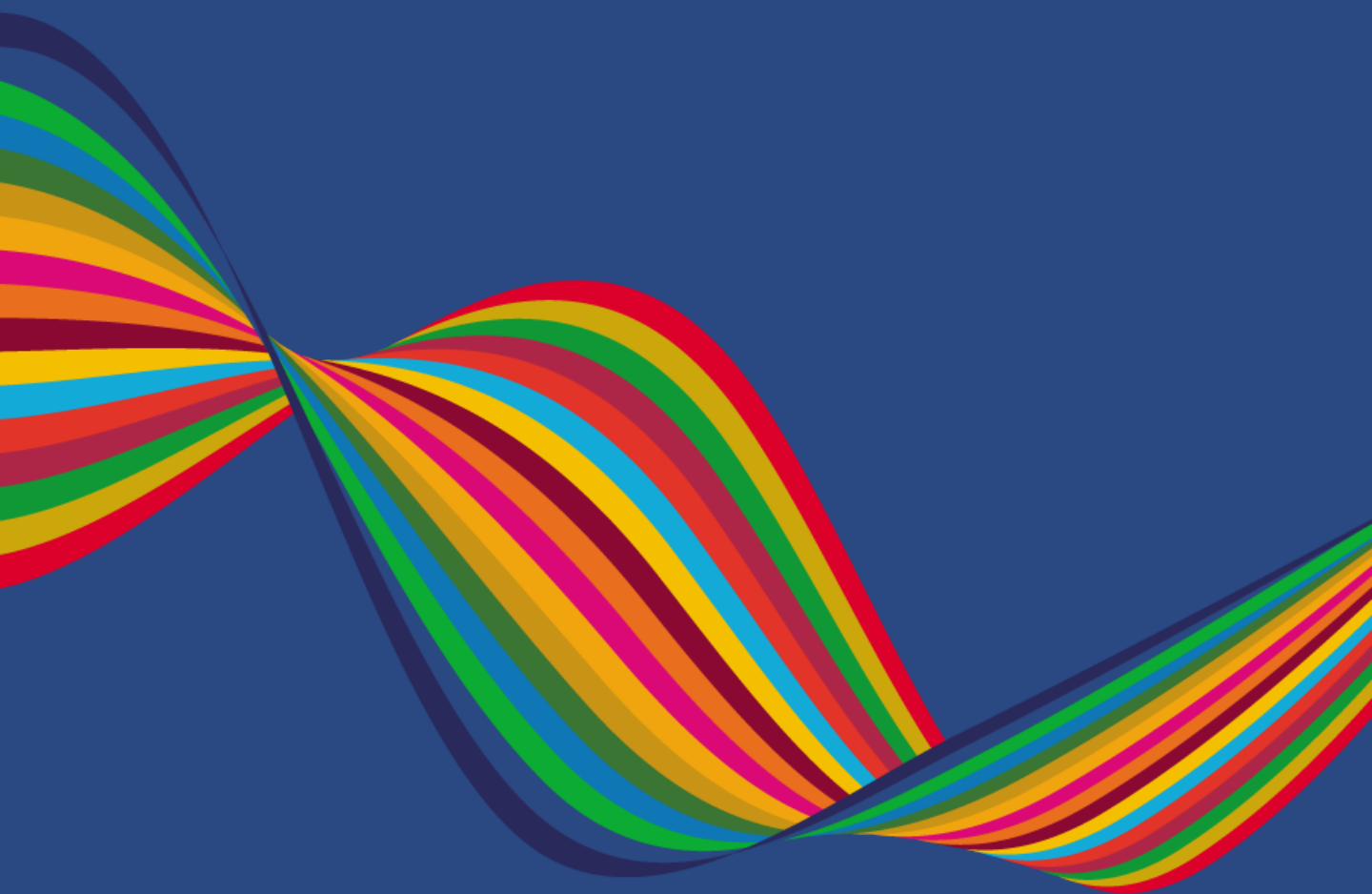




**General Guidelines  
for the Implementation of Sustainability  
in Higher Education Institutions**



# General Guidelines for the Implementation of Sustainability in Higher Education Institutions



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# HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 2030 Agenda is underpinned by the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), which are the common goals that humanity has chosen for itself through the agreement of all the United Nations Member States. The SDGs are based on a multidimensional understanding of development, including environmental, social and economic sustainability.

