



HESI Global Forum 2024

The Future of Higher Education for Sustainable Development

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Background

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) is a partnership between several United Nations entities and the higher education community. For 2024-2025, the initiative is chaired by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN University, UNESCO IESALC, and the Sulitest Association.

Each year, HESI organizes a global forum as a special event to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) – the UN’s main platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The forum highlights the critical role of higher education in achieving sustainable development.

The 2024 HESI Global Forum was held on 15 July 2024 under the theme "*The Future of Higher Education for Sustainable Development*" and featured:

- Insights on higher education for sustainable development from leading experts and thought leaders.
- Showcases of inspiring initiatives from the UN system, HESI action groups, and other key stakeholders.
- A multi-stakeholder discussion exploring the intersection of education, innovation, and sustainability, with a focus on the impact of AI and other emerging technologies in light of concerns about slow progress toward achieving the SDGs.
- A fire side chat on government’s perspectives on the role of higher education in advancing sustainable development.

The Forum also served as a preparatory platform for initiatives to be advocated or launched at the 2024 Summit of the Future. Recommendations and strategies from the Forum could inform policy and practice, shaping advocacy efforts and action plans for sustainable development in higher education.

Key Messages and Action Points

1. Role of Higher Education in Advancing Sustainable Development

- **Key Message:** Universities are pivotal in addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. They serve as key drivers of research, education, and policy innovation, essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Action Point:** Higher education institutions (HEIs) need to adopt an **activist role** in promoting sustainable development through innovative research, partnerships, and ethical leadership.

2. Acceleration of Progress Towards the SDGs

- **Key Message:** The latest SDG Progress Report shows that only 17% of SDG targets are on track, highlighting the urgent need for acceleration.

- **Action Point:** HEIs must work faster and more collaboratively to meet the SDGs, focusing on developing **actionable recommendations** that inform both policy and practice in education and sustainability.

3. Leveraging Technology, Especially AI

- **Key Message:** AI holds transformative potential for education and sustainability but must be integrated responsibly, addressing ethical risks and ensuring equitable access.
- **Action Point:** HEIs should lead the responsible use of **AI and emerging technologies** to promote inclusive and equitable access to education, focusing on governance frameworks and global cooperation.

4. Cross-Sector Collaboration and Partnerships

- **Key Message:** Partnerships between universities, governments, the private sector, and civil society are crucial to advancing sustainable development.
- **Action Point:** Foster **multi-stakeholder partnerships** that bring together academia, industry, and policymakers to address shared challenges. Encourage collaborative projects and **knowledge-sharing platforms**.

5. Addressing Global Inequalities

- **Key Message:** There remains a significant divide between the Global North and South in terms of access to education and resources, exacerbated by climate change and economic disparity.
- **Action Point:** Global financial reforms and **international cooperation** are needed to address inequalities in education. Middle-income countries and SIDS (Small Island Developing States) require access to concessional financing to build resilience and invest in long-term educational development.

6. Inclusion of Students and Youth Leadership

- **Key Message:** Students are at the forefront of sustainability initiatives and must be actively included in decision-making processes. Empowering students to drive sustainability efforts is essential.
- **Action Point:** HEIs should establish **student-led action groups**, ensuring that youth leadership and voices are central to shaping future education systems and sustainability solutions.

7. Sustainability Metrics and Accountability

- **Key Message:** Sustainability metrics in university rankings are becoming a powerful tool to hold institutions accountable for their contributions to the SDGs.
- **Action Point:** Encourage more **integration of sustainability metrics** into global university rankings to ensure that sustainability becomes a core aspect of higher education performance assessments.

8. Focus on Green Jobs and Workforce Development

- **Key Message:** The global transition to green economies requires workforce development that aligns education with green job markets.
- **Action Point:** Develop **green job educational programs** and **workforce toolkits** to meet national climate commitments and support youth employment in sustainable industries.

