

## IMPACT STORY

### DRIVING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM WITHIN



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## Background

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in advancing sustainable development by shaping the knowledge, skills, and mindsets of present and future generations. Developed by UNITAR, UNESCO, and a collective of HEIs, the **Leaders in Higher Education Alliance and Programme - for Accelerating Sustainability Transformations (LEAP-FAST)** aimed to strengthen this role by fostering a global movement of sustainability leaders in higher education. The initiative comprises four components: a Leadership Dialogue, a Certificate Programme, an SDG Ambassadors' Programme, and Regional and National Spin-offs.

In 2025, two editions of the LEAP-FAST Certificate Programme were delivered, funded by and in partnership with Majmaah University. The first ran from 23 March to 31 May, the second from 14 September to 27 November. Together, they welcomed 113 participants from 32 institutions across more than 15 countries. Over the course of 10 weeks, academic directors, faculty members, and teaching staff learned how to embed sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) action at the heart of their work; in institutional practices, curricula and teaching methods across cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural domains.

The programme was designed as a blended learning journey, combining self-paced learning on UNITAR's Moodle platform, online workshops, and peer exchange. This all culminated in a five/six-day in-person workshop hosted by Majmaah University and CIFAL Saudi Arabia. At the close, 36 participants from the first edition, and 53 participants from the second edition, were awarded a certificate of completion for the programme.

This is the story of that learning journey, and of the people who are putting it into practice.



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**Jacobus Bracker**

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## Links with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



The programme primarily aligns to SDG 4 Quality Education, target 4.7.

## Links with UNITAR's Strategic Objectives (SO)

The programme most strongly aligns to SO 3 “Countries build robust learning ecosystems to meet their learning needs and foster lasting impact”.

## Programme Results

Participants were invited to share their insights and experiences at two points in time: immediately after completing the programme, and again through a follow-up survey and focus group discussion several months later.

The first survey results indicate high satisfaction levels. Across both editions, around 90 per cent of respondent found the content useful. Moreover, a large majority considered it relevant to their professional practice. The first cohort rated relevance slightly higher than the second, at 91 per cent versus 84 per cent. For 74 per cent the content was also new.

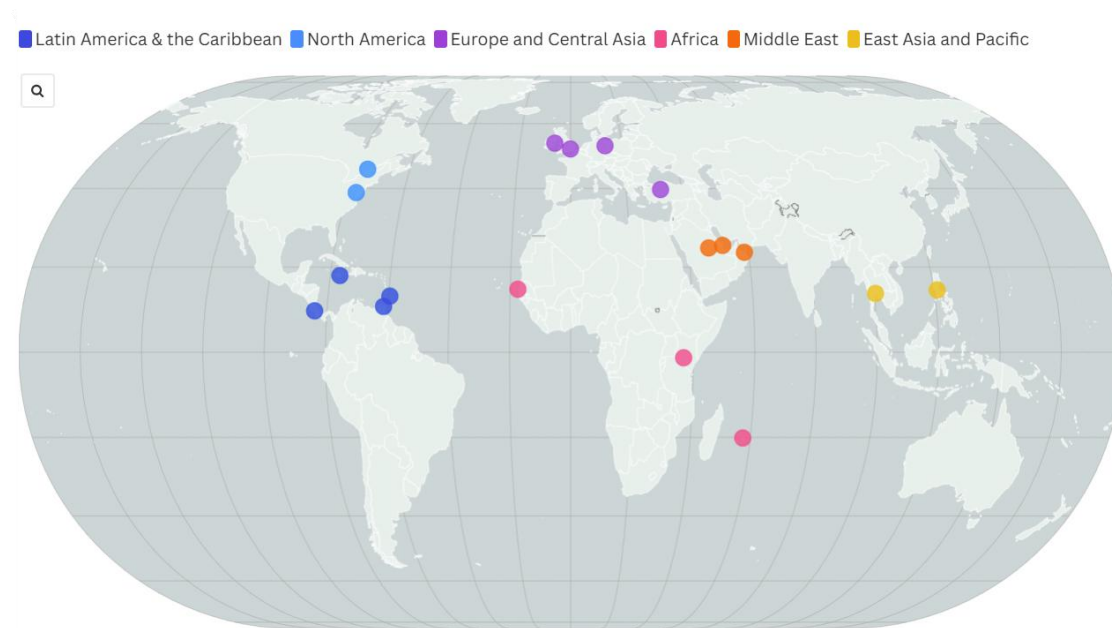
The second survey and focus group, conducted after participants had time to apply what they learned, offer more insight on the changes set in motion.

