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Moon, C. J., Walmsley, Andreas and Apostolopoulos, Nikolaos (2018) Governance implications of the UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative. *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*, 18 (4) . pp. 624-634. ISSN 1472-0701 [Article]  
(doi:10.1108/CG-01-2018-0020)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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# Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society. ISSN 1472-0701 (Published online first) <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/24041/>

Governance Implications of The UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative

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Full paper for special issue 'Governing SDGs: From Universal Agenda to Local Action'.

## Abstract

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI, 2017a) states that higher education institutions (HEIs) are integrating the SDGs into sustainability strategies in the form of research, teaching, pedagogy, and campus practices, and to position HEIs as key drivers for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Concern has been raised (HESI, 2017b) as to the potential impact of HEIs in helping to achieve the SDGs; the challenges faced by HEIs with integrating the SDGs into curriculum and institutional strategies; the role of partnerships for HEIs among students, faculty, government, and various stakeholders; and how the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the SDGs, will transform the work of HEIs. Prior research has highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research and studies (e.g. Mader & Rammel, 2015); and more recently Rasche et al (2017) conceive that governance systems in general can serve to make, take, or break support for the SDGs. In fact, Velazquez *et al.*, (2005) found many obstacles preventing the success of sustainability initiatives on campuses around the world. This paper reviews progress of a sample of n=307 signatories to the HESI. Findings reveal a difference between HEI governance that is 'instrumental' and governance that is 'holistic' in relation to sustainability with implications for achieving the SDGs in general and for academic-business partnerships in particular. The research is supported by a grant from Enterprise Educators UK (EEUK, 2017) a network of 1,600 enterprise and entrepreneurship educators and practitioners from over 100 UK Higher and Further Education Institutions and related organisations.

Key words: SDGs, HEIs, UN HESI, HEIs and Governance.

"... the need of new ways of teaching and learning as well as a strong cooperation between higher education and business to enhance a sustainable socio-economic development in general and new forms of sustainable driven enterprises in particular...aims at changing the EU landscape of HEIs towards a stronger accentuation on new inter- and transdisciplinary ways of teaching and learning as well as sustainable entrepreneurial education, increasing university-business cooperation, new university spin-offs or related start-ups in the area of a "green economy" and a subsequent change in the curricula of European HEIs."

(CASE, 2017).

## Introduction

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) was established in 2012 by a group of UN partners including the Executive Coordinator of Rio+20, UN DESA, UNEP, UNESCO, UN Global Compact, UN GC PRME and UNU. Initially 272 HEIs from 47 countries made voluntary commitments to drive the sustainability agenda. Progress was evaluated in 2014 (HESI, 2014) finding that 73% of 272 commitments made by HEIs indicated partial progress, either directly or indirectly; 18% hadn't demonstrated any progress, 9% could not be determined. The methodology for the evaluation was based on identification of key words from HEI websites. Thus, if the HEI published at least one achievement on-line they were rated as "Y" i.e. making progress. If on-line information was not available, then each HEI was rated as "N" i.e. no progress or "U" for unclear.

Research for this paper provides a more in-depth review of progress and discusses implications for governance of HEIs. The focus is on HEIs as they are considered to be a key catalyst for a sustainable society (IARU, 2016); and HEIs serve as institutional moral reinforcers (Hanson *et al.*, 2017). Although some HEIs have charitable status many do not and are commercial enterprises in their own right, with turnovers to match those of listed companies, and some VCs (CEO equivalent) earning in excess of £300K per year. Thus, HEIs are significant stakeholders towards achieving the SDGs but are also case studies for understanding how other organisations can face the formidable challenges with integrating sustainability into their governance and operations (Ferrer-Balas, 2008). And as Mindt and Rieckmann (2017) contend, the transformation of current economic systems towards sustainable development requires innovative sustainability-driven enterprises with competent managers and staff. This includes HEIs.

