DIGITAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

Re-Defining Sustainability

A Higher Education Perspective for Post 2030

By the DEC 2025 ESG & Sustainability Working Group

Table of Contents

Contributors 3

Executive Summary 5

Recognition of Higher Education Institutions as Cross-Cutting Actors 6

Sustainability Priorities for the Post 2030 Agenda 7

- Key Gaps in the Existing Framework 7
- Ten Emerging Sustainability Goals and Sub-Goals Proposed 9
- Importance of SDGs for the Post 2030 Agenda 12

Higher Education Institution Priorities and Progress 14

Institution Initiatives to Advance Emerging Sustainability Priorities 16

- Education for Sustainable Development 16
- Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions 17
- Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging 18

Key Drivers for Higher Education Sustainability Performance 21

- How Key Drivers Differ by Institution Maturity 23

Acknowledgements 25

Copyright and Contact Details 26

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Executive Summary

This report examines how higher education institutions interpret the current United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where they identify critical gaps, and which new goals or sub-goals they believe are needed post 2030.

Developed by the Digital Education Council 2025 ESG & Sustainability Working Group, the study draws on the working group discussions and a global survey of 46 institutions across 25 countries. Responses were provided by institutional representatives in leadership and specialist roles in sustainability and ESG with oversight across strategic, operational, academic, and governance domains.

The report highlights higher education's cross-cutting contributions to sustainability, identifies three structural gaps in the SDG framework, and proposes ten new goals and sub-goals to close them. It also documents real-world institution initiatives and synthesises seven organisational drivers that shape sustainability performance.

The ten new goals and sub-goals were first identified through the working group's exploratory survey and discussions which surfaced emerging sustainability challenges not fully addressed in the current SDG framework. These proposed additions were then evaluated by institutions alongside the existing SDGs. Representatives rated each goal's importance for the post 2030 agenda, its priority within their institution and where relevant, their stage of implementation.

Quantitative ratings were used to identify gaps between importance and practice, while qualitative insights captured how institutions understand their sustainability role and which emerging challenges the current SDGs fail to address.

This document serves as a practical resource for institutions seeking to strengthen their sustainability strategies, align with emerging global priorities, and contribute evidence to post 2030 SDG discussions.

Recognition of Higher Education Institutions as Cross-Cutting Actors

Higher education's role in promoting ESG and sustainability is multifaceted. Institutions teach, research, and innovate in ways that shape societal responses to environmental and social challenges while also influencing communities, policy systems, and global frameworks. Drawing on insights from the working groups discussions and the survey with institution representatives, this section highlights where institutions see their most significant contributions.

Educating Sustainability-Literate Professionals

Institution representatives from 42 higher education institutions described a growing effort to embed sustainability into the curriculum with greater intention and structure. Some institutions are making sustainability literacy a requirement for all students, while others focus on curriculum redesign that incorporates ESG concepts, systems thinking and authentic problem solving.

Institution representatives also highlighted the importance of faculty development. Programmes are being created to help educators integrate sustainability into learning activities, case-based teaching and interdisciplinary collaborations. These efforts reflect a broader shift towards building sustainability capacity among both students and academic staff.

A recurring theme among institution representatives was the need to measure sustainability literacy more meaningfully. They noted that many students understand sustainability at a conceptual level but struggle to apply it in practice. This prompted institutions to explore frameworks that assess awareness, intention and behavioural action, especially in leadership-oriented programmes such as MBAs.

Producing Impactful Research

Research was consistently identified by institution representatives as one of higher education's most significant contributions to sustainability. They shared cases where environmental science, engineering and technology research directly enabled major emissions reductions in industry, in some cases surpassing the institution's own carbon footprint.

Institution representatives described research focused on urgent local challenges. They emphasised that higher education often steps in where government capacity is limited, making academic research a critical source of evidence for public and private decision-making.

They also discussed the growing pressure to make research outputs visible and comparable. Many institutions are mapping their work to frameworks such as the SDGs or sustainability rankings, although several noted that current indicators do not fully capture the complexity or long-term nature of research influence.

Raising Public Awareness and Supporting Community Action

Institution representatives emphasised that higher education often plays a regional leadership role in sustainability education, particularly in contexts where public awareness and technical capacity remain limited. One example is large-scale capacity-building programmes delivered to municipal commissioners and political leaders, focused on water, waste, hygiene and sanitation management. It highlights how institutions help strengthen local sustainability governance beyond the campus.

Institution representatives also pointed to public education as a key area where institutions can make an impact. Outreach efforts are seen as ways to broaden access to sustainability knowledge. These responses suggest that practitioners see public engagement as an important extension of institution responsibility.

Influencing Global Sustainability Frameworks

Institutions expressed strong interest in influencing the evolution of global sustainability frameworks post 2030. They argued that existing frameworks, including the SDGs, do not sufficiently address behavioural change, or the social and educational dimensions of sustainability. They also pointed to limitations in current global metrics, which often fail to reflect institution research impact, community engagement or the full scope of academic contributions.

Survey responses reinforced this view, with representatives noting that sustainability indicators used in rankings can be inconsistent, overly narrow or poorly aligned with institution realities. Several institution representatives emphasised that higher education holds the data, expertise and lived experience needed to reshape these frameworks.

Institution representatives agreed that the sector should play a more active role in defining post 2030 goals, advocating for metrics that better capture teaching, research, operational change and community impact.

Sustainability Priorities for the Post 2030 Agenda

As institutions reflected on both current and emerging sustainability challenges, clear gaps in the existing SDG framework became visible alongside strong support for several new or strengthened goals. This section synthesises those insights by outlining where the current framework falls short, which new goals and sub-goals are most needed, and how institutions prioritise them for the post 2030 agenda.

Key Gaps in the Existing Framework

Institution representatives identified critical blind spots that limit their effectiveness in guiding institution action. The gaps outlined below highlight where the framework must evolve to reflect emerging realities and ensure equitable, sustainable progress beyond 2030.

Under-Recognition of the Systemic Role of Higher Education Institutions

Institution representatives noted that the current framework was developed primarily for national governments, leaving organisational actors such as Higher Education Institutions without clear guidance despite their growing influence in implementing sustainability initiatives.

