



How Higher Education is Breaking Barriers in Sustainable Development through Scientific, Inclusive, and Equitable Solutions: Highlights from the HESI Global Forum 2025

Co-organized by the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#), [UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education](#), [United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability](#), and the [Sulitest Association](#), the [Higher Education Sustainability Initiative](#) (**HESI**) **Global Forum** was held on 21 July 2025 virtually as a Special Event to the [High Level Political Forum 2025](#) focusing on higher education's contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 on Health and Well-being, SDG 5 on Gender Equality, SDG 8 on Economic Growth and Decent Work, SDG 14 on Life Below Water, and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals.

With over 500 participants from across the globe including policymakers, academics, youth and students, private sector leaders, civil society representatives, and representatives from international organizations, the **10th HESI Global Forum** demonstrated the power of collective action in advancing sustainable development. Both speakers and participants represented all five UNESCO regions, reinforcing the forum's truly global and inclusive character. Launching the new HESI Partnership Framework with three dynamic thematic sessions and featuring two high-level panel discussions, the Global Forum explored the critical role of higher education in advancing scientific, inclusive and equitable solutions for SDGs.

Opening remarks

During the Opening Remark, **Mr. Francesc Pedró**, Director of [UNESCO IESALC](#), opened the Forum with a powerful reminder: “We have five years to meet the SDGs—and the clock is ticking.” While he acknowledged setbacks like the COVID-19 pandemic, which erased years of progress, he emphasized higher education's vital role in driving science-based, inclusive, and equitable solutions for sustainable development. Mr. Pedró highlighted how partnerships, particularly those rooted in South-South and triangular cooperation can break barriers by fostering knowledge exchange and capacity building across regions.

Mr. Pedró's call to action was echoed by **Ms. Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi**, Director of [UNU-IAS](#) who reinforced that higher education must be at the forefront of sustainable development. “How would you feel knowing that learning outcomes are declining, and only a 4% increase in secondary school completion has been made since 2015?” she asked. Highlighting the urgency, she emphasized that universities are uniquely positioned to generate knowledge, build skills, and foster inclusive partnerships. She also noted UNU's commitment to policy-relevant research and innovation, adding,

“The challenges are great, but so is our collective commitment to breaking barriers through higher education.”

Keynote address on the theme of the Forum

In the keynote address, **Mr. Dameon Black**, the CEO and Commissioner of the Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission, called Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to recognize that *“The barriers to sustainability are not just structural—they are systemic. And higher education holds the key, especially in regions like the Global South and Small Island Developing States, where climate vulnerability, limited resources, and social inequalities intersect.”* Most importantly, he challenged institutions to take bold steps to break academic silos and promote interdisciplinary collaboration; center diversity in both data and decision making; and treat students as active innovators and not passive recipients of knowledge.

Multi-stakeholder Panel Discussion: Higher Education’s Role in Advancing Scientific, Inclusive, and Equitable Solutions for Sustainable Development

During the multi-stakeholder panel discussions, participants unpacked some of the real-world barriers faced by learners globally, particularly around language, digital access and representation. **Ms. Sitti Asmah binti Federico** who is an Indigenous Youth Leader in Malaysia showcased how collaborations with Wikimedia, universities, and volunteers in East Malaysia are helping to translate indigenous languages into digital formats, giving communities ownership over their knowledge systems.

While **Ms. Patricija Zizyte** of [Oikos International Consulting](#) echoed the need for youth representation in decision-making spaces, she emphasized that representation alone is not enough. “Lack of collaboration is one of the barriers,” she noted, recounting how a peer once told her that it wasn’t a lack of ideas, but a lack of collaboration, that often-stalled progress.

Building on this, **Mr. Joao Papel**, the IEEE Vice Chair at [Tokai University](#) added a powerful call for inclusion. He said, *“Coming from a rural village in Mozambique, a place where dreams often arrive late, and too often, never arrive at all, I have experienced how language, geography, and disability can keep communities locked outside education.”* He urged institutions to shift from conducting research on people with disabilities to doing research with them, ensuring true inclusion in higher education and innovation.