The SDGs are a benchmark that countries, individual institutions and civil society can use to guide their efforts towards enduring peace and prosperity for people and the planet. Established in 2015 with a 2030 horizon, we are currently halfway, but the [2023 SDG Report](#)'s review is not positive. Until 2020, the progress was slower than expected and the polycrisis in which we are immersed, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have set back gains made towards realizing the SDGs by decades. Progress is now severely derailed, so the forecast is not promising. It is therefore more important than ever to mobilize attention, take responsibilities and call for increased focus and efforts towards the implementation of the SDGs.

Each individual and organization has a role to play to contribute to the SDGs, higher education institutions (HEIs) have a truly unique position.

- As their first mission, HEIs educate and train the future leaders and equip them with the skills and knowledge that prepare them to contribute to sustainable societies.
- As their second mission, HEIs undertake the majority and the most innovative research in societies, creating cutting-edge knowledge and technology.
- Through their third mission, HEIs directly contribute to communities by transferring and disseminating this knowledge and technology and establishing alliances with other actors of the Quadruple Helix (governments, industry and societal groups).
- The management and administration of the HEIs offers an opportunity to lead by example making governance, strategies and operations more ethical and sustainable.

This unique position provides HEIs with a large potential of not only participating in but leading the way towards sustainable economic, social and environmental development. And this potential should be paired with a large responsibility to do the utmost to advance sustainable development. Most HEIs already contribute to the SDGs in different ways and to different extents, but this is often done through scattered initiatives without an overarching approach to sustainability or a sustainability strategy at institutional level.

Recently, HEI leaders have an increased interest in better understanding how they can contribute to the SDGs and in gaining knowledge on how to systematize this approach. However, a very small share of HEIs worldwide can afford external guidance of professionals to support them in this process.

## **WHY THESE GUIDELINES?**

The need of a more rapid progress towards the SDGs, the unique position of HEIs to accelerate this progress and the HEIs leaders' interests towards sustainability are the base of this document.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide general guidelines for leaders in HEIs to systematize and maximize their institutions' contributions towards the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations.

These general guidelines outline the essential elements that can help HEIs systematize their approach and increase their contribution to the SDGs, transforming into more sustainable organizations. These guidelines are a starting point that highlight general steps to consider and high-level actions to lead a change towards sustainability within HEIs. These guidelines will be followed by more detailed work and publications on this topic.

## **A TRANSITION INTO A SUSTAINABLE HEI**

The following sections describe the stages in which HE leadership can lead a smooth transition towards a more sustainable university and ensure that the HEI community is guided through the change journey.

Those leaders who have already started this transition can use these guidelines to check whether they have considered all the elements identified in this document and put them in practice.

# A TRANSITION INTO A SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION



# TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTION





## STAGE 0: CONCEPTUAL ALIGNMENT AND RATIONALE

### What?

Discuss and clarify among the HEI leadership team, as well as the higher education institutions (HEI) community (students, academics, administrative staff and external partners) the meaning of the concepts 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' in the particular context of the HEI and the reasons why the HEI should embark in a sustainability transition.

### Why?

A common understanding of these terms in the HEI community is critical for a clear, efficient and meaningful communication throughout the transition and beyond.

The concept of sustainability is often associated uniquely with environmental sustainability. However, with a UN approach, and in line with the SDGs, it is important to understand sustainability from a broad perspective: economic, social and environmental. These three perspectives also made up the concept of sustainable development.

### How?

- Holding meetings and discussion amongst the relevant stakeholders until there is agreement on a common definition of these terms.
- Communicating the concept of sustainability and sustainable development to the HEI community and externals in a consistent and coherent way across all channels and target audiences.

The internal  
conceptual  
alignment  
should be the  
base for



Awareness  
raising





## STAGE 1: AWARENESS RAISING

### What?

Inform the HEI community in a clear, sincere and inclusive way about (i) the need to transition towards a more sustainable HEI, (ii) the reasons why this transition is needed - including the potential future challenges and benefits - and (iii) how this will specifically affect each of them.

### Why?

The HEI community wants to hear about the need and reasons for the transition from the senior management who are responsible of the change. Beyond creating awareness, communication can help dispel rumors, misinformation and distrust among the HEI community, which can have long-lasting negative effects.