## Conceptual framework

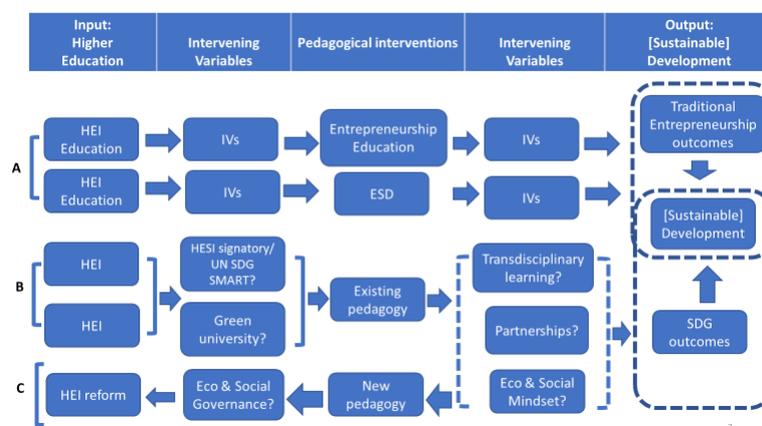


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework in Fig.1. is based on academic literature relating higher education to sustainability outcomes (e.g. Wals, 2013, review for UNESCO of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development). The literatures on the 'need' for both entrepreneurship education (ED) and education for sustainable development (ESD) are both strong. The impact of pedagogical interventions on both EE and ESD outcomes is less clear (conditions A&B) due to numerous intervening variables (c.f. Wals, 2013). In fact, there are tensions between the goals of traditional entrepreneurship and sustainable development i.e. economic growth and the exploitation of resources (self-interest) vs. limiting growth and conserving resources (sustainability). As James & Schmitz (2011) acknowledge, business schools sometimes fail to engage the exploration of sustainability holistically because of the lure to view sustainability as a tool for profitability instead of responsibility.

Aragon-Correa *et al.*, (2017) also draw attention to these tensions. These tensions partly explain the lack of eco and social entrepreneurship courses in HEIs (Moon, 2017); and also creates a potential problem for policy makers in regard to higher education. For example, Snelson-Powell *et al.*, (2016) suggest that: rather than institute actual change and include sustainability in organizational activities, business schools may 'merely' indicate that such change is taking place. This paper, therefore, investigates key factors of the above literature e.g. transdisciplinary learning, partnerships and eco & social mindsets (condition C), to see if there are significant pedagogical and governance implications necessary for HEI reform, in order that HEIs can transform from mere catalysts of sustainable development to fully committed enablers. The impact of the research could represent a paradigm shift from conditions A&B to condition C.

## Prior research

Dawe *et al.*, (2005) in a report for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) investigated sustainability 'literacy' of students in different academic disciplines over a six-month period. The authors found an overall patchy picture with sustainable development being marginal or non-existent in some influential disciplines but increasingly higher profile in others; major gaps in curricula; and four major barriers to implementing ESD: (1) overcrowded curriculum; (2) perceived irrelevance by academic staff; (3) limited staff awareness and expertise; (4) limited institutional drive and commitment. The problem over major gaps in curricula and the four barriers cited all have governance implications.

The Mader and Rammel (2015) study for UNESCO Chair in Higher Education for Sustainable Development, International Association of Universities, Institute for the Advanced Studies of Sustainability (United Nations University) concluded that: to achieve related goals of drafted UN SDGs, HEIs, and higher education policy needs to take action to change not only single curricula, research programs or waste systems within institutions but enable a whole of institution and system-wide transformation in collaboration with practice. This highlights the importance of taking a more holistic approach to governance; and the significance of academic-business partnerships.

425 higher education stakeholders from 101 countries responded and reported about their achievements and challenges. The study, carried out in collaboration with the International Association of Universities and financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science Research and Economy, was presented in September 2014 at the international Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development in Nagoya, Japan. Globally 45% of respondents say that they are inspired by policies to integrate sustainability into their institution.

The authors concluded that this transformation would be enhanced by the following actions:

- Establishing transdisciplinary settings for research and education;
- Aiming at capacity building and training to enable individual and collective leadership for sustainability in higher education;
- Initiating the assessment of global, regional and local challenges so to link global challenges to regional context;
- Establishing sustainability as a base line for higher education policies at national, regional and global levels;
- Applying a whole institution approach that reflects people's needs and competences;
- Inspiring transformations at the interface of education, research, policy and practice;
- Supporting a stronger focus on transformative education and new ways of teaching and learning.

