**Rio+20 Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI)[[1]](#footnote-1) Commitments - A Review of Progress, October 2014[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**Executive Summary:**

* After conducting a preliminary study to review the progress of the 272 commitments made by higher education institutions in Rio+20 HESI, the findings suggest that these commitments have played an enabling role in mobilizing higher education institutions towards ensuring a sustainable future.
* 73% of the institutions who had submitted commitments were found to have made at least partial progress on their commitments, either directly or indirectly. 18% were found to have no demonstrated progress; the remaining 9% of institutions’ progress could not be determined.
* While the quantity and depth of sustainability initiatives varies significantly across the institutions, the majority actively support sustainable development through four outcome areas: education, research, operations and outreach programs.
* The tools leveraged by these institutions to reach the outcomes primarily include strategic plans, working groups and reporting mechanisms.
* Outside of the individual institutional initiatives, Rio+20 HESI also spurred the implementation of collective actions to promote sustainability across higher education institutions, such as the Platform for Sustainability Performance in Education.

**Introduction**

Over two years ago, an unprecedented number of higher education institutions (HEI) from all corners of the globe assembled on a single platform to collaboratively champion education, research and actions for sustainable development in the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in July 2012.

Rio+20 was an action-oriented conference, where all stakeholders, including Major Groups, the UN System/IGOs, Member States, were invited to make voluntary commitments focusing on delivering concrete results to advance sustainable development. By the end of the Conference, over 700 voluntary commitments were announced and assembled into an online registry managed by the Rio+20 Secretariat, spearheading a new bottom-up approach towards the promotion of sustainable development.

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) for Rio+20 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 Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education and UNU, as an unprompted initiative for higher education institutions in the run-up to the Rio+20 Conference. HESI consists in the signature of a common declaration for sustainable development, a presentation of the institution’s plan for sustainability for 2012-2015 and an invitation to submit voluntary commitments to the Rio+20 registry. Reported as a successful initiative resulting from Rio+20, **HESI facilitated commitments on behalf of 272 organizations from 47 countries to take an active role in building a more sustainable society, representing 36% of all commitments made in the Rio+20 Conference.**

HESI spurred commitments from a diversity of educational institutions, varying in their geographic location, size and prior experience with sustainable development. While 85% of the commitments were made by countries in the North, a range of countries in the South were also represented, including Nigeria, Colombia, India, Brazil, Ethiopia, Thailand, Bangladesh, South Africa, Guatemala, Ghana, Mexico and Kenya. A variety of schools, public and private, big and small, participated - with their level of experience in sustainable education varying across a wide spectrum, as demonstrated in their commitments. Some of the more experienced institutions committed to improving on existing efforts; others were just beginning and committed to joining the global movement.

As highlighted by the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), the United Nations has become increasingly involved in mobilizing higher education institutions towards ensuring a sustainable future. By enabling learning and disseminating knowledge for today and tomorrow, higher education serves as a key sector leading the implementation of education for sustainable development.

Reflecting on the achievements and challenges for education institutions throughout the decade, the International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Higher Education Beyond 2014, taking place this November in Nagoya, Japan will serve as a follow-up to the commitments made by HEIs in the Rio+20 conference. Organized by the United Nations University, in collaboration with PRME, UNESCO, UN DESA, UN Environment Programme and the International Association of Universities, the conference will examine progress from these commitments in order to enable higher education institutes to scale their transformative impact.

**Role of Rio+20 HESI**

In light of the upcoming UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, Aichi-Nagoya, a preliminary study was conducted to review the progress of the 272 commitments made by HEIs, and better understand the role of the Rio+20 commitments in facilitating this progress. Upon review of the public commitments and corresponding developments through a basic online search (further explained in the Appendix), a promising **73% of all pledging institutions were found to have made at least partial progress on their commitments**, either directly or indirectly. While the level of progress varied significantly among the schools, this figure provides an optimistic outlook that the majority of these schools are, in some shape or form, moving sustainable development forward.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise role of Rio+20 for each pledging higher education institution in their sustainability efforts, we can see trends from which we can extrapolate the enabling role that Rio+20 commitments have played in advancing schools towards sustainability. This was a particularly noticeable outcome for schools which were relatively new to the field of sustainability education. For these institutions, Rio+20 provided a platform to join this movement, notably by catalyzing or reinforcing participation in international sustainability networks from which they could learn and grow. For example, many of these institutions pledged to engage or continue to engage with international frameworks, such as PRME and the United Nations Global Compact. Following the conference, a considerable number of institutions pledging to join executed their commitments and are now new signatories in these platforms. By utilizing the existing reporting structures from these networks to comment on their sustainability efforts, these institutions are now empowered to be transparent in their sustainability initiatives. Even more, many signatories have detailed new initiatives post-conference in their sustainability report submissions, highlighting the progress made by these institutions following Rio+20.

