



HESI **HIGHER EDUCATION**
SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

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

Volume 3: for readers of assessments

How can you interpret Higher Education assessments of progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

Who should use this guidance?

This document is aimed at the general readers of assessments, ratings or rankings that use or incorporate elements of the SDGs or sustainability. It may include the general public, students, academics (or other university employees), university leaders, funders and governments.

We hope it can help you to understand when these assessments might be useful, but also when you should be wary of them.

What are the 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 aren't 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 universities and higher education.

We believe that higher education has a unique role to play and can offer disciplinary and transdisciplinary teaching and research and can generate and contribute to the development of new and innovative approaches to sustainability around global, regional and local issues.

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

Assessments of university SDG performance

Over recent years there have been attempts to understand how universities are working towards the SDGs, either directly or through sustainability initiatives.

This has been done through ratings, rankings and assessments.

- **Assessments** provide a level of performance by a university. Assessments are usually set against fixed standards.
- **Ratings** give a university one or more grades based on performance criteria. Ratings may be relative to performance of a group or may be against fixed standards.
- **Rankings** give a university a rank, or position, based on performance criteria. Rankings are relative to the performance of a group.

This document is designed to give people a framework for interpretation of these approaches.

How can you use assessments, ratings or rankings to understand progress towards the SDGs?

Assessments, ratings and rankings are useful because they attempt to bring together, in a single place, information about a university. This information may not otherwise be easy to locate. In particular, with the Sustainable Development Goals there is a broad range of information that might be applicable.

- They also compare this information either against a specific standard, or against the performance of other universities.
- They convert this information into easily understood formats, either a rank, a score, or a badge.
- Where this information is available for the different SDGs it has the potential to help people understand progress, and also to push universities to make further progress.
- Individuals may also use this as an element in decision making processes, for example when deciding on which university to attend, or how to partner for research purposes.
- They can be a useful starting point for further exploration of universities and how they are working towards the SDGs.

What to be aware of when using assessments, ratings or rankings

All of these approaches have some significant limitations. It is useful to be aware of these when using them. The following guidance may help you to draw your own conclusions from any ranking, rating, or assessment system.

The most important starting point is to understand what you are hoping to interpret from the evaluation. This will help you to decide how useful it is to you.

- Evaluations are usually competitive rather than cooperative in nature (although they may contain measurements of cooperation). Universities are complex organisations that may not perform in a consistent way.
- Evaluations are not able to show the full scope of a university's activities, and by summarising to a limited number of measures may conceal issues that are important to you. Where they allow you to explore data in more detail this can be more useful than the overall view.
- Where they evaluate SDGs alongside other aspects of university performance the overall outcome may not be directly related to the SDGs.
- Because the SDGs are not focused specifically at universities, organisations that compile assessments and rankings have to make decisions about which aspects of university activities to focus on.
- The things that are measured are usually the things that are easy to measure, and these may not be the most important things. The choice of metrics may also be influenced by the biases or objectives of the organisation performing the assessment.

- For rankings it is easy to become too focused on small differences, especially in year to year changes. For ratings and accreditation a small change in performance can result in a large change in apparent performance at the edges of the rating or accreditation boundaries.
- It is worth exploring the methodologies and objectives of assessments, to determine where their strengths and weaknesses are. These methodologies should be made clear by the creators, who should be open to adapting them to reflect changed circumstances.
- Assessments based on a single system or country may have access to more detailed data than international assessments.
- It is always worth looking for additional sources of information. What do other systems show? What does the university say itself? When a university showcases its performance is it selecting only the system in which it does best?

Conclusions

Because we believe in the power of higher education to support the UN SDGs it is good that people want to understand their contributions.

Assessments, Ratings and Rankings, may help you to understand how a university is performing in delivering progress around the SDGs.

But when using them it is important to understand what you are looking for, and how an evaluation system approach compares to your needs. The objective of the organisation creating the evaluation may also be relevant, and it is useful to be aware of any biases that have been brought into the process.

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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