Thus, it appears that HEIs might be willing to embrace the sustainability agenda in general but might

lack the capacity to support the UN SDGs in their governance strategy and operations. In fact, Wyness *et al* (2015) in a survey of N=54 entrepreneur educators from Australia, New Zealand, UK and the USA found embedded sustainability practice was typically limited to “add-on” courses to traditional entrepreneurial teaching. Yet, Snelson-Powell *et al.*, (2016) conclude that failure to implement sustainability could subject [HEIs] to legitimacy risks, if the lack of operational engagement is later exposed. Thus, the Mader & Rammel (2015) recommendations provide an agenda for change.

## **Governance implications**

HESI (2017b) have noted that institutional structures and hierarchies within universities often impede interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research and studies. A focus on governance could, therefore, have a considerable impact on spurring sustainable innovation and applied research. The emphasis could, therefore, shift from ‘teaching’ students to supporting students, ‘enabling’ them to learn applied skills of relevance to business and society in general. And if students were more involved in formal or informal institutional governance then perhaps there could be a renewed interest in the SDGs and in developing new and innovative solutions from the perspective of youth or the next generation.

Unfortunately, the European Commission funded project “University Educators for Sustainable Development” (UE4SD) revealed that among 33 European countries there is a big lack of professional training programs in education for sustainable development. An investigation among 33 countries showed that even though 16 countries report about national strategies or action plans on sustainable development or ESD, only 9 strategies call for professional development and only seven countries report about national or regional initiatives for professional ESD training (UE4SD, 2014).

Consequently, there is a sizeable gap between what is explained in national or regional strategies and what is done to empower people to act accordingly. Significant to CPD (continuous professional development) is ensuring that teaching-learning approaches are updated; and this can be achieved via good academic-business partnerships.

## **Academic-business partnerships**

The most recent review of progress with the HESI was in July 2017 (HESI, 2017b) in New York, on the occasion of the 2017 session of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development - United Nations’ central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - and in conjunction with the 2017 Global Forum for Responsible Management Education.

Over 500 participants from governments, the United Nations (UN) system, academia, and other relevant stakeholders including business attended the two-hour event, which presented concrete case studies from a wide range of higher education institutions and initiatives on how they are contributing to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Examples of best practices collaboration between academia and business include:

- ESPAE-ESPOL - five companies presented their experiences and progress in aligning their strategies with the SDGs through use of the SDG Compass.
- ChallengeLab.org of Chalmers University of Technology provides a broad platform for students to engage and take on the planet's biggest challenges in collaboration with industry, governments and academia.

- Stanford University Sustainable Urban Systems (SUS) initiative – an initiative which applies multiple engineering knowledge fields in an integrated approach to shape the future of cities to test SDG localization strategies, collecting relevant actionable data at the city level to achieve the SDGs.

Whilst it is too early to evaluate the impact of these partnerships, it is clear that the overall trend is for companies to work with HEIs to better inform their strategies in support of the SDGs.

## Teaching & Learning approaches

Mindt and Rieckmann (2017) conclude that ‘To date, there is no comprehensive literature review dealing with teaching-learning approaches and methods of higher education for sustainability-driven entrepreneurship’. These authors distinguish sustainability-driven entrepreneurs as having: (1) systems thinking competence; (2) normative competence (values thinking); (3) action competence; (4) interpersonal competence; and (5) strategic management competence. This builds on the work of Wiek *et al* who more recently identified a meta competence (6) integrated problem-solving (Wiek *et al.*, 2016, 243).

Active, collaborative, problem-based, experiential, and interdisciplinary approaches can all benefit from academic-business partnerships. Mindt and Rieckmann (Ibid) cite various authors that testify to such benefits (e.g. Barth *et al.*, 2014; Lehmann *et al.*, 2008; Thomas, 2009). One example is the European project CASE – Competencies for A Sustainable Socio-Economic Development – which is a joint European Master’s Programme on Sustainability-driven Entrepreneurship involving 10 universities and business partners from five European countries (CASE, 2017). The pedagogical framework is shown in Fig 2.



Fig 2. CASE thematic and pedagogical outline.

Evaluations of 9 pilot courses are currently under way. Examples of innovative pedagogical practices involving external partnerships (from a total of 19 partnerships) include:

- Austria ‘sustainability challenge’ – intra and transdisciplinary course in cooperation between four HEIs - encourages students to develop their own business solution together with business partners. TryOut – six-week internships in start-ups.
- Germany ‘Outside the University Box’ provides city challenges for students with three external partners: the city administration, a local food entrepreneur (start-up company) and a municipal institution for elderly people and intense nursing. Working with a

company partner on corporate sustainability communications. Internship in an institution with disabled persons.