Following its commitment to develop a strategy to implement PRME, the Riga International School of Economics and Business Administration in Latvia now works with the Social Entrepreneurship Development Fund to share knowledge on social entrepreneurship, and has received Bronze status from the Sustainability Index Project, as reported in their 2014 SIP report.

From a broader perspective, Rio+20 HESI has also achieved considerable progress in promoting awareness of the importance of higher education for sustainable development. Many schools publicized their involvement in Rio+20 in the sustainability, international or related sections of their websites, or have made explicit references to Rio+20 in their annual and/or sustainability reports. Even more, a few have held internal events in explicit connection to the conference. As publicizing the Rio+20 HESI commitments is critical for ensuring accountability for these pledging institutions, Rio+20 has enabled institutions not just commit, but also to hold themselves accountable to these commitments and spread knowledge of the mission of HESI to wider communities.

**Summary of Progress: Outcomes**

After reviewing the sustainability initiatives of all 272 institutions, it is clear that the large majority (73%)[[3]](#footnote-3) is advancing their sustainability efforts. While it is again difficult to discern whether all of these efforts were executed before or after Rio+20, or whether they would have been accomplished in the absence of Rio+20, it is nonetheless worthwhile to comment on the progress made by these institutions in order to identify trends, opportunities and challenges facing higher education institutions in promoting sustainable development.

While the quantity and depth of sustainability initiatives varies significantly across pledging institutions, there are noteworthy patterns in the types of outcomes and the implementation methodologies used to achieve these outcomes. In regards to the outcomes, the majority of institutions actively support sustainable development through education, research, operations and/or outreach programs.

*Education*

A large percentage of commitments sought to integrate sustainability into their curricula, and many of them are doing so. At a minimum level, most of these schools offer at least one stand-alone course with a focus on sustainability. While for the majority this course is listed as an elective or limited to its management or environmental department, a smaller percentage mandates a sustainability course across all programs and offers majors focusing on sustainability. A small minority of schools have integrated sustainability across all courses. These exemplary institutions have conducted holistic assessments of their current curricula, and from this evaluation, have worked to systematically embed sustainability into the core of all course offerings and programs. To facilitate faculty development, a number of schools also conduct training programs and have published resources on how to teach sustainability.

Committed to integrating sustainability into its curriculum, RMIT in Australia developed a university-wide project, *Learning and Teaching for Sustainability in 2013,* to advance curriculum and professional development. A Sustainability Audit of first-year courses was conducted, and a comprehensive range of resources to support sustainability learning and teaching are published on their website.

*Research*

In regards to research, a majority of the HESI institutions have pledged in some form to support research on sustainability. At a beginner level, most of these schools have highlighted faculty and/or student research publications on a topic relating to sustainability as accomplishments in this field, and mention sustainability as an objective of their research activities. Many maintain groups, departments, and even centers dedicated exclusively to promoting and coordinating research on sustainability. Among these, some offer funding, mentorship, fellowships and other incentives to engage both faculty and students in sustainability research.

Following its pledge to promote research on sustainability, India’s Teri University developed the Department of Business Sustainability to support research in sustainability.

*Operations*

Also prominent in many of the higher education institutions’ commitments in HESI was their pledge to green their operations. The great majority of institutions focused on environmental sustainability in their commitments, and ambitiously pledged to lower their carbon footprint by a concrete percentage by a set date. To date, most of these schools have implemented various initiatives to green their campus and the environment at large. Initiatives range from implementing recycling programs to offering bike-share services to planting 100 trees across campus. A sizeable number has developed and published environmental management plans and regularly report on their progress. Among the schools who report, many have demonstrated reductions in their carbon footprint. In addition, a few institutions have engaged in independent environmental auditing schemes, such as LEED and ISO 14000.

Richland College in the US, committing to implement energy efficiency projects and minimize its waste, incorporates environmental sustainability strategies into its strategic plan, which are evaluated monthly with results annually published. They continue to maintain a university-wide recycling program, and have reduced waste by 13,000 pounds since 2012.

*Outreach*

In line with their commitments, a vast amount of the pledging institutions have also engaged in innovative outreach projects to raise awareness of sustainable development. Many have hosted conferences, forums or workshops with a focus on sustainability, from the Transnet Program in Sustainable Development conferences organized by the Gordon Institute of Business Science in South Africa to Tongi University in China’s International Forum on Innovation and Sustainable Development. Some host competitions to fund student projects supporting sustainability. Even more, a few have dedicated days or weeks towards raising awareness on sustainability, such as the Universidad del Pacific in Ecuador’s annual Global Compact Support Week

**HESI and Beyond: Moving from Individual to Collective Outcomes**

On a larger scale, Rio+20 HESI prompted not just individual actions on behalf of higher education institutions, but also collective actions that were launched and are sustained by HESI organizers and endorsers. Notable examples include the Platform for Sustainability Performance in Education and the Sustainability Literacy Test.

