Higher education and the SDGs
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This paper was commissioned by UNESCO and is part of 3rd World Higher Education Conference organized by UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022, with the purpose of enhancing the contribution of higher education institutions and systems world-wide, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its pledge to leave no one behind, and looking at the Futures of Education. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to UNESCO.


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Summary

This document serves as a summary of the report of the Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda (EGU2030), entitled Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability¹. It constitutes an urgent call for higher education institutions (HEIs) to play a much stronger role in the necessary societal transformations for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They are called upon to face the challenge of using the knowledge they produce and the education of future generations they carry out to contribute to the solution of some of the world’s greatest problems. This implies developing a radical agenda that requires new alliances and new incentives. The opportunity is for the HEIs to embrace the 2030 Agenda by making sustainability and SDG literacy a core requisite for all faculty members and students, to connect students with real world problems and to foster immersive experiences.

Three core themes for the necessary societal transformations for the SDGs are presented. First, the need for engaging in more collaborative multi-, trans- and interdisciplinary activities for the SDGs within HEIs is explored. Secondly, we discuss and advise on how diverse ways of knowing can be better incorporated and situated within HEIs for promotion of the SDGs. Thirdly, we address the need for HEIs to interact with society at large, both private and public sectors and with all sectors and communities within it, as well as between HEIs in different parts of the world, in name of the 2030 Agenda.

Challenges and potential ways forward are provided within each of these core themes. With consideration of these core areas of transformation, recommendations are provided for how HEIs can strengthen their role for the achievement of the SDGs, particularly in relation to education, research, and outreach and community engagement.

Acknowledgements

With the purpose of producing updated analysis and recommendations for the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), UNESCO organized the Technical Expert Group (TEG), whose members were tasked with preparing background documents on each of the main themes of the Conference. Experts participating in the TEG included César Guadalupe, Dag Olav Hessen, Susanna Karakhanyan, Achim Hopbach, Mpine Makoe, David Mills, Ka Ho Mok, Kilemi Mwiria, Jamil Salmi, Sylvia Schmelkes, Francesc Pedró, Damtew Teferra. This is one of the TEG’s background documents, which respectively approached the following themes:

- Impact of COVID-19 on higher education
- Higher education and the SDGs
- Equity, inclusion, and pluralism
- Quality and relevance of programmes
- Academic mobility in higher education
- Governance in higher education
- Financing higher education
- Data and knowledge production
- International cooperation to enhance synergies
- The futures of higher education

The following UNESCO focal points participated in or provided support, at different moments, to the TEG’s activities: Dana Abdrasheva, Daniele Viera, Phoebe Kirkup, Paz Portales, Victoria Galán, Huong Nguyen, Hassmik Tortian, Qingling Kong, Peter Wells, Harold Mera, Takudzwa Mutize, Talal El Hourani, José Antonio Quinteiro, Keith Holmes and Emma Sabzalieva. The TEG’s activities were directly coordinated by José Luis Guzmán.

The TEG met online four times throughout 2021 (March 24, May 19, July 21, and September 8) and held an in-person meeting in Barcelona on 29-30 November 2021. Besides extensive literature review, the process of elaborating the documents included 24 online consultation meetings facilitated by the TEG members. These meetings involved more than 180 experts or stakeholders from all regions of the world. In addition, the TEG members considered comments provided by diverse reviewers for each theme and a technical team of UNESCO specialists reviewed the final versions.

This background document on equity, inclusion, and pluralism is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Francisco Javier Gil, a professor and researcher at the University of Santiago in Chile (USACH), who held the UNESCO chair for ‘Inclusion in Higher Education’ until he passed away in March 2021. Professor Gil was a champion of social justice and pioneered several initiatives to promote equity and inclusion in the Chilean higher education system. He was driven by the belief that ‘talent is equally distributed among the poor and the rich, and among all ethnic and cultural groups.’ The PACE programme that he designed and piloted has transformed the life of thousands of young Chileans who would not have had the opportunity of becoming successful professionals without Professor Gil’s determination and commitment to equity.

education for global sustainability, which was authored by the UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda (2022). It has been put together by the expert group’s co-chairs to summarize the report, but it reflects the work produced by all of its members, who are acknowledged as co-authors of this document:

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The University of Bergen has hosted and supported the work of this expert group. Special collaboration from Thomas Völker and Kristin Svartveit is acknowledged. Special thanks should also be given to Paz Portales and Phoebe Kirkup from the UNESCO Higher Education Section, for their invaluable and continued guidance and support to the expert group.
Acronyms

EU European Union.
ISCED International Standard Classification of Education.
HEIs Higher education institutions.
IPCC Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
TEG Technical Expert Group.
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals
WHEC2022 World Higher Education Conference (2022)
Presentation

This document is a summary based on the outcome of a one-year collaboration process of a Global Independent Expert Group set up by UNESCO in partnership with the University of Bergen⁴, and supported by the International Science Council⁵ and the International Association of Universities⁶. It is meant to inform and inspire discussions and agreements in the context of the 3rd World Higher Education Conference⁶ – taking place in Barcelona on 18-20 May 2022 – and to continue these global conversations even beyond that.

This document is framed with a human rights approach and the aspiration of ‘leaving no one behind’, which is the overall purpose of the 2030 Agenda. It believes that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define some of the most important purposes to be achieved in order to reach this consensus. The institutions and organizations of nations and societies are called upon to work towards these goals. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are key to foster progress towards them.

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01.