There are powerful internal and external reasons for driving an HEI towards sustainability, many of which tap into the HEI social responsibility. The internal reasons are mostly related to the achievement of more relevant curricula, more impactful research and better management and administration. Externally, the HEI could position itself as an engine to tackle the most pressing social, economic and environmental problems that humanity is facing together with industrial, governmental and social stakeholders.

### How?

- Evaluate the situation, people, needs and channels to use for raising awareness.
- Create a transition communication plan for raising awareness on the sustainability transition.
- Explain why the change is needed being as specific as possible by using facts, data and examples.
- Execute and evaluate the communication plan.



## STAGE 2: LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

### What?

Demonstrate willingness, responsibility, intention and dedication to achieve a more sustainable HEI in the near future.

### Why?

The commitment of the top HEI management is essential for the success of a sustainability transition as they are in charge of envisioning the change, motivating the HEI community and leading with the example.

This is particularly important because most HEIs work in silos (e.g.; campuses, faculties, departments, offices) and sustainability is a transversal topic that will involve changes from all of them and thus requires a top leadership orchestrating these changes.

### How?

- Integrate the concept of sustainability in the mission and vision of the HEI.
- Include sustainability as a core value for the HEI and present the HEI as a sustainable HEI.
- Appoint someone in charge of sustainability at the highest level (ideally, a vice rector highly coordinated with the rest of the vice rectors) or establish a committee responsible to lead this transition.
- Integrate sustainability in the current or prospective HEI strategy or institutional strategic plan, as well as in decision-making processes.

**The leadership  
commitment  
should lead to**



**Stakeholder  
Engagement**



## STAGE 3: STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT

### What?

Achieve (at least) an openness for dialogue and (ideally) a personal commitment of the key stakeholders inside and outside the HEI to support the sustainability transition.

### Why?

Becoming a sustainable HEI is not only a top-down undertaking. Stakeholder inclusion, participation, engagement and ownership are keys to the successful sustainability and SDGs implementation within an HEI.

For a successful stakeholder engagement, it is important to (i) identify the key stakeholder in and out of the HEI (ii) recognize their interests, (iv) encourage bottom-up actions (v) recognize, reward and embrace their engagement. This will make stakeholders feel empowered, heard and respected during all the stages of the change (design, piloting, implementation, evaluation, etc.).

Only when stakeholders feel that they have ownership of the transition, everyone can work together on the basis of shared values, a common desire for change and a sense of continuation. This often result in a quicker adoption of the change, making sustainability part of the institutional culture.

### How?

- Seek the initial participation of HE leaders and other influential people within the HEI to act as sustainability champions and bring other people onboard.
- Establishing a committed community-of-practice for the transition
- Inspiring and motivating the HEI community and external partners to be part of and feel ownership of the sustainability transition.
- Call for openness, support, inclusion and coordinated action to achieve the transformation.
- Give the HEI community the opportunity to ask questions and address their concerns
- Empowering and supporting champions and interested stakeholders in their actions to take the initiative forward



## STAGE 4: STRATEGY DESIGN AND DRAFT

### What?

Co-design, co-draft and explicitly establish an institution-wide public document describing what is needed for the HEI to successfully transition towards sustainability and sustainable development. This document is agreed on by HEI leaders and HEI community.

### Why?

The strategy is an explicit and public mandate from the institution's leadership needed to create a common vision and a direction for the whole HEI towards sustainability. It also helps HEI leaders set values, broad institutional goals and a governance structure for this transition. Overall, it guides the process towards the sustainability outcomes and ideally also inspires the HEI community to be part of this transformation.

### How?

- Either designing a distinctive sustainability strategy connected with the current HEI strategy or integrating the sustainability aspect transversally in the general HEI strategy or plan.
- Undertaking a consultation process to co-design the strategy with key representatives of the HEI community and ideally also with external stakeholders
- Undertaking an analysis of the context and setting the main goals to be achieved with that strategy, together with a timeline.
- Establishing who is responsible and accountable for the different phases of the transition. Some of the options are a steering committee, a board or an advisory group supported by external collaborators and often led by a coordinator who oversees the whole transition process.

**The content of the strategy should be the basis for**



**Knowledge provision**



## STAGE 5: KNOWLEDGE PROVISION

### What?

Provide knowledge to the HEI community in a clear but holistic way on what to expect and what to do during and after the HEI sustainability transition.

### Why?

The HEI leadership cannot assume that even if the HEI community is aware of the change, and even engaged on it, it knows what to do. Knowledge is only relevant when the person has the awareness and desire to engage first and only then knowledge will lead to successful change.

