The IAU Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD)

Work Plan 2025-2026

Revised version

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Introduction

The IAU builds on more than three decades of experience in advocating for and engaging in sustainable development, notably with the adoption of the *IAU **Kyoto Declaration on Sustainable Development*** in 1993, urging higher education leaders and the HE community to take action for sustainable development. This was followed by the IAU ***Iquitos Statement on HESD*** in 2014 to connect knowledge and research systems worldwide. IAU contributed to the UNESCO Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UN-DESD, 2004 – 2015), was a partner to the UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP-ESD), and continues as **a key partner in the UNESCO ESD Net 2030** since 2020.

With the adoption of the UN Agenda *[Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.](#)*, **including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),** the IAU launched ***The IAU Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development*** (Cluster hereinafter) in 2018, a project that aims to mobilise Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for the UN SDGs. With over **70 Members**, the Cluster stimulates **numerous projects and partnerships**. The Cluster on HESD brings together HEIs to collaborate on innovative joint initiatives and partnerships, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The Cluster is led by 16 Lead Universities, each **engaging** more specifically **on one of the SDGs**. IAU leads the work on SDG 17 by fostering global HE partnerships. The coordinating 'Leads' collaborate with several '**Satellite' Members** within a **Subcluster** on a particular SDG, and initiate concrete projects across all goals. The Subclusters are encouraged to work across goals, disciplines, and cultures. HEIs engage with the SDGs in multiple ways, through teaching, research, leadership, and campus operations. The Cluster facilitates collaboration and promotes a whole-institution approach to sustainable development.

Mission

The Global IAU HESD Cluster aims to be **inclusive** and **open** to all Members who seek a network to exchange information on implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in higher education. Through collaboration, exchange, and joint research, the Cluster leverages higher education's contribution to sustainable development in **global** and **local** contexts. In line with this mission, the Cluster strives to be a leading global network of HEIs, higher education associations, and other related networks. The Cluster advocates for transformative change in HE policies and sustainable development planning, promotes diverse practices, fosters innovation, and serves as a forum for exchange and encouraging joint action.

OBJECTIVE OF THE CLUSTER

Under the overarching **[IAU Strategy 2022-2030](#)**, Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) is one of four key priorities of the IAU. The IAU Cluster on HESD networks promotes action towards the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. All **Member institutions** are considered **equal**, regardless of location, size, age, or mandate. **Connections** and **partnerships** between diverse institutions must be maintained and built. IAU believes this approach **triggers innovative approaches** to issues raised in the goals.

The Cluster advances universities' engagement with the SDGs. Through **teaching and learning**, **research**, **campus initiatives,** and **community engagement** projects, the Cluster's approach strives to have an impact that extends beyond the academic circle and into the broader communities.

The Cluster encourages a **holistic approach to the SDGs**. It aims to lead by example and encourage HEIs to take action for a more sustainable present and future.

Within the overarching goal of "Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN SDG Summit 2019), the Cluster has **two concrete objectives:**

1. First, to serve as a **resource and networking hub,** both for institutions already engaged in SD and those starting to engage with SD, to help address the SDGs locally and create innovative partnerships. HEIs turn to the Cluster for collaboration and guidance on best practices to advance the SDGs in local, national, and international contexts. This includes **facilitating work in institutions**, by proposing tools and providing support in various forms.
2. Second, the IAU Global Cluster reinforces IAU's **global voice for higher education and sustainable development**. IAU advocates for HESD at UNESCO, the UN, particularly at the High Level Political Forum, at IAU global Conferences, at Member workshops, and other local and regional platforms.

While recognizing the interrelatedness of global challenges, the Cluster focuses on the higher education sector and the following overarching key topics:

● UN 2030 Agenda and SDGs,
● Higher Education and Research
● Sustainable Internationalisation
● Partnerships

The list of Cluster leads and Satellite Institutions can be found here:
https://www.iau-hesd.net/index.php/IAU-Global-HESD-Cluster
The IAU Strategy 2022-2030 can be found here:
[iau_strategy_2030.pdf (iau-aiu.net)](#)

Work Plan

This working plan was discussed at the **IAU HESD Cluster Meeting**, which took place online on 27 September 2024 and includes input from the IAU Cluster Members and IAU Working Group on HESD. It underwent a review process coordinated by the IAU Secretariat with inputs from the IAU Cluster and IAU Board Working Group for HESD.

The Cluster works mainly at two levels:

- 16 HESD Cluster Lead universities, each leading one of the SDGs.
- Each SDG Lead institution works and advances projects relating to the SDG with Satellite Institutions and Observer Institutions.

IAU coordinates the overall project, providing assistance as needed to Subclusters and leading the work on SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals. IAU acts as a multiplier, working with and supporting international organisations, such as UNESCO, and the Lead Institutions. Together, the Lead and Satellite Institutions are reporting back to IAU on their actions.