Introduction
Humanity is facing unprecedented challenges, most strikingly so in relation to climate change and loss of nature and biodiversity, as well as to inequality, health, economy, and a range of aspects related to the 2030 Agenda. The recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) clearly expressed the seriousness of the situation and the urgent need for action, as does the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services with regard to nature degradation and loss. Most of the risks are well known: in fact, they were clearly expressed already in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission Report (WCED, 1987), but despite warnings and increasing awareness, the ‘business as usual’ trajectories have still dominated. Over the past few decades there has been a growing consensus that we have been heading towards an unsustainable and dangerous future. The ultimate risk is reaching regional and global tipping points in climate, biodiversity and ecosystem services (Lenton et al., 2019; Lenton, 2020) also with the risk of ‘untold sufferings’ (Ripple et al., 2019) for humankind. The increased risk of extreme climate events may also impose cascading or domino effects on all the SDGs (Reichstein et al., 2021). Given this new reality where the human future, along with other species, is at stake, it is time for universities and other HEIs to systematically rethink their role in society, their key missions, and how they could serve as catalysts for the necessarily fast transition towards sustainability that is required.

While it is important for universities and HEIs more broadly to retain their positions as arenas for developing and debating critical ideas, basic research and education, and academic freedom, it is crucial that they now strengthen their role as providers of knowledge and solutions in order to play a key role in the name of this agenda.

The 2030 Agenda is a call for all sectors of society around the globe. HEIs have a particularly important role to play in progress towards the SDGs. As plural institutions, they have built a reservoir of knowledge on each of the SDGs that both theoretically and technically underpin proposals for the advancement of each of the goals. They also have the possibility of convening different sectors of society to debate and define ways ahead with a long-time horizon.

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7. The Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education, adopted by the UNESCO General Conference at its 40th session on 25 November 2019, defines a higher education institution as ‘an establishment providing higher education and recognized by a competent authority of a State Party, or of a constituent unit thereof, as belonging to its higher-education system’ (UNESCO, 2019, p. 2). For the purposes of this document, we conceptualize higher education institutions in line with this definition. In terms of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) this corresponds to ISCED levels six and above. For more information on the ISCED, see [http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-ised](http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-ised) (Accessed 23 August 2021.)

This again calls for a radical new way of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary action in research and education, a matrix where new horizontal structures and platforms add to the vertical, often silo-like structures of faculties and their departments. It also calls for much more active outreach and community engagement, as well as providing science advice for policy and for extended networking and alliances, while at the same time approaching society with an open disposition and a willingness for dialogue.

There is also a need for a strong standpoint on the part of HEIs regarding the need for sustainable development, since there are strong forces and structural configurations that oppose sustainability, short-term outlooks on the part of governments, enterprises and even individuals who see challenges to their benefits in moving towards these goals.

The 2030 Agenda speaks for ‘leaving no one behind’. The role of HEIs is key in the proposal and experimentation of social policies and strategies for inclusion in all areas, such as health, employment, poverty reduction, and particularly in the area of education, to which these institutions belong (Bengtsson et al., 2018).

It is not possible to renounce this key role of HEIs. It is in their power and their responsibility to strengthen their contribution to the construction of more equitable, just and sustainable societies. The 2030 Agenda can become the beacon for unifying strategic planning towards this objective.

1.2. The challenge: Informing the 2030 Agenda

The SDGs prioritize the problems that the world has to face at the global level in order to ensure dignified subsistence of life on the planet. They also represent a global agreement of 193 countries on the route to follow in order to progress towards desired outcomes through targeted goals (United Nations, 2015).

In line with the ethical principles and values universities and HEIs adhere to, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs should become important priorities and their weight within these institutions should be strengthened (Schneider et al., 2019).

Universities and HEIs more broadly should use the knowledge they produce and the education of new professionals they carry out to help solve some of the world’s greatest problems, as covered in the SDGs. The complexity of the challenges faced implies that solutions should be part of a radical agenda that calls for new alliances and new incentives.

HEIs should have a wider agenda and take new incentives and initiatives for a societal transformation. HEIs have played a crucial role as providers of societal enlightenment and change over centuries, maintaining their role as free and critical institutions while also – to varying degrees – aiming to perform a service-role within societies. It is crucial to maintain and encourage these important roles. This also implies that HEIs need to think critically about their own practices, curricula, and research, and to motivate this orientation among its employees, students and society at large.

Furthermore, it is time for the HEIs to make sustainability and SDG literacy a core requisite for all faculty members and students. Sustainability education should connect students with real-world problems and immersive experiences. Appreciating the greater good for people and planet and contributing to values more than mere monetary benefits will further enthuse or inspire students. As well as the faculty mentors. Ultimately, the education culture at universities and HEIs needs to encourage students to learn via experimentation and critical thinking from multiple perspectives.

This document is structured around three main themes: (1) Beyond disciplinary boundaries for the SDGs; (2) Ways of knowing; and (3) Higher education partnerships.
02.
Beyond disciplinary boundaries for the SDGs
The first theme, on working together with the SDGs, addresses the question of moving towards more inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to education and research. It makes the case for including more problem-based learning and research in the programmes and activities of HEIs. Universities and HEIs have, for natural and historical reasons, evolved into more specialized disciplines. This scientific reductionism has provided new insights and major scientific achievements, but also created scientific ‘silos’ in structure and thinking. The major challenges we are facing both within most of the SDGs (for example, the complex causes and remedies related to climate, health, nature degradation, and poverty), and not the least the interactions between the SDGs, requires holistic perspectives across the disciplines of basic and human science. This poses major challenges for the structure of education and research within HEIs, but also for financing institutions. The transit towards multi-, inter and transdisciplinary research requires profound cultural and structural changes in the traditional ways in which many universities and HEIs are structured. We stress however, that the foundation for multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches in higher education will still be strong and discipline-based research and education, but that HEIs must create arenas and incentives where disciplines can provide more holistic perspectives on drivers and solutions for sustainability and social justice. Changing structures within universities and HEIs is often a slow process, but since the SDGs require action now, it is crucial that such incentives are implemented as soon as possible.