Whereas **Ms. Yuma Inzolia**, Head of Capacity Building at [UNESCO IESALC](#), warned that access without retention is not equity but abandonment. She also highlighted the risks of digital exclusion and structural inequalities that continue to marginalize underserved students. She emphasized that higher education must evolve from being a gatekeeper of opportunity to a gateway one that leaves no one behind. In response to these challenges, UNESCO IESALC has strengthened capacity-building initiatives such as Inclusion 360°: Redefining Higher Education which supports higher education institutions in assessing and transforming their policies, practices, and campus cultures to become more inclusive.

Mr. Michaels Philips, UNESCO Chair at [Doha University of Science and Technology](#) called for decolonizing sustainability research, prioritizing funding for low-income countries, and ensuring that inclusion is genuine, not tokenistic.

Introduction and launch of the HESI Partnership Framework

The HESI Global Forum 2025 marked a pivotal milestone with the official launch of the [HESI Partnership Framework](#), led by **Mr. Ola Goransson** of [UN DESA](#). Described as a “*blueprint for scaling collaborations across higher education institutions, stakeholders, and countries*,” the Framework stands as the Forum’s most significant outcome, designed to accelerate collective progress toward the SDGs. Structured around three core pillars—Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, and Partnerships and Engagement—the Framework seeks to coordinate global efforts more effectively.

- The first pillar, teaching and learning, focuses on changing education to be more inclusive, culturally aware, and tech smart. It highlights the important role universities play in training future leaders and supporting economies by including sustainability in their programs.
- The second pillar, research and innovation, stresses the need for science and research that solve global problems. It encourages working across different fields and involving many groups, with a focus on sharing knowledge worldwide.
- The third pillar, partnerships and engagement, is about building strong teamwork between the UN, universities, students, and communities. It promotes sharing ideas, learning from each other, and working together to support sustainable development. Together, these pillars guide higher education to work better and faster toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Interactive Breakout Sessions: Deep Dive into the Role of Higher Education in driving inclusive Sustainable Development

In the following breakout sessions corresponding to the priority area of the HESI Partnership Framework, participants collectively explored bold, forward-looking initiatives.

In **Breakout Session 1** on Teaching and Learning: Transforming Higher Education for Sustainability moderated by **Mr. Jerome Silla** from [UNU-IAS](#), **Mr. Alvaro Peña** shared [Uruguay’s U-Tech initiative](#), which brings higher education to underserved communities, many of them first-generation university students and emphasized that sustainability is not merely taught but discovered collaboratively with learners.

Ms. Chua Bee Leng from the [National Institute of Education](#) in Singapore, stressed the importance of developing students as ethical and responsible users and co-creators of AI for sustainable development. Meanwhile,

Mr. Eyitayo Olatunde Olakami from the [Botswana International University of Science and Technology](#), highlighted the impact of introducing sustainability concepts at the entry level of engineering education, helping students grasp its socio-economic and environmental relevance from the outset.

In **Breakout Session 2**, moderated by **Ms. Bosen Lily Liu** from [UNESCO IESALC](#), focused on Research & Innovation: Advancing Science-Based Solutions for the SDGs, speakers and participants reinforced that the effectiveness of global partnerships—especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC)—depends on equity, inclusion, and deep local engagement.

Ms. Sarah Kandil, student and recent PhD holder at the [American University of Sharjah](#) and participant of the Greening-with-STI Bootcamp co-launched by UNESCO IESALC and the [United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation](#) (UNOSSC), showcased how these ideas come to life: from locally sourced, redesigned safety shoes for industrial workers to AI tools aligning actions with SDGs, her work demonstrated how inclusive, real-world innovation can thrive when research is driven by local context and global solidarity, sharing that “sustainability should be a mindset, not just a set of isolated technical solutions for discrete problems”.

Ms. Ragini Malik, Trust Funds and Programmes Officer at UNOSSC, added that localized ownership and context-specific innovation are essential and stressed that “horizontal knowledge exchange among countries of the Global South can unlock homegrown research and technologies that are both scalable and sustainable”.

Mr. David Steingard, Director, [SDG Dashboard](#), emphasized the need to move beyond top-down models dominated by the Global North, “recognizing that everyone brings something vital to the table—whether it’s indigenous knowledge, grassroots experience, funding, consultative expertise, or advanced scientific and technological tools”.