9. Building Resilience in Vulnerable Regions

- **Key Message:** Countries like Jamaica face disproportionate challenges due to climate change, impacting both their education systems and broader societal infrastructure.
- **Action Point:** HEIs in SIDS and other vulnerable regions should focus on **resilience-building programs** like Jamaica's Global Tourism Resilience Centre, and leverage international partnerships to address local and global challenges.

10. Supporting Policy and Research Integration

- **Key Message:** Universities play an essential role in influencing public policy and providing research-based solutions to global challenges.
- **Action Point:** Strengthen **policy-relevant research** within HEIs, ensuring that universities actively contribute to public policy discussions and decision-making on sustainability issues.

11. Commitment to Equity and Ethical Leadership

- **Key Message:** Universities must embrace their responsibility to act as ethical leaders, ensuring that equity, inclusiveness, and social justice are prioritized in education and sustainability initiatives.
- **Action Point:** Integrate **equity and ethics** into educational frameworks, ensuring that all voices, particularly those from underrepresented communities, are heard and included in shaping sustainable development strategies.

12. Digital Transformation and Inclusivity

- **Key Message:** Digital infrastructure is essential for advancing education and sustainability, particularly in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Action Point:** Invest in **digital transformation** across HEIs to ensure continuous learning, innovation, and global collaboration. Address the digital divide to make education accessible to all learners, particularly in underserved regions.

13. Action-Oriented Follow-Up and Implementation

- **Key Message:** Moving beyond dialogue, there is a need for action-oriented follow-up to implement the ideas discussed in global forums.

- **Action Point:** Commit to concrete **follow-up actions** and continued dialogue between universities, governments, and international organizations to ensure that education plays a key role in advancing the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

By addressing these key messages and action points, higher education institutions can strengthen their role in shaping a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient sustainable future.

Sessions

Opening segment

The 2024 HESI Global Forum opened with insightful remarks from key speakers, emphasizing the critical role of higher education in sustainable development and addressing global challenges. Each speaker highlighted innovative solutions and the role of technology, especially AI, in shaping the future of education and sustainability.

Ms. Lotta Tähtinen, Chief of Outreach and Partnerships, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA, welcomed attendees and emphasized the importance of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) in uniting the global higher education community to drive progress on the SDGs. She reflected on the grim findings of the latest SDG Progress Report, noting that only 17% of SDG targets are on track and urging higher education institutions to accelerate their efforts. Ms. Tähtinen called on the forum to generate actionable recommendations that can inform policy and practice, and contribute to the SDGs through education, research, and advocacy. She highlighted the role of universities as catalysts for innovation and change, particularly in light of global inequalities, environmental crises, and economic challenges.

Ms. Shen Xiaomeng, Vice-Rector in Europe & Director of the United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security, discussed the transformative potential of AI in sustainable development, while addressing the ethical and environmental challenges it presents. She underscored the need for higher education institutions to take the lead in responsibly exploring AI's applications in fields such as energy optimization, climate prediction, and equitable access to education. Ms. Shen announced the launch of the Future of Higher Education and Artificial Intelligence Action Group within HESI, which aims to build a knowledge base on AI's opportunities and risks in sustainable development, fostering collaboration between UN entities, academia, and global networks. She also highlighted the importance of cross-border cooperation in advancing AI's potential for addressing global challenges, with the United Nations University playing a central role through various educational and research initiatives.

Ms. Bosen Lily Liu, UNESCO IESALC (delivering remarks on behalf of Mr. Francesco Pedro, Director of the UNESCO IESALC), emphasized the crucial role of higher education in advancing the SDGs and addressing global disparities in technological readiness. She highlighted the opportunities AI presents for transforming education, but also cautioned about the need for responsible and ethical integration of AI in education systems. Ms. Liu spoke about UNESCO IESALC's efforts in promoting AI governance, including frameworks aimed at bridging the technology divide and supporting equitable access to digital tools in education. She stressed the importance of fostering collaboration between higher education institutions and policymakers to ensure that AI and other technologies are used in a way that benefits all learners, especially in underserved regions.