They highlighted this mismatch. They noted the need for clearer expectations for institutions, while emphasising that current goals do not reflect the practical work that must be carried out to achieve climate, education, and community outcomes.

They noted that while institutions are advancing institution-level actions across areas such as net-zero commitments and sustainability literacy, these efforts often lack a common reference point. This absence of

institution targets results in fragmented progress, difficulty in benchmarking ambition, and reliance on voluntary leadership rather than systemic guidance.

The data illustrates the need for explicit institution-level goals in the post 2030 agenda, ensuring that Higher Education Institutions are recognised as essential agents of transformation.

Insufficient Equity and Inclusion Safeguards

Institution representatives believe that the current framework handles equity in fragments. They described working simultaneously on disability inclusion, cultural bridging, gender diversity, Indigenous rights, environmental justice, and linguistic accessibility, but the current SDGs do not reflect this holistic reality. It was noted that institution inclusion challenges don't fall neatly into SDG 5 (Gender Equality) or SDG 10 (Reduced Equalities) but rather cut across the implemented actions.

Survey evidence underscores this gap. There is strong support for more explicit equity-related goals. Yet implementation lags behind, reflecting the absence of frameworks, indicators, and safeguards that institutions can adopt. Representatives called for universal design principles, integrated cultural and linguistic inclusion, and explicit recognition of gender diversity and Indigenous perspectives which the representatives believe are missing from the current SDG architecture.

The data highlights the need for a more cohesive equity framework that addresses intersectionality, social cohesion, and identity-based inclusion, rather than scattering pieces across multiple goals.

Lack of Guidance on Emerging Technologies and Digital Sustainability

The current framework was finalised before the rapid growth of AI and large-scale digital infrastructure. Institutions now face challenges the SDGs do not currently recognise: digital access gaps, algorithmic biases, data ethics, and the increasing environmental footprint of digital technologies. As one representative explained, "The SDGs don't speak to the world we now operate in. AI, data governance, and digital inequality are reshaping everything."

Institution representatives highlighted the importance of equitable access to emerging technologies and noted that institutions are still in the early stages of implementing this effectively. Institution representatives also underscored the compounded challenges, from ensuring "reliable and affordable digital access" for underserved groups to addressing the "ecological and human-rights implications of AI." The need for institutions to develop "digital literacy, safeguards, and infrastructure" and even "digital footprint decarbonisation strategies" was also mentioned.

Because the current framework does not address digital sustainability institutions attempt to build policy responses independently, leading to fragmented and reactive approaches. The data suggests the need for a new goal that unifies access, ethics, and environmental impact within an integrated digital sustainability framework.

Ten Emerging Sustainability Goals and Sub-Goals Proposed

According to the institution representatives, the gaps identified in the current SDG framework suggest the need for new goals and strengthened sub-goals in the post 2030 agenda.

Drawing on the working group discussions, delegates identified 10 new goals and sub-goals to address these gaps. This section presents these proposals with the rationale for their inclusion.

Figure 1. Ten Proposed Emerging Sustainability Goals and Sub-Goals

Goal 1: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Current Status: Sub-target 4.7 under SDG 4
Proposal: Elevate to a standalone global goal

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is foundational to developing sustainability competencies across all disciplines, yet its current placement as a sub-target limits visibility and system-level impact. Survey results show it received the highest inclusion rating of all proposed goals and the highest level of priority, but implementation lags behind creating a notable gap.

Institution representatives reported that sustainability learning is still treated as optional or peripheral despite its relevance to all fields of study, and highlighted the lack of shared frameworks for sustainability literacy assessments. The responses indicate that strengthening educator capacity, redesigning curricula, and embedding sustainability learning across programmes require a dedicated, globally recognised goal. The data suggests a standalone ESD goal would formalise expectations, support institution-wide integration, and enable consistent benchmarking of sustainability competencies.

Goal 2: Equitable and Sustainable Access to Emerging Technologies

Current Status: Fragmented references in SDG 9 and SDG 4
Proposal: Elevate to a standalone global goal

Rapid technological advancement has outpaced the existing SDG framework. Survey data indicates strong support for a dedicated goal on equitable and sustainable access to emerging technologies, yet implementation remains one of the lowest across all proposals creating a significant gap.

Institutions emphasised challenges related to digital access, affordability, AI ethics, algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the environmental footprint of rapidly expanding digital infrastructures. Many highlighted the need for reliable connectivity, modern devices, digital literacy programmes, and safeguards for responsible technology use. The survey data supports a call for a coordinated global goal that integrates digital equity, ethical governance, and environmental sustainability within the technology ecosystem.

Goal 3: Social Inclusion and Cultural Bridging

Current Status: Fragmented across SDG 5, SDG 10, SDG 16
Proposal: Elevate to a standalone global goal

Institutions described inclusion as an interconnected set of challenges. Yet the current SDGs address these issues in isolation, leaving institutions without a unified framework to guide integrated action. Survey responses and qualitative submissions revealed that many institutions are already operating far beyond the scope of what the SDGs currently recognise.

Examples include establishing cross-representative student leadership structures that bring together voices from disability groups, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and students from rural backgrounds; co-designing accessible buildings, digital platforms, and learning materials with students who have diverse needs; and creating intercultural dialogue initiatives that connect local, migrant, and international communities. Despite this breadth of activity, institutions noted that these efforts remain fragmented, often run through separate offices or projects without a cohesive strategy or shared indicators. The data suggests that a dedicated goal would reflect the integrated reality of inclusion work within higher education. It would support institutions in building coherent, coordinated approaches that strengthen equity, cultural recognition, and belonging across all communities.

Sub-Goal 1: Disability Inclusion and Universal Design (within Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging Goal)

Disability inclusion is referenced across the current SDGs but lacks a comprehensive, proactive framework anchored in universal design. Survey data show strong support for explicit recognition with institutions largely at the piloting stage revealing a persistent gap between perceived importance and implementation.

Representatives emphasised the need to shift from accommodation-based approaches to systematic universal design. They highlighted practices such as involving students with visual or hearing impairments in co-designing building renovations, developing tactile campus maps, and creating accessible learning materials. Others stressed that accessibility must be embedded “by design” across physical, digital, and social environments rather than retrofitted. The data suggests that a dedicated sub-goal would provide the coherent structure institutions need to advance universal design at scale.

