

# The SDG Accord

*The University and College Sector's Collective Response to the Global Goals*

## **Annual report to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as part of the SDG Accord mandatory institutional reporting**

**New York, 11th July 2018**

**Global universities, colleges and students leading  
delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals**

**Led by a Global Alliance of university  
and college sustainability networks**



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## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# Global universities and colleges leading delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

“All the SDGs come down to education...” — Malala Yousafzai

## Foreword

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect a powerful global ‘Call to Action’ and a collective ambition to work together to address the grand challenges of our time.

The SDG Accord was launched by EAUC<sup>1</sup> under a year ago, and reflects a coming together of the world’s universities and colleges to deliver against the SDGs. To date, the SDG Accord has attracted some 600 signatories from over 60 countries, with additional endorsement from 75 global education sector networks. The SDG Accord highlights the critical role that further and higher education institutions have in acting across all the goals, and not being limited to Goal 4. What universities and colleges do matters to our shared ambition to create a more equitable and inclusive society, and be responsible custodians of our planet.

Central to the SDG Accord is a unique Global Alliance of the world’s higher and further education sustainability networks, coming together in a concerted action, ready to collaborate and empower the sector on its critical journey. Together, we believe that the higher and further education sectors play a key role in enabling the world’s 200 million students to emerge as sustainability change-agents. Further, the sector’s role in undertaking research and supporting innovation, alongside lifelong learning, underpin a global knowledge-based economy.

Inclusion is at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its powerful statement that we will ‘leave no one behind’<sup>2</sup>. It is here that the SDG Accord champions the contribution every student, graduate, alumni, professor, researcher, teacher, administrator, leader and manager can play. And this local action, connected as a global SDG movement, means that the heads of universities and colleges who sign the SDG Accord on behalf of their institution then move to account publicly on their progress.

This first Report is the result of deep engagement with Accord signatories, and reflects progress and challenges to date on behalf of the sector. Through our partnership with the UN members of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative<sup>3</sup>, this Report will be presented annually at each UN High Level Political Forum until 2030.

We wish to express our admiration of those pioneering institutions who have led the way in signing up to the SDG Accord. Of these, over half plan to report their SDG progress formally next year, with 80% prioritising engaging students more in their SDG activities. Today’s students are tomorrow’s leaders and change-agents, and the SDG Accord reflects the recognition of our sector’s unique position and responsibility to contribute to the realisation of all the SDGs through research, campuses, education and lifelong learning.

<sup>1</sup>Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges, the UK and Ireland’s membership organisation supporting sustainability in Universities and Colleges. [www.eauc.org.uk](http://www.eauc.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/08/505552-ban-hails-un-member-states-agreement-peoples-agenda-end-poverty-promote>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi>

## About the SDG Accord

The SDG Accord was launched in September 2017. Initiated by the UK and Ireland based Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC), the SDG Accord is a collective response to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the world's universities and colleges. Led by a Global Alliance of the world's university, college and student sustainability networks, the Accord is a worldwide partnership – representing approximately 64 institutions and reaching 1.28 million students.

The Accord asks signatories to make a commitment to embed the SDGs into their education, research, leadership, operations, administration and engagement activities. Reflecting the “leave no one behind” approach, while anyone in an institution can sign the Accord as an individual, for an institution to formally endorse the Accord it must be signed by the most senior person within that institution, to ensure there is institutional accountability for progress. The Accord is a public declaration of an institution's commitment to sharing and reporting on their progress towards the SDGs – giving rich insight into the actions undertaken by higher and further education and their outcomes in our communities and the world at large.

Universities and colleges occupy a unique societal position – they are powerful influencers of the next generation of leaders, professionals, artists and scholars. They also hold significant financial and cultural assets, and are often the bedrock of strong communities. While the sustainability journey of each institution will reflect their unique context, it is clear that connecting them one to another through the SDG Accord offers the opportunity for scaling of impact. The SDG Accord provides a platform to come together in a movement, to inspire, celebrate and advance the critical role that education has in delivering the SDGs, and present the impact of signatories in a coherent Report for use by the UN, governments, business and wider society.