Sustainability is a way of understanding life together, of living with nature and the environment in a global world full of life and biodiversity calling us to value life by increasing our awareness and sophisticate our way of living:

Only by following an interdisciplinary approach, sustainable development education will be able to confront “problems that cross traditional disciplines, involve multiple stakeholders, and occur on multiple scales” (Dale & Newman, 2005, p. 353), such as climate change, poverty, and inequalities, acknowledging the interdependence between society and ecosystems. (Annan-Diab and Molinari, 2017, p. 77).

Sustainability is an objective that is transversal across disciplines, education and professions. This call for change is not a critique of the fundamental role disciplines can play for processes of knowledge production and circulation. Rather, it is an attempt to better understand achievements and limitations. There is a need to reorient the existing education programmes to include more aspects related to sustainability and its three pillars - society, environment and economy. ‘No one discipline can claim education for sustainable development for its own, but all disciplines can contribute’ (UNSECO, 2005, p. 31).
both conceptual integration of different disciplines and the transgression of academic boundaries (which is not necessarily a part of interdisciplinary modes of producing knowledge), to include other forms of knowledge. Transdisciplinarity points to a disintegration of boundaries and the development of something entirely different (Nowotny et al., 2003). In highlighting commonality in the rationale for applying one of these approaches, a recent review of inter- and transdisciplinary research shows that despite the crucial differences there are also commonalities, for example the focus on problem-solving in interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (Vienni Baptista et al., 2020).

2.2. Challenges of working together for the SDGs

While there is general agreement about the need for thinking and working together for the SDGs within the university sector, there is less common understanding about how that collaborative activity could and should take place. In addition, there is a gamut of context-specific challenges to overcome, both profound and mundane, if agreement that action should be taken can be secured. Undoubtedly, responding to these challenges will require substantive change. Additional time, resources and investment will be required, as well as a cultural change in mindsets in academia and society, and an open dialogue between participants. There is also space for HEIs to play a significant role in extending collaborative partnerships with each other and with other stakeholders engaged in the 2030 Agenda, including governments, enterprises and communities. The nature and value of partnerships beyond HEIs are addressed explicitly in section 4, focused on higher education partnerships.

The fact that HEIs organize their teaching and research on the basis of ‘disciplines’ is a result of the development of sciences as ‘normal sciences’ defined by different ‘paradigms’ in Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) sense, so it is only natural for different branches of scientific knowledge to provide different ways of understanding the world and thus make it difficult for scientists of these disciplines to communicate with other disciplines. It is true that major steps of scientific development are marked by ‘crises’ and ‘revolutions’ in the history of science characterized by breaking the borders between different ‘normal sciences’, and the seriousness related to many aspects of the SDGs should be seen as a crisis that should motivate efforts across disciplines. In order for researchers and professors of different disciplines to think and work together, efforts should be made by them to reach deeper and broader understandings of the problems they are supposed to address together, than those that could possibly be made on the basis of their respective disciplines separately, or even jointly.\(^\text{11}\)

The rigid academic units and disciplinary structures of HEIs can cause resistance to changes. Both for teaching and research, there are structural constraints. Curriculum changes in HEIs are often associated with cumbersome and lengthy approval processes. Academic units (departments and faculties, schools or colleges) are resourced and incentivized based on the student numbers and their full-time equivalents. In other words, leaders of each academic unit fight very hard to retain and grow full-time equivalents. This means less attention is given to subjects and co-teaching by faculty members from other academic units.

\(^{11}\) See for example ‘Pathways to Sustainability’ at Utrecht University, with a community of more than 1,200 academics: https://www.uu.nl/en/research/sustainability/fields-of-expertise (Accessed 16 Feb 2022.)
As academics, university authorities and their agents, we consider critical thinking to be one of the main values and most critical elements of universities and HEIs in addition to the more traditional functions of teaching and research. It is the pillar of our most dearly shared values, so we must have a critical look and reflect on our mission and our role within society. We insist that this shifting mission is not linear, that it must move beyond traditional separations between basic and applied knowledges, and that it integrates thinking about problems and working together towards their solution. In the academic literature these new forms of knowledge creation have different nomenclatures and definitions. They polemicize between themselves. Among the most used concepts are those of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity (see Box 1). However, precisely because it includes not only academics but all members of society, we choose to refer to different forms of ‘working together’.

**Box 1. Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity**

As recognition has dawned that single disciplines working in isolation will not be able to address complex planetary and societal challenges, diverse practices of ‘beyond-discipline’ collaboration have evolved. A number of key terms – multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary – have been used to describe the varying degrees of interaction and integration involved in these practices, but there remains some ambiguity surrounding how these terms are used and understood (for example, Choi and Pak 2006). We do not aim to provide clear-cut definitions, but it is important to clarify our own understanding of these terms and – importantly – their differences. We distinguish the terms having regard to the degree of integration, the distribution of power among different actors, and the rationale for collaboration.

**Multidisciplinarity** brings together knowledge from different disciplines to address a given issue. The process of knowledge production and power relations between disciplines is mostly left unaffected in multidisciplinary collaborations. Each discipline works in a self-contained manner without aiming to transform the disciplines themselves (see Max-Neef, 2005). Compared to inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, integration – both on an epistemic and social level – is not an objective of multidisciplinarity.

**Interdisciplinarity** describes a mode of knowledge production that focuses on coordination and interaction between different disciplines as a means to both advance knowledge and action (see Pohl and Hadorn, 2008). In contrast to multidisciplinarity, there is an attempt to integrate scientific practices, including information, data, concepts and theories from more than one discipline (see Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy, 2004). However, the term has been used to describe a range of ambitions, from cooperation that leaves disciplinary boundaries mostly untouched to collaborative work through which disciplines themselves are transformed (see for example, Barry et al., 2008).