Sir Hillary Beckles, Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies (via video message), delivered a thought-provoking keynote address on the vital role of universities as agents of change for sustainable development. He framed the SDGs as a "lifeline" for higher education institutions, calling for them to adopt an activist role in addressing critical issues such as poverty, food security, climate change, and inequality. Sir Beckles introduced the University of the West Indies' International School for Development Justice, which focuses on offering online master's programs dedicated to the SDGs. He emphasized that universities must prioritize ethical leadership, acknowledge their historical roles in global injustices, and actively engage in finding solutions to today's most pressing challenges. Through partnerships and collaboration, Sir Beckles urged universities to come together to produce innovative research, teaching methodologies, and advocacy strategies that support sustainable development.

Each speaker stressed the importance of leveraging higher education's potential to address global challenges, particularly through collaboration, innovation, and the responsible use of emerging technologies like AI. Their insights set the stage for further discussions on how universities can lead in advancing the SDGs and fostering a more sustainable and equitable future.

Session 1 - Innovative Higher Education Initiatives for Sustainable Development

The "**Kicking it off - Innovative Higher Education Initiatives for Sustainable Development**" session of the Forum, moderated by **Mr. Jean-Christophe Carteron**, brought together various leaders and innovators to showcase projects that align with the SDGs. This session highlighted the transformative potential of emerging technologies, particularly AI, in fostering sustainability across higher education institutions. The segment also emphasized the importance of collaboration, demonstrating how collective action can amplify impact and drive global progress toward sustainability.

Mr. Paulo Speroni, Manager of Strategy, Governance & Innovation at Principles for Responsible Management Education, began by introducing the work of the **HESI Student Action Group**, which is dedicated to empowering students to drive sustainable practices within higher education institutions. Mr. Speroni highlighted the importance of student leadership in shaping the future of education and emphasized that today's students are already at the forefront of promoting sustainability. He discussed the group's work in building a global network of student change agents, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that the student voice remains central to decision-making processes in higher education. By organizing their efforts into subgroups focused on network development, advocacy, and knowledge sharing, the action group has been able to create a platform for student-led initiatives that contribute to sustainable development on a global scale.

Following this, **Mr. Duncan Ross**, from Times Higher Education, spoke about the **Rankings, Ratings, and Assessments Action Group**. Ross noted the growing importance of sustainability metrics in global university rankings and explained how these assessments are increasingly influencing institutional policies and practices. He emphasized that the action group has been working to bring together key ranking agencies and universities to collectively enhance the role of sustainability in higher education evaluations. Mr. Ross highlighted that these sustainability-focused assessments now represent one of the largest ways that universities hold themselves accountable for their contributions to the SDGs. By engaging with both international and national ranking bodies, the action group seeks to improve the integration of sustainability into performance assessments, making it a core aspect of institutional accountability.

Ms. Jonghwi Park, representing the United Nations University, provided insights into the newly established **Futures of Higher Education and Artificial Intelligence Action Group**. Ms. Park discussed the dual nature of AI in higher education, recognizing its potential to revolutionize learning and sustainability practices while also acknowledging the ethical and societal risks it poses. She explained that the new action group aims to explore how AI can be leveraged to advance the SDGs within universities while minimizing the risks associated with its implementation. The action group is focused on generating evidence-based insights and fostering informed debates on how AI can be integrated responsibly into educational systems. By collaborating with universities, UN entities, and sustainability experts, the action group hopes to provide guidance on using AI to enhance education and promote sustainable development.

In a video message, **Ms. Debra Rowe**, President of the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development, spoke about two significant action groups: **Education for Green Jobs** and the **SDG Publishers Compact Fellows**. She emphasized the urgent need to align education and career development with green job markets to fulfill national climate commitments. The Green Jobs Action Group, in collaboration with UNEP, focuses on developing resources like the Global Guidance Document for Green Jobs Education and a toolkit for workforce development. Meanwhile, the SDG Publishers Compact Fellows works with academic publishers and researchers to ensure that educational content and research are aligned with the SDGs. Rowe stressed the importance of making research outcomes accessible to practitioners and policymakers and advocated for more inclusive and equitable approaches to sustainable education.