Ms. Meredith Storey, Senior Manager at Principles for Responsible Management Education ([PRME](#)) of the United Nations Global Compact, highlighted the role of global responsible management education, “through platforms like HESI and its partners, advances the SDGs by creating spaces where higher education leaders, researchers, and practitioners listen, learn, and grow together”.

Mr. Darian Stibbe, [The Partnering Initiative](#), moderated **Breakout Session 3** on Partnerships & Engagement: Strengthening Higher Education’s Role in Society, where **Mr. Virendra Rawat**, Founder of [Green Mentors](#), introduced the Green Gadget and Green Education Programme, designed to align students’ skills with India’s growing green jobs sectors.

The President of [Okayama University](#), **Mr. Yasutomo Nasu** emphasized that “universities must become action tanks, not just think tanks,” urging them to not only support the SDGs but to embody them and highlighted global programs like the [UNCTAD-Okayama initiative](#) that empowers young female scientists across Africa and the Caribbean.

Ms. Arianna Soressi, Director of Grants & Development in [Change the Chamber](#), stressed the need for meaningful youth engagement, stating, “*Students don’t need token seats, rather they need real space and voice to lead change,*” as she showcased how her organization equips young people with skills to tackle global challenges and co-create solutions. As Mr. Stibbe noted, promoters of collaborative initiatives should start small and demonstrate impact and then attract more and more support and engagement from government and other stakeholders. The biggest key is ‘Just do it’: pick up the phone, talk to people, try to build momentum, because people want to work in collaboration.

Innovative higher education initiatives related to SDG 3, 5, 8, 14, 17 and leaving no one behind

On the session on Innovative Higher Education Initiatives related to SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14, 17 and the principle of *Leaving No One Behind*, led by **Mr. JC Carteron**, Sulitest President, panelists showcased cutting-edge models that bridge research, policy, and community engagement.

Ms. Jingwen Mu, Director of Institutional Research and Strategic Planning at [Hong Kong Baptist University](#) emphasized a holistic understanding of health under SDG 3, illustrating how interdisciplinary programs merging Chinese medicine, mental health, and community-based interventions are driving wellbeing outcomes beyond traditional healthcare boundaries.

For SDG 5, **Ms. Sylvia Mkandawire**, Senior Program Manager of the [Association of African Universities](#) spotlighted a regional effort across 20 African countries that promotes gender-sensitive environments in STEM and higher education, including tailored support systems and leadership development for women. “It’s about more than access—it’s about creating environments where women can thrive,” she noted.

On SDG 8, **Ms. Jerome Schatzman**, a graduate from [ESSEC Business School](#) highlighted the critical role of higher education in advancing SDG 8 by aligning academic programs with labor market needs and fostering entrepreneurial mindsets among youth.

Turning to SDG 14, **Ms. Ana Margarida Costa**, a professor from the [King Abdullah University of Science and Technology](#) spotlighted a bold initiative to restore 1,000 hectares of cold reefs in the Red Sea, using AI-driven ecological engineering, demonstrating the potential of scalable, climate-resilient higher education projects.

The Executive Director of Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement at [the University of Manchester](#), **Mr. Julian Skryme**, framed SDG 17 as a cornerstone, stating that partnerships are “the enabler that delivers all the other goals,” while outlining the university’s civic panels and participatory governance structures that institutionalize community collaboration. These initiatives emphasize the evolving role of universities as not only centers of knowledge, but as active partners in building inclusive and sustainable futures.

Closing remarks

Mr. Navid Hanif, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development at [UN DESA](#), closed the forum with a powerful call to action: “*Quality education is key to advancing sustainable development, yet progress has fallen short.*” He reflected on the growing momentum witnessed throughout the forum - from students, faculty, and institutions—ready to break barriers and drive transformation.

Whether through inclusive AI, green skills, or gender-sensitive policies, he affirmed that higher education holds both the tools and the responsibility to lead the way, emphasizing that “*The rise of digital societies calls for better integration of technology into education, to ensure access to relevant, high-quality content for a changing labor market*”. He stated that higher education is not just a place of learning, it is a catalyst for systemic change.

By generating science-based insights, cultivating future-ready mindsets, and co-creating solutions with every corner of society, it holds the key to transforming isolated efforts into lasting, global progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Now is the time to unleash its full potential. *“A sustainable future will not be achieved by chance—it will be built by educated, empowered, and connected people like you.”*