**Transdisciplinarity** was introduced as an explicit addition to interdisciplinarity to describe collaborations that go beyond coordinating interactions between different disciplines and aim at transcending them, therefore moving beyond disciplinary boundaries. In addition, transdisciplinarity rests on the premise that researchers alone cannot solve these problems, and that therefore academic boundaries also need to be transgressed through the incorporation of extra-academic actors and knowledges into processes of problem-definition, knowledge production and knowledge use. Transdisciplinary collaborations thus aim for

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10. This box has been adapted from the report Knowledge-driven actions: *Transforming higher education for Global Sustainability* (UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022, p. 30).
Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for HEIs to move forward productively in their contributions to achieving the SDGs. There is no single route for all HEIs here; the pathways to be taken will depend on the starting position of HEIs and their role and remit in situated contexts. Nonetheless, all pathways will involve developing the means to build on and promote knowledge that comprises a diverse range of traditions, institutions, and epistemologies to promote a truly global knowledge base for the SDGs.

Incentives around and support for research need to be reoriented to encourage researchers to engage in equitable and collaborative SDG-related research. This can range from systemic measures to improve literacy around the SDGs throughout HEIs to specific training for collaborative research across the academic life course. Externally driven ranking systems of HEIs, for example, should be revised in order not to penalize collaborative researchers, and government agencies can play a key role in developing and implementing specific policies for HEIs to promote collaborative research for the SDGs. It is important for HEIs to increase integration between those collaborating from a variety of different disciplines, and to incorporate collaborative working for the SDGs as a part of their teaching programmes in meaningful ways that go beyond the creation of mere add-ons to existing disciplinary-based curricula. Also, HEIs themselves as well as financing agencies should broaden career incentives across disciplines. Good examples on how collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches have been implemented are provided in the report upon which this document is based: Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022).
03. Ways of knowing
The second theme relates to engaging in different ways of knowing. The EGU2030 report makes a strong point of the need for universities and HEIs in general to open up to the multiple and plural views of the world, as well as to very diverse sets of knowledge that can be an added value to strict science-based knowledge, and with a potential for, among other things, explaining why we need to strengthen our awareness regarding environmental protection actions and policies. HEIs should be privileged spaces for epistemological dialogues among diverse views of the world and should show openness to other ways of producing knowledge.

Diverse cultures possess different stores of knowledge, perspectives of the world and languages through which to express their understanding. Differing world views can be seen in the relationship between humanity and nature and between human beings, in conceptions of community, power, distribution of resources and justice. Even within particular cultures, there is diversity and contestation around the nature of reality and the ways in which it might be apprehended by human beings. Yet, these other ways of knowing/knowledge and of creating meaning are rarely represented in HEI settings. For instance, Indigenous conception of nature might enlighten and spur HEIs and governments to work with a higher sense of the implication of the ‘business as usual’ economic model and the need to break the legacy of colonial times.

Not being inclusive of diverse knowledge systems can result in the ignoring of valuable knowledge, leading to less rigorous, fair and sustainable outcomes. Greater engagement and dialogue with diverse communities will strengthen HEIs’ capacity to build global knowledge for sustainability and social justice. Mainstream academic knowledge has many merits, but should not assert an exclusive claim, or relegate other ways of knowledge to irrelevance or the merely exotic.
3.1. Framing ways of knowing

There is a need for recognizing, appreciating and learning through different ways of knowing. The verb ‘knowing’, instead of the noun ‘knowledge’ is used for speaking in favour of going beyond ‘mainstream knowledge’. Knowledge is notionally static and measurable – as a ‘resource’, or ‘asset’, or form of ‘capital’. In contrast, the connotations of the verb ‘knowing’ are far more irreducibly dynamic: about processes, actions or practices, in which the main distinguishing features are ever-moving relations, rather than fixed categories. Interpretive, deliberate or analytic knowledge should be interconnected to help define and sustain each other.

Ways of knowing have to be recognized as always embedded, situated and conditioned by encompassing social contexts. The practical implication of this is that realizing the full potential of human understandings is less about different ways of knowing and more about knowing through difference (Zanotti and Palomin-Schalscha, 2016).

Recognizing diversity does not mean ‘anything goes’. Just because many aspects are equally ‘true’ in representing complex, uncertain, multidimensional realities, then, does not mean all possible pictures are equally valid, nor that none can be recognized to be false. Such is the case of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’. Greater humility and reflexivity in ways of knowing is an antidote for the growing spread of intolerance to ‘academic excellence’, ‘science-based decisions’ and ‘evidence-based policy’ (Wilsdon and Doubleday, 2015).

Arising from this more plural, relational and reflexive approach to knowing is the notion of coproduction (Jasanoff, 2004; Ostrom, 1996). But even this one term can be used in many – often incompatible, sometimes opposing – ways. What is needed is not insistence on integration, but greater appreciation for difference. In order to be useful in addressing any given problem, knowledge needs to be ‘coproduced’ in particular ways and settings by a diversity of different communities and practices. Recognizing that knowledge is coproduced is about appreciating how context, culture and power can help shape the forms taken by all understandings.

A tension between an integrative and a constructivist approach to coproduction is recognized. Both approaches address the need for plurality, humility and reflexivity. When the first sense of coproduction encourages collaborations on equal terms across social differences, then it is entirely consistent with this. It is in this way that power and privilege can be progressively challenged – as much in ways of knowing as in wider political orders. For that to happen, power in all forms must be openly acknowledged and actively countered, not merely ignored. The second (constructivist) sense of coproduction instils greater appreciation for the need for pluralism across an irreducible diversity of context-conditioned ways of knowing. Here it is clear that progressive responsibilities in knowledge production are not just about speaking truth to power, but also about acknowledging how power shapes truth. Both challenge current pressures for hegemonic integration that can so badly reinforce existing patterns of exclusion and appropriation.
There are distinct ways in which we can justify the importance of diverse ways of knowing. First, they might be seen to have intrinsic value. So, the epistemology and ontology of a community may be seen as having its own worth, as being valid in itself, bringing richness to the lives of those within it. Furthermore, the existence of a diversity of worldviews may enrich the lives of all (Fricker, 2007). Second, diverse ways of knowing might have instrumental value. Alternative ways of viewing the world and stores of knowledge can lead to better outcomes in a material sense. Third, it might be seen as a question of justice to acknowledge and provide space for diverse ways of knowing. In light of the historical processes of colonization, exploitation and marginalization, there may be a requirement for redress in acknowledging, respecting and providing space for the worldview of a particular community. For all peoples we can see it as a human right and a fundamental mark of respect for dignity, that their culture, language and knowledge systems can be expressed and are valued in all spheres of society (Araujo and Maeso, 2015). In practice, it is important that we maintain all three of these approaches.