## SDG Signatories

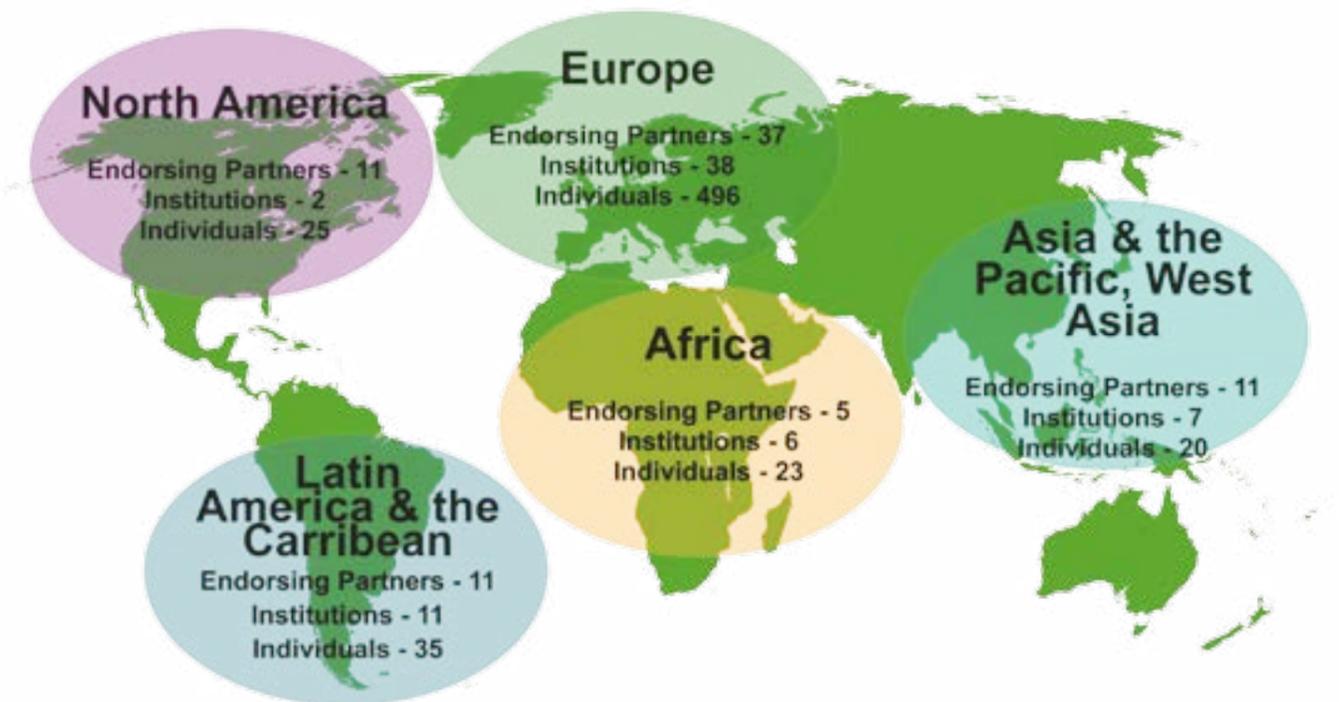
There are four different types of signatory: institution, individual, supporting organisation and students' organisation. All signatories are encouraged to follow the principles outlined below, but only institutions are required to.

“...as leaders or individual practitioners, academics, students or researchers, we will:

- Align all major efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals, targets and indicators, including through our education, research, leadership, operational and engagement activities;
- Aim to involve members from all key stakeholder groups in this endeavour, including students, academics, professional staff, local communities and other external stakeholders;
- Collaborate across cities, regions, countries and continents with other signatory institutions as part of a collective international response;
- Using our own unique ways, inform, share our learning and account to both local and global communities our progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals;
- Annually report to the UN High Level Political Forum ‘how does my institution contribute to the Goals and what more can we do?’”

## How global is the SDG Accord?

There are currently 599 signatories to the SDG Accord across 63 countries.



## Creating SDG resources

### Case study: UCSI University (Kuala Lumpur Campus), Malaysia SDGs – Is Malaysia Prepared?

UCSI University has undertaken a huge initiative to implement SDGs across their campus and local community. Through its three year road map, the university encourages and strategically integrates learning, training and practising of SDGs by empowering them as advocates and change makers. The university provides a platform to share knowledge, resources, and opportunities and also provides a global platform that facilitates networking, learning and sharing of experiences. Some key examples are:

- In December 2017, UCSI University Sarawak Campus received conditional approval for a Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) from United Nations University for Kuching region
- In March 2018, UCSI University hosted the SDG Conference for the first time with the theme ‘SDGs – Is Malaysia Prepared?’
- From April to June 2018, SDGs Secretariat Office, Steering Committee and later Working Committee were formed
- In July 2018, UCSI University will be holding SDG Week for campus community
- Launching of an online platform called “My SDG Step” for university staff and students to share stories on how they relate the goals with their daily activities

Find out more about it here: <http://sdg.ucsiuniversity.edu.my/>

## Part I

# Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord

### Methodology

We asked the 64 SDG Accord institutional signatories from across the world to report on their work with the SDGs between the 20th April and 25th June 2018. Of those asked, 37 institutions submitted reports. Institutions were spread across 11 countries, with those in the United Kingdom making up two thirds. The survey required sign-off from the most senior member of staff i.e. President, Vice-Chancellor, Rector or Principal. Submitting institutions were all higher and further education institutions, but with great variety in size and scope. Those undertaking the reporting were encouraged to consult holistically across their institution to capture report data.