### How?

- Facilitating access to information about (i) the SDGs and its importance for HE, (ii) how HEIs can contribute to SDGs, (iii) how to initiate and implement a sustainability transition within an HEI, (iv) how other HEIs have designed and implemented a sustainability transition, etc.
- Delivering formal training programs that contextualize and test the information provided.
- Organizing user-groups and forums on the topic to share good practices, ideas, concerns and answer questions.
- Implementing a mentoring scheme (usually long-term, informal and voluntary) or one-to-one coaching (usually short-term, formal and goal-oriented) that personalize the sustainability transition experience for a group of key people in the HEI.

The knowledge provision should be the base for



The mapping of current SDG-related initiatives



UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the International Association of University Presidents Triennial Conference 2021



We call on universities, through your teaching, research, and innovation, to continue to make a profound contribution to the 2030 Agenda.



UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed at the High-Level Americas University Presidents Meeting 2022



Universities are places that nurture incubation, exchange, innovation and interdisciplinary analysis, setting the pathway to change.



UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay, at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022



Knowledge is absolutely critical in a world of complexity and challenges, like climate disruption, digital revolution or deepening of inequalities after the pandemic. We need to be able to rely on strong higher education all around the world.



## STAGE 6: CURRENT INITIATIVES MAPPING

### What?

A mapping exercise to identify in which ways the HEI might be already contributing to the SDGs, as well as ongoing or planned changes that might affect this contribution.

### Why?

To provide a useful and timely 'snapshot' that will allow the HE leadership to gather evidence, analyze where they are and identify strengths and potential areas for improvement.

These teaching, research, engagement and managerial initiatives are likely to be scattered around the organization and take many different shapes, so a systematic and consistent approach to capture and analyze information is needed.

### How?

- Appointing someone who coordinates the mapping activity and ensure the presence of a wide range of representatives who discuss the design and set the process to prevent biases.
- Using a comprehensive and inclusive approach (bottom-up participatory exercise, in which students and staff are consulted, through surveys, suggestion boxes, 'town hall' meetings, or focus groups) and making the results public.
- Using existing tools designed for this purpose to save time and resources and to ensure that the mapping exercise is comprehensive and externally validated.



## STAGE 6: CURRENT INITIATIVES MAPPING

SET4HEI ([www.set4hei.org](http://www.set4hei.org)), UNESCO Sustainability Evaluation Tool for Higher Education Institutions, is an online free self-assessment tool that allows your institution to measure their contribution to each of the 17 SDGs based on a list of 400 potential activities categorized in four dimensions: 1) Teaching and Learning, 2) Research, 3) Engagement and 4) Governance and administration.

The activities captured will be very diverse in their nature (e.g., policies, strategies, offices, courses, events, campaigns, etc.) and the way they are undertaken (e.g., at institutional level or only in some faculties or for some groups, occasionally or systematically, etc.).

You can use it to capture those activities you currently undertake and consider the remaining ones as potential opportunities for future development.

The mapping of the current sustainability initiatives should be followed by



The prioritization of the potential future initiatives





## STAGE 7: FUTURE INITIATIVES PRIORITIZATION

### What?

Determine the initiatives that will be undertaken in the future, based on the list of current initiatives and the gaps identified previously, as well as the HEI strengths and vision.

### Why?

The gaps are likely to be large, even for proactive and commitment HEIs, as sustainable development is a very wide concept, so the prioritization of those activities that better align with the HEI's opportunities and strategy is key.

### How?

- Categorize all these potential activities by feasibility (how likely are we to implement them) and expected sustainability impact (in the HEI community and beyond).
- Shortlist to implement first the most feasible ideas with the largest potential impact.
- Consider each shortlisted idea as a separate project from then on.
- Set basic expectations for each project (scope, timeline, resources), though these may be modified once the project progresses, and the topic is further analyzed.

Depending on its strengths, opportunities and resources, the HEI can prioritize very diverse topics. For example, in terms of teaching, the initiatives could include the design of (under)graduate and lifelong learning programs and courses that directly address an SDG-related topic, or train teachers to integrate sustainability throughout the curriculum. Concerning research, fund projects linked to sustainability, train researchers to integrate sustainability into their research or promote theses related to the SDGs.

