

# How universities can achieve equitable, accountable and measurable change for sustainability

**A Global Sustainable Development report**

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**Authors: Tim Sowula**

Editor, World Summit Series  
Times Higher Education

**Professor Moyra Boland**

Professor of creative pedagogy  
University of Glasgow

**Dr Ishan Cader**

Director, Consultancy  
Times Higher Education





# Introduction

**T**he intention of this report is to inspire strategic change for universities committed to supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It distils the collective intelligence of 266 participants of the Global Sustainable Development Congress 2022, hosted by Times Higher Education in partnership with the University of Glasgow in October 2022.

The annual congress has been initiated as a new platform of activity that can enable university leaders and their communities to forge stronger partnerships with governments, the private sector and civil society. This report provides practical actions and areas of strategic focus that universities can and must enact in order to catalyse and accelerate progress.

Times Higher Education's unique dataset on university impact from around the world provides evidence of the extraordinary effort, commitment and energy invested by more than 1,500 institutions globally towards achieving the UN SDGs. The congress provides the opportunity to add human context to the data, allowing delegates to work creatively together and create action points that can be put into practice. This report is the initial reference point for all university staff, at every level, of what they can do now, and next.





## Executive summary

**T**his report, and the Global Sustainable Development Congress that it articulates, is a call to action for universities to recognise and leverage their ability to create change. It is written from Times Higher Education's perspective as the global authority on higher education performance and leadership, and provides four groups of recommendations for universities to consider if they wish to progress their impact towards achieving the UN SDGs.

The congress has been clear. To achieve the SDGs, universities must leverage their human talent. They must build and lead equitable partnerships. They must ensure their curricula are diverse, interdisciplinary and accessible. Universities must embrace their reputation and be seen in public as responsible leaders.

The overarching principle is that in order to adequately respond to this period of “polycrisis”, universities must use their unique capacity to effect change through partnerships. Universities must act radically at a greater scale and at a greater pace than before. They must consider how they can leverage their considerable reputation, status, heritage, economic reach, and research and teaching capacity to act in partnership with civil society, governments, NGOs, media and industry. Collaboration among these six stakeholders – a hexa-helix – will multiply the potential impact.

Universities must present a mindset of humility and curiosity, but with a constant focus on achieving equitable, accountable and measurable change.





## Purpose and methodology

**W**orkshops were held on the morning of the third day of congress, allowing delegates to reflect on the sessions they had attended and informal conversations they had shared. The aim of the workshops was to collect ideas and thoughts to feed into this report.

The purpose of the workshops was to give delegates the opportunity to reflect on the three-day congress in an informal setting. The workshops were organised under the three themes of the congress: education, gender and inequality; health, well-being and demography; and sustainable cities and communities. Delegates chose which workshop to attend.

The methodology was designed to ensure that each delegate attending the workshops had an opportunity for their voice to be heard and the appropriate time and space to have a conversation with their peers about possible thoughts and outcomes from the congress.

The three workshop hosts met twice to ensure the same methodology was used in each workshop and the pedagogical design ensured the values of equity and inclusion underpinned the activity. The format of each workshop was as follows:

- The host introduced the theme of the workshop and gave a summary of the key ideas that had emerged during the congress; the summary was supported by notes taken at each congress session by University of Glasgow by PhD students.
- The workshop participants were asked to reflect on five questions:
  1. What do we already do (related to the workshop theme)?
  2. What can we do?
  3. How do we know we have done it?
  4. Does that correspond with means of measurements? What are the existing incentives to do it?





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5. How can we get better measurements/incentives to make these things happen/happen faster?
- The five questions were written on five single pieces of flip chart paper. In each workshop, the participants were split into five groups and given 7-8 minutes to discuss each question with their group and note down their responses. The flip chart paper was moved around the groups until all groups had contributed to every question.
  - The workshop concluded with a general discussion about the outcomes.

It is important to note that the participants in the workshops represented higher education institutions. Therefore, the output from the workshops was from the perspective of what universities are doing, can do and should be doing.





