



## **Joint Statement from Higher Education Institutions 2024 Leaders in Higher Education Alliance and Programme – For Accelerating Sustainability Transformations (LEAP-FAST)**

*Delivered at the official side event of the 2024 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*

1. We, the institutions engaged through the initiative entitled UNITAR-UNESCO's "Leaders in Higher Education Alliance and Programme – For Accelerating Sustainability Transformations (LEAP-FAST)" - are committed to supporting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the realization of the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the remaining years until 2030. We are committed to the recommendations of the Transforming Education Summit 2022. We look forward to contributing to the upcoming Summit of the Future and to the Social Summit 2025.
2. We meet as UN member States negotiate the Pact for the Future with the Declaration on Future Generations Today, only 17% of SDG targets are on track to be achieved. Nearly half show minimal or moderate progress. We are determined to support the acceleration of the SDGs against the backdrop of violence and conflicts, the continuing climate crisis, and growing inequalities. We highlight the unique role of higher education in achieving sustainable development.
3. Higher Education Institutions are living laboratories for the future of society. They inform policies through research. They create community partnerships to enable inclusion and representation. They educate and prepare future leaders to champion equality and sustainability, and cooperate across borders to build peace and solidarity. In times of growing uncertainty, global instability and conflict, Higher Education Institutions are safe spaces of respectful exchange and soft multilateralism.
4. This Dialogue aims to reimagine leadership for sustainable development. It seeks to reframe higher education to encompass and support progress towards the SDGs.
5. Higher Education Institutions play a pivotal role in societal and cultural transformations. They contribute to responsible prosperity by producing skilled and globally aware graduates, fostering innovation, equitable relations, promoting lifelong learning opportunities, and conducting research directly to serve the public good. By equipping individuals with knowledge, competencies and skills, Higher Education Institutions contribute to reduced inequalities, gender equality and enhance sustainable lifestyles.
6. Higher Education Institutions foster critical thinking, tolerance, and openness to diverse perspectives. They equip people to take responsible actions inspired by respect for cultural diversity and by the vision of the 2030 Agenda. Higher Education Institutions instill the values of peace, dialogue and international cooperation in students. They build ethics, and social awareness in students. They promote human rights and democratic, peaceful and inclusive societies. They foster informed global citizenship and encourage active participation in societal issues. They have the power to foster trust across countries and people.
7. Higher Education Institutions are well placed to address the global challenges of sustainable development, such as climate crisis, green futures, poverty, gender equality and social cohesion. But they

need to play a larger role in working with governments, the private sector, and civil society to transform policy and serve communities.

8. Today Higher Education Institutions face numerous challenges and threats. Persistent inequities in access to higher education need to be addressed seriously to provide for inclusive transformation pathways towards sustainability. This will challenge the harmful exclusion of communities from civic participation. The value and contributions of Indigenous knowledges in societal transformation needs greater recognition. Higher Education Institutions should become open institutions, fostering epistemic dialogue and integrating diverse ways of knowing. Higher Education Institutions must actively address inequalities related to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other factors.
9. Higher Education Institutions should overcome disciplinary silos. They should foster transdisciplinary collaboration to enable students to deal with complexity of real-world issues, and conduct research that informs policies in a holistic manner. They can design locally contextualised actions that promote critical thinking and place-based solutions that are responsiveness to community priorities. They can nurture educational approaches that value relationships, empathy and compassion. They can help to move beyond hyper-individualism in return to knowledge for the public good.
10. This requires a shift towards cooperation instead of competition, generating greater transdisciplinary innovation. We should move beyond current approaches in funding and performance assessment to reflect the broader societal impact of research and educational programs and promote a culture of lifelong learning for all. In short, Higher Education Institutions should embed sustainability throughout the DNA of the institution, in a whole-institution approach.
11. Communicating the relevance and sharing the values of higher education for a more sustainable future is essential. Higher Education Institutions must be active partners in addressing inequality and poverty, by enabling and supporting participation of students from all backgrounds. They must demonstrate their positive impact on our planet, recognising the inter-connections and relations between humans and nature. Higher Education Institutions must lead in addressing disruptions brought about by artificial intelligence, harnessing its benefits while mitigating its dangers. They must continuously strive to improve the quality of education as committed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
12. Rising tuition costs, mounting student debt, and alternative career pathways contribute to declining trust in higher education in some countries, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
13. Higher Education Institutions also face financial pressures due to budget constraints and unpredictable revenue streams. New educational models have challenged the traditional university experience. Students seek quicker, more practically oriented, and more affordable paths to career readiness. There is a need for greater collaboration along the continuum of education, from primary through tertiary institutions, and between Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education Institutions. A stronger collaboration between Higher Education Institutions and other sectors is essential to bridge the skills gap, enhance the quality of education, increase employment opportunities for graduates, and ensure that academic curricula align with industry needs when it comes to pioneering the transformation of industry for a sustainable world. Likewise, all sectors, including Higher Education Institutions, need to accommodate their capacities to enhance continuous learning and to work towards societal impacts.
14. In navigating these challenges, Higher Education Institutions must adapt, innovate, and prioritize diverse student participation while maintaining their core mission of education and research. They should recognize the role of students in transformations and co-creation of the curriculum as part of an ongoing commitment to building equitable and inclusive institutions and societies and to establishing participative governance structures for all its members. They should enable students and staff to put sustainability competencies into practice in everyday life.
15. Higher Education Institutions need enabling environments and incentives to realize their potential in whole-of-society transformations. They should advocate for their role in society, including through active engagements with the private sector, media engagement, and restoring trust in science and institutions fundamental to democracy.
16. Higher Education Institutions have been proactive in promoting transformative practices and seizing new opportunities. Many Higher Education Institutions are preparing students for the future of work and stewardship of the planet. They have initiated community-led research and have expanded student

placement programs promoting reciprocal community engaged learning. They are collaborating with the students and communities they serve in the development of curriculum to address community needs and to leverage community knowledge. There are multiple examples where Higher Education Institutions help transform businesses by partnering with them on more equitable approaches to student enrolment and job placements, the development of curriculum and availability of free online learning.

