The UNEP Sustainable University Framework

Defining a sustainable university and creating a global pathway to recognising and becoming one.

Contents

1. What is a sustainable university?

Higher education has always been at the frontier of new thinking and practice in the world, but with the environmental challenges growing ever steeper, the purpose of Universities needs to be re-imagined.

UNEP is inviting all Higher Education partners to become a sustainable university.

One which educates global citizens as to how they can play a role in supporting sustainable development in their lives, careers and wider life choices. Such an institution will also research and offer insight on how to overcome urgent societal challenges and role model possible solutions that can be taken forward by other actors in the world. It not only works to reduce the environmental, economic and social footprints of its operations, but it will seek to break new ground by putting back more into society and the environment more than it takes out as a carbon net-positive actor in its community. It does this through making sustainability a central priority, by both inspiring and empowering students, faculties and staff to act.

The value of sustainability university networks
Across the world, students, academics and university networks have pioneered programmes, tools and assessment systems to inspire, challenge and support universities to become test-beds and role-models of sustainability. Frameworks to self-assess and report sustainability performance are often the most valuable tools to both stretch high-achieving institutions and present entry points for institutions that are taking first steps toward sustainability.

Successful Frameworks include STARS - Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System produced by AASHE in North America, the Unit-Based Sustainability Assessment Tool run in Africa, the Assessment System for Sustainable Campus run by Hokkaido University for CAS-Net Japan and the Sustainability Leadership Scorecard led by EAUC in the UK and Ireland.

Other networks achieve similar framework results using different tools such as charters e.g. the Sustainable Campus Charter led by ISCN, national sustainability assessments such as ARIUSA for Latin American countries and signposting tools such as the Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) Global Portal run by the International Association of Universities.

For more national and international sustainability networks for you engage with, go to:

- The Global Alliance of University Sustainability Networks
  https://www.eauc.org.uk/global_alliance
- UN Higher Educations Sustainability Initiative -HESI
  https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi
- UNEP Youth and Education Alliance- YEA!
  https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/education-environment/what-we-do/youth-and-education-alliance

2. Why this framework?

Across the world many universities do not benefit from access to a local or national university sustainability network where best practice is shared and action plans are implemented per the national context. Nor for them is there a sustainability framework which reflects the social, cultural, economic and ecological circumstances of their region. It is with this in mind the UN Sustainable University Framework has been created.

Recognising the many different contexts and possibilities around the world, the UN Sustainable University Framework embraces the common elements of the existing Frameworks and assessment tools developed by existing university sustainability networks. The result is a universal stepped approach which any and every university can apply to its country context. Using the Framework enables the university to create its unique pathway to become sustainable.

The collective framework has been designed to align, aggregate and amplify the work of existing Higher Education sustainability tools with the aim of presenting an empowering, collaborative and global definition as to what is a sustainable university and a framework to become one. No doubt improvements can be made to this document, neither do we claim to have all the answers, but we hope this Framework will be a useful and constructive first step for institutions wanting to deliver on sustainability and are looking for handrails that can help them move forward. Good luck.

Vision
Higher Education shapes the leaders of tomorrow and unless the next generation have sustainability hardwired into their mindsets and skillsets, the transition to a sustainable world will become much harder. The vision for this Framework is that the world's students and universities, supported by existing and yet to be formed national and international sustainability networks, use frameworks such as this one to integrate sustainability and environmental best practices into their curricula, civics and across their campuses. As a result of this, we hope that not only will students passing through Higher Education make different decisions in their lives but that the profile of higher education as a key agent of sustainability change is recognised and raised.

Thanks & Credits

UNEP, its recently formed Youth and Education Alliance and the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative of UNEP is a member, recognise the significant value universities achieve when part of a sustainability network. UNEP supports the creation of more country and regional networks where best practice is shared and action plans are implemented per the national context. UNEP and the writer are deeply grateful to the existing networks and other organisations which have inspired this collective Framework and will continue to lead, collaborate and empower the advancement of global sustainable university sector.

The UNEP Framework has been directly influenced by amongst others: Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System – AASHE, North America; Unit-Based Sustainability Assessment Tool MESA, Africa; Assessment System for Sustainable Campus - Hokkaido University, Japan, Sustainability Leadership Scorecard – EAUC, UK and Ireland, Sustainable Campus Charter, ISCN, International, National Assessments of Sustainability in Latin American countries, ARIUSA, Latin America and The Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) global portal, International Association of Universities. Thank you to all for your inspiration.

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3. Introduction and how to use this Framework

Reflecting the holistic approach of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and most sustainability network accreditations, the framework takes a whole-institution approach to ensure that sustainability is integrated across all aspects of the organisation.

The UNEP Framework presents a university as comprising four Core Areas. These are: Teaching and Research, People and Society, Environment and Climate, Administration and Governance. This whole-institution Quadruple Bottom Line approach ensures that the sustainability potential of every part of a university is included in its sustainability planning and action.