This is an annual reporting process and will feed in directly to the UN High Level Political Forum each year.

### Summary findings

This is the inaugural reporting year and it is clear that most institutions are at early stages with the SDGs, with a few pathfinding institutions leading the way.

### Key findings:

- Just under two thirds (62%) said their institutions commitment to the SDGs was either Good or Very Good
- However, only a quarter (24%) formally report on their SDG work
- Of those that do not yet formally report on the SDGs, over half (51%) plan to next year
- Nearly three quarters (72%) can supply informal evidence of the work they are doing towards the SDGs
- The SDGs that these institutions have committed to the most at this stage are Education (Goal 4), Gender Equality (Goal 5) and Climate Action (Goal 13). On the other end of the scale, the Goals mostly likely not to have been addressed yet were Life Below Water (Goal 14) and Zero Hunger (Goal 2)
- The most common areas in which institutions had started to embed the SDGs were teaching and curriculum and engagement activities, while the least likely area for the SDGS to be embedded was in research
- In the next 1-2 years, the most commonly outlined step for institutions to take was to engage students with the SDGs
- By far, the biggest challenge to engaging with the SDGs which institutions reported was a lack of staff capacity.

## Promoting in research

### Case Study: University of Aalto, Finland

#### Embedding the SDGs in research

In 2017, Aalto University launched the Aalto Sustainability Hub to bring together researchers of various fields and promote sustainability throughout the university's operations. The SDGs are a core element of this work, and the university has started to track the embedding of sustainable development in research and publications. In 2017, sustainable development was the topic of 12% of all publications at Aalto.

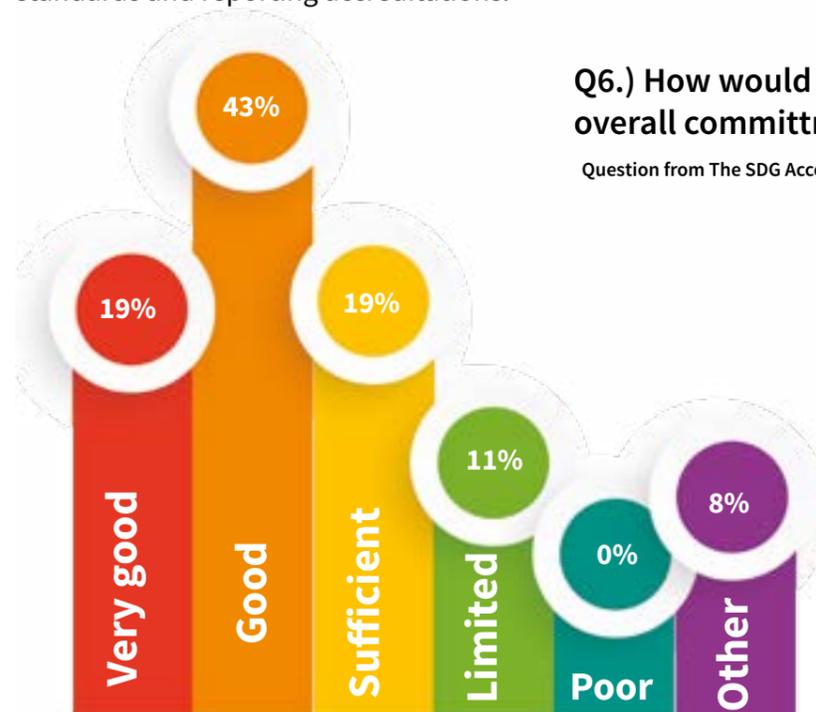
Find out more here: [www.aalto.fi/sustainability](http://www.aalto.fi/sustainability)

## Part I

# Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord

### Current Reporting

Very few institutions stated that they formally reported on the SDGs. This matches with much of the feedback we receive in which institutions express that they are currently overburdened with reporting in the education arena, and there is little coherence in the vying performance improvement tools, quality standards and reporting accreditations.