The Platform for Sustainability Performance in Education, launched during the UNEP’s Governing Council in February 2013, is currently supported by the UNGC, PRME and UNESCO. This platform serves as a hub for sharing sustainability assessment tools from around the world in order to assist HEIs with the assessment, implementation and reporting of their institutional sustainability performance. Some of these tools are managed by HESI endorsers, such as CGE, CPU, ASHEE, EAUC and ACTS.

The Sustainability Literacy Test, supported by PRME, UNESCO, UNDP, UN DESCA and created in collaboration with other HESI endorsers, is a tool for higher education institutions across the globe to systematically assess the sustainability literacy of their students. In particular, the test assesses the level of knowledge in economic, social and environmental issues. To date, 255 universities from around the world use this test, and more than 24,000 students have taken it.

Following its commitment to develop a strategy to implement PRME, the Riga International School of Economics and Business Administration in Latvia now works with the Social Entrepreneurship Development Fund to share knowledge on social entrepreneurship, and has received Bronze status from the Sustainability Index project, as reported in their 2014 SIP report.

**Summary of Progress: Implementation Methodologies**

The number and diversity of achievements in sustainability made by higher education institutions is laudable and signifies the promise of higher education institutions in pushing the sustainability agenda forward. Similarly, the methodologies used to achieve these outcomes in many cases are commendable and vary substantially. The tools leveraged by these institutions primarily include strategic plans, working groups and reporting.

*Strategy*

Developing a strategic plan in order to achieve the desired sustainability outcomes was a common commitment among the Rio+20 HEIs. While many schools did publish individual strategies to achieve at least one of their sustainability outcomes on their websites, only some published comprehensive strategic plans systematically bringing together all strategies to achieve sustainability in the four outcome areas listed above. Among these strategies, a few listed concrete objectives, targets, key progress indicators, timelines, responsible persons/departments and/or other metrics to monitor the progress of their strategies. In developing the plans, a notable group performed comprehensive assessments and disseminated surveys to stakeholders in order to evaluate the institution’s current sustainability status and engage their communities in the decision-making.

*Working Groups*

A considerable number of institutions from Rio+20 HESI committed to organize sustainability working groups, tasked to carry out and oversee the school’s sustainability initiatives. As of today, many of these commitments have been executed. Some schools delegated these tasks to one person. For instance, the IEDC-Bled School of Management in Slovenia established the Coca-Cola Chair of Sustainable Development, dedicated to research, education and practice of sustainable value creation and who has developed deeper relations with Coca Cola University to promote CSR in corporate activities. However, most others had larger task forces typically consisting of a variety of stakeholders, including students, professors and faculty, and meeting on a consistent basis.

Fundação Dom Cabral in Brazil committed to continue operating its sustainability committee. To date, Sustainability and Social Inclusion Committee has overseen various social programs, such as the Dignity Program and Good Example Award.

*Reporting*

Most of the institutions committed to publish reports to showcase and monitor their progress in sustainability initiatives on a consistent, typically annual, basis. Some schools did publish various sustainability achievements on their website; however only a small percentage of institutions produced sustainability reports publically available on their website. Among these, many of the reports were in the form of Sharing Information on Progress (SIPs) and Communication on Progress (COPs) from PRME and GC signatories, respectively. A small few reported through other frameworks, such as the Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System (STARS) in North America or Green Plan in France. Additionally, a small amount of these reports used quantifiable metrics to communicate their progress.

**Concluding Remarks**

In sum, the progress made by the majority of higher education institutions following their commitments in Rio+20 HESI is substantial and deserves recognition. Through innovative, experimental and rigorous implementation methodologies, many higher education institutions have followed through on their commitments and have thus far made landmark achievements in promoting sustainability through education, research, operations and outreach. While it is difficult to comment on the exact role of the Rio+20 commitments in facilitating these achievements, we can conclude that to some degree, this conference provided an enabling role to these institutions. Even more, the conference facilitated the development of various initiatives to collectively mobilize higher education institutions towards sustainability, such as the Platform for Sustainability Performance in Education and the Sustainability Literacy Test.

Yet even among the vast progress, there remains considerable room for growth. Developments in the frequency and quality of sustainability reporting and holistic integration of sustainability across entire university curricula are examples of improvements that can enable institutions to build upon their contributions to education for sustainable development post 2015.