The following four sections of analysis and recommendations come from a distillation of the comments and responses from participants of the three workshops

## 1. Leverage your human talent: *recommendations of actions that can be taken in the next 12 months to make your workplace more sustainable and inclusive*

A better workplace can be created through greater inclusion and more sustainable practices. In the next 12 months, your institution – and this is applicable to any medium or large corporation, not just established research universities – can be a beacon of best practice for your communities, and gain a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent. You should seek out partners to help you establish:

- Ombudsperson for women and minority groups at every university
- Maternity/parental leave
- Student/staff diversity networks
- Childcare on campus and improved accommodation for families
- Family homes on campus
- Subsidised food to improve staff well-being
- Gender pay-gap reporting and targets to reduce it
- Staff mentoring scheme for career development
- Having a policy and complaints mechanism that is actually used and ongoing policy improvement
- Question every investment by asking what the wider local community can gain from it
- Equitable distribution of opportunities to involve more people from disadvantaged backgrounds





## 2. Build and lead equitable and accountable partnerships:

*recommendations of considerations to make when deciding a longer-term approach/strategy*

Many universities may have a long history of being a place of research and teaching, embedded in their locality, and will be expected to have longer-term strategic goals. Therefore, they can leverage their position as stable, secure institutions to influence the nature and focus of partnerships with potential external partners. Considerations to make when deciding long-term approaches and the potential impact of a partnership are:

- Ask the right questions, and listen to and respect the answers. Be humble. Do not try to do something to be new, or the first. Ask if it is an equitable partnership with

a robust collective decision-making process. Are the SDGs embedded in all aspects of our partnership? Aim to do what is needed, and be the best at it. This is especially important when creating a partnership between institutions in the Global North and Global South.

- Seek to do things collaboratively rather than imposing solutions. Is there a transparent social justice commitment to drive community engagement? This, in turn, will protect and secure the partnership against changes in leadership or the political landscape. The more people who have a stake in success, the more resilient the partnership.
- Effective measurement: Do you know your baseline indicators? What are your impact indicators? Are you setting the right targets to empower marginalised groups or people from disadvantaged areas? Can you then create new role models from those groups and promote them as examples of excellence?





## 14 Core findings and recommendations

- Accountability is vital. Higher education institutions have a unique coordination function between agencies and must be as strongly embedded within communities locally as they are globally. Define the purpose of the partnerships and have a public schedule of activity.
  - Consistency of KPIs and interoperability of metrics across schools or departments, even partners, is essential.  
Can you have a single database and scorecard that everyone in the institution can access and understand? Does that work with national and international indicators? Could it be publicly accessible, to create greater accountability and encourage support where it becomes clear it is needed? Can these metrics also reflect Times Higher Education's Impact metrics?
  - The SDGs require interdisciplinary activities.
- Interdisciplinarity also provides security against disruption. But interdisciplinarity needs to be intentional and meaningful to be impactful. Citations in journals are not enough evidence of real-world impact.
- Communication is key to long-term success. Embrace criticism and value the external context. Do you view social media sentiment as valuable external data?
  - **Embrace risk: The risks of not trying to be ambitious and daring to achieve the SDGs are greater than the risks associated with failed activity.** We can use statistical methods to quantify risks and take into account uncertainty associated with interventions and outcomes, to inform decision-making. We should embed this in partnerships from the outset, and be public and transparent about the risks that we are taking. Risks should be shared across the partnership.





## Core findings and recommendations

- **All partners must be incentivised to have a clear and transparent return on their investment, whether reputational or financial.** Partners' investments must be institutionalised rather than based on individuals to ensure that they are secure and can deliver the greatest benefits to the widest group of beneficiaries.





## 3. Ensure your curricula are diverse, interdisciplinary and accessible:

*recommendations to catalyse your teaching and learning experience towards the SDGs*

It is fundamental to have an ethos that commits to delivering inclusive teaching and learning:

- Content: Can you assess your curricula to include more content related to sustainability and the SDGs? Are you aware of best-practice benchmarks?
- Interdisciplinarity: Problem-focused learning should be encouraged, to reflect the changing requirements of graduate skills. Is your curricula content designed to encourage action and provide skills that can accelerate impact? Do your curricula involve internships with industry and experiential learning so that graduates can apply their skills immediately? Can you include in your

curricula authentic challenges from community/employers/governments to allow students to develop core sustainability competences? Are there opportunities for your students to engage in an international experience?