According to CASE (2017): The CASE Knowledge Alliance jointly accepts the need of new ways of teaching and learning as well as a strong cooperation between higher education and business to enhance a sustainable socio-economic development in general and new forms of sustainable driven enterprises in particular.

## **Measurement of sustainability in HE**

### Governance

Cortese (2003) highlighted the critical role of higher education in creating a sustainable future. In fact, he acknowledged that it is the people coming out of the world's best colleges and universities that are leading us down the current unhealthy, inequitable, and unsustainable path. Thus, a transformation of higher education is called for. More recently, IARU (2016) have produced a report on 'greening' the university. Whilst the report is written by the International Association of Research Universities, the findings are aimed at all HEIs. Thus, IARU recognise that all aspects of HEI life need to be geared towards achieving sustainability including: sustainable campus organisation, campus-wide operations, buildings, laboratories, green purchasing, transport, communication, employee and student engagement. There are clear implications here for the governance of HEIs. Indeed, without top level support and more holistic approaches there is little to suggest that HEIs can overcome the 'cynical' or 'instrumental' attitudes towards the environment that many students can have (Moon, 2015). Therefore, steps that HEIs take towards 'greening' the university (as identified by IARU) will be used as a default measure of governance for the purposes of this research.

### Sustainability literacy

Another measure of HEI commitment to sustainability is 'sustainability literacy'. In fact, there is one test named SULITEST (2017) that has been taken by over 61K students from over 600 HEIs in 57 countries. Results show that that students are on average more aware of specific SDGs than of the 2030 Sustainable Agenda and related UN processes. However, this test reveals general awareness of sustainable development knowledge rather than impacts of HEIs tackling SDGs in particular. And Dawe *et al.*, (2005) in their report for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) concluded from 'sustainability literacy' there was an overall patchy picture with sustainable development being marginal or non-existent in some influential disciplines and higher profile in others; major gaps in curricula; and major barriers to implementing ESD. Nevertheless, various statements are included in the accompanying survey for this paper to check for the strength and depth of HEI commitment. Thus, statements pertaining to pedagogical approaches, transdisciplinary projects, partnerships, give a more thorough indication of the level of commitment provided towards the HESI and concomitant SDGs.

### Behavioural change

Clearly the best measure of the effectiveness of ESD is actual behavioural change. This can be evidenced by identifying sustainable development projects initiated as a result of ESD programmes in HEIs. However, the actual impact of educational programmes might not be evident for years after students graduate, if at all. Thus, apart from impact case studies written of projects undertaken by participating students, most educators are again left to try and measure the effectiveness of ESD programmes through various default measures e.g. attitude change, propensity to engage in sustainable development initiatives, etc. One approach to eliciting such propensity is through

identifying sustainability mindset, or more specifically eco and social mindset in the case of eco and social entrepreneurs. Moon (2013) used personal construct theory and rep grid technique to show that the mindset of eco and social entrepreneurs does differ from more traditional entrepreneurs. The stage is now set to more precisely measure what this mindset involves; and several scales are explored in this study relating to compassion, empathy and connectedness in relation to the SDGs. The findings will form the basis of a tool that can be used by organisations, educators and students for reflection, appraisal and development purposes.

From the above literature the following research questions were formed.

## Research questions

Our survey instrument, educator interviews, and student feedback mechanisms, were designed to get answers to the above challenges:

1. What are the benefits and best practices in adopting the UN SDGs?
2. What are the benefits and best practices of the UN HESI as a tool for adopting the UN SDGs?
3. What are the challenges and obstacles faced by HEIs in adopting the above e.g. governance issues, silo issues, mindset issues, etc?
4. What are the implications for enterprise and entrepreneurship education e.g. mindset of educators, CPD of educators, tools for educators, etc?
5. What added value does enterprise and entrepreneurship education bring to HEI implementation of the SDGs?
6. To what extent is the 'competence' model the primary theoretical underpinning to pedagogical development in this area i.e. sustainable entrepreneurship.
7. How can we effectively measure changes in student attitudes and behaviours as a result of ESD interventions?

