



HESI Global Forum 2025

Breaking Barriers in Sustainable Development Through Scientific, Inclusive, and Equitable Solutions

21 July 2025, 07.00 – 09.30 AM (EST), Virtual

Background

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will take place from 14 to 23 July 2025, under the auspices of ECOSOC, held under the theme of *“Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for leaving no one behind”*. The 2025 HLPF will conduct in-depth reviews of SDG 3 (Health and well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Economic Growth and Decent Work), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

As the world approaches 2030, the role of higher education institutions in advancing sustainable, inclusive, and science-based solutions has never been more critical. Yet, growing inequality in the sector pose significant challenges, including limited access for marginalized populations, geographical imbalance in sustainability research, the exclusion of indigenous/local knowledge from scientific frameworks and data biases in AI, to name a few. With only five years remaining until 2030, breaking down these barriers in higher education is essential to ensuring a just and sustainable future for all.

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) is a partnership between several United Nations entities and the higher education community. For 2024-2025, the Initiative is chaired by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN University, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education, and the Sulitest Association.

Each year, HESI organizes a global forum as a special event to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) – the UN’s main platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The forum highlights the critical role of higher education in achieving sustainable development.

The **2025 HESI Global Forum** will bring together academia, policymakers, students, private sector representatives, and international organizations to discuss how higher education can catalyze science-driven solutions for sustainable development, addressing these critical gaps and reinforcing a more equitable higher education landscape in research, innovation and education. The Forum will also provide space to introduce the new collaborative HESI Partnership Framework, reinforcing academia’s role in policy engagement, cross-sectoral collaboration, and knowledge-sharing for sustainability.

Objectives

- Explore how universities and research institutions can advance data-driven, interdisciplinary approaches to address the SDGs under review.
- Highlight strategies to ensure that education systems are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities.
- Promote collaboration between academia, governments, industry, and civil society, with a focus on South-South and triangular cooperation.
- Recognize the role of students, educators, and researchers in accelerating sustainable development through education, policy engagement, and advocacy.
- Provide a platform for structured consultation on how higher education institutions can strengthen their contributions to sustainability through research, teaching, and engagement.

Outcome

The Forum will mark the formal start of engagement on the **HESI Partnership Framework**, providing a collaborative structure through which action groups, universities, and partners can coordinate efforts, share results, and scale innovative practices. This engagement will aim to strengthen the coherence, visibility, and impact of higher education initiatives in support of the 2030 Agenda.

Draft programme

Time	Session
07.00 – 07.15 AM	Opening remarks
07.15 – 08.00 AM	<p>Multi-stakeholder Panel Discussion: Higher Education’s Role in Advancing Scientific, Inclusive, and Equitable Solutions for Sustainable Development</p> <p>The session will take stock of the inequalities that prevent the university sector from leveraging its full potential to achieve the SDGs inclusively and equitably, while showcasing promising practices to address these challenges. Through an interactive discussion, the panelists from diverse sectors will explore the multifaceted natures of inclusivity issues, including the geographical imbalance in SDG-related research, the persistent gaps between academia and local communities, the marginalization of indigenous/traditional knowledge in scientific discourses, and the rapidly emerging data-bias issues in AI. This session will lay the groundwork for the following sessions of the Forum, providing thought-provoking insights that will guide and shape the subsequent breakout sessions.</p> <p><u>Moderated by</u> Ms. Jonghwi Park, United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability</p> <p><u>Guiding questions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• From your perspective, what barriers do you see in the higher education sector towards inclusive and equitable opportunities of all?• What steps can HEIs take to ensure that research on sustainability is more globally representative and inclusive?