Mr. Aurelien Decamps, co-founder of the Sulitest movement, presented Sulitest's efforts to mainstream sustainability literacy through digital assessments. Decamps explained that the **TASC (Test for the Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge)**, Sulitest's flagship tool, helps universities measure their students' understanding of sustainability and the SDGs. This data allows institutions to make informed decisions about curriculum changes and track the progress of their sustainability initiatives. He emphasized that collaboration is at the heart of Sulitest's mission, with stakeholders from across academia, NGOs, and professional networks working together to ensure the relevance of their tools. Mr. Decamps noted that while many universities have champions leading these efforts, the goal is to foster a culture of sustainability literacy across all institutions, driving collective progress toward the SDGs.

Ms. Quinn Runkle, from SOS-UK, showcased several impactful initiatives, including the **SDG Accord**, the **International Green Gown Awards**, and the **Race to Zero Campaign**. Runkle discussed how these initiatives are helping universities commit to ambitious sustainability goals and take tangible steps toward achieving them. The **SDG Accord** has brought together over 2,700 institutions worldwide to embed the SDGs into their work, and the **International Green Gown Awards** celebrate the exceptional sustainability initiatives of universities and colleges. Ms. Runkle emphasized that the **Race to Zero Campaign** is pushing universities to commit to net-zero emissions, with institutions required to produce and report on action plans within 12 months of signing. She encouraged HESI members and other stakeholders to support these initiatives by sharing them with their networks and amplifying their impact.

Ms. Victoria Galán-Muros, from the UNESCO IESALC, introduced the newly launched **Sustainability Evaluation Tool for Higher Education Institutions (SET4HEI)**. This tool, developed in collaboration with UN agencies, provides a comprehensive framework for universities to assess their contributions to the SDGs across various dimensions, including teaching, research, and management. Galán-Muros explained that the tool is designed to be accessible, open, and adaptable, allowing institutions to tailor their evaluations to their specific contexts. The SET for HEI provides universities

with 400 indicators across the 17 SDGs, empowering them to chart their own path toward sustainability while offering a transparent and longitudinal assessment model. Ms. Galán-Muros stressed the importance of making such tools available to universities globally to enable more institutions to actively contribute to sustainable development.

Ms. Jayashri Wyatt, Chief of Education Outreach Section at the UN Department of Global Communications, concluded the session by discussing **United Nations Academic Impact SDG Hubs**. She highlighted the critical role that universities play as SDG Hubs, serving as models of innovation and leadership in advancing the global goals. Ms. Wyatt shared examples of successful partnerships between UNAI and universities that have led to impactful projects, such as student leadership initiatives and collaborations with global organizations to address pressing challenges like climate change and inequality. She emphasized that students, faculty, and university leadership all have a vital role to play in driving measurable change toward the SDGs and that the UNAI network is committed to supporting these efforts through its ongoing work with higher education institutions.

This dynamic session highlighted the powerful role of higher education in driving sustainability and innovation. The speakers collectively emphasized the importance of collaboration, the potential of emerging technologies like AI, and the need for universities to take bold action in contributing to the SDGs. By fostering partnerships across institutions, sectors, and geographies, these initiatives demonstrate the capacity of higher education to lead the global sustainability agenda.

Session 2 - Multi-stakeholder panel: Integrating Education, Innovation, and Sustainable Development in The Future for Higher Education

The multi-stakeholder panel titled "**Integrating Education, Innovation, and Sustainable Development in The Future for Higher Education**", moderated by **Ms. Bosen Lily Liu** from UNESCO IESALC, explored key questions on how higher education institutions can integrate emerging technologies, such as AI, to advance SDGs and promote sustainability. Each speaker shared insights on innovative teaching practices, partnerships, and their visions for the future of higher education.

