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The UNEP Sustainable University Framework

Defining a sustainable university and creating a global pathway to recognising and becoming one.





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1. What is a sustainable university?

Higher education has always been at the frontier of new thinking and practice in the world, but with the environmental challenges growing ever steeper, the purpose of Universities needs to be re-imagined.

UNEP is inviting all Higher Education partners to become a sustainable university.

One which educates global citizens as to how they can play a role in supporting sustainable development in their lives, careers and wider life choices. Such an institution will also research and offer insight on how to overcome urgent societal challenges and role model possible solutions that can be taken forward by other actors in the world. It not only works to reduce the environmental, economic and social footprints of its operations, but it will seek to break new ground by putting back more into society and the environment more than it takes out as a carbon net-positive actor in its community. It does this through making sustainability a central priority, by both inspiring and empowering students, faculties and staff to act.

The value of sustainability university networks

Across the world, students, academics and university networks have pioneered programmes, tools and assessment systems to inspire, challenge and support universities to become test-beds and role-models of sustainability. Frameworks to self-assess and report sustainability performance are often the most valuable tools to both stretch high-achieving institutions and present entry points for institutions that are taking first steps toward sustainability.

Successful Frameworks include STARS - Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System produced by AASHE in North America, the Unit-Based Sustainability Assessment Tool run in Africa, the Assessment System for Sustainable Campus run by Hokkaido University for CAS-Net Japan and the Sustainability Leadership Scorecard led by EAUC in the UK and Ireland.

Other networks achieve similar framework results using different tools such as charters e.g. the Sustainable Campus Charter led by ISCN, national sustainability assessments such as ARIUSA for Latin American countries and signposting tools such as the Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) Global Portal run by the International Association of Universities.

For more national and international sustainability networks for you engage with, go to:

- The Global Alliance of University Sustainability Networks
<https://www.gau.universitiesalliance.org/>
- UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative -HESI
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/education/2016>
- UNEP Youth and Education Alliance- YEA!
<https://www.unep.org/education/education-environmental-education/youth-and-education-alliance>



2. Why this framework?

Across the world many universities do not benefit from access to a local or national university sustainability network where best practice is shared and action plans are implemented per the national context. Nor for them is there a sustainability framework which reflects the social, cultural, economic and ecological circumstances of their region. It is with this in mind the UN Sustainable University Framework has been created.

Recognising the many different contexts and possibilities around the world, the UN Sustainable University Framework embraces the common elements of the existing Frameworks and assessment tools developed by existing university sustainability networks. The result is a universal stepped approach which any and every university can apply to its country context. Using the Framework enables the university to create its unique pathway to become sustainable.

The collective framework has been designed to align, aggregate and amplify the work of existing Higher Education sustainability tools with the aim of presenting an empowering, collaborative and global definition as to what is a sustainable university and a framework to become one. No doubt improvements can be made to this document, neither do we claim to have all the answers, but we hope this Framework will be a useful and constructive first step for institutions wanting to deliver on sustainability and are looking for handrails that can help them move forward. Good luck.

Vision

Higher Education shapes the leaders of tomorrow and unless the next generation have sustainability hardwired into their mindsets and skillsets, the transition to a sustainable world will become much harder. The vision for this Framework is that the world's students and universities, supported by existing and yet to be formed national and

international sustainability networks, use frameworks such as this one to integrate sustainability and environmental best practices into their curricula, civics and across their campuses. As a result of this, we hope that not only will students passing through Higher Education make different decisions in their lives but that the profile of higher education as a key agent of sustainability change is recognised and raised.

Thanks & Credits

UNEP, its recently formed Youth and Education Alliance and the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative of UNEP is a member, recognise the significant value universities achieve when part of a sustainability network. UNEP supports the creation of more country and regional networks where best practice is shared and action plans are implemented per the national context. UNEP and the writer are deeply grateful to the existing networks and other organisations which have inspired this collective Framework and will continue to lead, collaborate and empower the advancement of global sustainable university sector.