The SDGs are both diverse and plural, and therein lies their strength. This diversity of goals, but also of metrics and targets, catalyses and articulates different kinds of knowledge, and these diverse perspectives are mobilized thanks to the emphasis the 2030 Agenda places on democratic processes (United Nations, 2015; Wölkner, 2016). Sustainability, however, is an area in which traditional scientific production has not always had a favourable impact. Much of the knowledge produced by research and HEIs in general has had technological applications that have helped destroy our environment in order to benefit economic growth and wealth accumulation.

In contrast, many traditional communities have been able to conserve the biodiversity of their territories, protect the forests, avoid erosion of the soil, control the production of harmful waste – many have practiced circular economy for centuries – and, in addition, put limits to accumulation and curtailed gross inequalities in their communities. It is the sustainability crisis that has made humanity look towards Indigenous and other ways of knowing. Still the outlook of this ‘discovery’ is instrumental: to take from them what they have to offer that can be useful for the rest of humankind. It has rarely been truly dialogical, an approach which would imply meeting the peoples that have this knowledge with humility and openness and a willingness to achieve a deep understanding and appreciation of the culture and the vision of the world and universe that supports it, as well as with the disposition to share, in the same horizontal manner, the scientific way of knowing and specific knowledge matter on specific issues with the peoples of different cultures. This latter approach is what HEIs are in a particularly favourable position to adopt.

Even within the Western tradition, there are many forms of knowledge and knowing that have been marginalized historically. For example, in all forms of professional work, tacit knowledge is crucial, derived not through formal education but through experience and interaction in the community of practice (Polanyi, 2009). Opening to diversity must occur within as well as between cultures.

Epistemological dialogue around each of the SDGs, and about the whole idea of a sustainable world, is particularly worthwhile. Pluralities of how to know and diversity of what is known can contribute to build resilience in face of deep uncertainties such as the ones we are living now; for instance, to deeply comprehend that the market should be embedded in the ecological cycles and social dynamics, rather than in the opposite way.
3.3. Key dimensions of ways of knowing in higher education and potential implications

The following dimensions are crucial for incorporating diverse ways of knowing into the structure and organizational culture of HEIs.

The first is the diversification of students and staff. Most of the new entrants into HEIs have been from the privileged echelons of society, and access is still highly restricted for certain social groups. Lower-income communities, those from rural areas, Indigenous and other minority ethnic and linguistic groups, and those with disabilities are under-represented all across the world. While women now constitute the majority of university students worldwide, in some contexts they are poorly represented, and across the world there are disparities in terms of disciplines (Salmi, 2020).

Allowing for a diverse student population that is representative of the broader society is the first step towards allowing for diverse forms of knowing in these institutions. A diverse HEI in terms of students is not necessarily a diverse one in terms of knowledge traditions. Nevertheless, it is a first step towards allowing for diverse forms of knowledge. Beyond that, epistemological dialogue must be fostered and spurred.

The process of widening participation is needed for staff as well as for students. While this is undeniably a challenge in contexts in which higher education expansion is in its early stages – with bottlenecks in the lack of Ph.D. courses – efforts must be made to ensure that the diverse communities in a society are represented among academic staff, professional staff and senior leadership.

The second dimension to consider is language. Although there are 6,500 languages in use in the world today (Hammarström, 2016), many of them are disappearing. Language is the way the different types of knowledges are expressed, and it is a powerful tool for epistemological dialogue. HEIs can make an effort towards the diversification of languages used within their walls, which is also a way of diversifying faculty and students. There is great potential in the role of HEIs to foster language diversity, strengthen local languages and to thus preserve traditional wisdom and ways of knowing.

The third dimension is curriculum. The global challenges being addressed by the SDGs are complex, interconnected, transdisciplinary, and immersed in societal governance and values. The knowledge we bring to mitigate, or even solve the global challenges must mirror that complexity and diversity. One movement advancing these ideas is that of decolonizing the curriculum. In short, decolonizing is about de-centring the existing, colonial form of knowledge production in higher education and ensuring that more diverse ways of knowing are respected and built into higher education curriculum, practices, and governance. This work must continue, but we must progressively overcome barriers within the traditional structures of HEIs, such as disciplinary silos and individualized scholarship, and promote instead the inclusion of Indigenous and traditional knowledge and a greater voice from community and youth, in a way that is inclusive, peaceful, and successful (Emeagwali and Dei, 2014).

The fourth dimension is research. The current research ecosystem builds upon – and perpetuates – legacy issues of inequity, exclusion, power and privilege. Metrics of success and merit have been defined largely by those in positions of power in the research community itself, mostly in ‘Western’ countries.
As such, the current system, while advancing innovative ideas and solutions, remains structurally ill-equipped to fund global cooperation and the codesign of knowledge creation beyond traditional paths. More importantly for the SDGs, the system is not yet structurally designed to truly value the different ways of knowing so essential to global sustainability, equity, and inclusion.

If we do not work to rethink and realign our global research ecosystem towards more knowledge coproduction and inclusion, we will leave brilliant ideas on the floor, exclude valuable partners, and perpetuate unethical inequalities in the research process as we develop a growing structural deficit in the knowledge needed to address the complex, transdisciplinary, and global challenges described in the SDGs.