In November 2023, the IAU introduced **Terms of Reference** which distinguishes between Satellite and Observer Institutions within the Cluster. Characteristics vary slightly between the two, mainly because Observer Institutions are non-Members of the IAU, unlike Satellite Institutions. It may be revised or updated every year per approval from the IAU Board HESD WG and IAU Secretariat. **The full Terms of Reference are available here** defining the responsibilities of Leads, Satellites, and Observers, the Procedures to join the Cluster, and more.
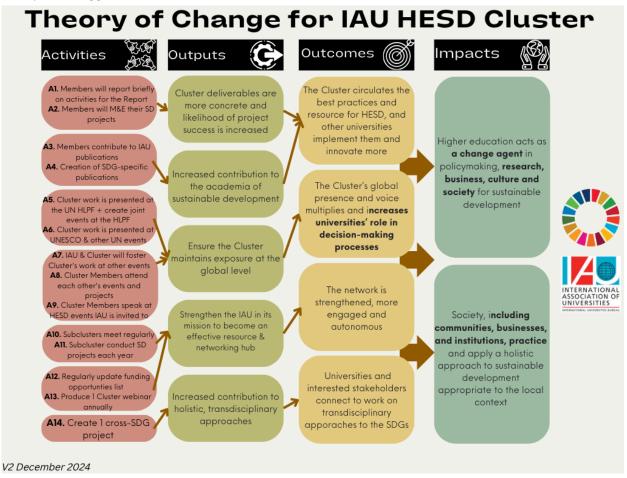
The term '**Cluster Members**' includes Leads and Satellites (and Observers).

Cross/trans-SDG partnerships are strongly encouraged, and many HEIs are active in more than one Subcluster. The separation into SDG teams is not supposed to create new "silo" approaches to sustainable development work. Rather, it should be seen as a method to ensure that all SDGs are being considered. Due to the diverse nature of the SDGs, each team will develop its own projects and strategies. **Joint initiatives** have been, are being, and will further be planned. The Cluster work involves HE leadership, academic staff and admin, and local partners.

THEORY OF CHANGE / ROADMAP

In an effort to have a stronger sense of direction for the IAU Global Cluster, a **theory of change[1,2]** is proposed by the IAU Secretariat. It visualizes what activities are envisioned for the Cluster to undertake, and the intended effects they will have in the short-term and long-term on our Cluster Members, IAU Members, the HE sector and society overall. It is subject to revision by the IAU HESD WG and Secretariat and open to suggestions from the Cluster.

Theory of Change for IAU HESD Cluster

Activities

A1. Members will report briefly on activities for the Report
A2. Members will M&E their SD projects

A3. Members contribute to IAU publications
A4. Creation of SDG-specific publications

A5. Cluster work is presented at the UN HLPF + create joint events at the HLPF
A6. Cluster work is presented at UNESCO & other UN events

A7. IAU & Cluster will foster Cluster's work at other events
A8. Cluster Members attend each other's events and projects
A9. Cluster Members speak at HESD events IAU is invited to

A10. Subclusters meet regularly
A11. Subcluster conduct SD projects each year

A12. Regularly update funding opportunties list
A13. Produce 1 Cluster webinar annually

A14. Create 1 cross-SDG project

Outputs

Cluster deliverables are more concrete and likelihood of project success is increased

Increased contribution to the academia of sustainable development

Ensure the Cluster maintains exposure at the global level

Strengthen the IAU in its mission to become an effective resource & networking hub

Increased contribution to holistic, transdisciplinary approaches

Outcomes

The Cluster circulates the best practices and resource for HESD, and other universities implement them and innovate more

The Cluster's global presence and voice multiplies and **increases universities' role in decision-making processes**

The network is strengthened, more engaged and autonomous

Universities and interested stakeholders connect to work on transdisciplinary approaches to the SDGs

Impacts

Higher education acts as **a change agent** in policymaking, **research, business, culture and society** for sustainable development

Society, including **communities, businesses, and institutions, practice** and apply a holistic approach to sustainable development appropriate to the local context

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1. [Definition](#) - a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or "filling in" what has been described as the "missing middle" between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved (Center for Theory of Change, n.d.).
2. Please consult this [concept note](#) by the UN Development Group Latin America and the Caribbean which offers another definition of the ToC, its terminology within the UN, how to develop a ToC, examples, and other sources to learn more about the idea of a ToC (UNDG LAC, 2016).

AREAS OF ACTIVITY

Output 1 – Cluster deliverables are more concrete and the likelihood of project success is increased.

- Activity 1: Every year, Cluster Members will report briefly on their activities, which is compiled and published as a Cluster report by IAU Secretariat (see 2023-2024 Activity Report).
- Activity 2: Cluster Members will monitor and evaluate their projects related to sustainable development.

Indicators - A timely and quality Cluster report, regular check-ins and updates between IAU and Cluster Members concerning Member projects.

Output 2 – Increased contribution to the academia of sustainable development.

- Activity 3: Cluster Members are invited to contribute to IAU publications to diversify the content on sustainable development for the IAU network.
- Activity 4: IAU Cluster Leads, with support from the IAU Secretariat, are encouraged to propose and lead on SDG-specific publications, sharing their expertise with the IAU network, academia, and global society.

Indicators - Number and quality of published contributions from Cluster Members per year, the initiation and taking initiative to contribute or co-draft an SDG-specific publication

Output 3 – Ensure the Cluster maintains exposure at the global level.