17. Higher Education Institutions are exploring emerging technologies such as virtual reality and AI. These tools enhance teaching, research, and administrative processes. Beyond merely combining virtual and physical classrooms, hybrid learning allows for immersive experiences. Students can apply classroom concepts in real-world scenarios, expanding their understanding.
18. Many Higher Education Institutions have started their renewable energy transitions to achieve zero carbon targets. Their campuses strive for a positive environmental footprint by implementing green construction, energy-efficient buildings, and sustainable procurement practices. Higher Education Institutions therefore play a vital role in promoting sustainability by focusing on sustainable campus operations, including energy-efficient buildings, zero waste, and eco-friendly transport systems. They prioritize digital transformation and technological innovations to enhance sustainability practices within their institutions.
19. Sustainable Higher Education Institutions also integrate environmentally friendly practices into various aspects of their programs. They encourage students, staff, faculty, and visitors to consider and reduce their impact on the world. They educate global citizens about sustainability, emphasizing its importance to the future of society. They prepare students to address urgent societal challenges through regenerative practices for the wellbeing of our planet and societies.
20. Higher Education Institutions need to provide experiential learning opportunities and to conduct insightful research on pressing sustainability issues. Their findings contribute to solutions for environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being. Higher Education Institutions are also committed to building gender equality by breaking down structural barriers that have historically prevented full participation in higher education and by contributing to cultural change to challenge gender injustice, stigmatization and gender-based violence.
21. Higher Education Institutions empower students, staff, and the communities they serve to act sustainably and with shared purpose towards our collective sustainability, flourishing and well-being. They collaborate with external groups to support sustainable development in their communities and beyond, including through key partnerships with industry, civil society and with governments.
22. Higher Education Institutions and Governments should work together to fully harness the potential of higher education for the acceleration of the SDGs. Mission-driven research is a critical element of global research and innovation ecosystems. It has the potential to lift our international efforts, revitalize national research programs through the facilitation of global connections, and bring the full benefit of research to all citizens through a more inclusive approach to international cooperation and collaboration. Higher education, in order to realize its full capacity to contribute meaningfully to equality and sustainability, must reclaim its purpose as contributing to the wider social and planetary good.
23. Governments have much to gain from fully harnessing the power of higher education to achieve all dimensions of the 2030 agenda. Legal frameworks and funding models should reflect that capacity within and between countries empowering higher education to play their role. Governments should engage Higher Education Institutions at all stages of the policy-making process. They should facilitate transnational partnerships, foster academic mobility, and recognize Indigenous and community-based knowledge systems. Governments should review the purpose of education to incorporate sustainability.
24. Working in step with each other, governments and Higher Education Institutions can continue to focus on widening participation with a principled approach to equity policy, based on long-term, genuine commitment in partnership with communities. Proven programs such as open access and enabling pathways must be protected and strengthened. First Nation and Indigenous leadership must be supported and enhanced at all levels in higher education. Higher Education Institutions play a vital role in advancing international cooperation, thought leadership to solve wicked problems, and knowledge-sharing by actively participating in international research networks, joint projects, and collaborative initiatives.

25. These global partnerships enhance cross-border knowledge mobilization while acknowledging the importance of contextualizing approaches and incorporating local knowledge creation. Emphasis should be given to Low, Lower-Middle income countries and small island developing States facilitated through funding support. Governments and Higher Education Institutions can work together to encourage academic and student mobility across borders because exchange programs allow exposure to diverse perspectives, fostering thought leadership and cross-cultural understanding. Higher Education Institutions should promote open access to research publications, data, and educational resources. Sharing knowledge freely contributes to global thought leadership and collaboration and aligns with UNESCO's recommendation on Open Science ensuring research is accessible, inclusive and transparent, and that furthers the right of everyone to share in its advancement and its benefits.
26. Finally, international and regional organizations play a pivotal role in supporting Higher Education Institutions to achieve sustainability goals. Through collaboration, funding, knowledge sharing, and capacity building, these organizations help Higher Education Institutions drive innovation, build equality and inclusion, foster environmental stewardship, and educate future leaders for a sustainable world. It is imperative for these organizations to continue and expand their support for academic institutions in sustainability initiatives.

#### **Reference documents:**

- United Nations (2015). Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- United Nations (2022). Transforming Education Vision Statement.
- UNESCO (2021). ESD for 2030 Roadmap
- UNESCO (2021). Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education
- UNESCO (2022). Knowledge-driven actions: transforming higher education for global sustainability.
- UNESCO (2023). Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development.
- UNESCO (2023). Recommendation on Open Science
- UNESCO (2022). Beyond limits: New pathways to reinvent higher education

#### **Higher Education Institutions participating in the LEAP-FAST initiative:**

1. Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)
2. Bacesehir University (BAU)
3. Chaminade University of Honolulu
4. Costa Rican Public University/Universidad Nacional
5. East China University for Political Science and Law
6. Kenyatta University (with UNESCO Chair Dorcas Beryl Otieno)
7. Majmaah University
8. Nanyang Technological University (NTU)
9. Shanghai Academy Social Sciences (SASS)
10. Qatar University
11. Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) de Dakar Sénégal
12. University of Mauritius
13. University of Newcastle
14. University of the Philippines
15. University of Victoria
16. University of West Indies
17. University College Dublin
18. York University
19. Nova School of Business & Economics (Nova SBE)