- Access: Can more people access your teaching, especially people from disadvantaged or marginalised groups? And does your teaching respect and reflect their experience? Do your curricula provide opportunities to hear diverse voices and perspectives? Can you collaborate with local colleges to improve access and gain efficiencies on costs of provision? And what partnerships can you create to support the retention of learners from disadvantaged groups and marginalised communities? Do your assessment processes ensure all learners have an opportunity to demonstrate their ability?





## Core findings and recommendations

### 4. Embrace your reputation and become responsible leaders: *recommendations to catalyse your public outreach and community engagement towards the SDGs*

Many universities have developed and evolved with their host locations or carry the name of their location or region. They may have graduated many people into the local economy and will be significant contributors to the local or national economy. Universities are uniquely placed to assume the role of a trusted institution that can draw together key stakeholders in different areas of their work. Universities have enormous potential influence and this can be leveraged to fully embrace the SDGs. Universities should consider:

- Their estate and facilities:
  - Can you manage your estate so that your venues are more accessible to the public,

and designed to be more inclusive for people with special needs?

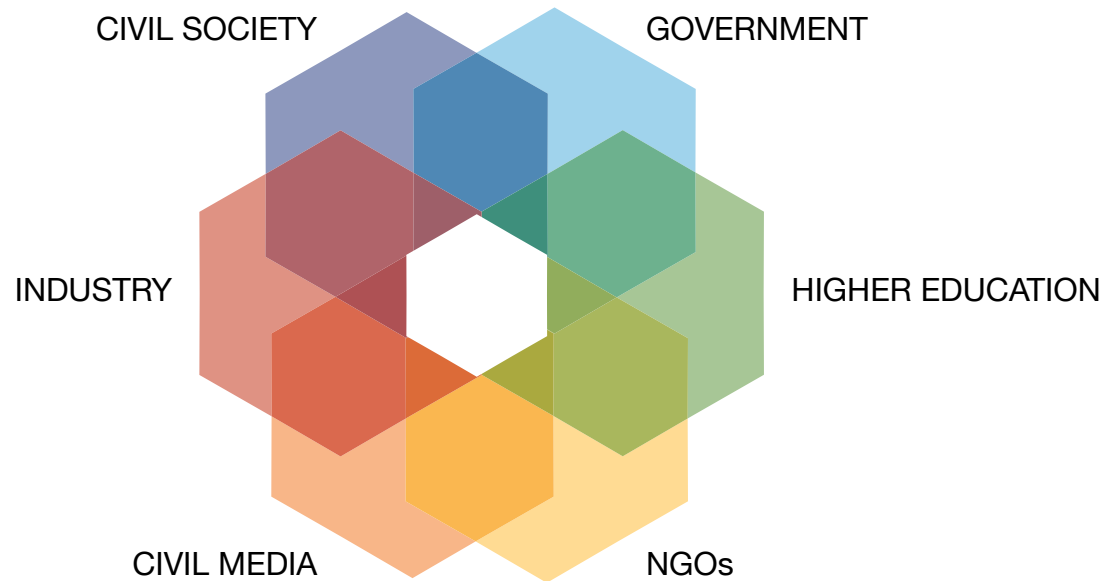
- Can your estate serve as a hub for local businesses? For alumni? Who do you consider as your community and stakeholders in the well-being of your estate? Are they included?
- Their reputation and communications:
  - Can you measure public awareness of your work and your reputation? Does it reflect what you do, what you want to do, or what you may have done in the past? And who is responsible for your reputation? Is it you, or your whole community?
  - Are you explaining not just what you do, but why you do it? Can you influence national policy? And if and when you do, can you claim the credit?
  - Remember “community” means engaging equitably and ethically on a local as well as global basis.





