

The 2023 Congress Communiqué

Uniting higher education, governments, industry and society for a sustainable future



GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
CONGRESS

Hosted by



جامعة الملك عبدالله
للمعلوم والتقنية
King Abdullah University of
Science and Technology

Convened by



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Higher
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29 May – 1 June 2023



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Introduction from KAUST

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) hosted THE's Global Sustainable Development Congress in Saudi Arabia because we believe that our world is in a state of sustainability emergency and that global universities have a crucial role to play in addressing this crisis. The framework of the GSDC was meticulously designed not as a platform for mere discourse and listening, but as a catalyst for actions that will engage higher education institutions. Those actions are spelled out in this communiqué.

The congress focused on four key sustainability sectors: health and demography; energy and industry; sustainable environment; and future cities and communities. It brought together a phenomenal group of speakers, experts and participants from diverse backgrounds, representing academia, business, government, international organisations and NGOs. The plenary keynote speakers, as well as sector-specific keynotes, shed light on the underlying sustainability issues and provided inspiration for accompanying panel discussions. The panels delved

deep into needed actions in areas such as research and innovation, supportive policies and collaboration, talent development, and upscaling actions and impact.

This communiqué serves as a declaration of the congress' commitments and a heartfelt plea to university presidents and collaborating sectors throughout the world to take immediate action. By embracing these commitments, higher education institutions can become beacons of sustainability, serving as examples for the communities they serve. We implore higher education institutions worldwide to reconsider the traditional role of universities in society, allowing us to lead the way in implementing tangible solutions for climate and sustainability challenges.

Together, we have the power to make a profound difference in the face of this global crisis. Let us seize this opportunity to transform our universities into bastions of sustainable practices and inspire the world to take much-needed actions. Our future depends on it.

**Professor Tony Chan,
president, KAUST**

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Introduction from THE

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals were agreed in 2015, setting the world ambitious targets to ensure a more sustainable and prosperous global future. Times Higher Education recognises the important role that the global higher education sector can play in attaining the SDGs.

In 2019, THE launched the Impact Rankings, which assess universities' contributions to all 17 goals, using bespoke indicators and metrics that are mapped to each of the SDGs. The rankings were devised to measure universities' contributions to sustainability through a theory of change, providing a global standard through which the sector can measure, track and improve its work in the SDGs. This theory of change encompasses **research**, **stewardship**, **outreach** and **teaching**.


Research relates directly to a university's generation of research related to each SDG. **Stewardship** relates to how universities – through their policies and practices – demonstrate their impact in terms of the SDGs. **Outreach** relates to the work that universities do in their

local, regional, national and international communities to impact sustainability. **Teaching** relates to how successful universities are in creating skilled practitioners to deliver on the SDGs.

The global higher education system can accelerate progress on the SDGs in several ways: its research can impact on environmental policy and innovation; its stewardship can set an example for sustainable practices; its outreach can ensure that sustainable impact is delivered across all communities; and its teaching can convey the knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable a more sustainable future.

The Global Sustainable Development Congress brings the leaders, practitioners, teachers and policymakers of global higher education together with governments, industry and civil society leaders to share knowledge, insight, best practice and opportunities to accelerate sustainable transformation. This year, the congress committed to a series of pledges – set out in this communiqué – setting a benchmark for progress that can be reviewed at each annual Global Sustainable Development Congress in the future.



 **We, the delegates of the 2023 Congress, representing 538 institutions from 67 countries, call for the presidents of higher education institutions to pledge to respond to this time of crisis through the following immediate actions:**

1

Research and innovation

Prioritise the commercialisation and scaling-up of sustainability-relevant technologies and discoveries.

To effectively advance climate solutions, the generators of solutions must be supported to translate inventions and discoveries into societal value. This involves providing crucial support to researchers and innovators as they navigate the challenging “valley of death” phase, and also means ensuring that developed solutions receive the necessary investments.

Work with industries to incentivise the establishment of industry-funded research laboratories within universities.

To foster collaboration and bridge the gap between academia and industry, universities must co-establish industry-oriented platforms with support from industry and others. These labs serve as valuable platforms for understanding and addressing challenges in various fields, particularly in energy and carbon-intensive sectors. Additionally, universities should actively share their research data and funding with academic partners, promoting broader engagement and increasing the reach of their research outcomes.

Proactively develop capacity and infrastructure to convene a diverse range of stakeholders, including communities, NGOs, government entities, industry representatives and academia.

By providing a platform for engagement, universities empower individuals to take action at different levels, foster a culture of collaboration and ensure an understanding of the facts related to sustainability. Furthermore, these multi-stakeholder international platforms serve as vital hubs for sharing valuable information, initiatives, innovations and data.



2 Talent development

Require mandatory interdisciplinary SDG programmes for our students to prepare the next generation of leaders.

To cultivate the next generation of sustainability leaders and improve cognisance of the multifaceted challenges that must be overcome to achieve SDGs, students must be given the right tools. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of sustainable development principles and equips students to drive sustainable practices in their respective fields. This can be facilitated by interdisciplinary education.

Offer access to online courses in multiple languages to serve developing countries and refugee populations.

To facilitate access to education – particularly for developing countries and refugee populations – online course materials developed by universities must be translated into multiple languages. The application of natural language processors (NLP) for translating educational materials and assisting virtual learners can significantly lower the barriers to accessing universities, allowing students to engage with educational content in their native language, even from rural, remote and hard-to-reach regions. In addition to language translation, a programme to improve broadband connectivity in hard-to-reach regions will further enable educational access for non-traditional learners.

