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

Volume 2: for higher education institutions participating in assessments

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

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** (HESI[1]), a partnership between United Nations bodies[2] 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 deadlines[3], 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 therefor 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.

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 ...).

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[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/*

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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Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions on assessments that use the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Target audience and aims

This document is **aimed at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)** that are in the process of deciding whether to participate in one or more voluntary external assessments of their contributions towards sustainability. Since the adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a growing number of HE assessments and tools that incorporate the SDGs, either explicitly or implicitly, have emerged.

Here, we define "voluntary assessments" as encompassing any of the various ratings and rankings that have incorporated aspects of the UN's SDGs. This is in contrast to government mandated or accreditation assessments. In offering these guidelines, we hope to help institutions navigate between an increasing variety of opportunities, reflect on the different approaches, and make strategic use of such assessments in support of enhanced data collection, analysis and continuous improvement.

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/.

Assessment tools and HEIs

Higher education institutions play a critical role in delivering on sustainability. Many HEIs have begun to incorporate elements of the SDGs into their strategic plans and priorities within a number of domains, including governance/campus operations, teaching/curriculum, research, and service/community engagement activities. Many are also interested in participating in one or more assessments of those activities.

In general, when choosing an assessment, it is advisable for an HEI to select one that looks at sustainability in a holistic manner. This means that it assesses work being done in multiple domains, including governance/campus initiatives, teaching, research, and community engagement.

When interpreting the output from assessments HEIs must be aware that they can have far reaching effects, particularly on reputation, with the potential to influence various stakeholders, including: policymakers, administrators, funding agencies, faculty, staff, students, and the communities in which they operate. Both rankings and ratings can serve to help define and assess quality and have changed the higher education landscape, for better and worse.

Sustainability assessment tools, due to their relatively young age, have yet to show how much impact they might have outside the sustainability circle. Certainly, there are significant differences in objectives and methodology across assessments.

Positives of participating in an SDG assessment

Various assessment methods, if effectively implemented, can be beneficial, as they attempt to bring together, in a single place, externally validated information about an institution and its performance, often relative to other HEIs.

- Participating in an external assessment can **provide clarity on performance** achievements and **identify opportunities for improvement** for the overarching goal of advancing the institutions' sustainability impact.
- Where there is a **broad-based participation of individual academic and staffing units** in collecting and analysing the data this can go a long way in i**ncreasing awareness, commitment and effectiveness** of any response for improvement. Gathering such data is likely to involve faculty, staff, students, and administrators, for instance by scanning course outlines and responding to surveys, analysing research projects and dissemination vehicles, and taking stock of community projects and governance initiatives for evidence of commitment and progress.
- The assessment process in and of itself can result in **enhanced investments in data collection and reporting systems**, better data for strategic planning and accountability, greater internal awareness of institutional priorities, and enhanced sense of teamwork through greater cross-functional collaboration etc.
- **Benchmarking and sharing data with a third party** can help validate the information, identifying areas where there is comparative strength as well as room for improvement. The results of such an assessment can often be compared with global standards and the achievements of other HEIs, as well as internal benchmarks. Multiple year assessments, on the same measures, can help institutions track progress over time, encouraging and informing further progress.
- Individual HEI's may find the results helpful in their **marketing, strategic planning and governance processes**, including articulating their unique strengths, writing annual reports (for government and other stakeholders), and impacting budgets, by informing internal resource allocation decisions.