## Methodology

### *Sample*

The target sample was the 307 HEI signatories to the UN HESI. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with 80 students of enterprise education and 8 entrepreneur academics. The initial survey instrument included questions on which SDGs each HESI had signed up to, progress with their implementation, challenges faced and how obstacles were overcome. Further, a series of statements from the literature were designed to test the validity of the literature on ESD pedagogy, governance, and partnerships, etc. As this paper focuses on Governance and Academic-Business partnerships, only related responses from the initial survey are reported below.

## Findings

Fig. 3 shows that 276 of 307 HEIs committed to SDG#4 Education i.e. 89%. 30 HEIs committed to SDG#13 Climate Action i.e. 9.7%. Only 24 HEIs committing to > 1 SDG i.e. 7.8%. Of particular concern is that five SDGs are not being committed to by any of the HESI signatories. And SDG#17 Partnerships for the Goals is only committed to by N=5 HEIs.

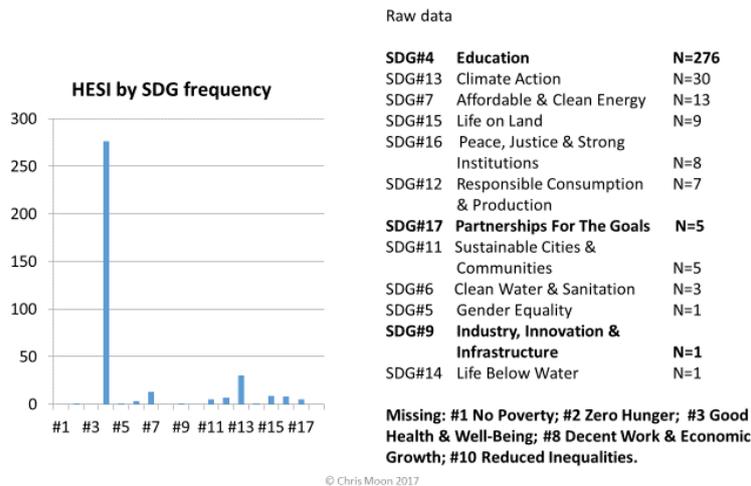


Fig. 3. Frequency of SDG SMART commitments by HESI signatory.

Table 1 indicates that although over 300 HEIs signed the UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, only a small proportion are taking a holistic approach across the HEI to implementing the SDGs. Our measure based on IARU (2016) provides an indication of the extent to which whole institution approaches are being implemented i.e. board level support with sustainability integrated into operations. For each HEI that means ESD curriculum, transdisciplinary and extra-curricular activities including academic-business partnerships. For the majority of HEIs these are still absent.

How the SDGs can help HEIs (PRME)	Obstacles for HEIs that can hinder the adoption of SDGs (adapted from Rasche et al, 2016)	How HEIs can overcome the obstacles (adapted from Rasche et al, 2016)	Implications for HEIs (EEUKRP 2017/18 survey findings)	Implications for entrepreneurship education (EEUKRP survey findings 2017/18)
Strengthen and enable future business practitioners, thereby adding value to modern business and society	Groups of actors can obstruct the development and implementation of the SDGs	Base on mission and strategic vision of HEI; integrated through all levels of the HEI and through strategic engagement with staff and students	HEIs are catalysts for a sustainable society. Therefore, HEIs need to develop sustainably: including campus organisation; campus-wide operations; buildings; laboratories; green purchasing; transport; communication; employee and student engagement.	Entrepreneurship education can benefit from being more competency based e.g. CASE competences for a sustainable socio-economic development with real-world orientation, university-business cooperation, and sustainability-driven entrepreneurship.
Give future business leaders the tools to recognise and maximise sustainable opportunities	Aspirational talk, greenwashing, and 'bullshit' can be used to oversell commitment to SDGs	Ensure specific-timebound and measurable, linked to value creation, financial drivers and future investment	HEIs need to set goals based on achieving all 17 SDGs, with measurement and reporting based on all 17 SDGs.	All enterprise and entrepreneurship students should be tooled in e.g. Circular Economy Design techniques and Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) tools.
Create a paradigm for teaching, learning and understanding sustainability as core to the business model	Individuals can exploit loopholes in the SDGs	Ensure covers all dimensions of sustainable development and implemented on an interdisciplinary scale	There are 17 SDGs. EEUKRP found that most HEIs have only signed up to one SDG #4 Education. Sustainability needs to be integrated across schools and programmes building on the agenda set by Mader& Rammel.	Approaches to solving global risks increasingly need to be based on developing sustainability innovations via transdisciplinary approaches, partnerships and eco & social mindsets. Policy makers for EE should ensure that there is a paradigm shift in this regard.

