



**HESI** Higher Education Sustainability Initiative

**1**  
EMBODIED  
UNDERSTANDING

**2**  
COMMUNITY,  
CONNECTION, &  
COLLABORATION

**3**  
CULTURAL  
TRANSFORMATION

**4**  
CURRICULUM &  
PEDAGOGY

**5**  
YOUTH  
LEADERSHIP

**6**  
STRUCTURAL  
CHANGES

**7**  
POLITICAL &  
SYSTEMIC  
LITERACY

**8**  
INTERPERSONAL  
&  
INTRAPERSONAL  
SKILLS

**9**  
DIVERSE  
KNOWLEDGE &  
CREATIVITY

# 9 HARMONISING PRINCIPLES *for*

## GREENING HIGHER EDUCATION

Report by HESI Student Action Group:

Student/Youth Networks of:



STUDENTS  
ORGANISING FOR  
SUSTAINABILITY  
INTERNATIONAL



an initiative of the  
United Nations Global Compact



ALL-AFRICA STUDENTS UNION  
UNION PANAFRICAINNE DES ETUDIANTS  
UNIÃO DOS ESTUDANTES DE TODA A ÁFRICA  
اتحاد طلاب عموم إفريقيا



STUDENTS  
ORGANISING FOR  
SUSTAINABILITY  
UNITED KINGDOM



EUROPEAN  
STUDENTS  
UNION

With the support of the HESI Co-Chairs: Sulitest, UNESCO IESALC, UNU & UNDESA

# BACKGROUND & CONTEXT



**HESI** Higher Education Sustainability Initiative  
STUDENT ACTION GROUP



## From Frameworks to Practice:

Unlocking the Potential of Sustainability Competencies in Higher Education



3

HOURS

7

FACILITATORS

11

SPEAKERS

120+

PARTICIPANTS

14

TABLES

5

FRAMEWORKS

## DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS



Local & International University Students



UNICEF Turkey Climate Ambassadors



International Higher Education Professionals

As the HESI Student Action Group, we were invited to host a three-hour workshop on harmonizing sustainability competency frameworks in higher education at the Global Sustainable Development Congress in Istanbul, Turkey, on June 16th, 2025. Rather than analyzing or critiquing existing models, the workshop aimed to create an experiential and collaborative space—embodying the very competencies a sustainable education system should foster.

Backed by the HESI Co-Chairs and Times Higher Education, we designed a bold, student-led space that flipped the traditional script—prioritizing co-creation over instruction, dialogue over delivery, and shared leadership over hierarchy.

This report captures the insights and outcomes of that session—highlighting the lived experiences, emergent ideas, and co-created pathways that can support higher education institutions and networks in meaningfully embedding sustainability competencies on a global scale.



## ROADBLOCKS TO CHANGE

### Lost in Translation

Sustainability frameworks are often too complex, too long, or simply not known—resulting in poor understanding and implementation across institutions.

### Framework Overload

Too many overlapping frameworks, not enough clarity on how or why to use them, leaving institutions directionless and disengaged.

### Students Still Unheard

Despite being key actors, students are rarely represented in decisions—leading to irrelevant curricula and top-down approaches.

### No Time, No Tools

Educators lack training, time, and institutional support—while stakeholders question the value, delaying commitment and action.

### Systemic Resistance

Rigid academic structures, political inertia, and economic priorities often conflict with sustainable mindsets and long-term thinking.

### Mindset Mismatch

Short-term visions, scarcity mentality, and competition overshadow collaboration, creativity, and care—the very competencies we seek to promote.

## SEEDS FOR CHANGE

### Co-Creation as Culture

Empower students and staff to design learning pathways—through dialogue, participatory design, and lived experiences.

### From Frameworks to Playgrounds

Transform tools into games, experiments, and real-world cases—turning theory into something tangible, and fun.

### Competencies Beyond the Classroom

Recognize and assess sustainability learning where it really happens: in communities, projects, emotions, and everyday action.

### Make Sustainability Unignorable

Integrate sustainability into course evaluations, institutional visioning, public awards, and cross-sector partnerships—from bottom to top.

## VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS

**"We need think about beyond ESG pillars only,**

*culture is very important as a curiosity"*

**"Stop using vague definitions."**

**"Incorporating nature into education and culture is incredibly important."**

**"Importance of translation of global frameworks to local context"**

*"Trust Youth!"*

**"It's all about people at the end of the day. Ubuntu mentality -**

**"Communication between schools and the real life matters"**

*I am because we are."*

**"Youth global communication"**

**"Political literacy**

*if we don't understand the system we cannot change it."*

**"Alternative history and economics theories."**

**"Sustainability cannot be thought alone without organizational change"**

**"Need for more international discussions and bridges"**

*"Being in a community is critical"*

*where do we go from here?"*



# 9 HARMONISING PRINCIPLES



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As we work toward greening higher education, these principles emerged as shared goals across sectors, disciplines, and generations. They reflect the deep alignment on what truly matters—not just what we do, but how we do it—as we transform education for a more just, sustainable, and connected world:

## 1 EMBODIED UNDERSTANDING

True learning goes beyond knowing—it's about wrestling with complexity, rethinking what we thought we knew, and turning frameworks into living tools. People are hungry for meaning, not just models.

## 2 COMMUNITY, CONNECTION, & COLLABORATION

Change is not a solo act. Collaboration across roles, disciplines, and cultures isn't a bonus—it's the engine. Learning happens in relationships, and action scales through networks.

## 3 CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Sustainability isn't just technical—it's cultural. It's about shifting values, mindsets, and collective ways of being. Education must awaken a deeper connection to nature, community, and purpose.

## 4 CURRICULUM & PEDAGOGY

Embedding competencies means reimagining what and how we teach. It's about bringing sustainability into every classroom, assessment, and course—not as content, but as context and purpose.

## 5 YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Students aren't just the future—they're the force. Youth-led initiatives, trainings, and communities are already shaping the transformation. The system should follow, not block their lead.

## 6 STRUCTURAL CHANGES

We can't just tweak things—we need to rebuild. Real change means rethinking power, roles, and incentives within academia. It's time to challenge the system from within.

## 7 POLITICAL & SYSTEMIC LITERACY

If we don't understand systems, we can't change them. From local governance to global capitalism, sustainability demands political awareness, civic courage, and structural critique.

## 8 INTERPERSONAL & INTRAPERSONAL SKILLS

Transformation starts within. Self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to co-create and inspire—not control—are core to leading change in complex systems.

## 9 DIVERSE KNOWLEDGE & CREATIVITY

Innovation comes from mixing perspectives. From data literacy to cultural storytelling, and science to speculative ideas—there's no one path. Creativity and diversity are the real edge.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

### Support Student-Led Movements

Fund, mentor, and amplify grassroots student organizations working on sustainability and systems change.

### Create Spaces for Collaboration

Support multi-stakeholder formats—such as workshops, co-design labs, and assemblies—that invite collaboration.

### Use 9 Principles as Anchors for Practice

Treat the principles as “learning lenses” to guide curriculum design, institutional planning, development, and collaborations.

### Integrate Practice-based Learning

Ground education in real-world complexity through partnerships, projects, and lived case studies aligned with the principles.

# ACT NOW!

## FURTHER GOALS FOR HESI STUDENT ACTION GROUP

### MAP CASE STUDIES ACROSS NETWORKS

Collect and curate concrete examples where the 9 principles are already alive—in classrooms, institutions, and grassroots initiatives.

### 9 PRINCIPLES SUCCESS INDICATORS

Create flexible and meaningful indicators for each principle, inspired by the SDG model, to track progress and inspire alignment.

### PRESENT & ADVOCATE IN GLOBAL FORUMS

Showcase the principles and real-world examples at major education and sustainability gatherings, amplifying student voices and system-change approaches.

### EXPLORE A UNIFIED ‘SUPER-FRAMEWORK’

Begin structured conversations around creating a future-oriented, post-2030 framework grounded in the 9 principles.

### Facilitator Organizations & Representatives:

#### HESI-SAG (Higher Education Sustainability Initiative: Student Action Group)

- Lisa Schivalocchi (European Students’ Union)
- Hülya Afat (oikos Consulting)
- Patricija Zizyte (oikos International)
- Iman Cumberbatch (PSEG Institute for Sustainability Studies & NYU)
- Belinda Mensah (All-Africa Students Union)
- Benedicta Neysa Nathania (UNESCO GEP - Learning Planet Alliance)
- Darren Axe (SOS-International)

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