

BLOG 1: 9 HARMONISING PRINCIPLES FOR GREENING HIGHER EDUCATION

With less than five years left until 2030; the crucial target year for the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#); harmonizing sustainable competencies in education has become increasingly urgent. Key international initiatives have developed frameworks for sustainability competencies, including the [UNESCO Competency Framework](#), [GreenComp](#): the European Union's Sustainability Competence Framework, [Green Skills and Green Jobs Youth Consultation](#), an initiative of SOS-International on behalf of the United Nations Environment Programme Green Jobs for Youth Pact Youth Advisory Group, [Skills for greener future by the ILO](#) and the [competency framework for sustainable development and social responsibility](#) published by the CDEFM. Yet, despite their potential, low awareness and adoption remain barriers to embedding these tools into pedagogical practice and curriculum development.

Between 16–19 June 2025, the UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, Student Action Group (HESI-SAG) participated in the Times Higher Education Global Sustainable Development Congress (GSDC) in Istanbul, where the action group co-organized a panel session and workshop *“From Frameworks to Practice: Unlocking the Potential of Sustainability Competencies in Higher Education”*. The workshop was convened by student representatives from [oikos International](#), [oikos Consulting](#), [Students Organizing for Sustainability International](#), the [All-Africa Students Union \(AASU\)](#), and the [European Students' Union \(ESU\)](#), with the student representatives' attendance being sponsored by [Sulitest](#) and [Kedge Business School](#). The event opened with remarks from [Jean-Christophe Carteron](#), President at Sulitest and [Phil Baty](#), Chief Global Affairs Officer, Times Higher Education. This was followed by a panel, featuring competency framework experts from UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean ([UNESCO IESALC](#)), Students Organising for Sustainability United Kingdom ([SOS UK](#)), [Open Universiteit](#), [Kedge Business School](#) and [Join EDuC](#). The interactive workshop engaged over 150 students, staff and institutional leaders, including 50 students from Türkiye. The workshop invited participants to explore the similarities and divergences among key sustainability competency frameworks previously introduced by the panelists, assess how they respond to the skills needed to achieve the SDGs, and engage participants in identifying actionable pathways for harmonizing these approaches. The outcome of the workshop has fed into the 9 harmonising principles below:

1. **Embodied Understanding:** True learning goes beyond knowing—it's about wrestling with complexity, rethinking what we thought we knew, and turning frameworks into living tools. People are hungry for meaning, not just models.
2. **Community, Connection & Collaboration:** Change is not a solo act. Collaboration across roles, disciplines, and cultures isn't a bonus—it's the

engine. Learning happens in relationships, and action scales through networks.

3. **Cultural Transformation:** Sustainability isn't just technical—it's cultural. It's about shifting values, mindsets, and collective ways of being. Education must awaken a deeper connection to nature, community, indigenous knowledge, and purpose.
4. **Curriculum & Pedagogy:** Embedding competencies means reimagining what and how we teach. It's about bringing sustainability into every classroom, assessment, and course—not as content, but as context and purpose.
5. **Youth Leadership:** Students aren't just the future—they're the force. Youth-led initiatives, training, and communities are already shaping the transformation. The system should follow, not block their lead.
6. **Structural Changes:** We can't just tweak things—we need to rebuild. Real change means rethinking power, roles, and incentives within academia. It's time to challenge the system from within.
7. **Political & Systemic Literacy:** If we don't understand systems, we can't change them. From local governance to global capitalism, sustainability demands political awareness, civic courage, and structural critique.
8. **Intrapersonal & Interpersonal Skills:** Transformation starts within. Self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to co-create and inspire—not control—are core to leading change in complex systems.
9. **Diverse Knowledge & Creativity:** Innovation comes from mixing perspectives. From data literacy to cultural storytelling, and science to speculative ideas—there's no one path. Creativity and diversity are the real edge.

In conclusion, as the 2030 deadline for the SDGs rapidly approaches, the urgency of harmonizing sustainability competencies in education cannot be overstated. The insights from the Global Sustainable Development Congress workshop reaffirm that while diverse frameworks already exist, their transformative power lies in meaningful adoption, contextualization, and collaboration. The nine harmonizing principles developed emphasize that embedding sustainability is not just a pedagogical shift but a cultural, structural, and systemic transformation, driven by youth leadership, collective action, and the integration of diverse forms of knowledge.

The HESI-SAG would like to thank Times Higher Education for their generosity in hosting this student-led workshop at the Global Sustainable Development Congress 2025 and for all their support in planning and delivery.