The UNEP Framework has been directly influenced by amongst others: Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System – AASHE, North America; Unit-Based Sustainability Assessment Tool MESA, Africa; Assessment System for Sustainable Campus - Hokkaido University, Japan, Sustainability Leadership Scorecard – EAUC, UK and Ireland, Sustainable Campus Charter, ISCIN, International, National Assessments of Sustainability in Latin American countries, ARIUSA, Latin America and The Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) global portal, International Association of Universities. Thank you to all for your inspiration.

Author: Iain Patton, with support from Sam Barratt, Carina Mutschele and Mari Nishimura of the Youth, Education & Advocacy Unit, Ecosystems Division, UNEP Date: September 2020



3. Introduction and how to use this Framework

Reflecting the holistic approach of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and most sustainability network accreditations, the framework takes a whole-institution approach to ensure that sustainability is integrated across all aspects of the organisation.

The UNEP Framework presents a university as comprising four Core Areas. These are: Teaching and Research, People and Society, Environment and Climate, Administration and Governance. This whole-institution Quadruple Bottom Line approach ensures that the sustainability potential of every part of a university is included in its sustainability planning and action.

The Framework presents a university as comprising four Core Areas. These are:

1. Environment & Climate	3. People & Society
2. Teaching & Research	4. Administration & Governance

These four Core Areas are used to establish a University Quadruple Bottom Line.



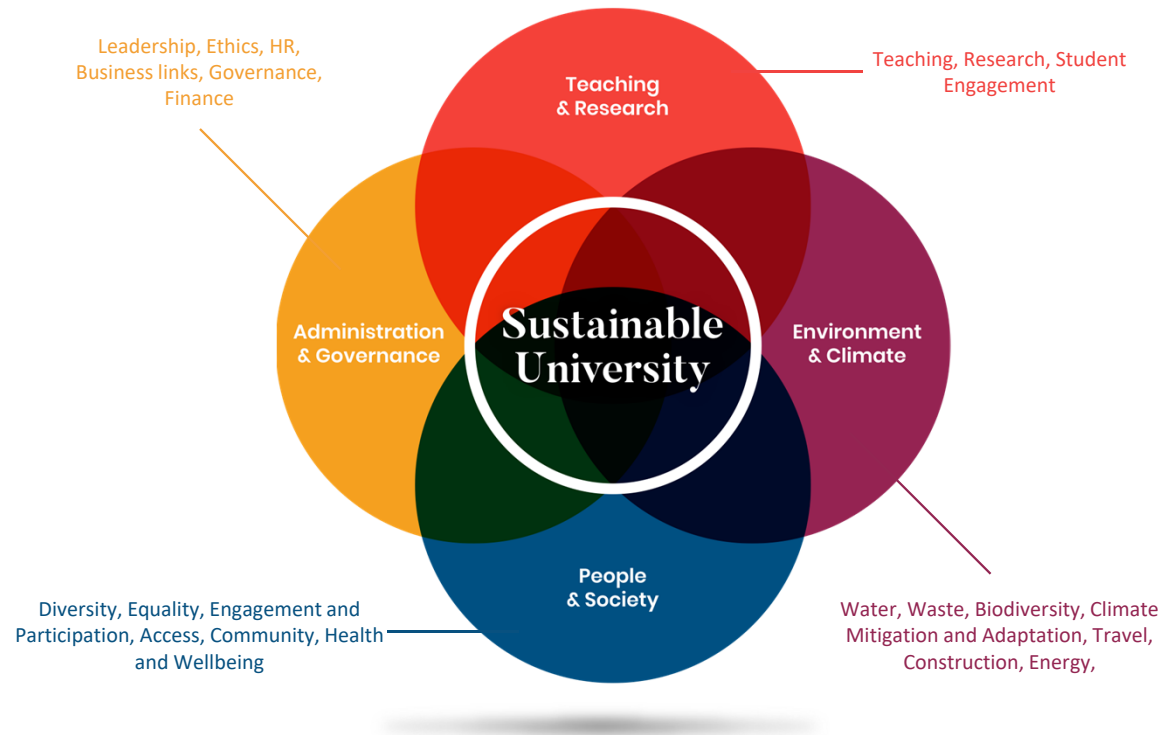


4. University Four Core Areas

Each of the four Core Areas comprise a number of Aspects.