Sub-Goal 2: Indigenous Rights (within Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging Goal)

Representatives believe that Indigenous rights and self-determination are largely absent from the current SDG framework, appearing only indirectly in a few targets. Survey data show this proposed sub-goal has the lowest institution priority and the lowest implementation level—barely beyond planning—paired with the highest variability across responses. This might be a reflection of geographic differences: according to the data, institutions in regions with Indigenous populations view this as essential, while others without such communities tend to de-prioritise it.

The gap between high inclusion support and minimal implementation indicates that institutions recognise its importance but lack frameworks, capacity, or contextual guidance to act. The data suggests that a dedicated sub-goal would establish universal principles—such as self-determination, knowledge systems integration, and cultural heritage preservation—while allowing flexible, context-specific implementation across different regions.

Sub-Goal 3: Gender diversity (LGBTQI+) Rights and Representation (SDG 5 – Gender Equality)

The current framework does not explicitly address gender diversity, LGBTQI+ rights, or non-binary identities. Survey data show strong support for expanding SDG 5 to include these dimensions, though institution priority and implementation remain uneven, reflecting diverse legal and cultural contexts across regions.

Representatives described efforts to create safe, inclusive, and visible environments for LGBTQI+ communities, including equality training, wellbeing support, and research-informed advocacy. Others highlighted integrated governance structures where LGBTQI+ representatives participate in central committees alongside EDI leads. A dedicated sub-goal would fill SDG 5's binary gap and provide clearer guidance for institutions advancing gender-inclusive practices.

Sub-Goal 4: Equity and Environmental Justice (SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities)

The recognition that environmental harms and benefits are inequitably distributed along lines of race, class, geography, and other dimensions of identity is largely absent from the current framework. Survey results reflect this gap: Equity and Environmental Justice received a strong inclusion rating but one of the lowest implementation scores across all proposed additions, creating the largest implementation gap identified in the survey. Institution priority also remained moderate with high variation across representatives underscoring the lack of shared frameworks to guide action.

Institutions highlighted gaps in curriculum, research, community engagement, and equitable climate transitions. They emphasised the need to link environmental risks to social inequality and ensure that vulnerable communities are not left behind in climate or technological transitions. The data suggests that higher education institutions can play a central role in advancing equity and environmental justice by: embedding environmental justice principles into curricula; supporting interdisciplinary research that links environmental risks with social inequalities; engaging in community-based participatory research with underserved groups.

Sub-Goal 5: Sustainable Urban Mobility (SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities)

Mobility is a major driver of emissions, congestion, and inequity, yet SDG 11 provides only broad transport guidance without addressing decarbonisation, behavioural change, or accessibility. Survey data reflects this gap: Sustainable Urban Mobility received strong support for inclusion but only moderate priority and early-stage implementation.

Institutions are already piloting cycling networks, pedestrian-first zones, low-emission commuting incentives, EV infrastructure, and campus-city partnerships to test public transport and micro-mobility solutions. The data suggests that without a coherent framework or shared indicators these efforts remain fragmented and difficult to scale. The survey results indicate that a dedicated sub-goal would provide the structure needed to coordinate and expand sustainable mobility initiatives.

Sub-Goal 6: Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions (SDG 13 – Climate Action)

Representatives believe that Higher education institutions are major actors with significant carbon footprints, yet SDG 13 focuses almost exclusively on national-level climate action. Survey data confirms this gap: Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions received one of the highest inclusion ratings and strong institution priority, but implementation remains only moderate, signalling the need for clearer guidance.

Institution representatives described a broad spectrum of climate initiatives already underway, including transitioning to renewable energy sources, developing green campuses, integrating climate literacy into curricula, expanding sustainable procurement practices, and establishing circular economy programmes to reduce waste. However, these initiatives remain fragmented, vary widely in ambition, and often depend on voluntary leadership rather than coordinated strategy. Representatives believe dedicated sub-goal would define expectations for organisational net-zero transition and resilience, enabling more coherent, systematic, and institution-wide climate action.

Sub-Goal 7: Sustainable Funding and Partnerships (SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals)

Across the survey, institutions identified sustainable funding as a systemic barrier to advancing sustainability initiatives. Sustainable Funding and Partnerships received solid support for inclusion, moderate institution priority, and early-stage implementation, revealing a clear gap between recognised importance and practical readiness.

Representatives pointed to fragmented partnerships, short-term project cycles, and resource constraints as key obstacles. The current SDG 17 focuses heavily on international macro-finance but provides little guidance for local institutions seeking blended financing, cross-sector partnerships, or long-term funding structures. The data suggests that a sub-goal would help institutions mobilise resources, align partners, and sustain implementation over time.

Importance of SDGs for the Post 2030 Agenda

The DEC 2025 ESG & Sustainability Working Group conducted a survey asking institutions to rate the importance of existing and proposed SDGs for inclusion in the post 2030 framework, using a 1–5 scale. These ratings provide a forward-looking sense of which priorities institutions believe should guide the next generation of global sustainability goals.

With 46 institutions across 25 countries responding these data reveal which goals institutions believe should shape the post 2030 framework, which emerging areas are gaining global traction, and which may remain more locally relevant.

Analysis of the responses revealed three overarching insights that capture how institutions prioritise and interpret sustainability challenges for the post 2030 agenda.

Figure 2. Importance Rating of the Current SDGs and the Proposed Goals and Sub-goals (Out of 5)

Existing & Proposed SDGs	Average
SDG4: Quality Education	5.0
SDG5: Gender Equality	4.9
SDG13: Climate Action	4.9
SDG3: Good Health and Well-Being	4.8
SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy	4.8
SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	4.8
Education for Sustainable Development	4.7
SDG12: Responsible Consumption and Production	4.7
SDG15: Life on Land	4.7
SDG2: Zero Hunger	4.7
SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	4.7
SDG13 (Climate Action) Sub-Goal: Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions	4.7
SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	4.7
Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging Sub-Goal: Disability Inclusion and Universal Design	4.6

Existing & Proposed SDGs	Average
SDG9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	4.6
SDG10: Reduced Inequalities	4.6
SDG17:Partnership for the Goals	4.6
SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation	4.6
SDG1: No Poverty	4.6
SDG14: Life Below Water	4.6
Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging	4.5
SDG10 (Reduced Inequality) Sub-Goal: Equity and Environmental Justice	4.5
Equitable & Sustainable Access to Emerging Technologies	4.4
SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) Sub-Goal: Sustainable Urban Mobility	4.3
SDG5 (Gender Equality) Sub-Goal: Gender diversity (LGBTQI+) Rights and Representation	4.3
SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals) Sub-Goal: Sustainable Funding & Partnerships	4.2
Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging Sub-Goal: Indigenous Rights	4.2

Current UN SDGs
Newly Proposed Goals/Sub-goals

Broad Importance of Sustainability Goals

All sustainability goals, both existing SDGs and newly proposed ones are perceived as important or highly important by higher education institutions. Among these, Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Climate Action emerged as particularly desirable for inclusion in the post 2030 agenda.