- Activity 5: The IAU and Cluster will present Cluster initiatives at the annual UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Cluster Members are invited to collaborate with the IAU for joint events at the HLPF. IAU can provide accreditation to its Members due to its ECOSOC status with the UN (for UN conferences).
- Activity 6: The Cluster work will be presented at UNESCO events and other UN and Member events of relevance to HESD.
- Activity 7: The IAU and Cluster will foster the Cluster's work at conferences, seminars, and other events. Cluster Leads will report briefly on events attended to strengthen network initiatives.
- Activity 8: Cluster Members will invite each other to attend and take part in projects, initiatives, and events.
- Activity 9: Cluster Members are invited to speak at HESD events the IAU is invited to take part in.

Indicators - Confirmation of IAU/ Cluster's proposals to present on Cluster initiatives at the HLPF, the creation of side/ joint events at the HLPF, number of times the Cluster is presented at UN events, number of out-of-network events attended by Cluster Members, number of in-network events attended by Cluster Members, number of presentations that Cluster Members give at events IAU is invited to

Output 4 – Strengthen the IAU in its mission to become an effective resource & networking hub.

- Activity 10: Subclusters will organize meetings and maintain regular contact, with or without the presence of the IAU Secretariat.
- Activity 11: Subclusters will regularly conduct sustainable development projects each year.

- Activity 12: The IAU will regularly update the funding opportunities list for Cluster Members.
- Activity 13: The production of at least one Cluster webinar annually.

Indicators - Establishment of regular Subcluster meetings, X amount of projects per Subcluster per year,

Output 5 – Increased contribution to holistic, transdisciplinary approaches

- Activity 14: Cluster Members are encouraged to collaborate and create a cross-SDG/ cross-cluster project, event, or initiative.

Indicators - Confirmation of interest and initiation of a cross-SDG initiative

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are recommended for Cluster Members to carry out, but are not to be measured or tracked in any substantial manner.

- inform leadership of their institution about their engagement in the IAU HESD Cluster on a regular basis, IAU can also issue certificates and letter to support this.
- IAU Cluster Members are invited to test, monitor and evaluate tools for what?
- Activity 5: Cluster Members are invited to jointly issue position papers and recommendations on tools for sustainable development.
- invited to review IAU publications and engage in other IAU activities.
- Suggest funding opportunities and actively seek support from the institution (financial and time resources)
- submit ideas, input, collaborate on events and proposals on an ad-hoc basis
- etc

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

It is recognized that the IAU Global Cluster on HESD Work Plan (2024-2026) must remain actionable and feasible. With this in mind, the IAU Secretariat has revised this work plan to be more concrete, objective, and outlined in a way that provides a logical pathway for progress. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the Cluster faces limitations. Below are three key areas that pose challenges for the Cluster.

- **Operational Autonomy:** At its core, the Subclusters are composed of separate institutions with varying capacities to implement and coordinate projects. Additionally, the IAU Secretariat also has limited human resources. As such, collaborating on deliverables may be a challenge. The IAU Secretariat aims to foster transparent communication with Subclusters to provide operation support as much as possible while equally empowering them to take initiative.
- **Limited Funding:** The Cluster is constrained by a lack of funding and resources for projects. The IAU, as the Lead for SDG 17, aims to maintain existing partnerships and create new partnerships that may open up new avenues for funding. The IAU is also responsible for *Activity 12,* the identification of third-party funding opportunities that may finance Cluster projects.
- **Turnover:** Like all institutions, the Cluster Members are not immune to staff changes. These can create a disconnect between sub-clusters and the IAU Secretariat, impeding project plans. The

IAU hopes that by maintaining strong connections with Cluster Members, the Cluster can minimize the amount of blockades brought by transitions. The introduction of the Terms of Reference also allows flexibility for Members to restructure and realign as needed.

COMMUNICATIONS

The IAU communicates regularly with the IAU HESD Cluster Leads via monthly updates on IAU activities, opportunities to be engaged, and activities from other Cluster Members that are open for participation. These also include information or requests for feedback for the Cluster Leads on IAU initiatives. The Leads, in turn, report back to IAU and are invited to actively share their initiatives for publication on IAU channels. Also, the Leads are responsible for communicating with Satellites and sharing information distributed by IAU, if of relevance for the specific Subcluster. Some platforms and possible IAU channels include:

- IAU Cluster Webinars with a focus on HESD are being offered regularly;
- The IAU website and the HESD portal reports on Cluster work highlighting the HEIs work;
- The IAU monthly Newsletter highlights achievements and share information;
- A LinkedIn group for the Cluster to facilitate information-sharing;
- An online Drive with IAU Cluster Resources is created (internal, please email i.toman@iau-aiu.net for access).
- An online Sheet with funding opportunities/ calls for proposals for sustainable development (internal, please email i.toman@iau-aiu.net for access).

ANNEX I – IDEAS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

Please use the following link to access the Annex containing ideas from Cluster Leads and Members of future projects for the Cluster (to be updated regularly):

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Kf42XpP7cu8qKVW5LW_zYIEMNIK5mQfTcPeoxL-Zzhc/edit?usp=sharing