Despite this challenge in research, there is a positive trend towards increased support of collaborative, transdisciplinary, globally relevant research in higher education that is already moving forward. Yet this restructuring of higher education research ecosystems is still very much in its infancy. Around the world, investments in change consistently come up against the inertia of powerful institutional norms, with any disruption to the status quo causing fear for institutional – and individual – financial well-being, promotion opportunities, and research reputation. These changes, while critical, are still not enough. To truly address the future sustainability of our planet and people, and to achieve social justice, we will need a research ecosystem that also recognizes the value of diverse ways of knowing and knowledge coproduction. We will need to advance and support more inclusive and equitable research if we hope to truly address the global goals of the Agenda 2030.

A fifth dimension is publishing, for which competition has been exacerbated by the perceived need for academics all around the world to publish in a limited number of prestigious journals, reinforced by evaluation, promotion, recognition and rewarding criteria. The dominant structures of sharing knowledge restrict access to those already involved and are one of the root causes for power asymmetries. Specialized disciplinary outlets and paywalls provide barriers and there is little diversification of ways of sharing knowledge. The metrics used to gauge research output should also be part of this discussion, either moving away from metrics or using them in creative ways to promote diversification and inclusivity rather than homogenization and hegemony.

The final dimension is engaging with community and nature. Despite human lives being wholly dependent upon the natural world for our sustenance and existence, the idea that all higher education programmes should, or even must, centre its curriculum, pedagogy and research on deeper explorations and understandings of the connected relationship between humans and nature, is not the norm. The production of knowledge that couples human and natural systems is critical for addressing global social, natural, and policy-relevant issues such as the SDGs. Our ways of knowing that are required to address SDG targets also must recognize the need to include approaches that are more holistic, contextual and grounded within careers programmes of HEIs.
The university is one of the world’s oldest institutions, and owes its longevity in large part to its success in reinventing itself for different ages and continuing to provide a locus for transformation of learners and production of knowledge of value to humanity. This document fully recognizes the tremendous value of traditional HEIs and the contributions that mainstream science has made to societies. The argument put forward here is not that we should do away with the knowledge forms that have been at the heart of science and the university, but that we should set them in dialogue with other forms of knowledge.

Paradoxically, challenging the university in this way may be the best way to protect it, as opening a more plural space within these institutions is the key to its survival, not its destruction. HEIs are the ideal site for pluralizing views of the world and finding solutions to common problems by way of dialogue with different sectors of society and with different ways of knowing. It is in these institutions where openness, acceptance of other ‘truths’, and recognition of the efficacy of other ways of knowing in understanding and solving problems that affect us all, are possible.

Epistemological dialogue is a new and largely unexplored way of knowing and learning (Andreotti et al., 2011). We know that dialogue transforms those involved in it. It is a form of learning and allows the reaching of consensus, and it opens up new avenues for problematizing and generating questions, thus seeking knowledge, in complementary ways.

Thinking beyond academic disciplines is an important part of the epistemological and ontological shift that will allow for the living together of different knowledge traditions, cultures and languages within the university. This shift will not be possible without the vibrant engagement of diverse communities and a porous boundary with society. Transforming an institution in this way is no easy task, but if we are to have any chance of achieving the SDGs and ensuring a fair and flourishing future for humanity, we must move from ‘saving the world’ to ‘embracing a pluriverse’ (Arora and Stirling, 2020).

Good examples on incorporation of diverse ways of knowing into HEI practices are provided in the report upon which this document is based: Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022).
04.

Higher education partnerships
The third theme focuses on strengthening the role of HEIs in partnership with other actors in society. HEIs often originated as elite institutions for education and enlightenment, but early on they were also seen as instruments for welfare and development, and for using nature for human ends. Over the centuries, HEIs have grown in number and diversity. On the flipside, knowledge produced by research and HEIs has also led to technological applications, which contributed to detrimental developments, environmental degradation and social marginalization being prime among them. In recent decades, some universities and HEIs more broadly became frontline institutions promoting and advocating societal changes for the betterment of society and nature, and in that way have been forerunners of what much later was formalized as the SDGs. However, there are still structural barriers that keep HEIs from more proactively contributing to addressing sustainability-related challenges in society. Given the challenges humankind is facing, these interactions of HEIs with society need not only to be strengthened, multiplied but also redirected towards the SDGs. This requires an acceptance among public and private financing institutions, but also a widespread awareness and ownership within and among the HEIs themselves. The heterogeneity in the HEI sector implies that there are multiple ways by which the support for the SDGs can be achieved. It also implies that we need different ways to rate the success and deliverables of these partnerships.
Despite the current pressures on HEIs with more emphasis on short-term economic returns, pressures on public financing, faculty specialization and reward systems focused on projects and careers linked primarily to publications and citations, there remains a general consensus to maintain the higher education sector as independent as possible, with a mandate for research, education, and community engagement, all geared towards the public good. HEIs should serve society through both intellectual and – where appropriate – also potentially commercial innovations; but also ideally operate as market-free institutions protected by the right to academic freedom, which help society to navigate towards the currently overarching challenge: a sustainable future for humankind and the entire biosphere.

HEIs play a huge role in providing knowledge and values to a major share of future leaders and the population in general. This is undoubtedly the most important, long-term opportunity for the sector to transform society towards the SDGs. The role as ‘free-thinking’ institutions promoting system change has never been more important, while there instead has been a strong bias and evolution towards ‘publish or perish’ regimes where outreach, interdisciplinarity and science advice are often downplayed because they are less rewarding in scientific careers. **This requires that HEIs themselves become aware of this bias and take their responsibility.** While not necessarily demanding a full transformation of the HEI sector, it will require substantial redirection of aims and goals, and commitment from the HEIs themselves is needed. One good example is the new Act on Higher Education in Norway, which explicitly includes as one of its four aims that universities should contribute to sustainability (University and University Colleges Act, 2021). Alternatively, another action is for HEIs to make a signed commitment to the SDGs (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017).