New Goals and Sub-Goals with High Priority

While most newly proposed goals and sub-goals were rated slightly lower than existing SDGs, a few stand out as highly important:

- Education for Sustainable Development
- Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions (as a sub-goal under SDG13 Climate Action)
- Disability Inclusion and Universal Design (as a sub-goal under Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging)

Divergence of Opinions

Some newly proposed areas attracted more divided views. These include:

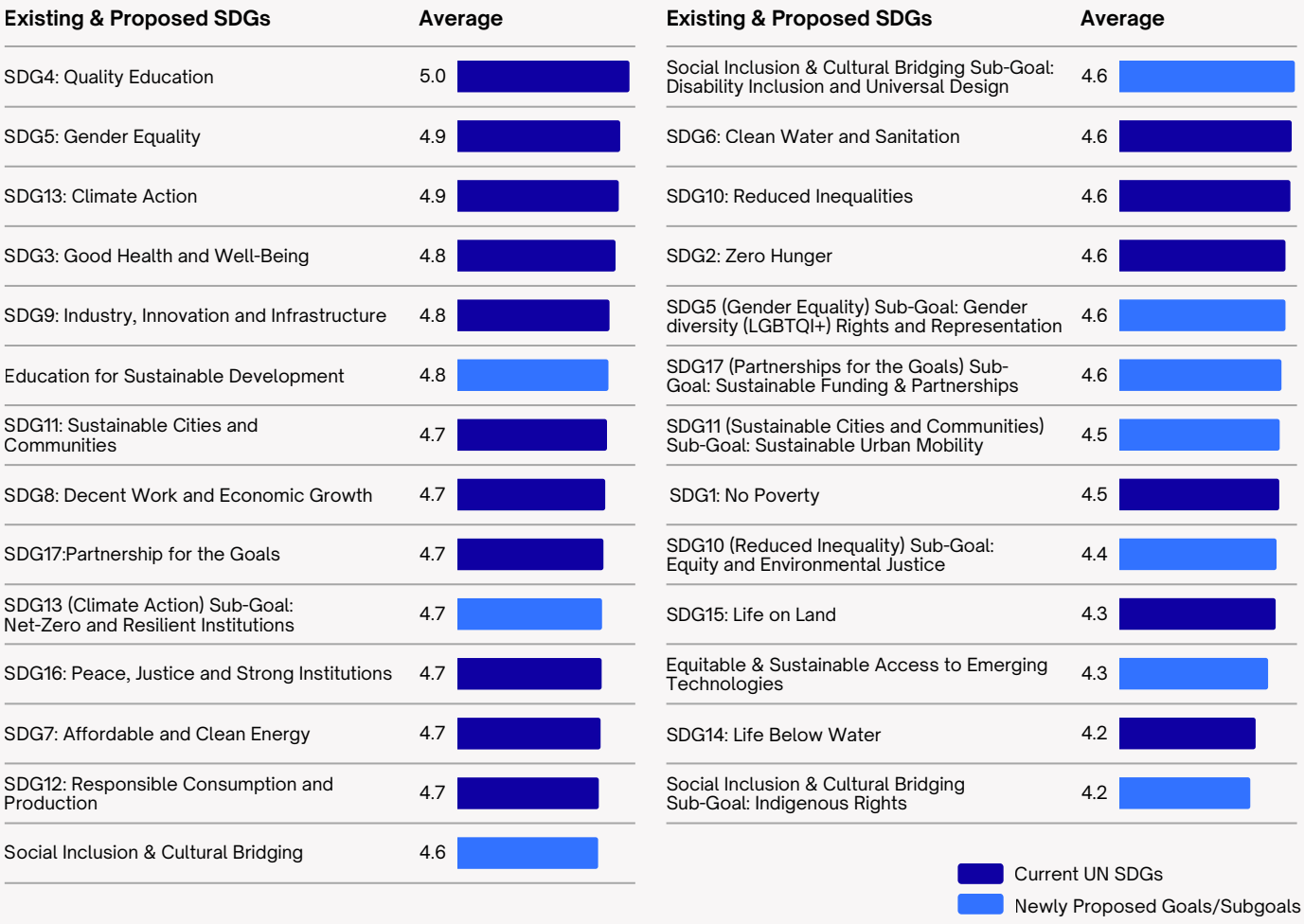
- Gender Diversity (LGBTQI+) Rights and Representation
- Equity and Environmental Justice (as a sub-goal under SDG10 Reduced Inequality)
- Equitable & Sustainable Access to Emerging Technologies

Gender Diversity (LGBTQI+) Rights and Representation stands out with a higher standard deviation. The data indicates that its inclusion in the post 2030 agenda may not evenly match expectations evenly across the world.

Higher Education Institution Priorities and Progress

Institutions report a broad mix of sustainability priorities across existing SDGs and the newly proposed ones. Importance ratings indicate which goals are expected to matter most beyond 2030, while priority ratings show where institutions are currently focusing their efforts. Three areas: Quality Education, Climate Action, and Gender Equality consistently stand out as the most actively prioritised today.