Connect with a network of stakeholders reaching beyond the business sphere, into signatories and supporting organisations	[Isolation; institutionalisation, bureaucracy, etc.]	Ensure covers entire value chain and all HEI stakeholders	Only N=5 HESI signatories commit to SDG#17 Partnerships for the Goals. HEIs need to more actively consider ecosystems development in this regard e.g. glocal identities; and promote academic-business partnerships across disciplines.	Learning gain by students needs to be curricula and extra curricula. The Erasmus CASE program provides examples of academic-business partnerships.
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Table 1. Implications of the SDGs for HEI reform & enterprise education.

## Discussion

This paper has highlighted some of the benefits of adopting the UN SDGs and a sample of best practices. Benefits include providing a focal point for students to learn about the breadth and depth of sustainability issues and problems within local and global contexts. Best practices are more evident when HEIs have committed to more than one SDG. In fact, this highlights the interdisciplinary nature of problems and potential solutions.

The UN HESI has been shown to be a valuable tool for adopting the UN SDGs in HEIs. The framework provides a reminder that there are 17 SDGs and innovative projects can be based on single or combined goals. By combining goals in different ways students across disciplines can ‘disrupt’ silo thinking and develop more creative solutions to complex problems.

HEIs are facing numerous challenges and obstacles in implementing the SDGs. Becoming one of the UN HESI signatories does provide an impetus to each HEI tackling the SDGs. However, there can still be important governance issues to face. Thus, HEIs that are adopting a more holistic approach to implementing sustainability have a more effective platform for SDG implementation, overcoming the vagaries of silo thinking. Indicators of this holistic thinking is evident when HEIs adopt more comprehensive measures to become a greener university (IARU measure). The growing emphasis on eco and social entrepreneurship in a small number of HEIs also provides a positive indication that mindsets are changing within HEIs. That is, accepting that traditional entrepreneurship has not always considered eco and social entrepreneurship as qualitatively different mindsets and more supportive of achieving the SDGs in general.

The implication for enterprise and entrepreneurship education is that CPD of educators is an important prerequisite for developing the next generation of eco and social entrepreneurs. Thus, there needs to be more CPD tools and training to enable staff development in this regard. This is especially true for enterprise and entrepreneurship education which is designed to enable the entrepreneurs of the future. Education to develop the mindset of entrepreneurs has ideally included an awareness of social, economic and environmental factors (QAA, 2015). However, there is increasing recognition that all graduates need to be prepared to make a strong contribution to a sustainable society (TEF, 2017). There is evidence of a changing emphasis on broader competences. Thus, the development of sustainability competences are now a feature of a small but growing number of university programmes. However, the efficacy of the competency model in this regard is still relatively untested and should be subject to further research.

## Conclusions

This paper has reviewed developments in higher education towards achieving the SDGs. The UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative was used as a default measure of HEI commitment as each

HEI has to make SMART commitments towards tackling one or more of the SDGs. Of the 307 HEI signatories surveyed 276 (89%) only committed to SDG#4 Education. Whilst HEIs are clearly part of the education industry and education is critical to sustainable development, there is concern that some HEIs have selected SDG#4 out of mere convenience or marketing.

Other HEIs have committed to a broader range of SDGs and this provides the opportunity to identify best practices in relation to more than one SDG. And several HEIs have identified academic-business partnerships as evidence of such best practices. However, these examples are in the minority which raises concerns that the governance of HEIs is not fully committed to achieving the SDGs. Thus, numerous HEIs are still at the stage of simply providing courses in sustainability but not fully integrating them across disciplines; and not addressing sustainability practices in a holistic way across HEI operations.

This paper recognises that if HEIs are to fully prepare students to work in the green economy, and be the creators and innovators of more sustainable solutions, then HEIs need to transform their governance systems to fully endorse sustainability principles and practices. This includes signing up to the UN HESI but more so for each HEI to make SMART commitments towards achieving all the SDGs. Ashridge in the UK now report against all the SDGs is a leader in this regard globally. Perhaps it is time for other HEIs to transform or reform, in this way, in order to fully realise the transformative potential of the SDGs cited by Stevens & Kanie (2016).

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