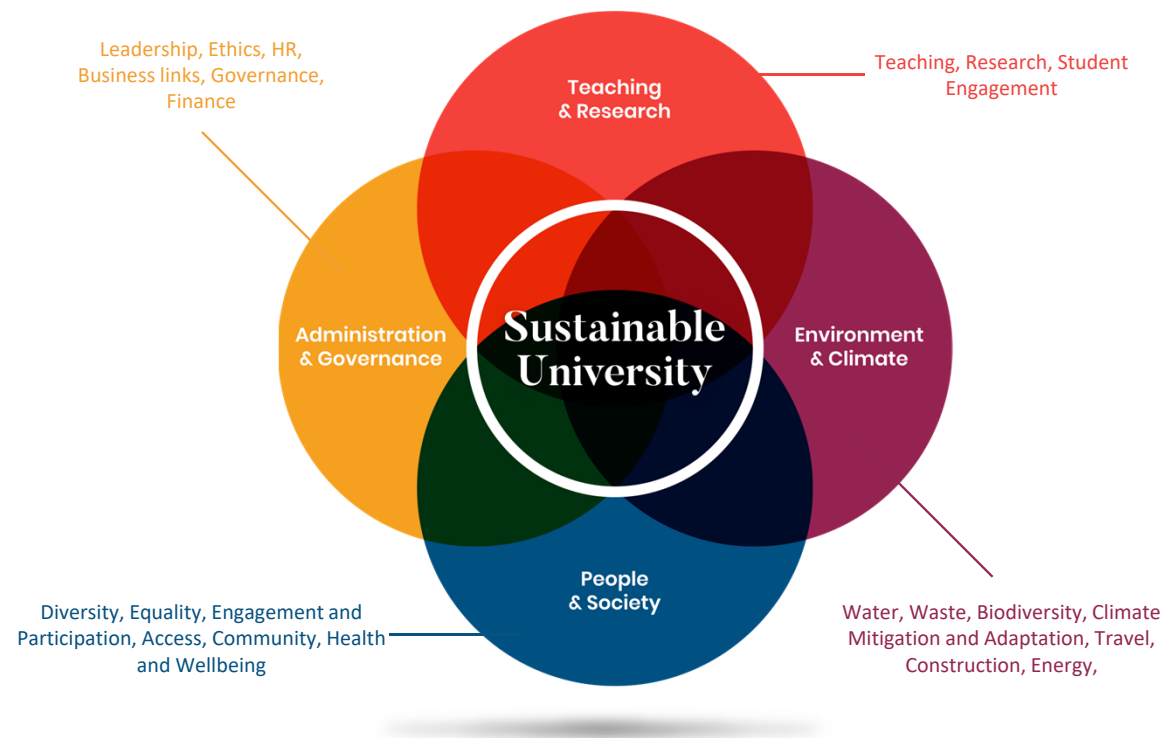| The Framework presents a university as comprising four Core Areas. These are:	
1. Environment & Climate	**3.** People & Society
2. Teaching & Research	**4.** Administration & Governance
These four Core Areas are used to establish a University Quadruple Bottom Line.	

4. University Four Core Areas

Each of the four Core Areas comprise a number of Aspects.

Aspects are areas and activities of the university which fall under the Core Area, for e.g. Biodiversity is an Aspect of the Environment and Climate Core Area. It is for each university to identify the most relevant Aspects of each Core Area which it needs to address if it is to become sustainable. Given the uniqueness of each university, its research, teaching and its location, there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to identifying Aspects or in which Core area they go. For example Student Engagement appears in the example in 'Teaching and Research' reflecting the increasing recognition of students as learning co-creators. Another possibility is to put it in 'People and Society'. The important thing is to think what makes most sense in your unique university.

Below is an example of Aspects which are commonly included in a typical universities' Core Area, but it is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list.

Leadership, Ethics, HR, Business links, Governance, Finance

Teaching, Research, Student Engagement

Teaching & Research

Administration & Governance

Sustainable University

Environment & Climate

People & Society

Diversity, Equality, Engagement and Participation, Access, Community, Health and Wellbeing

Water, Waste, Biodiversity, Climate Mitigation and Adaptation, Travel, Construction, Energy,

5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University

Having identified its particular sustainability Aspects, a university can proceed to use the Framework to identify its level of sustainability performance for each aspect.

For each Aspect, the UNEP Framework identifies the institutions level of sustainability performance in that area. These levels, or steps, increase in sustainability ambition starting at: Emerging, Progressing, Established and end with an institutions performance being recognised as Leading.

This Framework and the alternative graphic version on the next page show a path through the four steps. Each step contains a series of activities expected of a university as it progresses an increasingly ambitious journey towards being a sustainable university.

Because the Framework is intended for universities around the world, it does not consider the range of contexts institutions operate nor the unique opportunities and challenges it faces. A universities sustainability journey is not necessarily a linear one in the order presented. An institution might already have some elements in place when it starts in earnest. Every university's journey will look different, and you are encouraged to use this Framework to plan your unique institutions journey towards sustainability.

Note that the graphics might suggest a 'Sustainable Campus' end-point. But the latter stages of Step 4 in a Leading university do require a constant circular process of continual assessment and raising your vision and ambition for an even more sustainable institution.

EMERGING
Institutions just beginning to address sustainability

- Connect with local universities and sustainability networks
- Engage, excite and listen to staff and students
- Increase understanding and keep listening
- Recruit champions
- Establish a sustainability committee
- Make a committment
- Draft informal plans

STEP 1

PROGRESSING
Institutions making advances in formalising their sustainability progress

- Know what is best practice is
- Formalise plans and policies
- Back up plans and policies with agreed objectives and targets
- Agree roles and responsibilities
- Provide training and support

STEP 2

ESTABLISHED
Institutions with an established approach to sustainability and structures in place to support it

- Integrate and align sustainability and corporate plans and policies
- Measure and review progress
- Communicate performance regularly

STEP 3

LEADING
Institutions which are sustainability models to others

- Routinely report on performance and improvement
- Model best practice, share your learning and be a change agent to others
- Your sustainability journey is embedded as a research and curriculum resource
- Establish a continual improvement process
- Revise and raise your ambition and vision of sustainability

STEP 4

SUSTAINABLE CAMPUS