In community engagement, HEIs can prioritize initiatives in partnership with stakeholders such as NGOs, foundations, youth movements, businesses and governments to address the needs of vulnerable groups, or to advocate for SDG-related causes. The HEI leaders can also prioritize the sustainability and efficiency of their infrastructure or the inclusiveness of their students and staff policies.



## STAGE 8: RESOURCES PROVISION

### What?

Accompany the sustainability strategy and the selected initiatives by a dedication of sufficient physical, human and financial resources to implement and sustain them.

### Why?

Every HEI has limited resources to some extent and many of them suffer from significant budget constraints. However, the commitment and the strategy for a sustainability transition of the HEI needs to be backed up by enough resources (internal or external) to guarantee the appropriate implementation of the prioritized initiatives.

### How?

- Identifying internal resources that can be dedicated to the delivery of the sustainability initiative
- Proactively seeking external resources and/ or collaboration from industry, societal groups or governments at different levels.
- Leveraging and aligning new resources with the funding of current initiatives.
- Addressing sustainability through small-scale projects that aim at improving one aspect of one topic at a time.
- Using creative approaches and solutions for ensuring enough resources for the implementation of the key projects before starting.

After resources are secured, the leadership and community should



Implement the projects





## STAGE 9: IMPLEMENTATION

### What?

Design, define and execute a series of concrete, actionable and coordinated implementation projects. They are likely to be of different nature and involve different teams.

### Why?

The implementation of a sustainability strategy makes the concepts become a reality, which significantly increase the chances of a successful implementation.

### How?

- Establishing scopes and project teams (made of internal and ideally also external members) for each of the sustainability projects.
- Defining, measuring and analyzing the problem (if still unknown).
- Determining the most suitable solution(s) for the problem given the resources.
- Establishing a timeline and key performance indicators (KPIs) and a working plan flexible enough to adapt to changes.
- Starting with a pilot to prove the viability of the solution(s).
- Driving the implementation of the approved solution(s) by the project teams.
- Evaluating the projects at different stages of implementation against the baseline and react accordingly.
- Encouraging frequent contact among the team members of different projects to share good practices.
- Coordinating the implementation of all sustainability projects taking place simultaneously by a dedicated HEI manager to create synergies and enhance the impact.





## STAGE 10: LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

### What?

Ensure that the results of the projects are utilized after their completion and the benefits are sustained over time, while guaranteeing the commencement of new projects.

There are different types of sustainability, the most common ones being:

- **Financial sustainability:** The project continues operating after the planned final date using new sources of funding.
- **Business sustainability:** The project continues operating after the planned end of the project thanks to new sources of income that the project has generated.
- **Organizational sustainability:** The day to day running of the implemented solution(s) continues functioning after the project finishes and the project team is disbanded.

### Why?

Sustainable development is by nature a long-term concept. Some of the changes resulted from the short-term projects are only seen in the long-term. Sustaining projects until their completion and establishing an institutional continuous improvement strategy and methodology are some ways to ensure that the commitment with sustainability outlasts its original advocates.

### How?

- Creating a long-term sustainability plan as soon as possible for the projects and the whole transition towards a more sustainable HEI.
- Seeking new sources of funding and other resources to continue the implementation of current or new projects.
- Integrating the sustainable practices resulting from a project into the normal functioning of specific offices or teams.
- Appointing a dedicated person or office to the continued running of the sustainability projects, despite emerging challenges and fluctuations in the yearly workload cycle.
- Ensuring that the sustainability plan extends beyond the term of the leadership team who designed it, and it is assumed by the new leadership team as an intrinsic part of the HEI culture.

