



Inaugural HESI Networking Forum Launches New Chapter in Higher Education for Sustainable Development

Virtual | 21 May 2025 — The [Higher Education Sustainability Initiative \(HESI\)](#) marked a major milestone with the successful launch of its first-ever Networking Forum, drawing more than 140 participants from across the globe. Held virtually on 21 May 2025, the event featured **68 interactive breakout rooms** and provided an inclusive space for dialogue, peer exchange, and partnership-building among universities, student groups, UN agencies, and networks.

The [Forum](#) marked the launch of the first activity under the new HESI Partnership Framework, which will be officially introduced at the upcoming [2025 HESI Global Forum on 21 July 2025](#). The Framework lays out a coordinated vision for how higher education can drive progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Opening Remarks

The Forum opened with welcoming remarks from Mr. Ola Goransson (UN DESA), co-chair of HESI. He acknowledged HESI's broad community, which includes over 1,250 members across all regions and several UN partners, such as UNESCO, UNEP, UN Global Compact PRME, UN-HABITAT, UNCTAD, UNITAR, the UN Office for Partnerships, and UN Academic Impact.

Mr. Goransson encouraged participants to use the Forum to build relationships, explore synergies, and lay the groundwork for future collaboration.

In his overview of HESI, Mr. Goransson shared that HESI was launched in 2012 ahead of Rio+20 and has since grown into a global platform that supports multi-stakeholder dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and best practices in higher education for sustainable development. He introduced the five current HESI Action Groups and reflected on HESI's rich history of organizing forums and webinars, including the annual HESI Global Forum held as special event to the [High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF\)](#).

Mr. Francesc Pedro, Director of UNESCO IESALC, followed with remarks highlighting the central importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and knowledge co-creation in advancing the sustainable development agenda through higher education. He welcomed participants to this first-ever HESI Networking Forum and emphasized its value as a space for connection and mutual learning among a diverse and growing community.

Mr. Pedro noted that:

- Higher education institutions must act not only as knowledge producers but also as enablers of social transformation, equipping learners with the competencies, critical thinking, and agency to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.
- The HESI Networking Forum aligns with UNESCO IESALC's commitment to inclusive and equitable higher education, and its efforts to reduce global inequalities in access to education, research funding, and scientific cooperation.
- Events like the Networking Forum are critical to empowering underrepresented voices, facilitating South-South and cross-regional dialogue, and ensuring that the sustainable development agenda is driven by diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Mr. Pedro encouraged participants to see themselves as part of a shared movement within the HESI community—one that fosters collaboration across sectors and geographies, and works collectively toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world.

Interactive Format: Connecting the Global HESI Community

To foster connection and collaboration, participants then took part in three rounds of small-group networking breakout sessions, guided by structured prompts about their roles, sustainability priorities, and partnerships. This dynamic format sparked meaningful conversations and helped strengthen cross-regional ties across the HESI community.

Introduction UN Partners and HESI Action Groups

Breakout sessions also introduced participants to the work of HESI's UN partners and thematic Action Groups:

Featured UN Partners:

Mr. Ola Goranson opened the session with presentations by UN partners showcasing their higher education initiatives in support of sustainable development.

1. *UNESCO IESALC* – Ms. Bosen Lily Liu
2. *UNESCO* – Mr. Wesley Teter
3. *UN Global Compact PRME* – Ms. Meredith Storey
4. *UN University* – Ms. Jonghwi Park
5. *UN Environment Programme* – Ms. Giulia Salvetti

Featured HESI Action Groups:

Mr. JC Carteron from Sulitest provided a brief overview of HESI's Action Groups, highlighting their role in advancing sustainability in higher education through collaboration, and invited attendees to engage with the thematic working groups.

1. [*SDG Publishers Compact*](#) – Ms. Sally Wilson
2. [*Education for Green Jobs*](#) – Ms. Debra Rowe
3. [*Student Action Group*](#) – Mr. Darren Axe
4. [*Futures of Higher Education and Artificial Intelligence*](#) – Mr. Jerome Silla and Ms. Bosen Lily Liu
5. [*Rankings, Ratings, and Assessments*](#) – Ms. Kathleen Ng McGill

Virtual Exhibition Hall: Showcasing Member-Led Innovation

A dedicated Virtual Exhibition Hall highlighted 9 innovative initiatives from HESI members, showcasing practical solutions in curriculum integration, AI-powered tools, regional partnerships, and sustainability research:

1. TASK: the first international and psychometric tool to assess and monitor your education for sustainability strategy by Ms. Alix Robine
2. Challenges and opportunities to embrace Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship in Latin America: perspectives from a UNESCO Chair by Ms. Carla Sabbatini
3. EduFix: Sustainable Education Infrastructure Management through AI-Powered Solutions by Dr. Hemachandran K
4. Building higher education partnerships for sustainable development and the SDGs - 30+ years of experience from the International Association of Universities by Ms. Isabel Toman
5. Scientific Literacy for Sustainability: A University-School-NGO-IGO Collaboration by Dr. Rúben M. Costa, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology
6. Integrating Sustainable Development Goals into the Curriculum: The BUIITEMS Experience by Prof. Dr. Bilal Sarwar
7. Higher Education as a Catalyst for the SDGs: Ajman University in Action by Ms. Maya Haddad
8. Sustainability-Driven Research in Higher Education: Initiatives at Universiti Teknologi Brunei by Dr. Aida Maryam binti Hj Basri
9. Co-Creating Sustainable Futures: Salzburg's Transdisciplinary Contributions to the SDGs Insights from the Salzburg Sustainability Cluster (UniNEtZ I & II) by Dr. Meike Bukowski "

Framing the Future: HESI Partnership Framework

The Forum concluded with a presentation of the HESI Partnership Framework by Mr. Ola Goransson (UN DESA), outlining a new roadmap for advancing structured engagement and collective action across the HESI community. He emphasized that the Framework is designed to guide and coordinate contributions from across HESI's network—including UN partners, student organizations, university networks, and higher education institutions—with the goal of enhancing academia's role in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and ensuring HESI is well structured and equipped to contribute to future post-2030 sustainable development discussions.

The Framework is organized around four core objectives:

- Gather Insights on priorities, gaps, and opportunities for transformative action in higher education.
- Highlight Innovations in teaching, research, and community engagement.
- Strengthen Partnerships across academia, government, civil society, and the private sector.
- Inform Policy with actionable recommendations and good practices.

These objectives are anchored in three focus areas where higher education institutions can drive sustainable development:

- Teaching and Learning – Integrating sustainability into curricula and pedagogy.
- Research and Innovation – Supporting evidence-based policy and science-informed solutions.
- Partnerships and Engagement – Fostering collaboration for community impact and systems change.

The Framework also outlines a set of core activities to operationalize engagement, including:

- The annual HESI Global Forum.
- The new HESI Networking Forum, launched with this inaugural event.
- A series of Thematic Workshops, organized as Communities of Practice.
- And active support for engagement in key UN processes such as the HLPF and the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA).

Closing

Ms. Jonghwi Park (UN University) closed the Forum by highlighting the upcoming 2025 HESI Global Forum and inviting participants to continue their engagement in HESI's growing network and collective efforts. The 2025 HESI Global Forum will be held virtually on 21 July 2025, from 07:00 to 09:30 AM (EST), as an official special event of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Held under the theme *"Breaking Barriers in Sustainable Development Through Scientific, Inclusive, and Equitable Solutions,"* the Forum will explore how higher education can catalyze transformative action on the SDGs under review in 2025—including SDG 3 (Health), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 17 (Partnerships).

The Global Forum will bring together academia, policymakers, students, private sector leaders, and international organizations to:

- Promote interdisciplinary, science-based solutions to sustainable development challenges.
- Showcase strategies to make education systems more inclusive, equitable, and responsive.
- Foster collaboration through South-South and triangular partnerships.
- Amplify the role of students, educators, and researchers in advancing the 2030 Agenda.
- Launch formal engagement on the HESI Partnership Framework, supporting greater coordination and visibility for higher education's role in sustainable development.

Participants of the Networking Forum were encouraged to continue their engagement through this landmark event and to contribute to the shared mission of building a more just, sustainable, and knowledge-driven future.

Participant Reflections: A Forum that Resonated Across the HESI Community

The inaugural HESI Networking Forum received warm praise from participants around the world, who highlighted the event's engaging format, collaborative spirit, and meaningful outcomes:

- *"A fantastic forum... the meeting format and ability to interact in the breakout rooms was highly appreciated."*
- *"Thank you for a great session and for the opportunity to share our work at our UNESCO Chair."*
- *"It was a pleasure to attend the HESI Networking Forum. While the sessions were fast-paced, they provided a valuable platform for initial engagement and laid the groundwork for meaningful collaboration and knowledge sharing."*
- *"We write to warmly congratulate you and other HESI colleagues on the successful organization of the HESI Networking Forum."*

- *“Meaningful interoperability and value creation can only be achieved through the collective responsibility of all participants... I would be delighted to offer my full support and expertise for future collaborations.”*
- *“It was great to join and learn more about current developments. I loved the meeting format and the ability to interact with colleagues in the breakout rooms.”*
- *“Thank you for the inspiring event. I have joined the forum and look forward to the HESI Global Forum in July.”*
- *“Thank you for coordinating yesterday’s networking forum—a great event with excellent engagement from across the community.”*
- *“I heard it was a fantastic event! Congratulations!”*

These reflections underscore the value of the Networking Forum in fostering a connected, inspired, and action-oriented HESI community—laying a strong foundation for continued collaboration through the HESI Partnership Framework and the upcoming 2025 HESI Global Forum.



Learn more about HESI and the Networking Forum: <https://sdgs.un.org/HESI/Networking>



Save the Date: [2025 HESI Global Forum – 21 July 2025 \(Virtual\)](#)