### Q6.) How would you describe your institutions overall commitment to the SDGs?

Question from The SDG Accord: Reporting 2018 Survey

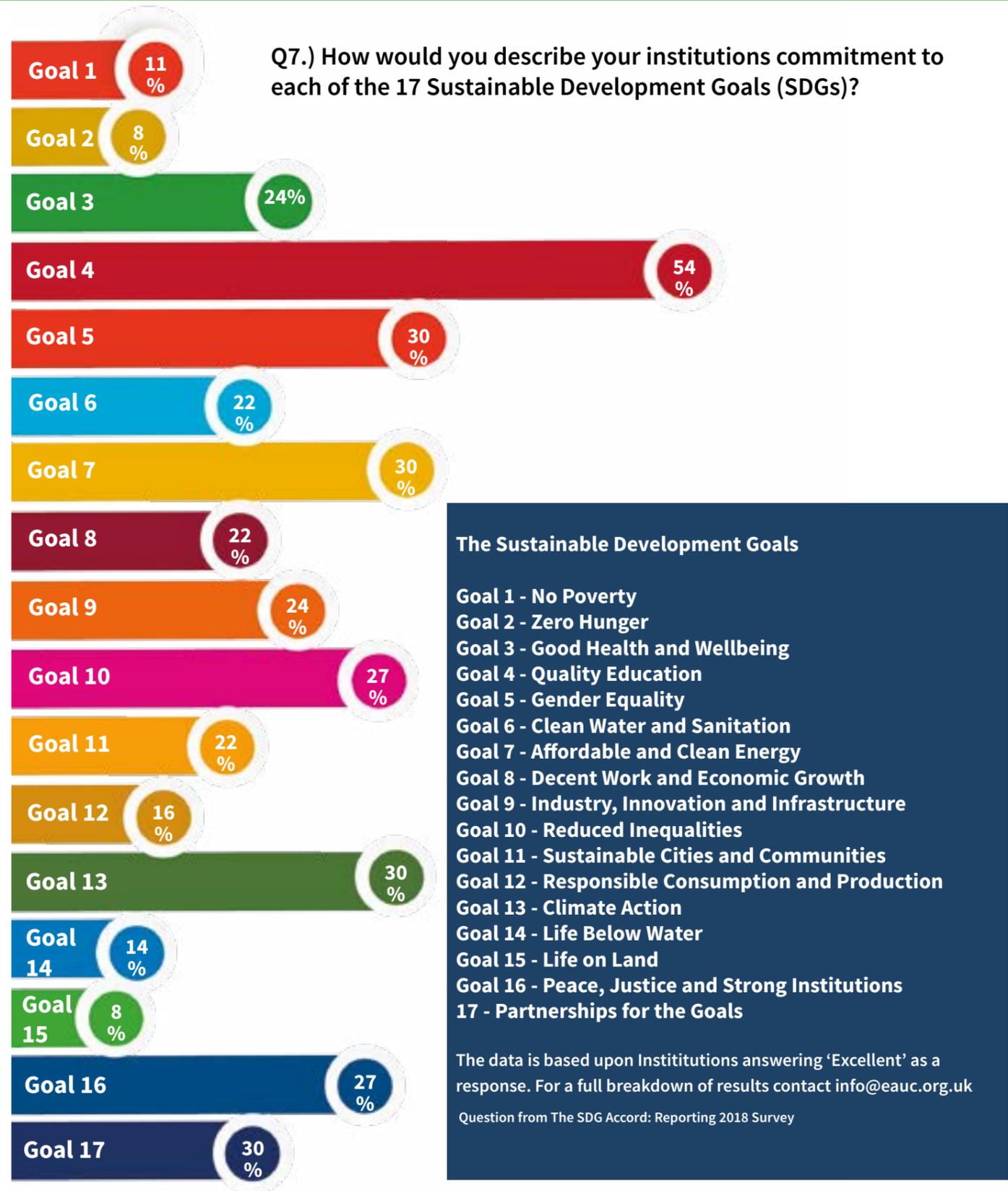
### Progress on Individual Goals

To gain more detail about the Goals individually, we asked institutions to describe their commitment to each of the SDGs. Encouragingly, the Goal that the most institutions rated themselves as excellent on, was Goal 4: Education. The second Goals most likely to be committed to were Gender Equality (Goal 5) and Climate Action (Goal 13) both with 70% rating themselves as Very Good or Excellent. On the other end of the scale, the Goal least likely to have been addressed yet was Life Below Water, with a third (32%) stating they had not addressed it yet. On the whole though, just under three quarters of reporting institutions had made a start on addressing all of the Goals - highlighting their recognition that they have a role to play in all of the Goals, not just Goal 4. See next page for graph.