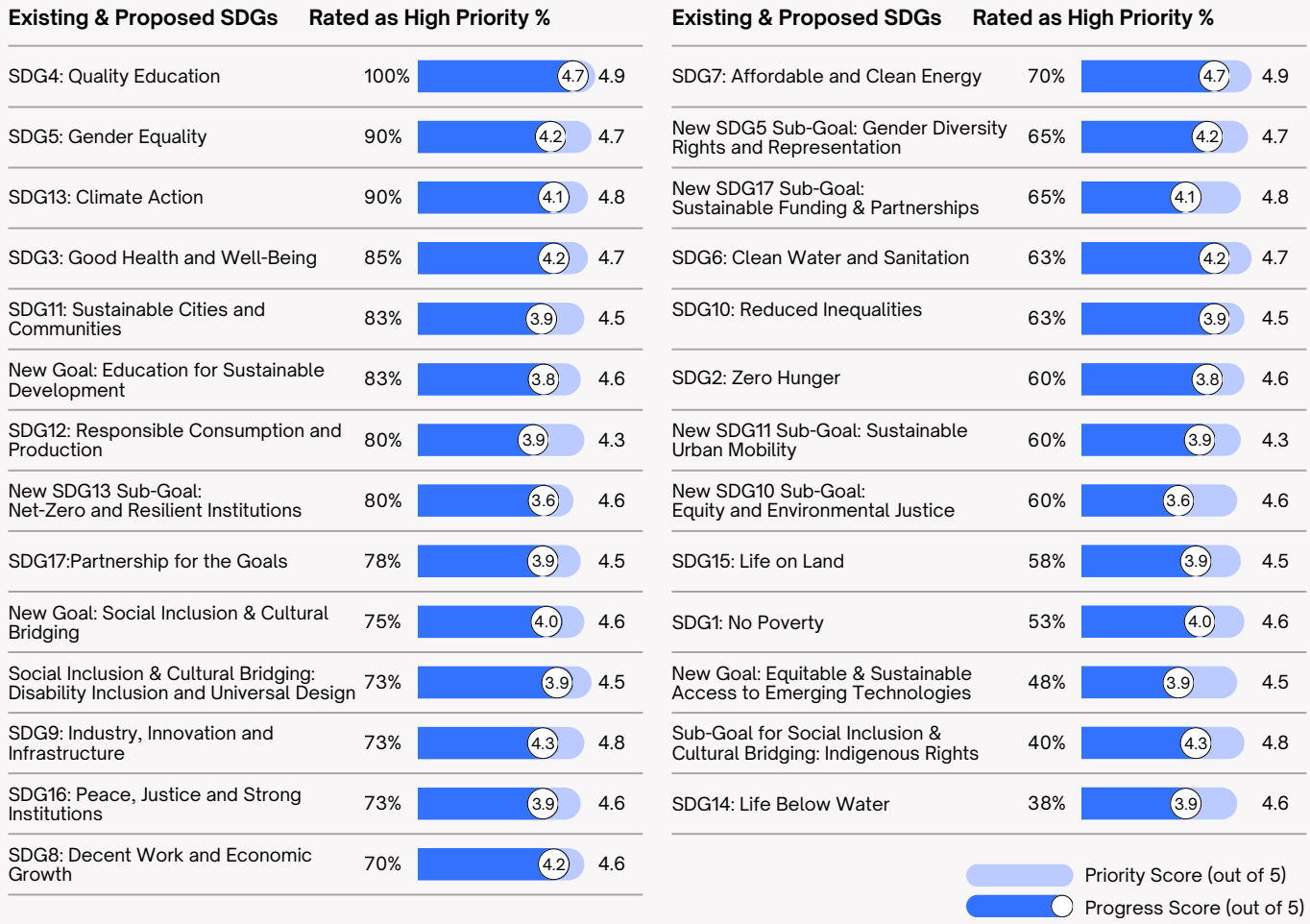
Figure 3. Higher Education Institution Sustainability Priority Rating (Out of 5)



At the same time, according to the data, not all sustainability goals hold equal relevance for every institution. Institutions operate in different regional, disciplinary, and institution contexts, which naturally shape their priority areas. Goals such as Life Below Water, Life on Land, or Indigenous Rights tend to be emphasised more strongly by institutions with specific academic specialisations or local community responsibilities, while being less central to others. This variation in data highlights the broad remit of higher education in sustainability emphasises the necessity for flexible, context-sensitive frameworks.

Institutions are also prioritising goals and sub-goals not currently part of the UN SDG framework, such as Education for Sustainable Development, Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions, and Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging. This reflects a broader and more contextually relevant set of sustainability priorities for higher education. Institutions suggested this calls for a re-think and adaptation of global frameworks for the post 2030 era.

Figure 4. Higher Education Institution Sustainability Progress



This chart includes the institutions that rated the respective goal or sub-goal as a priority level of 4 (High) or 5 (Top).

For the most widely shared priorities—Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Climate Action—institutions are comparatively more advanced, with the majority either having established strategies that are continuously improved or sustainability initiatives already implemented at scale.

The biggest gaps are found in Equity and Environmental Justice, Equitable & Sustainable Access to Emerging Technologies, and Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions—all of which represent emerging areas where institutions are only beginning to develop strategies or pilot initiatives. Another notable gap appears in Sustainable Funding & Partnerships. Representatives emphasised that long-term sustainability partnerships are a broader societal challenge that extends beyond the remit of higher education alone, highlighting the need for more durable, cross-sector collaboration models.

Institution Initiatives to Advance Emerging Sustainability Priorities

For these ten emerging priorities, institutions are beginning to implement a wide range of initiatives to address the gaps identified. This section highlights the key initiatives institutions can undertake, with particular focus on the three areas perceived as most important: Education for Sustainable Development, Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions, and Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging, including its sub-goal on Disability Inclusion & Universal Design.

Education for Sustainable Development

As a core strategic priority, advancing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) requires more than integrating sustainability content into curricula. It demands coordinated efforts that engage students, faculty, staff, and the broader community in developing sustainability literacy and competencies. To move this forward, institutions are implementing a range of initiatives to contribute to sustainability education and extend ESD beyond the campus.

Table 1. Key Initiatives for Education for Sustainable Development

Key Area	Key Initiatives
Curriculum Integration	• Embed sustainability as a core component into the curriculum regardless of field of study • Support and facilitate student-led sustainability initiatives • Conduct sustainability assessment and benchmarking
Staff Professional Development	• Offer continuous training programmes for educators and staff on sustainability
Community & Partnerships	• Work with local communities, industries, and governments to co-create sustainable solutions

Initiative Highlights

Curriculum-Wide Sustainability Mapping
Freie Universität Berlin

Freie Universität Berlin demonstrates a structured, institution-wide approach to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Since 2016, its Sustainability & Energy Management Unit has annually reviewed the entire course catalogue, tagging modules as “sustainability-relevant” or “sustainability-focused” and mapping them to up to three SDGs. FU Berlin’s model shows how a clear institution commitment, combined with regular curriculum audits, can embed sustainability into mainstream teaching and create transparency and accountability for ESD.