## Programme Reach

First and foremost, the profile of those driving the change is telling. LEAP-FAST reached participants across different levels of institutional influence: the largest share of respondents or 38 per cent describe themselves as contributors or advocates without formal authority, 25 per cent are primarily responsible for implementation at programme or unit level, 23 per cent influence strategic or policy decisions, and 13 per cent hold formal leadership authority with the power to approve or initiate institutional change. This diversity reflects the programme's goal to build a broad-based movement of sustainability leaders capable of influencing change from multiple entry points.

Geographically, the programme drew participants from more than 15 countries across 5 continents (See Figure 1). This reach was in part made possible by the programme's commitment to inclusive participation. In line with the eave No One Behind principle, travel costs were covered for participants from low and lower-middle income countries, Small Island Developing States, and those who would otherwise have been unable to participate.

Figure 1 – Geographic reach of the LEAP-FAST Programme



### Leadership and Professional Development

All respondents reported that the programme contributed to developing their leadership. Concretely, 40 per cent noted an increased leadership scope, 28 per cent took on more responsibilities, 21 per cent gained greater involvement in decision-making, and 10 per cent moved into a new role or position.

For one of the focus group participants, this represented a fundamental shift in how she approaches her work. What previously consisted of fragmented initiatives evolved into coherent institutional action led by her after the programme.

**“Before the programme, my work related to sustainability was more initiative based and focused on individual efforts. After the programme, my approach became more strategic and structured. I now focus on integrating sustainability as the [...] institution and [across] the whole curricula at my institution. [...] Overall, my role has evolved from building initiative to leading and living sustainability integration across multiple levels.”**

Moreover, all respondents find that at least one programme outcome continues to be relevant and useful to their ongoing professional or institutional practice. Among the outcomes that resonated most, practical tools, methods, and frameworks for sustainability transformation came out on top, cited by 78 per cent of respondents, followed by professional networks and partnerships at 63 per cent, a leadership mindset and strategic perspective at 54 per cent, and a shared institutional language around sustainability and the SDGs at 50 per cent.

### Workplace Application

More than 90 per cent of respondents have applied the knowledge and skills gained through LEAP-FAST in their workplace. Of these, 42 per cent directly attribute 51 to 75 per cent of that application to the programme, and 27 per cent attribute 76 to 100 per cent. Moreover, they are doing it consistently and with conviction: 38 per cent reported applying their learning frequently, 40 per cent often, and 22 per cent occasionally. A large majority, 86 per cent, rated the importance of that

application as very or fully important. Overall, confidence levels are high as 86 per cent reporting feeling fully or very confident in applying what they learned, though, men were more likely to describe themselves as fully confident than women.

Mr. Bracker remarks how being able to point to internationally recognised expertise has changed how his voice is received. The credential is both a marker of learning and tool for influence.



**“What I found very helpful is, in conversations with others who I am advising, that I could rely on this course and say, ‘look I did a certification course in an international community’, that is a convincing argument. So, the LEAP-FAST course was or has a quite an empowering angle [...].”**

### SDG Contribution and Institutional Impact

Equally striking, 76 per cent feel they have contributed to SDG-supporting changes within their institution or country, with 68 per cent describing these changes as significant or very significant. As presented in Figure 2, the most frequently reported changes are the revision of curriculum or course content to better integrate sustainability competencies, the introduction or strengthening of competency-based learning outcomes, and the adoption of more active, participatory, or experiential learning methods. Fittingly, Quality Education (SDG 4) is by far the SDG that respondents most frequently linked their contributions to, cited by 88 per cent of respondents (See Figure 3).

*Figure 2 - Introduced changes in relation to curriculum, learning methods, teaching practices, institutional processes etc.*

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Figure 3 - SDG contribution

SDG Contribution	Share of Respondents
SDG	
SDG 1. No poverty	29%
SDG 2. Zero hunger	29%
SDG 3. Good health and well-being	40%
SDG 4. Quality education	89%
SDG 5. Gender equality	26%
SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation	20%
SDG 7. Affordable and clean energy	29%
SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth	29%
SDG 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure	40%
SDG 10. Reduced inequalities	17%
SDG 11. Sustainable cities and communities	34%
SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production	37%
SDG 13. Climate action	51%
SDG 14. Life below water	11%
SDG 15. Life on land	17%
SDG 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions	23%
SDG 17. Partnerships for the goals	46%
Not sure	0%

While the available data does not allow for robust conclusions, the focus group discussion surfaced encouraging signals of a multiplication effect. Participants observed that the changes are reaching their universities' students and are being positively received, as evidenced by increased student engagement, stronger critical thinking, and a growing awareness of sustainability issues. Ms. Ülker shares:



“Actually, the feedback from students was very positive. They appreciated the practical and interactive nature of the learning experience. Many students expressed increased awareness of environment issues and a stronger sense of responsibility toward sustainable projects. They also valued the opportunity for them to participate in project and community-based activities. [...] Overall students reported that this experience helped them to develop their knowledge, their critical thinking, [...] problem solving skills [...]”