Aspects are areas and activities of the university which fall under the Core Area, for e.g. Biodiversity is an Aspect of the Environment and Climate Core Area. It is for each university to identify the most relevant Aspects of each Core Area which it needs to address if it is to become sustainable. Given the uniqueness of each university, its research, teaching and its location, there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to identifying Aspects or in which Core area they go. For example Student Engagement appears in the example in 'Teaching and Research' reflecting the increasing recognition of students as learning co-creators. Another possibility is to put it in 'People and Society'. The important thing is to think what makes most sense in your unique university.

Below is an example of Aspects which are commonly included in a typical universities' Core Area, but it is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list.





5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University

Having identified its particular sustainability Aspects, a university can proceed to use the Framework to identify its level of sustainability performance for each aspect.

For each Aspect, the UNEP Framework identifies the institutions level of sustainability performance in that area. These levels, or steps, increase in sustainability ambition starting at: Emerging, Progressing, Established and end with an institutions performance being recognised as Leading.

This Framework and the alternative graphic version on the next page show a path through the four steps. Each step contains a series of activities expected of a university as it progresses an increasingly ambitious journey towards being a sustainable university.

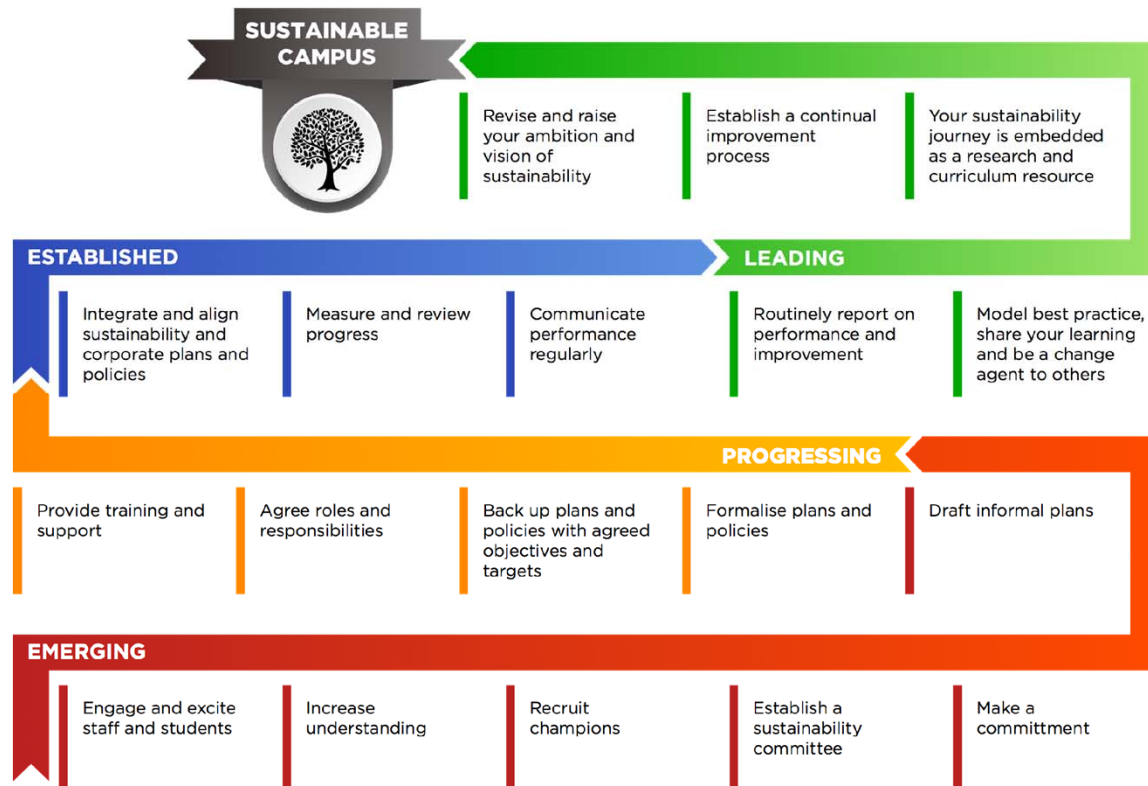
Because the Framework is intended for universities around the world, it does not consider the range of contexts institutions operate nor the unique opportunities and challenges it faces. A universities sustainability journey is not necessarily a linear one in the order presented. An institution might already have some elements in place when it starts in earnest. Every university's journey will look different, and you are encouraged to use this Framework to plan your unique institutions journey towards sustainability.