Cautions associated with participating

The key question HEIs should pose before using assessments is: **is this tool appropriate for the institution, and will it further its progress towards sustainable development, including understanding, engagement, and impact?** HEIs should note that:

- **Rankings, ratings, and assessments (tools)** are not the same and function in different ways. Be sure to take time to understand the options and choose an approach that matches your objectives. While a ranking classifies HEIs in a list and thus is competitive, a different tool can monitor progress and identify steps on the way towards reaching a certain goal, for instance incorporating the SDGs to teaching and research
- **Institutions should consider tools that measure sustainability holistically** (applying a whole-institution approach), instead of regarding different areas or even single SDGs in isolation to each other. In particular comparing progress on sustainable development can be problematic, as sustainable development is a cooperative approach and working towards a common goal for society.
- All assessment tools have **methodological strengths and weaknesses.** Weaknesses can include:
    - Encouraging a focus on "point-counting" rather than a more holistic view of the institution's sustainability performance
    - If high scoring can be achieved due to factors outside the HEI's direct control this may not demonstrate the success (or opportunities) for the HEI
- **Qualitative tools might be more helpful than quantitative rankings**, as different institutional contexts in distinct national contexts require more flexible approaches.
- Ideally the results from assessments should be used as part of an **ongoing conversation** rather than a goal in itself.

Where to get started

These guidelines and the questions below are by no means intended to promote any specific assessment tool. Rather, they aim to support HEIs in choosing the tool or tools that might best fulfil the strategic goals they aim to achieve. Ideally, no assessment should be used as a stand-alone evaluation tool but rather be part of the organization's ongoing strategic assessment activity.

Recommendation

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) recommends to HEIs looking for a ranking or assessment tool to ask themselves the following **questions:**

What is the primary motivation for undergoing the assessment?

- Enhancing progress towards sustainability and particularly the SDGs in:
    - Governance
    - Operations
    - Teaching
    - Research
    - Service/community engagement
    - All of the above
- Enhancing reputation
- Motivating internal stakeholders
- Recruiting staff or students

*What is the **purpose or focus** of the proposed assessment tool?*

- Internal evaluation
- Quality assurance
- Marketing
- Other purpose

*What are the **costs** of choosing this assessment tool?*

- Active costs such as participation fees, purchase of reports or analyses, auditing or other consulting services
- Passive costs including staffing requirements for data collection, validation and analysis, communications, other internal costs (see also time frame)
- Reputational costs of not participating, or of appearing to perform poorly

*What is the **time frame** to conduct the assessment?*

- How long will collecting information take?
- When will information on the outcome be available?
- How long is the commitment?
- What is the reporting period under review?

*What kind of **data** is required, and is the data transparent?*

- Is the data already available or will you need to put new processes in place to gather it? If so, does the data or collection method provide additional value to the HEI?
- Is the data quantitative and/or qualitative?
- Is the data collection process within the institution transparent?
- Is the data validation process by the organization offering the tool transparent and rigorous?
- What happens with the data afterwards? Do they remain sole property of the institution or can they be used by the organization providing the assessment tool?

*Is the **methodology** of the tool rigorous and transparent?*

- Is the organization offering the tool open to constructive criticism of their methodology to ensure quality and relevance of the tool and methodology?
- What is the scope of the assessment? Is it regional, national or international?
- How deep does the assessment go? Does the tool look at only a specific part of the HEI or the whole organization?
- Who is included in the assessment process (faculty, staff, students, or other stakeholders)?
- Is there the possibility for diversity of distinct institutional contexts in the approach?

*Does this **tool fit** the institution?*

- Does its purpose align with my institution's sustainability objectives?
- Who are the intended audience for the outputs of the tool? This could include prospective students, existing students, parents, staff, Board members, senior leadership, local communities, governments or other stakeholders.
- Who is offering the assessment? Could they be biased by financial interests? Do they have a valid interest in improving sustainability of institutions?
- Will the HEI benefit from using and collecting the data? This could be through celebrating areas of strengths, identifying potential areas for self-improvement, a longitudinal understanding of sustainability progress by evaluations over time, reflecting on lessons learned, or by engaging in a community of practice with peer institutions

References and further reading

- Guidance to organisations producing rankings or ratings (the first of this series)
- Guidance on interpretation (the third of this series)
- Mallow, Toman, van't Land. *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*. IAU, 2020 (https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_hesd_survey_report_final_jan2020.pdf)
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- Hazelkorn, Ellen. *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. Springer, 2015.
- Brundtland Report. *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. 1987.