“ We have much to offer in contributing to the Goals by providing education, working with business and enterprise, the impact of our research, and through promoting health and wellbeing in the communities with which we work. We have put in place a new framework which will channel and measure our current efforts in order to develop them further, feed into the SDGs and related challenges, and achieve greater impact. ”

Coventry University, UK, Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Latham. SDG Accord Signatory

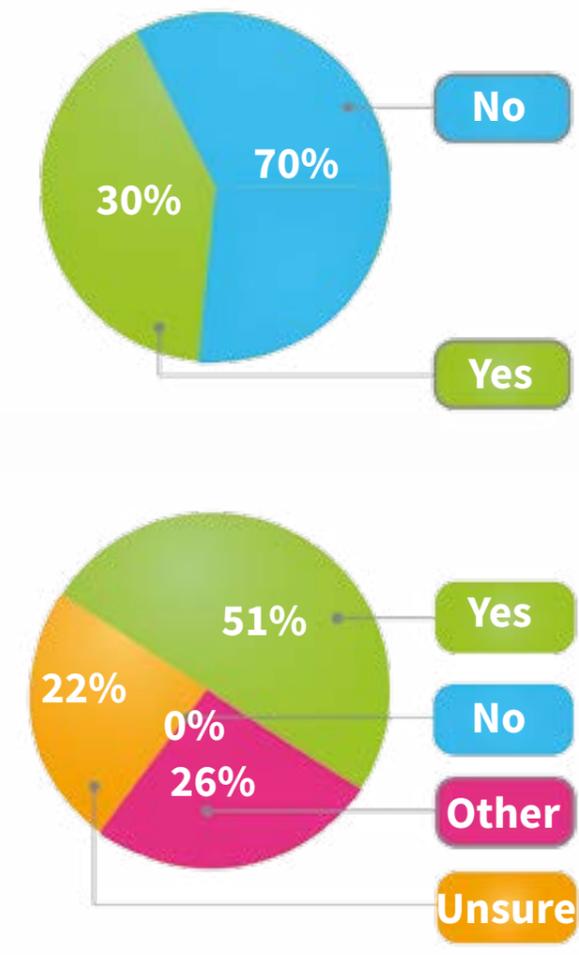
**Part I**  
**Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord**



**Part I**  
**Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord**

**Current reporting cont.**  
 However, over three quarters of the institutions who reported on the SDG Accord provided informal evidence to support the work they do on the SDGs. The type of evidence submitted includes overarching sustainability reports with implications of SDG work, websites with SDG orientated initiatives and various sustainability frameworks, i.e. Sustainability Leadership Scorecard which maps against the SDGs, and STARS which plans to.

There is huge promise on the reporting front too, with just over half (51%) saying next year they plan to formally report. The SDG Accord looks to be a serious driver for this reporting, and the engagement and discussion the reporting prompts within institutions is fundamental to encouraging deeper engagement with the SDGs. Consequently, many other mapping and accreditation tools are now being pushed to incorporate mapping of the SDGs as well.



Q8.) Do you formally report on your SDG work?

Q9.) If not, do you plan to next year?