Campus-Wide Sustainability Engagement Initiative
The West University of Timișoara

The West University of Timișoara (UVT) advances sustainability education through its annual "UVT Green Month," a university-wide flagship initiative that brings together students, faculty, researchers, and local partners for a month of events dedicated to sustainable development. The programme features workshops, expert talks, debates, research showcases, and community engagement activities focused on various sustainability themes. UVT uses Green Month as a platform to strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue, and position the university as a regional leader in sustainability education and action.

Driving Sustainability Through Impact Scholarships
OBS Business School

OBS Business School promotes student leadership in sustainable development through its annual OBS Impact Scholarship, an initiative that awards three fully funded master's degrees (100% of tuition costs) to students committed to generating positive societal impact. Applicants propose projects aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and selected winners receive financial support, visibility, and mentorship to help develop and implement their initiatives. Combining full-tuition scholarships with project-based impact learning, OBS offers a replicable model for sustainability education.

Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions

Representatives highlighted that achieving net-zero and building institution resilience require a holistic approach—one that integrates goal-setting, education, research, operational improvements, and broad community engagement.

Most surveyed institutions have already established clear net-zero targets, and they are advancing a range of initiatives aimed at translating these commitments into tangible progress.

Table 2. Key Initiatives for Net-Zero and Resilient Institutions

Key Area	Key Initiatives
Target Setting & Accountability	• Set clear and measurable net-zero targets • Conduct annual reporting, ensuring transparency and accountability
Climate Risk Assessment	• Conduct climate vulnerability and risk assessments for campuses and operations
Sustainable Operations & Infrastructure	• Increase uptake of renewable energy and implement energy efficiency upgrades • Promote green transport incentives • Shift to sustainable procurement • Advance waste reduction and circular economy practices • Leverage sustainable finance to fund decarbonisation plans
Research & Innovation	• Conduct applied research on technology efficacy, climate solutions, and resilience
Community Engagement	• Engage students, staff, and local communities in climate action

Initiative Highlights

A Comprehensive, Campus-Wide Pathway to Carbon Neutrality
ESADE

Esade has adopted a campus-wide decarbonisation strategy that combines emissions reduction with targeted offset projects. The institution has installed solar panels across its campuses, switched to green electricity, upgraded HVAC and lighting systems, and introduced waste- and consumption-reduction campaigns. It is also reducing mobility-related emissions through initiatives such as EV charging points. For remaining emissions, Esade invests in certified reforestation and forest-conservation projects in Spain and Brazil. These actions have enabled the institution to achieve both scope 1 and 2 carbon neutrality and a reduction in emissions by 84% compared to 2019.

Decarbonisation Through Energy Efficiency, Electrification, and Renewable Energy
RMIT University

RMIT's Decarbonisation Strategy relies on eliminating emissions at the source before using offsets. Practical actions include upgrading building design for energy efficiency through replacing boilers and chillers, installing over 40,000 LED fittings, improving water systems, adding rainwater harvesting infrastructure, and optimising building management systems to cut energy waste. Rooftop solar now powers multiple campus buildings and the university is rapidly phasing out natural gas by converting major facilities and mandating all-electric systems in new developments. Transport-related emissions are addressed through incentives for low-emission commuting, expansion of cycling and pedestrian-friendly zones, EV charging partnerships, and full offsetting of domestic and international travel.

Campus-Wide Transformation Towards a Botanical Garden Net-Zero Model
The Asian Institute of Technology

The Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) is undertaking a comprehensive transition towards a "Botanical Garden Net Zero Campus" by 2030, combining renewable energy expansion, efficiency upgrades, and nature-based solutions. Its climate action plan includes a 1.5 MW rooftop solar project coming online in 2024, a proposed 1.5 MW floating solar system, and future battery storage to enable a fully renewable electricity supply. AIT is simultaneously improving chiller plant efficiency, converting campus lighting to LEDs, and redesigning waste systems to minimise landfill disposal. The campus is being reshaped through expanded green spaces, enhanced forest management, and exploration of biochar production to support carbon sequestration. These operational measures are reinforced by policies promoting low-carbon travel, sustainable procurement, and reduced resource use.

Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging

Representatives highlighted that meaningful inclusion requires both policy-level commitments and everyday practices that ensure representation, equity, and a sense of belonging across diverse student and staff communities. Advances in technology have further expanded opportunities for accessibility and participation, enabling more inclusive learning and campus environments. Within this area, Disability Inclusion & Universal Design emerged as a key sub-priority. Institutions are increasingly recognising the need to embed inclusivity by design—across physical spaces, digital platforms, curriculum development, and campus services—to ensure that all members of the community can participate fully and equitably.

Table 3. Key Initiatives for Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging

Key Area	Key Initiatives
Institution Policies & Governance	• Embed equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in governance, teaching, and research • Evaluate policies, practices, and structures through an equity lens • Ensure diverse representation in faculty and leadership
Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy	• Include diverse cultural perspectives and case studies of marginalised communities into curriculum • Adopt inclusive teaching practices and accessibility support programmes • Promote international and intercultural collaboration across institutions
Student Engagement & Representation	• Increase enrollment and retention among diverse and economically disadvantaged students • Host cross-cultural dialogues and activities
Community & Partnerships	• Partner with local communities, especially underserved or rural areas, to co-create culturally relevant learning and innovation
Disability Inclusion & Universal Design	• Integrate Universal Design principle into space design, technology, communication, and learning environments • Conduct a comprehensive accessibility assessment • Co-design with persons with disabilities • Develop accessible educational resources and use technology to improve accessibility • Provide training for staff on disability rights and accessibility

Initiative Highlights

Enhancing Accessibility Through VR and Co-Created Digital Learning
University of Birmingham

University of Birmingham supports disability inclusion and universal design by offering flexible, accessible learning through virtual fieldwork and immersive digital tools, allowing students who cannot participate physically to engage with core learning activities. Through its cross-disciplinary BhamXR network and other inclusive-education initiatives, the university integrates virtual reality, interactive digital platforms, and co-created content to make academic experiences more equitable and accessible.