Ms. Miki Sugimura, UNESCO Chair on Education for Human Dignity, Peace, and Sustainability from **Sophia University (Japan)** focused on the need for higher education institutions to adopt transdisciplinary approaches in their curriculum to address complex sustainability challenges. She emphasized that SDG 4.7, which calls for education for sustainable development (ESD) and global citizenship, should be a guiding framework for transforming education to become more inclusive, equitable, and qualitative. She highlighted the work of **ProSPER.Net**, a network of 55 leading universities in the Asia-Pacific region promoting sustainability through research and education, as a model for fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, Ms. Sugimura stressed the importance of integrating innovative teaching methods that focus on competency-based education, encouraging students to be creative problem-solvers and leaders in sustainability. She mentioned initiatives such as the **SDG University Platform** in Japan, which facilitates the sharing of best practices among universities, as well as collaborations with regional networks like **UMAP** (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific), to promote student exchanges and research.

Ms. Gbemi Disu, Vice President at **Northeastern University (USA)** shared Northeastern University's focus on **experiential learning** as a key driver for integrating sustainability into higher education. Northeastern's long-standing approach of combining classroom education with real-world experience through partnerships with industries and communities enables students to gain practical skills that align with SDGs. She highlighted the university's **Impact Engines**,

interdisciplinary research groups that work on innovative solutions for societal challenges. One notable example is Northeastern's partnership with the **City of Boston**, using AI and data to develop a matching algorithm for youth employment, which has placed thousands of students in jobs. She also discussed how **cross-disciplinary education** at Northeastern encourages students to combine fields such as theater and computer science, allowing for innovative thinking and problem-solving that can address sustainability issues. Ms. Disu emphasized the importance of leveraging research for **evidence-based policy recommendations**, and shared examples of projects that have had real-world impacts, such as initiatives addressing inequality in the criminal justice system.

Ms. Jennifer Milam, Pro Vice-Chancellor of Academic Excellence at the University of Newcastle (Australia) discussed how the University of Newcastle integrates sustainability into both teaching and research programs, emphasizing equity and inclusiveness as central to innovation. She highlighted the importance of leveraging **emerging technologies** such as AI to reach underrepresented populations and address sustainability challenges across diverse communities. One example she shared was the **Global Center for Radiation Oncology**, which uses advanced technology to train radiation oncologists not only in Australia but also in countries like Vietnam, showcasing the potential for universities to extend their expertise globally. Additionally, the university's **waste management training program** in the Pacific, developed in partnership with local governments, serves as an example of how universities can use technology to deliver virtual training and enhance sustainable practices. Ms. Milam stressed the need for universities to reduce barriers to education and ensure that diverse voices, particularly women and underrepresented groups in STEM, are included in decision-making processes that shape the future of innovation and sustainability.

Mr. Arturo Condo, President of EARTH University (Costa Rica) provided insights into EARTH University's focus on **agricultural sustainability** and the role of higher education institutions in promoting sustainable development in the global south. He discussed the **University Global Coalition**, which brings together universities from around the world to collaborate on SDG-related projects, and stressed the importance of going beyond simple exchanges to co-design programs and conduct applied research that addresses local contexts. One key initiative mentioned was a collaborative project among universities in Latin America, Africa, and the U.S., focused on **SDG 2: Zero Hunger**, where students work together across borders to develop solutions for food security. Mr. Condo also highlighted EARTH University's partnerships with technical high schools in Costa Rica, where they help develop a comprehensive curriculum that incorporates entrepreneurship, leadership, and appropriate technology, fostering innovation at the grassroots level. He underscored the importance of **South-South cooperation** and invited other universities to collaborate in deepening partnerships to tackle global challenges.

Mr. Kevin Hall, President of the University of Victoria (Canada) discussed how the **University of Victoria** uses the concept of a "**campus as a living lab**" to integrate sustainability into the university's operations, research, and teaching. He emphasized the role of **indigenous knowledge** in guiding sustainable practices on campus, such as restoring natural landscapes, and highlighted how indigenous approaches to sustainability offer valuable lessons for the university and broader society. Mr. Hall shared examples of how students are involved in using AI and data analysis to track and improve the university's **purchasing policies**, ensuring they align with SDGs. He also mentioned the integration of students into energy management systems on campus, where they gain hands-on experience with sustainable energy solutions. The university's **responsible investment policy** is another area where students work with the administration to explore the impact of sustainable investments. Mr. Hall further emphasized that universities must become **hubs for innovation**,

connecting students, faculty, and the broader community to work together on sustainability challenges.