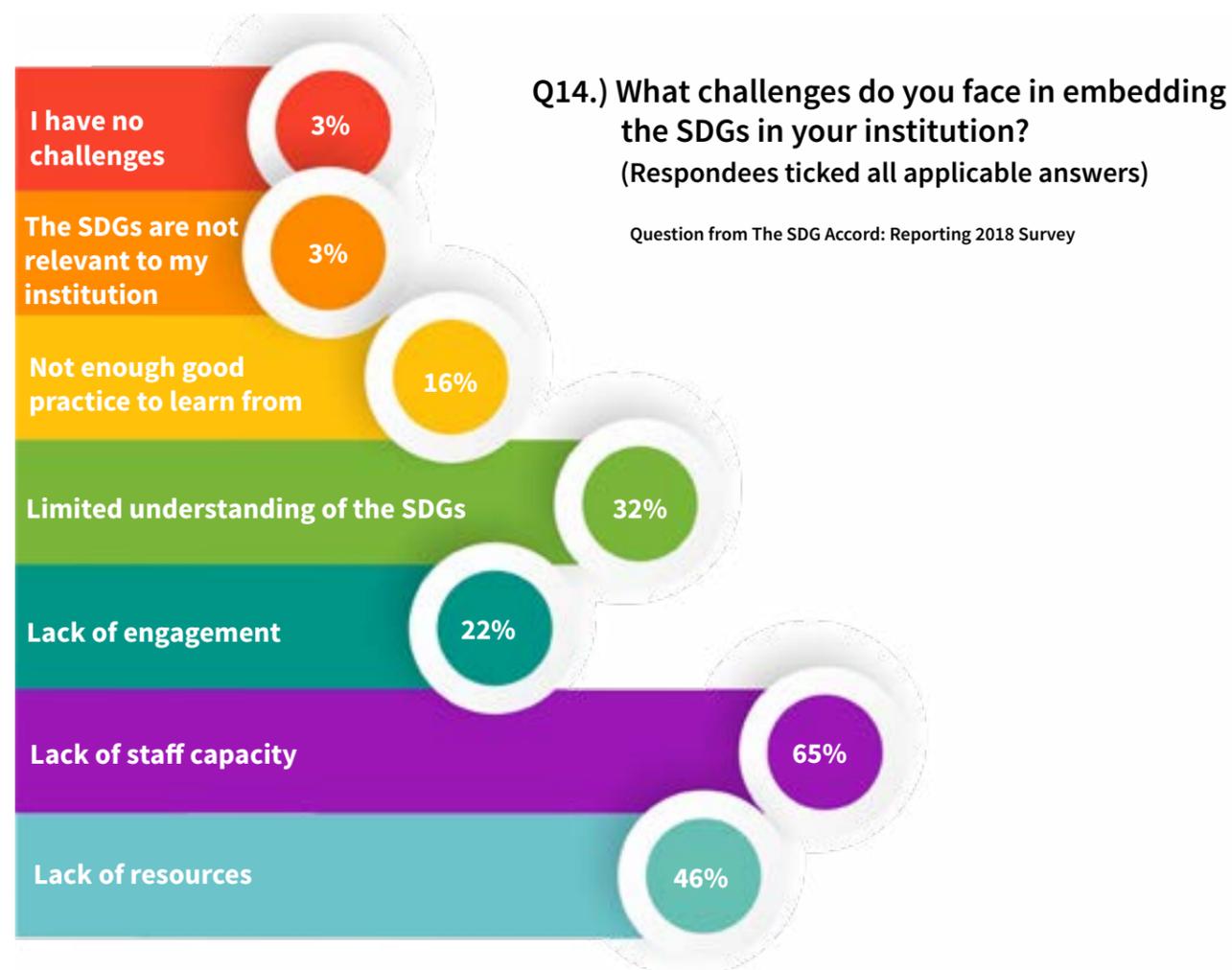
Questions from The SDG Accord: Reporting 2018 Survey

## Part I

# Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord

### Next Steps for Institutions

Over 80% of respondents said the next thing they were planning to do on the SDGs was to engage students more. This reflects the understanding that educators are in a unique position to influence the next generation on sustainable development, and they are taking this responsibility seriously by prioritising it. It also shows recognition that the ‘bottom upwards’ approach can be effective in driving change.



## Part I

# Progress report from the heads of universities and colleges who have signed the SDG Accord

The second thing institutions were most likely to do next was to collaborate with other institutions on the SDGs. This highlights the importance of the SDG Accord as a platform for institutions to share learning and discuss progress, and the value of the work of the different networks represented in the Global Alliance in supporting collaboration both nationally and internationally.

The third most likely step was: ‘We plan to discuss the SDGs at an executive level’. Over 70% of institutions stated this, showing the importance placed on having senior buy-in and top-down leadership as well. It was commonly reported that the SDG Accord has been a driver for deepening senior-level engagement with sustainability issues, and thus progress on the SDGs within the institution as a whole.

### Challenges

By far, the biggest challenge institutions reported was a lack of staff capacity, with 65% reporting this as an issue. The second biggest issue was a lack of resources. These are common concerns for sustainability leads within further and higher education institutions when asked about challenges within their roles. When given an opportunity to explain this in the context of the SDG Reporting, many said they lacked a framework for the SDGs which proved problematic, and that they struggled to integrate the SDGs into what they were already doing, which would be the most viable route in for them.