Equity Through Inclusive Practice
Western Sydney University

Western Sydney University advances disability inclusion through a strong institution framework that includes its Disability Policy, Respect and Inclusion in Learning and Working Policy, and a dedicated Equity, Inclusion and Belonging unit. These structures support equitable participation through reasonable adjustments, accessible environments, and clear expectations for a respectful, non-discriminatory campus culture. WSU also guides inclusive language use, which promotes person-first language and respectful terminology to help normalise inclusion across daily communication.

Table 4. Key Initiatives for the Emerging Sustainability Goals and Sub-goals

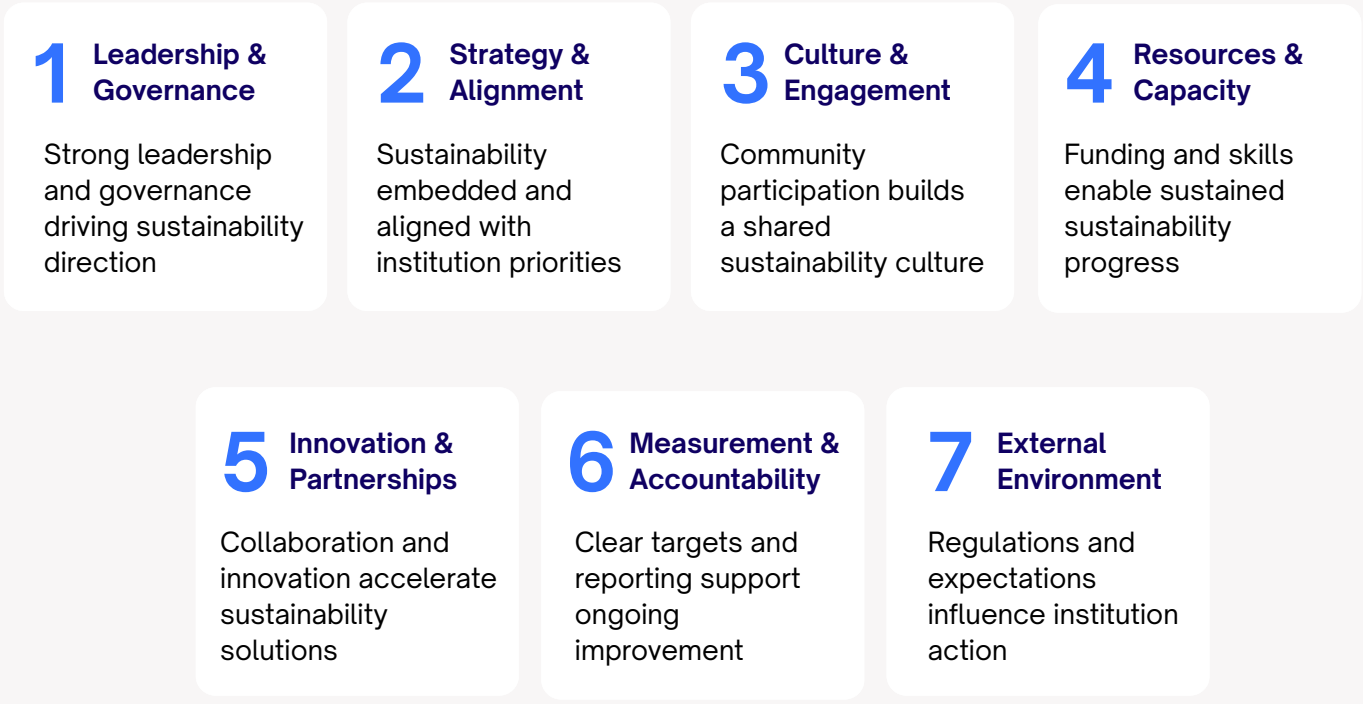
Priorities	Key Initiatives
New Goal: **Equitable & Sustainable Access to Emerging Technologies**	• Ensure equitable access to technology • Provide inclusive digital education and training • Educate on sustainable and ethical uses of AI and emerging technologies • Conduct research on affordable technologies and engage in technology transfer initiatives • Collaborate with the government for affordable technology
Social Inclusion & Cultural Bridging Sub-Goal: **Indigenous Rights**	• Formally recognise Indigenous rights in policy, governance, and institution frameworks • Integrate the Indigenous knowledge in curriculum • Strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities through collaborative research and leadership support • Honour indigenous heritage
New SDG5 (Gender Equality) Sub-Goal: **Gender Diversity Rights and Representation**	• Implement internal policies supporting LGBTQI+ rights • Ensure equal access, safety, and participation for all gender identities • Provide equality and diversity training for faculty, staff, and students • Support student and staff networks representing LGBTQI+ groups
New SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities) Sub-Goal: **Equity and Environmental Justice**	• Embed environmental justice in relevant programmes • Conduct research on intersecting environmental and social inequalities • Provide evidence-based policy advice on equitable climate adaptation
New SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) Sub-Goal: **Sustainable Urban Mobility**	• Research urban mobility issues and seek solutions • Pilot active mobility solutions on campus • Co-create mobility strategies with local governments • Implement incentives for sustainable transport • Improve campus infrastructure such as EV charging station and bike-sharing systems
New SDG17 (Partnership for the Goals) Sub-Goal: **Sustainable Funding & Partnerships**	• Diversify funding models (national, private, alumni etc) • Provide small internal funds for staff and student-led projects • Build partnerships with cities, NGOs, business, and government • Co-design sustainability projects with external stakeholders • Avoiding duplication and encouraging shared learning for cost efficiency

Key Drivers for Higher Education Sustainability Performance

Institution representatives identified seven concrete drivers that have the strongest influence on sustainability progress within higher education institutions.

The following sections summarise each of these seven drivers. Together, they offer a clear view of the organisational conditions and external factors that shape how effectively institutions advance their sustainability goals.

