



Building Sustainable Futures

A Consensus Statement
on the Unique Position of
Higher Education in the
Pursuit of Solutions

Partners



United Nations
Academic Impact



**International
Science Council**



Collaborating Partners



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Foreword

We live in a time of escalating and interlocking crises. The climate emergency, runaway inequality, multiplying conflicts, all compounded by a widespread erosion of trust in facts and science. Against this backdrop, higher education offers a powerful remedy. Universities and other tertiary institutions are spaces that both generate knowledge and facilitate dialogue, both elements that are sorely needed in our troubled world. Above all, they bridge borders and boundaries of all kinds, supporting all endeavours to find shared solutions to global challenges.

It is high time that the international community recognized higher education institutions in this central role. Not as contributors to conversations from the sidelines, but as essential partners in our efforts for a better tomorrow. Champions of research, innovation and robust, evidence-based solutions, the global community can ill-afford to ignore their impact on sustainable development, particularly at this precarious moment in international cooperation.

This is just as important as we look ahead to what comes next. We are arriving at a critical juncture. With only a few years left to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, progress is falling short of what the world urgently needs. At the same time, conversations are already underway about what kind of societies we want to build after 2030, what skills we need, and how our institutions must evolve to meet a rapidly changing world.

We look to higher education to help drive those conversations and provide answers to those questions. We look to tertiary institutions to lead societies in how best to learn, adapt, innovate and act for the common good. We look to them to fully realize their potential as powerful engines of societal transformation.

The international community, too, has work to do. It is vital we bring higher education out from the margins and integrate the sector fully into global decision making. In doing so we will strengthen and underpin our development efforts with more robust evidence, more inclusive dialogue, and broader collaboration. We will better deliver lasting impacts for people and planet.

Melissa Fleming,

Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, United Nations

Consensus Statement

Around the world, higher education institutions are navigating a period of profound disruption and possibility. They are being called upon to address increasingly complex global challenges while also confronting declining public trust in science and expertise, threats to academic freedom, widening inequalities, and persistent gaps between research, policy, and practice. Yet these pressures also underscore why higher education is more essential than ever.

At a time when societies need credible knowledge, inclusive dialogue, innovation, and long-term solutions, universities and tertiary institutions possess a unique capacity to help shape more sustainable, democratic, and resilient futures through research, teaching, innovation, and community engagement. Too often, however, these efforts remain fragmented or disconnected from broader systems of policymaking and international cooperation.

This Consensus Statement is grounded in the recognition that the moment demands more than isolated initiatives. It requires a movement built on solidarity, shared purpose, and collective leadership.¹ Repositioning higher education is not only about transforming institutions internally, but also strengthening connections between institutions, societies, governments, and global agendas. It is about building a stronger global community to advance coordinated action at the scale our global challenges require.

The Global Higher Education Symposium 2026 brings together participants from diverse countries and institutional contexts with a shared understanding: higher education must play a more central role in shaping sustainable, inclusive, and democratic futures. This statement is both a call and an invitation—for institutions, governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society to commit to deeper action and work collectively toward integrated initiatives to advance global development.

1. Integration of Sustainability and SDGs

Higher education institutions have the potential to continuously embed the SDGs as the current global action plan towards 2030 across teaching,

learning, research, and institutional practices. They can further explore effective sustainability communication and measurable action, engage diverse worldviews, and serve as living laboratories and catalysts for individual behavior change and institutional sustainable transformation through transdisciplinary approaches.

2. Democratic Values, Trust, and Responsibility

In order to fulfill their societal responsibility to benefit the common good, higher education institutions can provide trustworthy information in times of uncertainty and can support the rebuilding of public trust while defending the authority of knowledge.

Higher education can strengthen its commitment to core principles of access, equity, integrity, autonomy, inclusion, collaboration, and responsibility to remain a force for the common good, contributing to flourishing futures for people and the planet.

Higher education institutions can safeguard the rights, interests, physical and mental health of youth, fostering inclusive education that enables every learner to live a meaningful life while advancing sustainability. They can demonstrate responsible leadership that anticipates and addresses long-term individual and collective readiness for economic, environmental, and social challenges, including climate resilience, peacebuilding, and community impact.

3. Knowledge, Inclusion and Decolonisation

Higher education institutions have the potential to advance their understanding of quality, excellence, and relevance. They can meaningfully promote epistemic pluralism, justice, decolonisation of

¹ This reflects a broad understanding of leadership, reflecting different groups, such as experts, scientists, practitioners, beyond the traditional and formal understanding of leadership

knowledge systems and science systems, and expertise to foster more democratic and inclusive societies through collaborative partnerships and empowering historically underrepresented groups.

