between southern and northern hemisphere universities;
- Differing academic and holiday seasons;
- Other reporting requirements - avoid clashes for intensive periods, and determine if data can be included as part of other reporting requirements; and
- Time demands on providing data.

**Examples:**

Respondents to [AASHE's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System](#) - with over 1,000 questions across five categories – can take a year or more to complete the data collection to the standard required for approval.

In some country, like in France with the [Green Plan assessment framework and the Label DD&RS](#) each university is supposed to do a self assessment process on a yearly process and every 4 years some of them have to be audited to get the “label”.

How does the assessment function?

It is important that users of the assessment, both readers and participants, have confidence in the credibility and the outcomes of the assessment.

- To avoid game playing or *green washing*, ensure sufficient evidence exists to back up institutional claims. A stated commitment to sustainability does not infer implementation of relevant actions
- Avoid duplication of existing efforts- do your research into what related assessments already exist and seek to complement them
- Be clear the nature of the assessment - ranking, rating or another form of assessment
- Make support available on a timely basis to respondents who require clarification about the criteria or question being asked on the assessment
- Work proactively and collaboratively with respondents to iterate on the criteria and questions being asked to ensure that the tool continues to be rigorous, transparent, unbiased and relevant, addressing constructive criticism on a timely basis while maintaining a balanced reporting approach



Recommendations

Ensure transparency in your methodology used and in your data collection, scoring and evaluation process.

Incorporate data quality measures – to ensure accuracy of submitted data, and when using publicly available information, ensure that sources are rigorous, objective, and comparable. Make data publicly available to ensure stakeholders can validate the results.

Work towards an **equitable, fair or level playing field**. Institutions should not do well because of pre-existing privilege, such as access to greater resources. This can include normalising criteria using relevant baselines.

Take a **whole-institution approach** - an institution could be doing really well in one area but really badly in others. Try to ensure that policies and practices are not contradictory, and that good intentions do not accidentally cause poor outcomes.

Summary

The Sustainable Development Goals are one of the key initiatives for the world. By choosing to assess higher education's progress against the goals you can either support or hinder progress.

As a result, you need to take extra care when choosing to use the SDGs as part of your evaluation framework. We hope you are able to take account of all of the factors above, especially the recommendations.

It must be emphasized that institutions' resources, time and energy - and thus patience - to respond to the increasing number of assessments is limited. It is therefore in the best interests of organizations that design such assessments to design their frameworks comprehensively and rigorously to ensure that they demonstrate value to the respondent institutions - as well as to the intended audience - and towards the sustainable future we want.

Further reading

- [GRI reporting guidelines](#) - materiality assessment
- [Open letter to sustainability evaluating organizations](#) (July 19, 2010)
- [The Platform for Sustainability Performance in HE \(host by EAUC\)](#)
- [Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs](#). Earl, Sarah; Carden, Fred; and Smutylo, Terry, International Development Research Center. 2001.
- *How Reliable are University Rankings?* KD Consulting, Dasdan, Van Lare, Zivaljevic, 2020
- [IAU 2nd Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development: Higher Education and the 2030 Agenda: Moving into the 'Decade of Action and Delivery for the SDGs](#). Mallow, Toman, van't Land, IAU, 2020
- [The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development](#), Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, Global Sustainable Development Report 2019, United Nations, New York, 2019.
- *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. Hazelkorn, Ellen, Springer, 2015.
- *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. Brundtland Report. 1987.