Note that the graphics might suggest a 'Sustainable Campus' end-point. But the latter stages of Step 4 in a Leading university do require a constant circular process of continual assessment and raising your vision and ambition for an even more sustainable institution.



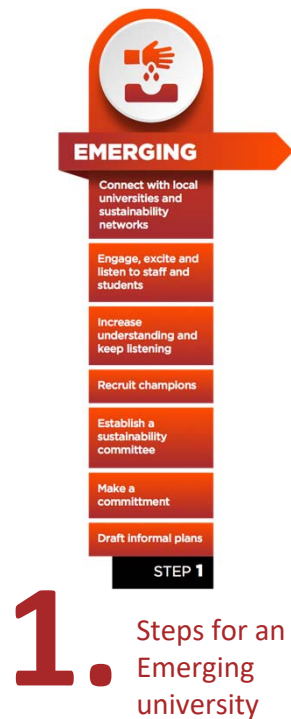


5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University





5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University



Connect with local universities and sustainability networks	Becoming a sustainable university can easily feel daunting. There is no one way to do it and your university is unique as is its own definition of sustainability. But help is out there if you look. Visit other universities and ask for their insights. If a national sustainable university network exists, join it and benefit from a huge bank of peer advice and support. If none exists in your region, start one. The UNEP Greening Universities Toolkit is always a go-to place for strategies, tools and resources from global university case studies and best practice.
Engage, excite and listen to staff and students	'Sell the sizzle' of sustainability, a positive future. Get people excited about the possibilities of sustainability as guilt and visions based on fear won't work. Your university is unique and so too will be your vision of what your sustainable university will be and your journey towards it. Developing sustainability mind-sets and behaviours and not just skill-sets and knowledge is critical to success. Are you sure all parts of the university community can participate and you are hearing their voices?
Increase understanding and keep listening	Get a conversation going across staff and students. Use the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Global Goals) to engage and focus people on hope possibilities. Implement and mainstream the Goals with this Guide from UN SDSN . Show how sustainability is relevant to everyone, but use their language and make it bespoke to them. Good communication, branding and use of social media is key here. Test and grow the appetite for change and action.
Recruit champions	Recruit staff and student Sustainability Champions. It is important that champions have a good understanding of their role and what they are setting out to achieve. Give them recognition, authority and allow them the chance to run their own projects, set their own targets and learn new skills.
Establish a sustainability committee	Ideally comprising staff and students, this is a fantastic way of effecting change, as long as the Committee is resourced and managed correctly. The University Sustainability Committee should meet regularly, be formally recognised, and chaired by a member of the university leadership. This gives it recognition and authority to lead change.
Make a commitment	Perhaps informal at first, but a spoken and then written commitment to understanding your institutions sustainability performance and improving it in one or more aspects of sustainability. But be realistic with what can be achieved and by when, so set priorities. Some early wins will help motivate people. Consider signing the SDG Accord and the Global Climate Letter to build confidence, commitment and focused action. Are you ready to commit to being a Net-Zero University ?
Draft informal plans	Bring champions and the committee together to start to chart how the new commitment can be realised. Who needs to be involved, what are the key milestones of progress, what does success look like? Consider a baseline review so you know what is already going on and where there are gaps. Certainly, ensuring compliance with environmental law and regulation is a priority. Consider creating an internal business case for sustainability to ensure clear and robust thinking and planning.



