

Universities and  
Sustainable Development  
Towards the Global Goals



# Universities promote sustainable development



## THE GLOBAL GOALS For Sustainable Development

# The unique contribution of universities



Sustainable development is crucial to the future of Europe and the entire planet. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ensures social cohesion, economic prosperity and protection of the environment.

Education, research and innovation are essential in sustainable development, making universities key contributors to achieving the goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals provide a common international framework for concrete action. Adopted in 2015 by 193 countries, the 17 goals have 169 targets and are part of the United Nations sustainable

development agenda aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity by 2030. The European Union has committed to work towards these goals both within Europe and with its partners abroad.

Universities provide cutting-edge research, high quality education, and ground-breaking innovation (Goal 4 and 9). Strong universities are an important part of civil society (Goal 16) and they are excellent promoters of global and local partnerships (Goal 17). Through their contributions to these four goals, universities facilitate the achievement of all the other goals.

Notably, universities support students in developing the rigorous scientific mindset and spirit of curiosity and entrepreneurship needed to produce the solutions required for sustainable development. University researchers, teachers and students work in partnership with citizens and the private and the public sector, co-creating knowledge that can produce solutions. It is the combination of these core missions that gives universities a

unique place in the common effort to achieve the SDGs.

A number of universities have incorporated the SDGs into their institutional strategies, both in management and in teaching and research. Sustainable campus management has become important to many universities and is often considered part of the institution's societal responsibility. Sustainable management can include energy saving measures, resource efficiency and waste reduction, as well as the sharing of services, infrastructure and facilities with other universities or external partners. A key element in all sustainability strategies is the "whole-institution approach", meaning all parts of the university community, including external stakeholders, are involved in the efforts.

# How universities facilitate social, environmental and economic development

The SDGs can be grouped into three broad areas: well-being, the environment and the economy. Universities play a central role in all three.

## WELL-BEING



Access to quality education is crucial for sustainable development and a pre-requisite for the achievement of the other goals. Higher education facilitates social mobility, empowers people through critical thinking and provides them with the skills needed in a rapidly changing labour market.

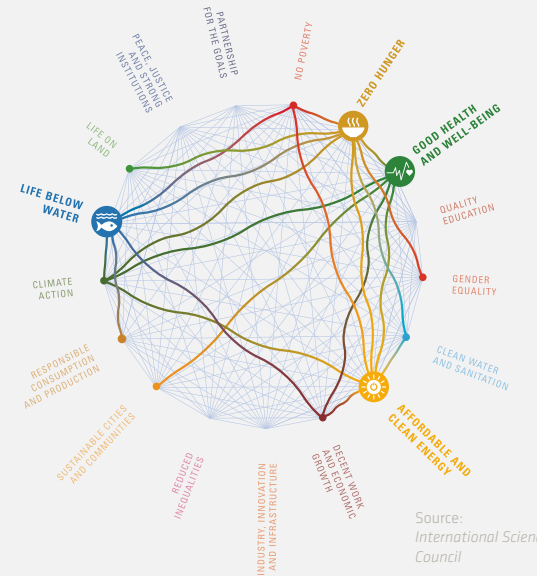
Higher education contributes in various ways to making people more resilient and able to face various challenges. Recent OECD statistics confirm that people with a higher education degree are less likely to be unemployed and earn on average 54% more than those who only completed upper secondary education. A university education, thus, better protects against poverty. Furthermore, the

data reveals that higher education graduates are less likely to suffer from depression, which is an important factor for health and well-being.

University hospitals play a key role in the public healthcare system. They train new generations of medical professionals, provide care to millions of patients and conduct research that helps find innovative solutions to cure or even prevent disease.

Universities are closely connected to their regions, playing a crucial role in the education, innovation, culture and civic life of their local communities. They are also major employers, making considerable economic contributions to their regions.

## ENVIRONMENT



Source: International Science Council

## ECONOMY



Digitalisation, automation and globalisation are changing labour markets in a rapid and radical way. The demand for highly skilled people is increasing, making re-training and up-skilling ever more important. Today in Europe, about 40% of young people have a higher education degree and this is likely to increase, as will the role of universities in providing lifelong learning.

Universities conduct fundamental research that is crucial to understanding how nature and the earth's ecosystems function. They gather people from various disciplines, with different approaches and talents to find innovative solutions to the world's challenges.

Research produces evidence that is indispensable in identifying developments in climate change and global warming, as well as their impact.

Research is also crucial in understanding the interactions of various SDGs, identifying trade-offs and mutual reinforcements and developing a balanced approach in pursuing them. Interdisciplinarity is a key factor in this process.

Sustainable development is only possible if we radically change the way we produce and consume. Innovative solutions must be developed in a collaborative effort. Universities work with companies, other education providers and local stakeholders in this regard, often supporting business creation through start-ups. This makes higher education a key facilitator in open innovation. Universities also provide the international links and pipelines needed to nourish local innovation ecosystems and achieve sustainable growth.

# Universities as strong institutions

Strong institutions accountable to society are a key component of sustainable development.



Strong autonomous universities are important partners of governments, companies and civil society in working towards common goals. These partnerships and collaborations are crucial in the promotion and implementation of the SDGs, both in Europe and internationally.

Universities facilitate people-to-people contact and are important actors in soft diplomacy. Thousands of mobile

students cross borders to gain knowledge about new cultures and bring understanding about their own countries to their hosts. Researchers cooperate around the globe, building networks and developing the know-how needed to sustain innovation worldwide.

## How EUA supports universities



EUA is the representative organisation of more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 47 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard, wherever decisions are being taken that will impact on their activities.

EUA is part of the SDG multi-stakeholder platform set up by the European Commission in 2017. Together with representatives from business and industry, as well as civil society, EUA advises the European Commission on the implementation of the SDGs through EU policy and funding programmes.

**More information:** <http://bit.ly/EUAandSDGs>

## European University Association (EUA)

Avenue de l'Yser 24  
1040 Brussels  
Belgium  
+32 2 230 55 44

Rue du Rhône 114  
Case postale 3174  
1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland  
+41 22 552 02 96

[www.eua.eu](http://www.eua.eu) · [info@eua.eu](mailto:info@eua.eu)

Follow us on