## Engaging with students

### Case study: University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom

#### Student-led global goals festival pop-up

Events Management and Performing Arts students at the University of Gloucestershire delivered a pop-up event exploring the Sustainable Development Goals as part of Cheltenham Jazz Festival. The event recorded over 800 interactions with visitors, including many families, and over 250 children completing the experience. Students working in teams developed unique interactive pop-ups, choosing 7 of the 17 Global Goals to provide an integrated journey through sustainability ideas and practice. The journey involved fun activities such as arts and crafts, mini golf, planting, an immersive ocean plastics experience, and a treasure trail. Children were given ‘passports’ and encouraged to collect stamps by visiting each of the pop-up activities to gain rewards. This engagement activity simultaneously improved awareness of the SDGs in the university students as well as the wider community.

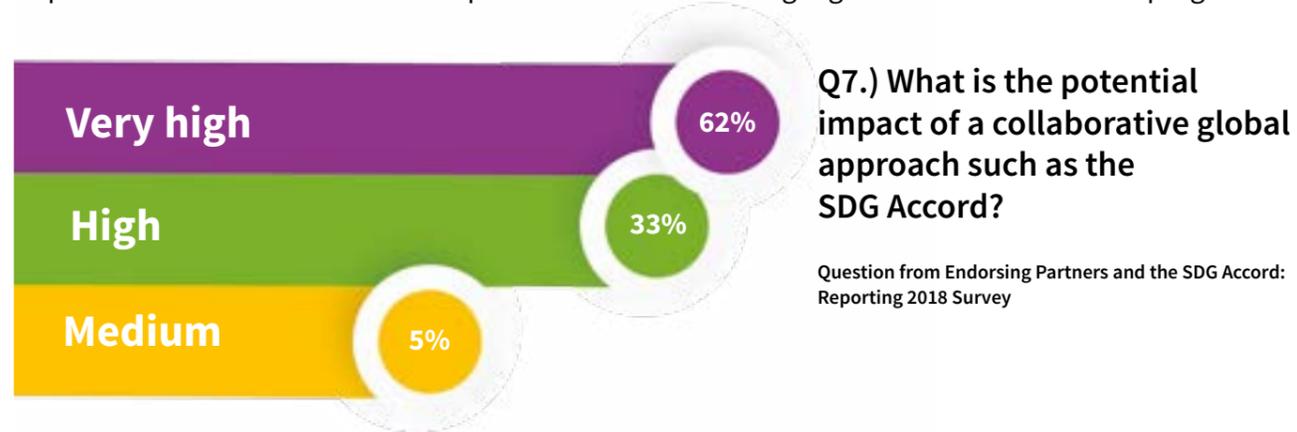
Find out more here: [www.sustainability.glos.ac.uk](http://www.sustainability.glos.ac.uk)

## Part 2 Progress report from SDG Accord Endorsing partners

The role of Endorsing Partners within the SDG Accord has been integral. The Accord is supported by 74 global Endorsing Partners, with an estimated combined institutional membership of 6000. This is a hugely powerful and unique partnership and shows how effective Goal 17 can be in action. We asked 21 of our Endorsing Partners about why they are supporting the SDG Accord, and there was a general consensus in responses. Most organisations said a variant of: ‘Because we believe that the SDGs will not be achieved without the commitment of the education sector’.

A huge majority (88%) of Partners said having the SDG Accord as a collaborative global approach to the SDGs for post-16 education was either ‘extremely important’ or ‘very important’. An even bigger majority (95%) said the potential impact of a collaborative global approach like the Accord was ‘High’ or ‘Very High’.

The importance of SDG Accord signatories sharing their learning on the SDGs was unanimous across all the Partners. It is this necessity that the SDG Accord is addressing, as it has created and facilitated multiples ways to share this learning globally. By sharing, the sector is then in a more powerful position to present a coherent and united response to the SDGs that highlights its commitment and progress.



### Embedding the SDGs in the curriculum Case Study: University of Kent, United Kingdom

‘FutureProof’ - A consistent, valuable and flexible culture change project

FutureProof is an initiative that looks at how staff and students can help deliver a University of the future. By challenging each department to review their impacts against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, FutureProof aims to inspire individuals, departments and the whole University community to take action in ensuring that their estate, curriculum and students are ready for the future. FutureProof provides a mechanism for embedding sustainability into Departmental/University objectives; supports existing goals; and provides solutions to current higher education challenges.

Find out more about it here: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/estates/sustainability/futureproof/index.html>

## Part 3 Student awareness and interest in the SDGs

Students are the change makers of the future, and the reasons our higher and further education institutions exist. They should be given an education that enables them to put a stop to the injustices of the world, and truly develop this world sustainably. Institutional signatories of the SDG Accord have confirmed that their students are engaged with much of their Global Goals work – but that overall awareness among students remains low.