4. Science, Technology, Innovation, including Artificial Intelligence for the Benefit of All

Higher education institutions can safeguard and validate data to support informed public decision-making and awareness, while also establishing open access, clear principles and guidelines for the intentional and ethical integration of artificial intelligence into academia.

Higher education institutions call on policymakers to strengthen science-society-policy interfaces and enable informed decision-making and inclusive knowledge exchange.

Higher education institutions call on policymakers to be recognized and supported as central actors in the science-policy-society interface, bridging knowledge, action, and public engagement alongside their students, faculty, and communities.

5. Systemic Change in Governance and Funding

Higher education institutions can play an important role in advocating to shift funding and institutional structures from competitive and fragmented models towards transdisciplinary integration, collaboration, and research that delivers societally relevant outcomes.

When funded sufficiently, higher education can support governments with timely, policy-relevant research and policy briefs. Well-established and resourced institutions can contribute more directly to capacity-building efforts in lower-income countries, including through innovation in financial support and collaborative research initiatives.

Key Themes of the Consensus Statement

Across the five themes of the Consensus Statement, there is a shared understanding that the themes are well grounded and resonate in all regions. Sustainability, democratic values, inclusion, innovation, and governance are consistently understood as interconnected, and none stands in isolation. The outcomes from the first GHES I followed by a global consultation indicate higher education is moving toward more systemic and integrated approaches.

Integration of Sustainability and SDGs

Sustainability is widely understood as a central underlying principle for higher education, requiring coherence across institutional missions, structures, and practices. Sustainability and the SDGs are becoming closely intertwined with questions of technology and artificial intelligence. A central aspect of this integration lies in strengthening the relationship between knowledge production and societal impact. HEIs are expected and are interested in contributing to public decision-making through active engagement with policymakers, communities, and broader publics, catalyzing both behavioral and institutional change, ensuring that sustainability becomes a measurable outcome across society.

Democratic Values, Trust, and Responsibility

It is recognized and deemed as significant by stakeholders that higher education continues to hold a unique position as a space for critical inquiry, open and safe dialogue, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Safeguarding academic freedom enables HEIs to remain independent actors that can question dominant narratives, generate credible knowledge, and support evidence-informed debate. Trust is built through transparency, integrity, and meaningful engagement with society.

Knowledge, Inclusion, and Decolonisation

Inclusion in higher education is not limited to access, but extends to questions of participation, representation, and the recognition of different ways of knowing. This includes a growing emphasis on epistemic pluralism and the need to move beyond dominant knowledge frameworks. By promoting epistemic justice and fostering inclusive research and learning environments, universities

contribute to more democratic and representative knowledge systems. At the same time, there is still a need to strengthen the conditions that enable meaningful participation, particularly for groups that have historically been marginalized.

Science, Technology, Innovation, including Artificial Intelligence for the Benefit of All

Science and innovation remain central to how higher education engages with global challenges. HEIs are expected to act as connectors, linking research with policy, practice, and community knowledge. Open access to knowledge and data becomes an important condition for this role. They must lead in establishing ethical frameworks, open access practices, and inclusive approaches to emerging technologies. Strengthening the interface between science, policy, and society ensures innovation serves the public good and responds to societal needs. By positioning themselves as central actors in this interface, HEIs bridge knowledge and action, foster informed public engagement, and support evidence-based policymaking for inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

Enabling systemic change in governance, leadership, and funding

Transforming higher education ultimately depends on the conditions and funding structures within which institutions operate. Governance structures, leadership approaches, and funding models shape what is possible and what is left behind. There is increasing interest in more flexible and collaborative approaches, including stronger partnerships across institutions and sectors, as well as leadership models that support shared responsibility and distributed agency.

Enabling and Hindering Factors

Across all themes, a common set of conditions shapes what higher education can and cannot do. Enabling factors tend to centre on alignment: between vision and practice, governance and implementation, and institutional priorities and available resources. Leadership that is able to connect these elements plays an important role, as do partnerships that extend beyond the institution.

Hindering factors include disconnected governance structures, funding models that do not support long-term or collaborative work, and performance systems that prioritize narrow indicators over broader societal

contributions. Political pressures, resource constraints, and institutional inertia add further complexity.

New and Emerging Themes

Mental health and well-being are increasingly recognized as central to the functioning of higher education, affecting both students and staff.

Questions of access and affordability remain pressing, particularly in light of widening inequalities and shifting funding landscapes.

The digital transformation remains a cross-cutting area of opportunity and concern for many with the implications of artificial intelligence for teaching, learning, and research still not fully understood.

There is also a continued call to prioritize the societal impact in communities as the futures of people and the planet are intricately linked to the futures of higher education.