5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University



2. Steps for a Progressing university

Know what is best practice is	It's time to ensure you are aware of best practice in your region and beyond. National and international networks such as the Asia Sustainable Campus Network (ASCN) , Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in North America (AASHE USA) , Copernicus Alliance (Europe) and ARIUSA (Central America) etc., and especially sustainability awards such as the International Green Gown Awards are a rich source of sector experience and expertise. The sector is renowned for its willingness to share its experience.
Formalise plans and policies	Plans and policies should now be ratified by the university senior leadership. Institution leaders will be responsible for delivering these so it's important that they are involved in creating them and their targets. This will drive confidence and commitment to their realisation.
Back up plans and policies with agreed objectives and targets	<p>You may be familiar with SMART goals — ones that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound. But to be truly meaningful, sustainability goals need to be framed slightly differently, to ensure that they are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ambitious. 2. Scientific. 3. Aligned with the core business of being a university. <p>Objectives should have a defined timescale and be linked to the organisation's wider corporate performance to ensure environmental policy commitments are being prioritised and addressed. The devil is in the specific detail. You will know your objective is specific enough if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone who's involved knows that it includes them specifically. • Everyone involved can understand it. • Your objective is free from jargon. • You've defined all your terms. • You've used only appropriate language.
Agree roles and responsibilities	Responsibility and authority for action is key. Ensure that the key people are aware of their roles with line management accountability and expectations agreed. Being explicit about leader's accountability for sustainability in your university will future-proof it against a change in leadership or a change in priorities.
Provide training and support	In emerging agendas, training, resourcing and other support for those responsible for delivery is often under-recognised. Staff can feel isolated so ensure key staff are linked to a university sustainability network such as these in the Global Alliance for training, resources and peer support. If no local network exists, talk to other institutions in your region and consider starting one up.



5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University



Integrate and align sustainability and corporate plans and policies	There is a risk that sustainability ambitions are superseded by other strategic goals if they are not incorporated into the institution’s corporate plans. In time this will include how the university procures and invests. Consider the value of a Sustainability or Environmental Management ISO Standard for your campus and/or one of the university sustainability accreditations . It is key to have senior support and to identify timely opportunities such as the development of a new university vision or strategic plan to progress the agenda and ensure a more integrated approach
Measure and review progress	Measurement can be tricky as at first data can be patchy. When you measure your progress, it gives you a realistic picture of the situation. If you are not making the desired progress, you are able to see this before you fall too far behind. You can then identify the changes that need to be made and implement them. Use this UNEP Sustainable University Framework, through self-assessment and/or independent audit team to identify your progress through compliance and improvement reporting. Consider asking a peer university to informally audit you, and you them. Are changed staff and student behaviours now evident and measured?
Communicate performance regularly	Progress reporting against sustainable development strategies, tactical plans, objectives and targets at management meetings and to governors and board members is essential. A sustainable development organisational chart showing roles, responsibilities, reporting and communication lines may be useful to communicate your performance transparently and accessibly to stakeholders. Incorporating sustainability into staff development practices, job descriptions and staff and student induction will drive culture change for sustainability. Do not assume that everyone has a full understanding of the breadth of sustainability, and how it is relevant to their curriculum or support service area. Not educating staff, and assisting them with understanding how it is relevant to their subject area is a huge barrier to becoming a sustainable university. Are students fully involved and integrated into your sustainability decisions and course co development?

3. Steps for an Established University



5. UNEP 4-Step Framework to a Sustainable University



4. Steps towards being a Leading University

Routinely report on performance and improvement	Incorporating reporting as a standing item into all management and governance meetings will ensure the issue and progress on targets is regularly seen, prioritised and actioned. University websites, prospectus and other core communication devices should make explicit reference to sustainability commitments and actions.
Model best practice, share your learning and be a change agent to others	By this stage your university is a model to other universities and shares its resources and insights with the wider sector. You are a key member of a national and or international sustainable university network and support its communities of practice, training and case study writing. Now, also, you actively identify opportunities to influence external agencies e.g. sector bodies, employers, trade organisations and suppliers in sustainability terms.
Your sustainability journey is embedded as a research and curriculum resource	Students passing through university is a unique opportunity to engage with them as agents of change and a net-zero economy and society. The experiences and opportunities offered to students as part of their formal and informal learning will be of benefit not only to them but also their employers and wider communities as they take these skills, values, mid-sets and behaviours with them. As a Leading university, you have mapped every academic course and business function against the SDG's and are ensuring that all aspects of the university are working towards achieving the Goals. The Goals are at the heart of all university decision-making. The Sulitest could be useful to ensure every learner graduates with sustainability literacy. The university campus is a Living Lab for researching, developing and testing sustainability solutions to society's problems.
Establish a continual improvement process	You might be a sustainability leader with successful International Green Gown Awards , but the bar can always be raised. The regular independent review process should result in clearly communicated findings to the Executive, and form the basis for the next round of strategic and tactical planning. By now the Sustainable Development Goals are part of the university language and culture driving new research and cross discipline linkage and learning.
Revise and raise your ambition and vision of sustainability	As co-creators of your sustainable university, students, employers and other key university and community stakeholders are designed-in to setting stretching objectives, targets and an ever more ambitious vision of a sustainable university. Sustainability is embedded into every aspect of teaching, research and operations. You are single-use plastic free and have fossil fuel industry divested and are progressing towards a fully ethical investment portfolio. The Climate Emission Net-Zero target is constantly being reviewed to be achieved sooner and towards being Absolute Zero.