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- How can you influence the private sector to recognise and value impact and success indicators beyond profits?
- Harmonise the understanding of risks across partners, to minimise it.
- Communication is multi-directional. Listen to your community. If they do not understand your impact, they will not value it – so should you be doing that activity? Are you measuring what your partners do not value?
- **Hexa-helix collaboration can be the nature of your partnerships** – collaborations between society, government, universities, NGOs, media and industry to achieve the goals of the SDGs.





# Conclusions

The findings from the workshops at the congress generated many ideas about how to move the agenda of the UN SDGs forward. As described above, we can summarise the findings as a series of considerations that the higher education sector should have at the forefront of their strategies regarding sustainability and impact:

1. Leverage human talent by making the workplace sustainable and inclusive.
2. Create enduring, equitable partnerships to facilitate solution building, risk taking and knowledge sharing.
3. Develop accessible, diverse and interdisciplinary curricula, embedding SDGs in the teaching and learning content and experience as much as possible.
4. Demonstrate stewardship and responsibility in engaging the

public, including them in the processes that will make a more sustainable future.

It is arguable that universities, as centres of research, can act as the key node that connects the other five components of the hexa-helix: civil society, government, industry, media and NGOs. Through research, teaching and community engagement, they are uniquely positioned within this matrix to show the impact of policies that can positively impact sustainability. Where possible, institutional strategies must be developed to ensure actions are measurable, understandable and transparent, and aligned across all major stakeholders.

The annual Times Higher Education Impact Rankings provide a set of metrics that universities can measure, monitor and use to improve their policies and procedures on sustainability. Institutions can also use the metrics to guide





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them on building partnership strategies so that knowledge and best practice are shared as widely as possible. Other indices, such as the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System ([STARS](#)), developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, can also support universities in focusing strategy on sustainability. Networks such as the [Nature Positive Universities](#) can provide diverse institutions with a framework and commitment to undertaking sustainable actions. Whichever set of internal metrics universities choose to monitor and evaluate their activities on sustainability, there are also external ones with which they can align, to enable the comparison, collaboration and co-production of solutions.

Although issues related to sustainability, such as climate change, confront all of humanity, it should be recognised that some areas of the world have

more resilience in dealing with the problems than others; this could be due to geographical location, internal wealth and resources, or governance and planning. It is also true that even within more-resilient countries, the negative impacts of climate change, pollution and other environmental hazards will affect some communities more severely than others. In other words, although we all face the same global challenge, it will affect us unequally, at different times and in different ways.

As such, equitable and genuine collaboration between universities is crucial to ensure that communities worldwide are afforded similar protection. While terms such as Global North and Global South are contestable, the reason they exist is that there is still an imbalance of power, resources and attention, as a result of previous legacies of colonialism, as well as contemporary inequities in our political and economic systems.





## Conclusions

Engagements between universities in the Global North and Global South should be carried out with a respect for each other's knowledge systems and solutions, and a mindset of co-ownership and co-production of global solutions to global challenges.





## Next steps

Universities looking to improve their commitments to achieving the UN SDGs can follow the recommendations outlined above and:

1. Join our conversation and continued learning and engagement at the [Global Sustainable Development Congress 2023](#) in Thuwal, Saudi Arabia at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) on 30 May – 1 June.  
email: [events@timeshighereducation.com](mailto:events@timeshighereducation.com)
2. Get support in driving your sustainable programme forward with the Times Higher Education [Consultancy services](#)  
email: [consultancy@timeshighereducation.com](mailto:consultancy@timeshighereducation.com)
3. See how the University of Glasgow is delivering sustainable change:
  - The [Glasgow Green](#) strategy
  - The University of Glasgow's [general sustainability site](#), including the wide range of activities they are progressing associated to the commitments outlined in Glasgow Green:
  - The University of Glasgow's [Centre for Sustainability](#) and examples of their work around:
    - SDG 11: [Sustainable cities and communities](#)
    - SDG 12: [Responsible consumption and production](#)
4. See more highlights and reports from the [Global Sustainable Development Congress 2022](#)







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