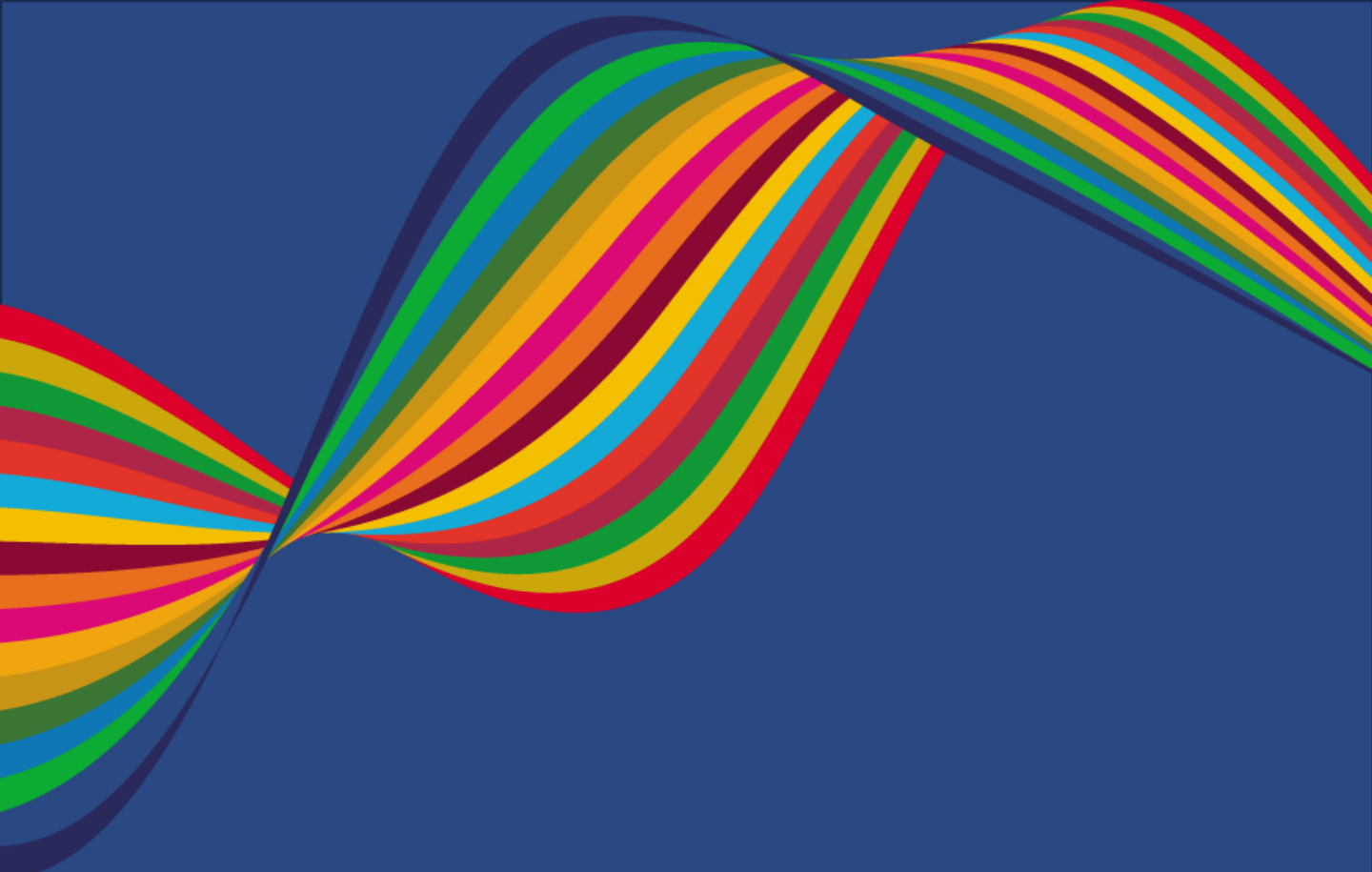
# FINAL THOUGHTS

- In a context of environmental emergencies, unprecedented economic crises and increasing inequalities, HEI leaders should be empowered to lead the transformation of our societies.
- Through talent and innovation, HEIs have the potential to lead the change to address the major social transformations that our world needs.
- The contribution to sustainable development is part of the social responsibility of HEIs.
- Not only the transition towards sustainability is compatible with the excellence in teaching and research, but it will enhance them, resulting in more relevant education and more impactful research.
- The transition to a more sustainable HEI need to be driven by the leadership but giving space to the emergence of bottom-up initiatives.
- The extension of these efforts in time is critical, since many of the results will only happen in the long-term.
- Aligned with SDG17, the collaboration of HEIs with other HEIs and other actors of the Quadruple Helix (governments, industry and society) will enhance its impact
- This is urgent. 2030 is around the corner, so there is no better moment than now to act in our words, get back on track and make the sustainable development agenda a reality.
- **If not higher education institutions, then who, and if not now, then when?**

**HEI, ARE YOU  
READY TO  
TRANSITION  
INTO A  
SUSTAINABLE  
INSTITUTION?**

Enter:  
[www.set4HEI.org](http://www.set4HEI.org)





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