Accord Endorsing partners the National Union of Students (NUS), based in the UK and supported by partners from around the world, have been polling students studying predominantly in the UK, Austria, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Denmark, France and Germany about their awareness and interest in the SDGs, and the findings have been very informative. The research was carried out in March 2018, and received 3543 responses.

Polling found that 40% have heard of the SDGs and know what they’re about, 32% have heard of them but don’t know what they’re about, and 25% say they have never heard of the SDGs. While a staggering 91% agree that sustainable development is something all universities and colleges should actively incorporate and promote and nearly three quarters (71%) said issues covered by the SDGs should be incorporated and promoted in all courses. This demonstrates that students are very supportive and keen for their institution to be involved when aware of the SDGs .

#### Some of the findings are:

- 82% agree with the statement ‘sustainable development is something I would like to learn more about’.
- 40% rated their place of study as good or very good in terms of the action taken to limit its negative impacts on society and the environment
- 43% rated their place of study as good or very good in terms of the opportunities provided to students to help limit the institution’s negative impacts on society and the environment
- 88% would opt for a job with a starting salary 5% lower than average to work in a company with a good social and environmental record, and 61% would make the same choice for a job with a starting salary 15% lower than average.

For more information about this research, it will be published online at: [www.sustainability.nus.org.uk/our-research](http://www.sustainability.nus.org.uk/our-research)

“ A little less conversation, a little more action ”  
— Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg

## Part 4 Recommendations and conclusion

### To the UN

1. Recognise the SDG Accord and the Global Alliance of university and college sustainability networks as a formal Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) SDG enabling partner
2. Endorse and communicate the important role higher and further education makes in contributing to delivery across all the SDGs (not just SDG 4)
3. Seek ways to convene tertiary education stakeholders and bring to wider attention examples of best practice from universities and colleges
4. Call on country members to mandate the embedding of Education for Sustainable Development and whole-institution university and college sustainability assessment and formally report on it
5. Enable the UN organisational members of the HESI to more regularly communicate, coordinate and host an annual cross system event in partnership with the Global Alliance
6. Create a mechanism to fund international collaborative interdisciplinary research opportunities in and between universities and colleges on the SDGs.

### To All Universities and Colleges

1. Sign the SDG Accord at a senior leadership level
2. Collaborate with your local Accord Endorsing Partner and contribute to the national and international repository of SDG Accord learning
3. Report formally internally and externally on SDG progress through the SDG Accord Reporting process
4. If your institution undertakes research, change the research application to necessitate researchers' outlining which of the SDGs the work contributes towards
5. If your institution looks to update or begin new processes, incorporate the SDGs. Particularly strategies, policies and the updates to the curriculum or course review process
6. Look for innovative ways to increase staff and student capacity to address the SDGs.

### To Students

1. Sign the SDG Accord
2. Start a conversation with your university or college and ensure the SDGs are being integrated into your course and/or research, as well as wider operational and engagement activities
3. Be the change you want to see.

### To Accord Endorsing Partners

1. Encourage your members to sign the SDG Accord and facilitate their national and international knowledge exchange
2. Integrate the SDGs into the tools, standards and accreditations you control
3. Create new resources and services to support your members to engage more staff and students in the SDGs, and create new approaches to SDG research
4. Create more opportunities for national and international SDG collaborations across other networks which are part of the Global Alliance.

## Part 4 Recommendations and conclusion

### Conclusion

This research identifies the critical first steps that universities and colleges are taking to play their part in realising the Sustainable Development Goals. It highlights the optimism and commitment within the sector, and awareness of a hugely rewarding path towards equality and prosperity available to the world if we incorporate them fully into the journey.

Institutions are keen to do more. Most students think universities and colleges should actively promote and move towards implementation of the SDGs through their teaching, research and operations. Sector support networks believe that the SDGs will not be achieved without the commitment of the education sector, given their unique skills and role in society. This must be listened to and acted upon.

There is an opportunity to inspire and show the world's 200 million higher and further education students why the Global Goals are so relevant and important to their lives and careers. The SDG Accord is engaging globally, and creating a collaborative platform to support shared learning and innovative initiatives - but it needs more support.

We would urge the UN, member states, further and higher education institutions and students to read our recommendations and heed their advice. Work with us to further this agenda - the potential for impact is limitless. Together, we can achieve great things.



“ Ours can be the first generation to end poverty – and the last generation to address climate change before it is too late. ”  
Former UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon

# Accord Supporters and Endorsing Partners



Sign up here: [www.sdgaccord.org.uk](http://www.sdgaccord.org.uk)