-
- Can you provide examples of successful partnerships between academia and local communities synergizing their strengths and complementing their roles towards sustainable development?
 - What strategies can HEIs adopt to ensure that AI research are inclusive, ethical and equitable?
 - From your perspective, what should change and what should remain for HEIs to drive more inclusive and equitable progress on the SDGs by and beyond 2030?
-

08.00 – 08.40 AM **Interactive Breakout Sessions:** Deep Dive into the Role of Higher Education in driving inclusive Sustainable Development

Breakout session 1: Teaching & Learning: Transforming Higher Education for Sustainability

This session will explore how teaching and learning practices must evolve to equip students with the skills, mindsets and values needed to drive sustainable development. It will spotlight how inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive curricula and responsible technology integration can empower all students, particularly marginalized populations. Discussions will center on how to adapt student-centered learning environments that promote the well-being of all learners, and foster teaching practices that value both scientific and traditional knowledge. The session will also address the ethical deployment of AI in classrooms as a tool for accessibility, ensuring all students are prepared to both navigate and shape a green, just transition in a rapidly evolving job market.

Moderated by Mr. Jerome Silla, United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability

Guiding questions:

- What are the risks of excluding marginalized learners from sustainability education, and how can this gap be closed?
- How can universities design learning experiences that center on student well-being while advancing sustainability goals?
- What support structures are needed for higher education to ethically use AI tools that democratize learning without reinforcing bias?
- How can universities partner with tech developers to co-create AI tools that support diverse learners and promote just transitions in employment?

Breakout session 2: Research & Innovation: Advancing Science-Based Solutions for the SDGs

This session will highlight higher education's existing and potential avenues to advance sustainability through research and innovation. Participants will showcase concrete science-based solutions in the forms of product prototypes and tools and explore how outcomes of research and innovation emerged from higher education can drive policy and market transformation towards more sustainable practices.

Moderated by Ms. Bosen Lily Liu, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education

Guiding questions:

- What are successful science-based solutions created through higher education level for SDGs, specifically on SDG 3, 5, 8, and 14?
 - What strategies have been adopted to promote policy transformation through sustainability research?
 - What role do you see emerging technologies, including AI, play in enhancing sustainability research?
-

-
- What are the key factors to ensure the effectiveness of South-South and Triangular Cooperation in advancing research and innovation for sustainability both within the Global South and to bridge global innovation gaps?

Breakout session 3: Partnerships & Engagement: Strengthening Higher Education's Role in Society

This session will explore how higher education institutions can play a more active role in addressing sustainable development challenges by strengthening partnerships with governments, the private sector, and civil society. Participants will discuss ways to institutionalize engagement, co-create solutions with communities, and align academic research and teaching with societal needs.

The session will also focus on the skills, capacities, and institutional support structures needed to build and sustain meaningful partnerships and cross-sectoral initiatives.

Moderated by Mr. Darian Stibbe, The Partnering Initiative

Guiding Questions:

- How can higher education institutions foster impactful partnerships across sectors?
- What skills and capacities are needed by faculty, students, and administrators to build and sustain these collaborations?
- How can community engagement be embedded into the mission and practice of higher education?
- What are practical examples of partnerships that have led to positive societal outcomes?

08.40 – 08.50 AM **Reporting back** from breakout groups with key messages and recommendations

08.50 – 09.20 AM **Innovative higher education initiatives related to SDG 3, 5, 8, 14, 17 and leaving no one behind**

This session highlights innovative higher education initiatives addressing SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14, and 17 (Partnerships), with a strong focus on inclusion.

Moderated by Mr. JC Carteron, Sulitest President

1. Ms. Jingwen Mu, Hong Kong Baptist University
2. Mr. Jerome Schatzman, ESSEC
3. Ms. Ana Margarida Costa, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology
4. Mr. Julian Skryme, University of Manchester
5. Association of African Universities

Guiding questions:

- What specific problem related to their target SDG does the project aim to address?
- Have they observed any unexpected positive impacts on other SDGs, helping to break down silos?
- What is their 2030 ambition—what systemic change do they hope to achieve?
- How can their model be scaled or replicated to inspire action by other institutions or regions?

09.20 – 09.30 AM **Closing remarks**

- Mr. Navid Hanif, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs
-