Mr. Mohammed Alshehri, Vice-Rector for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at Majmaah University (Saudi Arabia) discussed Majmaah University's efforts to integrate **AI-driven educational advancements** into their sustainability programs. By incorporating AI into sustainability-related courses, the university encourages students to use data analysis and predictive modeling to address environmental and social challenges. He emphasized the importance of **experiential learning**, where students apply AI tools to real-world projects, such as resource management and environmental monitoring, to develop practical solutions aligned with the SDGs. Majmaah University's partnerships with organizations like **UNITAR** and the **United Nations Academic Impact** have enabled collaborative projects and joint research initiatives that strengthen the university's role in promoting sustainability. Mr. Alshehri highlighted the importance of fostering a culture of **technological literacy and innovation**, empowering students to lead the way in applying AI to create a more sustainable and inclusive society.

Ms. Lydia Logan, Vice President of Global Education and Workforce Development, Corporate Social Responsibility at IBM (USA) spoke about **IBM's SkillsBuild program**, which partners with universities and governments worldwide to provide free technology training in areas such as AI, cybersecurity, and sustainability. She highlighted the importance of **public-private partnerships** in addressing the global skills gap and preparing students for the workforce of the future. IBM's initiatives include providing **digital credentials** that are recognized by employers, allowing students to gain tangible skills that lead to job opportunities. Ms. Logan also emphasized IBM's commitment to **ethical AI**, citing their pledge to train 1 million women and girls in Asia-Pacific on AI and sustainability by 2025, with a focus on bridging the gender gap in tech. She stressed that universities need to collaborate with industry to **democratize access** to cutting-edge technology and ensure that students from diverse backgrounds are equipped with the skills necessary to contribute to sustainable development.

Ms. Zamzam Ibrahim, Director of SOS-International (Somalia), a climate justice activist and advocate for youth involvement, highlighted the role of **civil society organizations** in building partnerships with universities to advance sustainability. She emphasized that real-world sustainability challenges require inclusive, **co-creative research** that involves youth and civil society at the forefront. Ms. Ibrahim shared how **SOS-International** is working with **Times Higher Education** and **UNEP** on initiatives such as the **Green Jobs for Youth Pact**, which aims to create opportunities for young people in the green economy. She stressed the importance of ensuring that sustainability projects are rooted in **equity and social justice**, particularly in addressing the structural inequalities that affect marginalized communities. Ms. Ibrahim called for **funding and resource mobilization** to support collaborative projects between universities, youth organizations, and civil society, ensuring that green jobs and sustainability education are accessible to all.

As the academic chair of SIPA Student Association, **Mr. Krishna Kishore Pandalaneni (India)**, provided a **student perspective** on the importance of addressing inequalities in education. He emphasized that higher education institutions must ensure that **innovation benefits diverse groups**, rather than exacerbating existing inequalities. He raised concerns about the cost of emerging technologies like AI and how access to these tools is often limited to privileged groups. Mr. Pandalaneni called for stronger mechanisms to **amplify student voices** and involve them in decision-making processes related to sustainability and innovation. He urged universities to take action to reduce the burden of innovation on students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to ensure that higher education contributes to **social justice and equity**.

Conclusion:

The panel concluded with a consensus on the need for **partnerships**—between universities, industry, government, and civil society—to drive sustainable development and innovation in higher education. The speakers highlighted the importance of **inclusive, interdisciplinary approaches**, the role of **emerging technologies like AI**, and the need for **student-centered education** to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of the SDGs. Each speaker emphasized the critical role universities play in shaping the future of sustainable development and the necessity of collaboration to achieve transformative change.