As the proposed Sustainable Development Goals of the Post-2015 era recognize the important role of education, higher education institutions’ involvement in sustainable development continues to be a critical part of the global development agenda. Looking forward to the upcoming International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development Conference in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, higher education institutions will have the unique opportunity to acknowledge the progress made from participants of HESI, as well as critically examine the challenges and collaboratively develop pathways to help achieve a more sustainable future.

**Appendix**

1. **Methodology of data analysis**

In order to determine whether an institution has demonstrated progress from their pledge in HESI, an internet search using key words of the commitment was conducted on the institution’s website and on Google. In the case that the institution was a PRME and/or GC signatory, their SIP and/or COPs were additionally reviewed. If there was at least one achievement published online either directly or indirectly related to the pledge, the institution was marked as having progress, or “Y”. In the case in which institutions pledged to “continue projects already underway” and the referring projects were unspecified, the institution’s website and other web presence were reviewed in search of any sustainability efforts. If some efforts were found, the institution was categorized as “Y”. If none were found, the institution’s progress was marked as unclear, or “U”. In addition, if for logistical, language, or website malfunctioning reasons the progress was not certain, the institution was labeled “U”. If the institution had no public information of achievements regarding their commitment, then this institution’s progress was labeled as “N”.

**2.0 Data Analysis**

**3.0 Number of Pledging HEI per Country**

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| --- | --- |
| Country | Number of Pledging HEI |
| Argentina | 2 |
| Armenia | 1 |
| Australia | 5 |
| Austria | 1 |
| Bangladesh | 3 |
| Belarus | 1 |
| Belgium | 3 |
| Brazil | 5 |
| Bulgaria | 1 |
| Burkina Faso | 1 |
| Canada | 2 |
| China | 5 |
| Colombia | 3 |
| Denmark | 1 |
| Ecuador | 2 |
| Egypt | 2 |
| Ethiopia | 1 |
| Finland | 6 |
| France | 61 |
| Germany | 6 |
| Ghana | 1 |
| Greece | 1 |
| Guatemala | 1 |
| India | 3 |
| Ireland | 1 |
| Italy | 18 |
| Japan | 11 |
| Kazakhstan | 1 |
| Kenya | 1 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 2 |
| Latvia | 1 |
| Lebanon | 1 |
| Lithuania | 1 |
| Mexico | 3 |
| Monaco | 1 |
| Netherlands | 3 |
| New Zealand | 2 |
| Nigeria | 4 |
| Norway | 1 |
| Philippines | 1 |
| Poland | 1 |
| Portugal | 4 |
| Romania | 1 |
| Russia | 8 |
| Serbia | 1 |
| Slovenia | 4 |
| South Africa | 3 |
| Spain | 17 |
| Sweden | 4 |
| Switzerland | 6 |
| Thailand | 1 |
| Turkey | 1 |
| UK | 15 |
| Ukraine | 2 |
| US | 34 |

**4.0 The commitment signed during Rio+20 HESI**



***Commitment to Sustainable Practices of***

***Higher Education Institutions on the Occasion of the***

***United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development***

***20-22 June 2012, Rio de Janeiro***

**“**As Chancellors, Presidents, Rectors, Deans and Leaders of Higher Education Institutions and related organizations, we acknowledge the responsibility that we bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development. On the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro from 20-22 June 2012, we agree to support the following actions:

* **Teach sustainable development concepts**, ensuring that they form a part of the core curriculum across all disciplines so that future higher education graduates develop skills necessary to enter sustainable development workforces and have an explicit understanding of how to achieve a society that values people, the planet and profits in a manner that respects the finite resource boundaries of the earth. Schools are also encouraged to provide sustainability training to professionals and practitioners;
* **Encourage research on sustainable development issues**, to improve scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of knowledge, including new and innovative technologies.
* **Green our campuses** by: i) reducing the environmental footprint through energy, water and material resource efficiencies in our buildings and facilities; ii) adopting sustainable procurement practices in our supply chains and catering services; iii) providing, sustainable mobility options for students and faculty; iv) adopting effective programmes for waste minimization, recycling and reuse, and v) encouraging more sustainable lifestyles.
* **Support sustainability efforts in the communities in which we reside,** working with local authorities and civil society to foster more liveable, resource-efficient communities that are socially inclusive and have small environmental footprints.
* **Engage with and share results through international frameworks**, such as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, led by UNESCO, the UN University system, the UN Academic Impact, the Global Compact, the UN-supported Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative and the UN Environment Programme’s Environmental Education and Training, in order to exchange knowledge and experiences and to report regularly on progress and challenges.“

1. Official website of HESI: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1073> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This report was developed by Kathleen Simon and Jonas Haertle of the UN Global Compact’s Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) secretariat as background for the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, November 2014. The PRME Secretariat is grateful for comments from UN DESA, UNEP, UNESCO, UNU and Jean-Christophe Carteron, HESI senior advisor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Appendix 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)