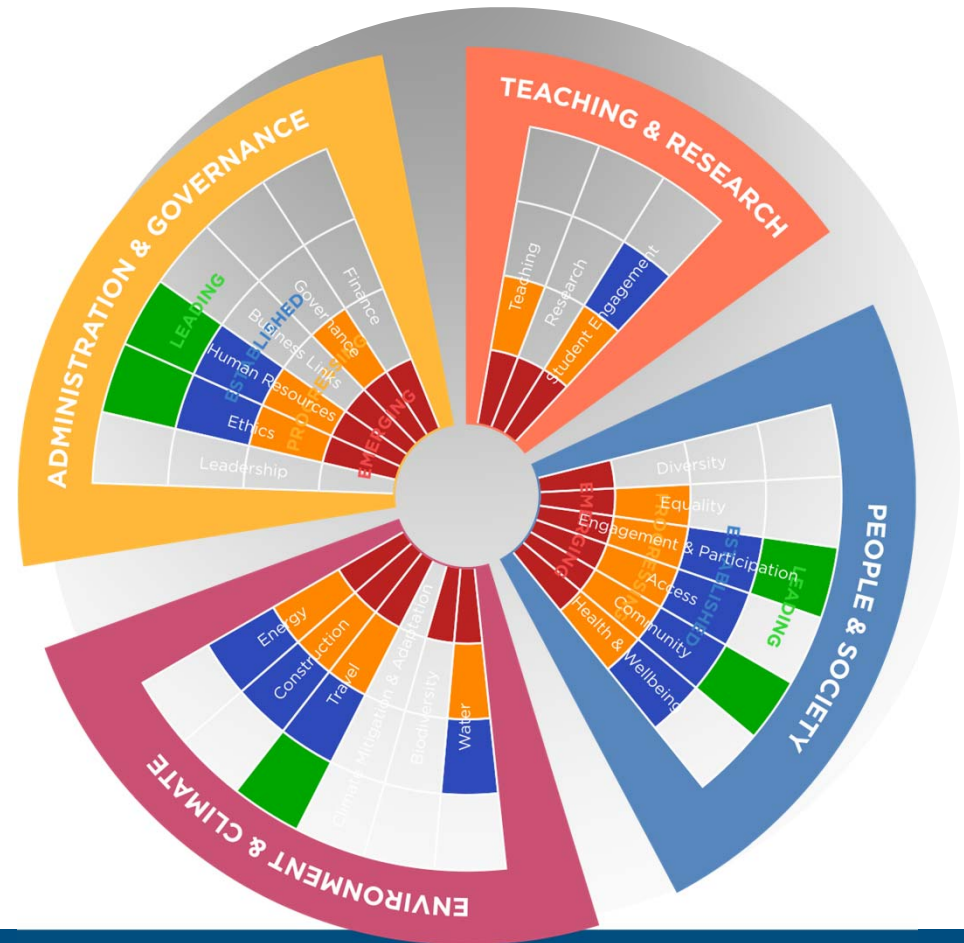


6. Presenting your sustainability progress

Having mapped your chosen Aspects against the 4 Steps, it is up to you how you present your progress. Often a radar chart similar to that shown is a good way to show whole-institution performance quickly and accessibly to all stakeholders. If it helps you can simplify things by just showing average performance across the aspects for each Core Area.

An institution is likely to be at different steps for each Aspect. But having mapped your performance against the Framework, a university can then decide its level of ambition for each Aspect, and create a route-map to the next step.