Session 3 - Government Perspectives on the Role of Higher Education in Shaping Sustainable Development

The session titled "**Fireside Chat: Government Perspectives on the Role of Higher Education in Shaping Sustainable Development**" featured an insightful conversation between **H.E. Mr. Brian Christopher Manley Wallace**, Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the UN, and **H.E. Mr. Abdulaziz Alwasil**, Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to the UN. Moderated by **Mr. Alex Mejia**, Division Director at UNITAR, the discussion explored how higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development, both globally and within national contexts.

Mr. Alex Mejia opened the session by acknowledging the vital role that universities have in shaping the future of sustainable development. He noted that universities have a unique ability to educate and inspire the next generation of leaders. However, he also highlighted the ongoing divide between the Global North and South in terms of access to education and resources, stressing the need for greater collaboration. Mejia emphasized the importance of accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda and called for universities to take a more active role in shaping the post-2030 development agenda.

H.E. Mr. Brian Wallace from Jamaica focused on the particular challenges faced by small island developing states (SIDS) like Jamaica, which are disproportionately affected by climate change. He explained that Jamaica's education system, along with other aspects of its infrastructure, has been severely impacted by natural disasters such as hurricanes. For instance, Wallace mentioned that Hurricane Beryl recently caused an estimated \$800 million in damage within 48 hours, severely disrupting the education sector. He underscored that this illustrates the existential threat climate change poses to all aspects of life in SIDS, including education.

Ambassador Wallace also reflected on the personal and societal transformative power of education, sharing his own family's journey from poverty to opportunity through education. He highlighted that education has long been a tool for social mobility in Jamaica, but SIDS face unique challenges in accessing the financial resources necessary to invest in education. To address these challenges, Wallace advocated for stronger international cooperation, including reforms to the global financial system that would allow middle-income countries like Jamaica to access concessional financing, enabling them to invest in long-term sustainable development goals.

Ambassador Wallace further highlighted Jamaica's innovative approach to building resilience in the tourism sector. He discussed the establishment of the **Global Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management Centre** at the University of the West Indies, which is aimed at helping the global tourism industry prepare for and recover from disruptions like pandemics and natural disasters. This initiative, he noted, has already expanded to other countries, demonstrating how universities in SIDS can lead in developing globally relevant solutions.

H.E. Mr. Abdulaziz Alwasil of Saudi Arabia focused on the broader global role that higher education institutions can play in supporting sustainable development. He highlighted that universities are not just places for academic learning, but critical partners in global development through their ability to foster innovation, research, and policymaking. He noted that globally, around 254 million students are enrolled in higher education institutions, representing a significant potential force for positive change.

Ambassador Alwasil outlined Saudi Arabia's significant investments in education, particularly in the areas of digital transformation and partnerships with global universities. He cited the **Kingdom's scholarship programs**, which have sent hundreds of thousands of Saudi students abroad to study in over 50 countries. This program has helped build a globally educated workforce that contributes to both national and international development. He also emphasized the importance of **digital infrastructure**, which allowed Saudi Arabia to continue education seamlessly during the COVID-19 pandemic, while many other countries struggled due to a lack of digitalization.

In addition to these efforts, Ambassador Alwasil highlighted the role of partnerships between universities, industry, and government in advancing innovation and addressing the needs of the market. He mentioned Saudi Arabia's **Research and Industrial Partnership Initiative**, which has established over 50 partnerships between universities and companies to drive technology transfer and economic development. These partnerships, he explained, are crucial for empowering both the economy and sustainable development efforts in the Kingdom and beyond.

Throughout the session, both ambassadors agreed on the importance of **collaboration and partnership** between universities and various sectors, including governments, industry, and civil society. They emphasized that universities could play a critical role not only in educating future leaders but also in driving innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and inequality.

Mr. Mejia concluded the session by reiterating the central role universities play in shaping the minds of future generations and in influencing global policymaking. He urged higher education institutions to take on the responsibility of shaping the future through research, innovation, and collaboration, particularly in the lead-up to significant upcoming global events like the **Summit of the Future in 2024** and the **Financing for Development Summit in 2025**. He further stressed the importance of follow-up actions and continued dialogue between universities, governments, and international organizations to ensure that the potential of higher education is fully harnessed in achieving the SDGs.