Background of the Consensus Statement

Background

In July 2025, the first Global Higher Education Symposium (GHES I) was convened at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on the margins of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), bringing together a diverse group of higher education leaders, scientists, youth representatives, UN entities, and policy partners. Organized through a collaboration of global higher education and science networks, the GHES I responded to growing questions about the relevance, trust, and societal role of higher education in a context marked by intersecting global crises, geopolitical fragmentation, and accelerating technological and ecological change. GHES I was grounded in a shared recognition that higher education institutions are more than knowledge providers or skills pipelines. As globally networked actors, universities play a critical role in shaping societal values, advancing open and credible knowledge, supporting evidence-informed decision-making, and contributing to multilateral cooperation.

A key outcome was a set of principles that capture the transformative potential of higher education for societies. Rather than producing a fixed declaration, participants committed to a Zero Draft Consensus Statement, designed to be refined and strengthened through broader

engagement. Therefore, a global consultation was offered between October and December 2025, engaging with 350 voices from higher education institutions, networks, and related stakeholders across the globe.

Now the GHES II provides a space to launch the consensus statement in its revised version following the consultations and to further advance a shared understanding of higher education's role in shaping just, inclusive, and sustainable futures.

Positioned within UN frameworks on higher education, such as the new UNESCO Higher Education Roadmap "Transforming higher education Global collaboration on visioning and action", the Pact for the Future, and in light of the post-2030 conversations, the Consensus Statement seeks to promote the role of higher education as a societal actor contributing to global agendas in the years ahead.

With thanks to the drafting authors: Katrin Kohl (York University), Amber Webb (SDG Academy, SDSN), and Noah Sobe (UNESCO).

Partners

German Center for Research and Innovation, New York

The German Center for Research and Innovation (DWIH) New York is administered by the [German Academic Exchange Service \(DAAD\)](#). It constitutes one of the five centers within the DAAD global network. It supports innovation and alliance by planning and providing a platform for events with a focus on current and international affairs. It aims to promote Germany's role as a place of research, science and innovation.

Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI)

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) is a UN partnership between several United Nations entities and the higher education community that works to strengthen the role of the higher education sector in advancing sustainable development by facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue, collaboration, action and the sharing of good practices.

International Association of Universities

The International Association of Universities (IAU) is an independent, non-governmental membership organization under the auspices of UNESCO. IAU convenes and connects almost 600 Members from some 130 countries and serves as the global voice of higher education to a wide range of international and intergovernmental organizations.

International Science Council

The ISC works at the global level to catalyse change by convening scientific expertise, advice and influence on issues of major importance to both science and society. The ISC is an international non-profit organization with a unique global membership that brings together 250 scientific organizations around the world, including international scientific unions and associations, national science academies and research councils, international and regional federations and societies, and academies and associations of young scientists.

Major Group for Children and Youth

UN Major Group for Children and Youth is the designated self-led youth constituency representing young people in over 50+ intergovernmental and 100+ multi-stakeholder processes. With a membership of over 10,000 youth-led, child-led, and youth- and child-serving organizations, our coordination comprises global focal points from 30+ youth constituencies engaging with the UN system (including groups such as Youth Science Policy Interface (SPI), YOUNGO - Youth Constituency of UNFCCC, Migration Youth and Children Platform, among others). Children and Youth International (CYI, formerly Rio+20s) was established in April 2010 specifically to serve as the financial and legal body of UN MGCY.

Sustainable Development Solutions Network

Under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) mobilizes the world's largest knowledge network to drive action on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. SDSN develops science-based pathways for SDG implementation and facilitates peer-to-peer learning, knowledge sharing, and the exchange of best practices.

United Nations Academic Impact

The United Nations Academic Impact is an initiative that engages over 1,900 member institutions in more than 160 countries around the world with the United Nations in supporting and contributing to the realization of the Organization's purposes and principles, including the promotion and protection of human rights, access to education, sustainability and conflict resolution.

York University (Canada)

York University is a public research university in Toronto, Canada (established in 1959). The UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education towards Sustainability at York University was established in 1999 as the first UNESCO Chair focusing on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). York University also serves as SDG 4 Focal Point in the Global Research Cluster of the International Association of Universities and as SDG 10 Hub for UN Academic Impact.

Collaborating Partners

UNESCO

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is a specialized agency dedicated to strengthening our shared humanity through the promotion of education, science, culture, and communication. UNESCO is the only United Nations agency with a mandate in higher education and works with countries to ensure that higher education serves the global common good and that quality higher education opportunities are available to everyone.

UNITAR

The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) provides innovative learning solutions to individuals, organizations and institutions to enhance global decision-making and support country-level action for shaping a better future. In 2025, UNITAR reached close to 580,000 individuals benefiting from the delivery of over 1300 training and related events yearly.

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