Figure 5. Seven Key Drivers for Higher Education Sustainability Performance



Leadership & Governance

Institution representatives expressed that leadership commitment remains the strongest determinant of institution sustainability progress. Leaders who are able to articulate a clear vision for institution sustainability, while supported by long-term priorities and resources, will be able to create the conditions for sustained action across the institution. Institution representatives repeatedly noted that without explicit endorsement from top leadership, sustainability efforts tend to remain fragmented, short-term, or overly dependent on individual champions rather than institution mandate.

Beyond leadership and vision-setting, representatives also highlighted the importance of governance systems that provide coherence, accountability, and continuity. Institutions with dedicated teams and actors for sustainability, such as sustainability offices, cross-functional committees, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, demonstrate greater organisational maturity in this area. These

structures enable systematic decision-making, create formal channels for coordination, and ensure sustainability is not sidelined by competing institution priorities.

Strategy & Alignment

Institution representatives stressed that the strategic integration of sustainability across teaching, research, and operations is essential to move beyond isolated projects. Effective strategies articulate how sustainability principles underpin curriculum reform, research priorities, campus operations, and community engagement. Institution representatives noted that such integration helps shift sustainability from an "add-on" initiative to an inherent organising principle of institution development.

The data suggests that alignment with institution plans, resource allocation models, and internal funding mechanisms is an important enabler. When sustainability goals are embedded in strategic plans, annual budgets, and performance indicators, they gain legitimacy and are more likely to receive sustained investment. This strategic alignment ensures that sustainability commitments are reinforced through institution processes rather than relying on ad-hoc or project-driven funding.

Culture & Engagement

Institution representatives emphasised that embedding sustainability in institution culture is both a long-term process and a precondition for durable progress. Institutions with a strong culture of sustainability often benefit from shared values, visible role-modelling, and an environment where sustainability considerations are normalised across daily operations and decision-making. Representatives noted that cultural alignment is particularly crucial in decentralised institutions where influence is distributed.

Active engagement from students and staff emerged as a repeated theme. Institution representatives described participation as a multiplier of institution commitment, enabling broader innovation and accelerating uptake of initiatives. Several representatives highlighted that mandatory sustainability literacy through initiatives such as induction programmes, professional development, or curriculum requirements, may be necessary to ensure the entire university community possesses foundational understanding and can contribute meaningfully to the agenda.

Resources & Capacity

Adequate funding, staffing, and infrastructure were also identified as foundational drivers of sustainability execution. Institutions with access to dedicated sustainability budgets, seed funding for pilot projects, or specialised operational teams are better positioned to demonstrate early wins and scale successful interventions. According to data, the absence of such resources often leads to delays, limited experimentation, and uneven implementation across different parts of the institution.

Capacity extends beyond financial means to include skills, agility, and organisational responsiveness. Institution representatives noted the value of teams with specialised expertise in sustainability, data analytics, environmental management, and change leadership. Adapting processes, policies, and structures quickly in response to emerging needs or external pressures was identified as an important indicator. Without this, sustainability efforts risk stagnation when institution systems or traditional workflows become bottlenecks.

Innovation & Partnerships

Institution representatives widely viewed innovation as an essential driver of sustainability, particularly in addressing complex environmental and societal challenges. Representatives pointed to the importance of cross-disciplinary research

and collaboration that brings together expertise from various fields to generate new knowledge, technologies, and models. The data shows that such approaches enable institutions to respond more effectively to real-world needs and to develop solutions that can be scaled and adapted across contexts.

External partnerships were highlighted as equally important to expand institution capacity and create opportunities for co-designed initiatives. Representatives underscored the value of collaboration with industry, government agencies, civil society, and international networks. These partnerships support knowledge exchange, resource-sharing, and comparative learning, enabling institutions to benchmark their progress and mobilise broader ecosystems around shared sustainability goals.

Measurement & Accountability

Institution representatives identified effective measurement as a central requirement for credibility and continuous improvement. Transparent reporting mechanisms, such as regular sustainability reports, dashboards, and accessible datasets, were seen as essential to demonstrating progress and reinforcing trust among internal and external stakeholders. Representatives emphasised the importance of evidence-based decision-making supported by clear, reliable data.

Monitoring frameworks and explicit targets were also deemed crucial. Institution representatives argued that higher education institutions need defined benchmarks—whether aligned to international frameworks, national standards, or internally developed indicators—to guide implementation and assess performance. They underscored that accountability mechanisms, including structured feedback loops and periodic reviews, help institutions identify gaps, refine strategies, and maintain momentum over time.

External Environment

Finally, Institution representatives indicated that external forces are increasingly shaping institution sustainability priorities. Regulations, policy frameworks, and accreditation requirements were described as strong motivators that can catalyse action, particularly in contexts where internal momentum may be uneven. Institution representatives noted that compliance-oriented pressures often serve as the initial trigger for coordinated institution responses.

Beyond regulatory factors, representatives also emphasised expectations from ranking bodies, funding agencies, and employers as influential drivers. Higher education institutions recognise that sustainability performance affects reputation, competitiveness, and graduate outcomes. The data suggests that these external expectations create an environment where sustainability is not merely a moral or social imperative but a strategic necessity, reinforcing internal efforts and accelerating adoption.

How Key Drivers Differ by Institution Maturity

In institutions where sustainability is not yet deeply embedded, early efforts often rely on drivers originating outside the institution. At this stage, regulatory requirements, accreditation standards, rankings, and expectations from funders or employers can play a significant role in prompting action. These external pressures are typically reinforced by measurement and accountability demands such as transparent reporting, baseline assessments, and monitoring frameworks. When sustainability is still emerging as an internal concept or priority, these drivers can help initiate formal structures and guide early direction.

As sustainability becomes more embedded within an institution, the drivers tend to shift from external compliance to internal alignment, integration, and cultural adoption. Medium-maturity institutions may increasingly prioritise embedding sustainability across teaching, research, operations, and partnerships, supported by shared frameworks and cross-disciplinary collaboration. In more mature contexts where sustainability is part of organisational culture, drivers may shift again—towards institution-wide engagement, long-term strategic refinement, and leadership in innovation. At this stage, sustainability becomes a more natural lens for decision-making and collaboration.

As sustainability becomes more conceptually and culturally embedded, the types of drivers influencing institution action tend to evolve. Early-stage institutions may be guided more by external expectations and reporting requirements, while institutions with stronger sustainability cultures may draw more heavily on internal ambition, strategic coherence, and innovation-oriented drivers.

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