As societies become more and more dependent on academic knowledge, and the turnover of this knowledge increases, **lifelong learning** will become a new norm, and HEIs must thus offer courses where the SDGs are embedded to leaders from politics, business, industry, teachers and other branches, and supported by values such as the protection of any form of life, cooperation and empathy. HEIs must actively seek cooperation with key companies and stakeholders to develop courses and research specifically devoted to or relevant for the SDGs.
HEIs should more actively engage with all branches of society: politics and the public sector; the private and business sector; and also civil society. This should not be a unidirectional effort, but rather seen as an interactive exchange of ideas, motivations and technologies. HEIs should also more actively engage in ‘science-based’ political influence in the form of science advice and science diplomacy (Scarfuto, 2019). This should take place both at the national and local level, and in coalitions at the international level, but could also be direct, bottom-up incentives following the example of the Climate Declaration to G20 (International Universities Climate Alliance, 2020), as well as the global initiative for biodiversity protection. It is important also to follow up on such statements and declarations at the political level. Another such example of HEI leadership is the very recent initiative where 56 universities in 30 nations have signed a treaty that commits them to work for the SDGs by 2030 (ZJU Newsroom Global Communications, 2021). Among the five key goals of this initiative is one specifically pertaining to the need to work with global partners to promote innovative solutions.

There are long traditions of strong links between certain disciplines within HEIs (economy, law, technology) and the private sector. Generally, this has been motivated by economic interests from both sides, and financing institutions have promoted and strengthened these economic incentives in recent years. For example, the European Union’s (EU) Horizon 2020 programme has explicitly prioritized projects promoting technological innovations and economic returns. To the extent that such interactions promote new technology in support of the SDGs, it is clearly a fruitful strategy. HEIs should however to a larger extent promote research and initiatives financing incentives to combat loss of nature, climate change and inequalities, for example, the EU Green Deal. The private business sector is facing new expectations, protocols and demands to meet both market expectations and regulations, and there is a growing demand for competence in this regard. Some HEIs have already taken action on this, for example, Cambridge University through the Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership which is a highly influential agency for business and financial markets to act in sustainable ways, also based on economic incentives.

Democratizing research, whereby local actors work together with university researchers in the cocreation of knowledge, not only empowers communities to influence how research impacts them, but it also serves as a mechanism for accelerating the realization of the SDGs. The growing field of community science, otherwise termed ‘citizen science’, refers to a participatory research practice, whereby non-university researchers participate in the production of scientific knowledge.

15. There is an ongoing debate both in academia and in policy circles about potentials and challenges of engaging citizens in science and democratic decision-making or deliberative democracy more broadly. For the academic debate see for example Wynne, 1992; Irwin, 2006; Brown, 2009. For discussion on a policy level see the recent report by the OECD (2020) or the widely cited report Taking European knowledge society seriously (Wynne and Felt, 2007).
4.2. Ways forward

The interactions of HEIs with society at large deal with both internal and external strategies in multiple ways, and this should start with an increased awareness of the SDGs from within (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017). HEIs can instigate bolder and more inclusive institutional policies that support multi-, inter and transdisciplinary research, scholarship, and creative practices across the professional lifetime of faculty. In particular, the discipline-specific focus of reappointment, promotion, and tenure guidelines and evaluation predominantly rewards faculty who contribute to highly specialized forms of knowledge production. Instead of penalizing faculty who become active in community engagement and transdisciplinary research and teaching, performance assessment criteria could be revised to reward a more diverse range of contributions.

HEIs must of course have a critical evaluation of their own practices, including travel. Given the exigencies of global climate change and the increasing corporatization of higher education, institutions must refuse to engage in research that supports non-sustainable practices. HEIs must plan for courses and ‘life-long learning’ for all sectors of society to meet the increasing demand for competence related to the SDGs, both for public and private sectors. Even more important, however, is the promotion of new solutions, from technologies to norms and law, in close interaction with society at large. HEIs must also actively engage in statements and appeals towards leading political or economic entities and advocate science advice at top political levels to promote the SDGs.
05. Recommendations
Over the last decades and especially in the context of the SDGs, HEIs are increasingly seen as crucial actors in contributing to sustainable development through research, education, but also through active engagement with their local communities and society more broadly. HEIs should have strong obligations to motivate societal change at large, taking a leading role in the transitions needed as humankind is facing unprecedented challenges, and to emphasize that there is an immediate need for change in responding to this call. This also implies that HEIs need to think critically about their own practices, curricula, and research, and to motivate this orientation among their employees, students and society at large.

Three basic premises give way to the recommendations that derive from this document. First, the 2030 Agenda calls for deep-going social, economic and political transformations to handle a broad range of societal and environmental challenges, both locally and globally. Secondly, HEIs can provide a broad understanding of the changes needed, generated through interaction between disciplines from the humanities to the social and natural sciences, and through their role to educate new generations of scholars, workforce, professionals, and agents of change, trained to understand and deal with these issues. Lastly, HEIs represent ‘free’ institutions for novel and critical thinking and therefore also represent unique intellectual spaces for openness to other ways of knowing and for a rethinking of sustainable development even beyond the SDGs.