Partner with a diverse range of stakeholders including development banks, government representatives, education organisations, NGOs, student bodies and donors.

To ensure that the transformative opportunity of quality higher education remains accessible to those affected by crises and conflict, the UNHCR convened the first planning meeting for the establishment of a global Interagency Steering Group for Higher Education in Humanitarian-Development Contexts on 30 May 2023 at the THE Global Sustainable Development Congress hosted by KAUST in Saudi Arabia.



3 Governance and regulation

Work with the government and private sector to establish regulatory and financial incentives/benefits that reward organisations that take leadership in pursuing net-zero carbon goals.

To achieve net-zero carbon emissions at multiple organisational levels is an imperative of our time. But it is important to distribute the risks associated with the transition to a net-zero economy across multiple sectors, rather than burdening a single sector with all the responsibility.

Collaborate with governments to establish incentives that promote positive outcomes while discouraging harmful actions in our universities and communities.

To drive the implementation of positive change and discourage detrimental behaviours, universities and partners should establish incentives to encourage positive actions in support of SDGs. An example is the provision of free lunches to all children, funded through a tax on food waste, or edible education projects that promote sustainable agriculture and healthy living. This approach creates a tangible incentive for reducing food waste and growing food sustainably, while supporting a beneficial outcome for children's nutrition.

Develop digital platforms and apps that will enhance the accessibility and quality of scientific information and advisory resources for policymakers and the public.

To facilitate the effective translation of scientific knowledge into health advisories and policy decisions, universities must promote the development of digital platforms and apps that democratise health and scientific information. Drawing inspiration from institutions such as the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center in the US, universities can establish a comprehensive global repository of scientific and advisory materials, ensuring the availability of precise, up-to-date information to make well-informed decisions.



4 Giga-scaled action

Offer sustainability extension services for our communities, building on the success of agricultural extension services in many parts of the world.

Agricultural extension services that help farmers incorporate knowledge and information into their decision-making have been widely successful. To promote sustainability across communities, universities should develop sustainability extension services that aim to provide training and support to communities, environmental workers and farmers, enabling communities to effectively use emerging technologies and embrace innovative ideas in pursuit of sustainability goals.

Prioritise comprehensive digital training programmes for all healthcare workers in our communities.

To enhance the digital proficiency of individuals working in health and medicine, health professionals must be provided with the necessary tools and skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively, leading to improved healthcare delivery and patient outcomes.



Methodology

The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Congress programme, from 29 May to 1 June, involved more than 1,300 in-person and 250 virtual delegates from 538 organisations – including 267 universities – representing 67 countries. The congress was designed to synthesise their ideas and commitment to change into institutional action and global transformation.

The congress was shaped to respond to the challenge set by KAUST president Tony Chan: **“The event will deliver bold insights and enable delegates to forge powerful new alliances. In effect, I want the congress to be a call to action, an invitation to global universities to pivot their educational and research programmes towards tangible outcomes.”**

The congress was informed by unique evidence of the work of universities: THE’s 2023 Impact Rankings dataset included 1,705 universities from 112 countries/regions.

The congress agenda was structured to debate activity across four core areas of action towards achieving the SDGs: energy and industry; health and demography; cities and communities; and the environment. THE and KAUST analysed the key areas of best practice for how activity could be more radical, rapid and occur at greater scale, with the aim of finding out what new initiatives institutions could take within the next year.

For each of the four core areas of action, the congress discussed: how higher education institutions are contributing impact through their research; the regulatory framework and governance they need to accelerate; the talent pipeline and leadership attributes necessary to maintain pace and focus; and how they can partner or collaborate with the private sector and civil society to catalyse change.

The activities cited in these discussions were then scrutinised to produce the top priorities and most important opportunities for each core area of action, and those priorities have been summarised to create the 11 calls to action as detailed in this communiqué.

We want the calls to action to drive new transformative global activity and alliances between higher education and governments, industry and civil society to respond to the climate crisis and other threats to the sustainable development of our world.

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Next steps

Universities looking to improve their commitment to achieving the UN'S SDGs can follow the recommendations outlined above and:

1 Join our conversation and continued learning and engagement at the next Global Sustainable Development Congress in Bangkok, Thailand, in June 2024. We would welcome expressions of interest in demonstrating how your institution has put into practice any of the 11 recommendations listed as part of this communiqué. email: Jeremy.buckle@timeshighereducation.com

2 Get support in driving your sustainability programme forward with the THE Consultancy services. email: consultancy@timeshighereducation.com

3 See how the **King Abdullah University of Science and Technology** is delivering sustainable change in each of the UN SDGs

4 See more highlights and reports from the **Global Sustainable Development Congress 2023**



A new steering group

UNHCR convenes a new steering group for displaced people in higher education at GSDC

To ensure that the transformative opportunity of quality higher education remains accessible to those affected by crises and conflict, universities should work with a diverse range of stakeholders including development banks, government representatives, education organisations, NGOs, student bodies and donors, to enhance coordination, promote best practices and mobilise resources for higher education response in humanitarian and development contexts.

Recognising the critical role of higher education in addressing the challenges faced by displaced and marginalised populations, THE stands alongside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in its mission to foster a collaborative and strategic approach to higher education in humanitarian and development contexts.

UNHCR convened the first planning meeting for the establishment of a global Interagency Steering Group for Higher Education in Humanitarian-Development Contexts on 30 May 2023 at the THE Global Sustainable Development Congress hosted by KAUST in Saudi Arabia.



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