One student's words stayed with her:

*“We did not just get the information and just remember it. We applied what we learned, and we show our knowledge to the community.”*

Figure 2 further points to a ripple effect among peers: 46 per cent of respondents shared best practices with colleagues, 34 per cent passed on tools, approaches, or lessons from the programme, and 31 per cent supported colleagues in applying sustainability-related teaching or

curriculum approaches. This appears to support the assumption that individual learning journeys extend into institutional ones. Here, it is worth noting that many respondents were operating in already relatively enabling environments: 77 per cent reported that senior leadership was fully aware and actively supportive of their participation in LEAP-FAST, 16 per cent said leadership was aware but not actively supportive, and only 7 per cent reported limited awareness.

## Enablers and Barriers

Yet, support received from supervisors at work did not emerge as a primary enabler. When asked about what most enabled them to apply the acquired knowledge, skills and competencies, respondents above all pointed to opportunity (91 per cent), followed by the programme's training design and methodology (60 per cent) and confidence (56 per cent).

The importance of programme design and methodology is further reflected in the extent to which participants continue to build on the practical outputs developed during the programme, using them as roadmaps for implementation within their institutions. The individual action plan is most widely taken forward, cited by 69 per cent of respondents, followed by the capstone project at 59 per cent, and both the institutional strategy and group action plan at 44 per cent.

Mr. Dioum returned to the Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD) in Senegal with a clear plan. The theoretical had become practical and he was ready to build on his capstone project to make the case internally to the Academics Affairs Office. He explains:



**“After this programme, I have had so many discussions with my institution to see how it is possible to integrate the SDGs in our curriculum and course content [...] This programme gave us the possibility to integrate all the practical approaches [...]**

**I developed a capstone project, that I present next week [...]. I am invited to make a presentation on how to integrate sustainability competences in our course during the series “Coffee Talk on Pedagogy”, organized twice monthly by the Direction des Affaires Pédagogiques.”**

Across the Indian ocean, at the University of the Philippines, chancellor Murao deliberately embedded a carbon footprint reduction goal into the university's institutional strategy following the programme. She describes:



**“Because it is now intentionally part [...] of our strategic plan [...] people start to [...] talk about how we can save on energy, use of electricity, use of lights, use of air conditioning, [...] it is becoming part of our conversations already. [...] also because we have some policies on energy conservation. People are now more conscious of that policy and trying to really practice it.”**

At the same time, the survey points to persistent barriers. The most cited challenges are lack of funding, lack of time, and lack of established structures and policies, reported by 55, 31, and 22 per cent of respondents respectively. Interestingly, the latter weighed more heavily on respondents from the second edition, while those from the first edition more frequently reported resistance at senior leadership or governance level and resistance due to institutional culture, procedures, or competing priorities. However, it is important to keep these figures in perspective, as they were reported by only 11 and 13 per cent of first edition respondents. While broadly consistent with the earlier finding that most respondents enjoyed senior leadership support, it is also a reminder that enabling conditions and pockets of friction often co-exist.

These challenges resonated strongly among participants of the focus group, Mr. Bracker expressed:



**"[...] A lack of financial support is always a problem and [...] then of course professors or teachers asking what do I gain from changing my courses and my curriculum? You have to set incentives and all this costs a lot of money and that that is, especially in the current political situation, a problem."**

These barriers underscore that sustainable transformation also depends on enabling conditions that extend well beyond what a single programme can provide.



## Conclusion

Across two editions, 113 participants from 32 institutions in more than 15 countries completed a 10-week learning journey designed to strengthen their capacity to lead sustainability transformation in higher education. Survey and FGD results suggest that for many, this journey did not end with the certificate.

Most respondents regularly and confidently apply the knowledge, skills and competencies developed during the programme in their workplace. In doing so, the majority feel they have contributed to SDG-supporting changes within their institution or country. Most frequently through the revision of curricula, the introduction of competency-based learning outcomes, and the adoption of more participatory teaching methods. Moreover, there are early indications of a multiplication effect as these changes reach students, colleagues, and in some cases, institutional strategies.

When asked about what most enabled this application, respondents most frequently cited opportunity, confidence and the programme's training design and methodology. At the same time, the results highlight the limits of what a single programme can achieve. Persistent barriers include lack of funding, time, and structural support.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how LEAP-FAST is growing a movement of sustainability leaders embedded across institutions, roles, and regions. From revised curricula in Saudi Arabia to new strategic plans in the Philippines, from capstone projects in Senegal to empowered advisors in Germany.