



HESI Partnership Framework

Advancing Higher Education's Contribution to Sustainable Development

Introduction

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), launched in 2012 as an open partnership between United Nations entities and the higher education community, has been a driving force in aligning higher education with sustainable development goals. As we approach 2030, the evolving global context calls for renewed dialogue on academia's role in shaping and supporting the sustainable development agenda.

The HESI Partnership Framework seeks to harness the collective expertise of the HESI community—including United Nations entities, university networks, student organizations, and higher education institutions—to strengthen the role of academia in advancing sustainable development. The Framework serves as a platform to guide and coordinate contributions across the HESI network and provide insights into how higher education can support implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Objectives of the Framework

- **Gather Insights:** Engage the higher education community in a structured dialogue to identify emerging priorities, knowledge gaps, and opportunities for transformative action.
- **Highlight Innovations:** Showcase innovative practices in research, teaching, and community engagement that align with sustainable development, with the aim of inspiring their wider adoption and scaling impact.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Foster collaboration between academia, governments, the private sector, and civil society to support integrated approaches to sustainability—particularly promoting South-South and triangular cooperation in higher education.
- **Inform Policy:** Provide actionable recommendations, good practices, and tools to inform policymakers and stakeholders on how higher education can best contribute to the SDGs.

Focus Areas

The Framework focuses on three key areas where higher education institutions can offer critical contributions to sustainable development:

1. **Teaching and Learning:** Advancing the integration of sustainability into curricula, pedagogy, and institutional practices, while exploring trends and challenges in education for sustainable development.
2. **Research and Innovation:** Encouraging sustainability-focused research to address pressing global challenges, strengthen the science-policy interface, and support evidence-based decision-making.
3. **Partnerships and Engagement:** Strengthening the role of academia in building sustainable communities through outreach, collaboration, and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Engagement of HESI Members

In addition to its UN partners and Aciton Groups, the HESI Community (full list below) comprises to date (March 2025) over 1,100 universities, higher education networks, and student organizations committed to advancing sustainable development. A key objective of the present Framework is to provide opportunities for members to contribute meaningfully to HESI and its related activities.

Any higher education institution or university network may join HESI. By joining, members commit to actively engaging in and supporting efforts that advance sustainability in higher education and beyond. These efforts may include:

- **Integrating sustainable development into teaching, research, and operations.** Higher education institutions play a vital role in fostering innovation, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning—equipping future leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs, scientists, and educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to drive sustainable development. Strengthening this role enhances understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their interlinkages, supporting meaningful progress toward the 2030 Agenda.
- **Promoting sustainability-focused research and innovation** at national, regional, and global levels to address emerging challenges, strengthen the science-policy interface, and contribute to evidence-based policymaking for sustainable development.
- **Contributing to the creation of sustainable communities** by fostering collaboration, outreach, and multi-stakeholder partnerships that deliver tangible, real-world impact.
- **Engaging in HESI's initiatives**, such as participating in global and regional consultations, contributing to Action Groups, and taking part in the annual HESI Global Forum.

Activities

The following table outlines the key activities coordinated under the Framework:

Activity	Description
HESI Global Forum	Each year, HESI organizes a Global Forum as a special event of 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 advancing sustainable development, showcasing best practices, emerging trends, and policy insights to drive meaningful action.
HESI Networking Forum		<p>To foster a strong culture of knowledge exchange and collaboration, the HESI Secretariat will convene an annual <i>HESI Networking Forum</i>, held virtually unless otherwise decided. This forum will serve as a dedicated space for members to connect, share experiences, and explore new opportunities for collaboration within the HESI community.</p> <p>The Networking Forum will also provide an introduction to the work of HESI Action Groups, helping members become more familiar with HESI's structure, focus areas, and ongoing initiatives. It will offer opportunities for members to present their own sustainability-related work, learn from peers, and engage in discussions that inspire innovation and collective action in higher education for sustainable development.</p>
Thematic Workshops as Communities of Practice		<p>To deepen engagement and foster sustained collaboration, the thematic workshops on the three priority areas—Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, and Partnerships and Engagement—will be structured as Communities of Practice (CoP).</p> <p>Each Community of Practice will serve as a dynamic platform where participants—including universities, student organizations, researchers, policymakers, and UN entities—can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange Knowledge and Best Practices on integrating sustainability in teaching, research, and institutional engagement. • Co-develop Solutions to address challenges and emerging trends in higher education's contribution to sustainable development. • Facilitate Peer Learning and Collaboration, ensuring that institutions can leverage shared experiences and insights to enhance impact. • Contribute to Policy and Institutional Change by feeding key recommendations into the Annual HESI Sustainability Snapshot and other global policy processes.
Supporting global processes	UN	<p>Promote engagement at key UN UN platforms—such as the High-level Political Forum, Science, Technology and Innovation Forum, ECOSOC Partnership Forum, and the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA)—by organizing side events that showcase higher education's contributions to sustainable development.</p> <p>Members are encouraged to co-organize and participate in these events to amplify their work and foster collaboration across the global higher education community.</p>

Expected outputs and outcomes

1. Expanded Engagement of Higher Education in Sustainable Development

- Strengthen the participation of higher education institutions, networks, student organizations, and academic stakeholders in shaping sustainability policies and practices.
- Foster greater collaboration among academia, governments, private sector, and civil society, enhancing cross-sector partnerships.
- Encourage South-South and triangular cooperation among higher education institutions to drive localized and regional sustainability initiatives.

- Increase engagement in HESI Action Groups, allowing institutions to contribute expertise and innovation in key thematic areas.

2. Annual HESI Sustainability Snapshot

- A comprehensive report consolidating key findings, emerging trends, and innovative practices from the consultation process.
- Include thematic insights, case studies, and policy recommendations to guide higher education's role in sustainable development post-2030.
- Feature contributions from HESI partners, action groups, networks, and individual institutions, ensuring diverse perspectives.
- Serve as a resource for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders, offering evidence-based recommendations for integrating sustainability into education, research, and institutional governance.
- Enhance global visibility of higher education institutions' contributions to sustainable development through publication and dissemination across UN platforms, academic networks, and sustainability forums.

The HESI Community

Group	Description
HESI Secretariat	The HESI Secretariat is composed of its co-chairs. For the 2024-2025 term, HESI is co-chaired by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), UN University, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), and the Sulitest Association.
HESI Partners	The UN Partners of HESI are UNESCO, UN Environment Programme, UN Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative, UN-HABITAT, UNCTAD, UNITAR, UN Office for Partnerships, and UN Academic Impact.
HESI Action Groups	HESI Action Groups are thematic coalitions within HESI that focus on advancing specific areas of sustainable development in higher education. There are five action groups: 1) Futures of Higher Education and Artificial Intelligence 2) Student Action Group 3) Rankings, Ratings, and Assessments 4) Education for Green Jobs 5) SDG Publishers Compacr
Higher Education Institutions and Networks	The HESI Community includes over 1,250 universities, regional/global higher education networks, and student organizations committed to advancing sustainable development. Networks play a key role in mobilizing institutions, facilitating engagement, and synthesizing contributions

Initial timeline**April – July 2025**

21 May	HESI Networking Forum (virtual)
21 July	2025 HESI Global Forum (virtual) – open forum to highlight the critical role of higher education in achieving sustainable development, including introduction of the Partnership Framework.
Q3/Q4	Organization of virtual thematic workshops with partners

August 2025 – July 2026

Q3/Q42025, Q12026	Organization of virtual thematic workshops with partners
April	Collect input to HESI Sustainability Snapshot through survey
May/June	Drafting HESI Sustainability Snapshot
July	2026 HESI Global Forum – open forum to highlight the critical role of higher education in achieving sustainable development, presentation of Snapshot and findings around the three areas.