HEIs have ethical principles and values. It is time to make them explicit and promote awareness and discussion around them. Critical thinking is one of these values which must remain a central issue for HEIs, particularly in relation to the complex matters of sustainability, social justice and towards achievement of the SDGs. Furthermore, sustainability should become a core practice and purpose of HEIs and be reflected in structures, programmes and activities over the simple monetary benefit of higher education studies. HEIs are called to face the complex problems of the world today, which is why they should incorporate multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary activities in education and research, and improve the relationships between research and education. It is also time to ensure that other ways of knowing, learning and sharing knowledge are visible and that HEIs have committed to them, and for HEIs to foster and spur dialogue and engagement with diverse communities – particularly those traditionally marginalized in these settings – acknowledging the value of difference. Among the responsibilities of HEIs is sharing and democratizing knowledge and building awareness around the consequences of unsustainable ways of production and consumption. They must also build awareness around the problems of inequity and exclusion, and of the need to foster progress towards the 2030 Agenda, leaving no one behind. Striving for a more equitable representation of all sectors of society in the student body and the faculty, and strengthening lifelong learning activities, are strongly recommended.
5.2. Recommendations for education

As students will become the workforce of the future, they require knowledge and a strong ethical grounding so that they commit to and strive for sustainability and social justice in their professional activities. To provide a complex outlook on the problems and their possible solutions, more multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary programmes and study programmes on sustainability issues have to be developed. At the same time, study programmes must include multi, inter- or transdisciplinary courses related to the SDGs, and education in general should employ inclusive approaches and respect of cultures and knowledge systems. Students require more opportunities for engaging in experiential and dialogic activities with different communities in society. Student and faculty participation in the definition of education around sustainability should be strongly fostered in a continuous effort to internally democratize HEIs around central issues. HEIs need to complement critical thinking techniques with problem-solving and case study projects that apply theoretical knowledge depending on environmental and social needs.

5.3. Recommendations for research

HEIs should not cease to protect and increase their academic freedom for the promotion of systemic change. Although basic and curiosity-driven research should be maintained as a core principle where relevant, HEIs should also strive to move beyond the traditional separation of basic and applied research. Internal incentives should be transformed in order to foster research projects, programmes and centres that deal with loss of nature, climate change and inequalities, as well as those that require the participation of multiple disciplines, which should in all cases include the social sciences and the humanities. Alternative research methodologies, such as participatory action research, should be experienced and refined to progress towards the coproduction of knowledge with diverse communities and transdisciplinary research. More emphasis should be put on SDG-related achievements and broad research for careers, curricula and promotion of researchers. There is a need to profoundly revise ranking systems that discourage collaborative and engaged research. Being consequent with the role of HEIs as democratizers of knowledge, open access publications and open science policies should be gradually embraced, and the dissemination and application of research results should be clearly strengthened.

5.4. Recommendations for outreach and community engagement

Much more proactive outreach and community engagement policies are necessary to fulfil the role of HEIs regarding sustainability and social justice. Advising policy, engaging in societal projects towards sustainability, and convening different sectors of society to partner for actions towards the SDGs have to be strengthened. Awareness raising that explains sustainability problems and favours the need for policy, societal actions and personal behaviours that combat climate change, nature loss and inequality among the different sectors of society have to be clearly expanded. Free open knowledge platforms should form part of these activities. Creation of and participation in networks between academics, civil society and the economic sectors for collaboration towards the SDGs also have to be increased. Existing multilateral networks between HEIs for the purposes of fostering and spurring collaborative research and education projects should be strengthened, and new ones developed. Partnerships between HEIs in high, middle and low-income countries should be revised to give way to more horizontal and productive relationships and emphasize capacity-building for sustainability.
Some more specific recommendations for governments and HEI global governance that are in accordance to those listed above include: developing quality assurance mechanisms fostered by governments that promote and advance the SDGs; the constitution of a Global SDG Research and Teaching Central Fund to support faculty and teaching grants for projects related to the SDGs; the development of a Global SDG Higher Education Benchmarking System to supplant a competitive environment fostered by ranking systems and that instead recognizes HEIs that holistically address a large number of SDGs across all their activities; and the organization, under the UNESCO umbrella, of an annual SDG Research and Teaching Conference. Donor agencies should consider greater investment in institutions in the global South to avoid South-to-North brain drain and to allow countries to find sustainable solutions that match their needs. HEIs should consider establishing the post of Chief Sustainability or SDG Officer and/or a Sustainability Committee at the top level. They should establish SDG-aligned and ‘sustainable campus’ policies that develop prototypes of sustainable institutions. Once these are well developed, HEIs could certify institutions in sustainability at different levels, with clear goals for reaching higher levels of certification. Finally, HEIs are ethically bound to refuse to engage in research that supports non-sustainable practices.

By providing a summary of the report Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022), this document proposed to synthesize the interplay between research, higher education and sustainable development from a global perspective. We have strived to achieve this, first, by developing the idea of working together for the SDGs and making an argument for the need to move towards multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary education and research. Secondly, we have tried to communicate the importance of opening HEIs to a profound epistemological dialogue with other ways of knowing and with different sectors of society, including those that have been marginalized from higher education. Thirdly, we have stressed the importance of strengthening the role of HEIs in society and seeking a strong voice in policy and practice through potent partnerships and networks. These three areas of further development of HEIs have strong cultural, structural and even organizational and financial implications. These final recommendations, therefore, are to be studied and debated not only by the global higher education community, but also by governments and financing agents, and by civil society organizations that can contribute to engaging HEIs in better fulfilling their role towards a more sustainable and just society.
References


Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the Government of Spain, the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher education and opening doors to new, innovative, creative, and visionary conceptions that not only serve current agendas for sustainable development, but also pave the way for future learning communities that overcome barriers, speak to all and are inclusive of all lifelong learners.

The WHEC2022 promotes a global conversation nurtured by diverse narratives on higher education through various activities: generation and dissemination of knowledge; formulation of updated policy recommendations; identification and sharing of innovative practices; networking and strengthening of partnerships; broad participation of stakeholders at local and international levels (within and outside higher education systems: professors, researchers, youth, managers, authorities, policy makers, experts, entrepreneurs, social leaders, etc.); and development of renewed paths framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and looking at the Futures of Education.

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