



Building Global Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Higher Education and the Road Ahead to 2030

IAU Global HESD Cluster - Position Paper

The [IAU Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development \(HESD\)](#), founded by the International Association of Universities (IAU) in 2018, is a network of about 70 universities and partners committed to advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Cluster focuses its work specifically on addressing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through teaching, research, campus activities, and community engagement. **With only a few years left until 2030, there is a need to strengthen its collective impact by streamlining priorities, collaboration, and coordination.**

This position paper is one of the outcomes of the [IAU HESD Cluster Expert Meeting that took place from 21-22 April 2026 in Carthage, Tunisia](#). It has been discussed in Carthage and online with both the members of the IAU HESD Cluster and the members of the IAU HESD Working Group, chaired by the IAU Vice-President.

Universities must work together

More than a decade ago, the United Nations set a bold and inclusive vision for global transformation with the adoption of the *2030 Agenda: Transforming our World* and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With just four years to 2030, it is urgent to accelerate progress, and the higher education community is a key actor for advancing knowledge, public discourse, and engagement with the SDGs. Ahead of the 2026 UN High-Level Political Forum (UN HLPF 2026), the 2027 UNESCO World Conference for ESD, the SDG 4 review planned to take place at the UN HLPF 2027, and the beginning of the 'Education beyond 2030' dialogue, **we recognize that universities must act not as individual institutions, but as a coordinated global community, capable of driving systemic transformation towards sustainability.** In a context marked by climate crisis, conflict, democratic backsliding, growing inequalities, and distrust in science and institutions, the higher education sector has the responsibility to strengthen its collective voice and societal impact.

We, as members of the **International Association of Universities Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) Global Cluster**, leaders, researchers, and experts from higher education institutions around the world, reaffirm our collective commitment to advancing sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda through higher education and research.

We emphasize that higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to contribute to sustainable futures through education, research, innovation, community engagement, partnership and cooperation. However, accelerating progress towards the SDGs requires moving beyond projects and initiatives. It requires strengthened partnerships, shared frameworks, and coordinated action at institutional, national, regional, and global levels. Next to SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals is understood as a foundational enabler for all other SDGs.

In line with the Global Higher Education Symposium that took place at the UN HLPF 2026, we confirm the following **key priorities for higher education in the years leading to and beyond 2030:**

- **Integration of sustainability across all university functions through a whole-institution approach** that embeds the SDGs in teaching and learning, research, governance, campus operations, and community engagement with **students and staff as active SDG advocates;**



- **Promotion of democratic values, trust, and institutional responsibility, including academic freedom,** active participation, ethics, and universities' role in fostering informed and inclusive societies;
- **Advancement of inclusion, equity, and the decolonization of knowledge,** ensuring that diverse perspectives, local knowledge systems, and underrepresented voices are meaningfully integrated into higher education and research;
- **Responsible development and use of science and technology, including artificial intelligence,** to ensure that research and innovation serve the public good and contributes to equitable and sustainable societies;
- **Systemic change and transformation in governance and funding models,** including incentives, leadership engagement, and public policies that support long-term transformation towards sustainability within higher education systems.

We further emphasize that networks, such as the IAU HESD Cluster, play a critical role as platforms for future thinking, advocacy, peer learning, and joint action. To maximize impact, global higher education partnerships should facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, strengthen collaboration across regions and sectors, amplify successful practices, and support coordinated contributions to national, regional and international policy processes.

We therefore call on:

- Universities and other higher education institutions to implement whole-institution and whole-systems approaches to ESD and work collaboratively across borders and disciplines;
- Governments and policymakers to recognize higher education as a strategic partner in achieving sustainable development and to provide enabling policy and funding frameworks;
- International organizations and networks to support stronger coordination, inclusive participation, and shared global advocacy for higher education's role in sustainable development;
- The global higher education community to actively contribute to the development of the Education beyond 2030 agenda, ensuring that sustainability, equity, peace, justice and human dignity are strongly repositioned at the heart of future frameworks.

As members of the IAU HESD Global Cluster, we reaffirm our commitment to working collectively and collaboratively to accelerate progress towards the SDGs and to strengthen higher education's role as a driver of sustainable, inclusive, democratic, and peaceful societies — now and beyond 2030.

The International Association of Universities, together with the Members of the IAU HESD Cluster.

The IAU extends its gratitude to all of the individuals and institutions that took part in the preparation of this document.

Institutions involved: University of Carthage, University of Manouba, University of Sousse, The British University in Egypt (BUE), Kenyatta University, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Université Catholique de Lille, University of Bologna (UNIBO), York University, Luther College at the University of Regina, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Mykolas Romeris University (MRU), University of Gothenburg (GU), University of Ghana, Assam Don Bosco University.