At the start of its sustainability journey, a university does not have to take on all its identified Aspects at once. It is for the university to identify its current priority areas for sustainability improvement and start working on these. However, over time, the UNEP Sustainable University Framework points an institution to raise its ambition and achieve the highest level of sustainability across as much of the university as possible.





7. Getting started quick wins

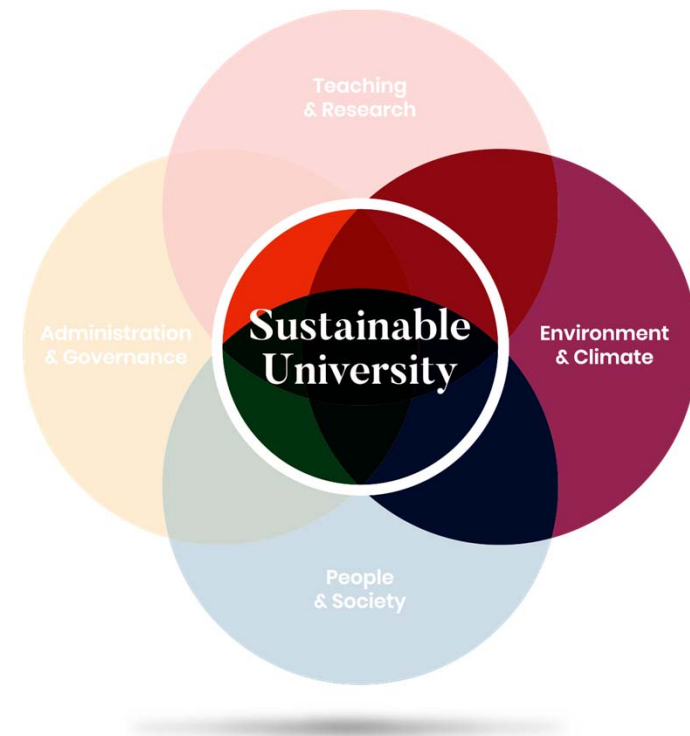
We know that starting the Framework can be daunting, so to help, here are some quick wins you can consider for each of the Core Areas

1. Environment & Climate

How your university impacts on the environment is one of the most visible and therefore obvious places to start your sustainability journey.

Think of this large and potentially overwhelming Core Area comprising built environment, ecosystems and lifestyle choices. An environmental review can be useful to establish a baseline of your biggest environmental and climate impacts. This will give you a list to prioritise action as you will not be able to address all the impacts immediately. Understanding and measuring your environmental impacts brings many opportunities to involve students as reviewers, academics can use the campus to enrich their teaching while researchers have real-world university problems to solve. Consider using this [Initial Guide to an Environmental Review](#) from the EU or read [here](#) how University College Dublin conducted its initial environmental review.

In terms of quick wins, reducing the impacts of university food, energy and waste offer high profile opportunities to engage the university community. This is a key area for cross university dialogue on problems and solutions and to show that your commitment to action is serious. Areas to focus on include looking at what food and drink is served in the university and the potential for more sustainable food choices. Another is to look at what the university is wasting and opportunities to involve students in measuring this and for e.g. designing a recycling scheme. But more pressing is likely to be how your university is responding to the climate crisis. Engaging with all university stakeholders will be key to building confidence, credibility and a mandate for whole institution emissions reduction targets and reporting.



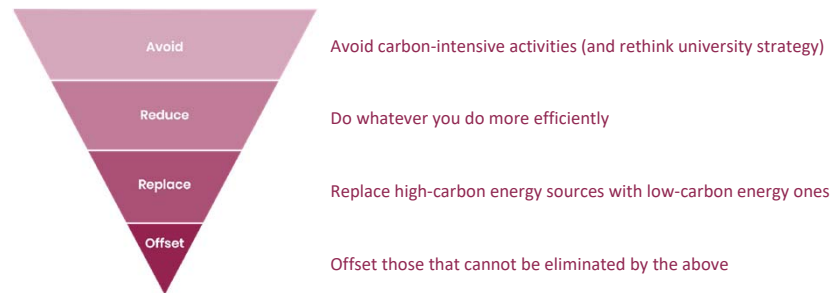


7. Getting started quick wins

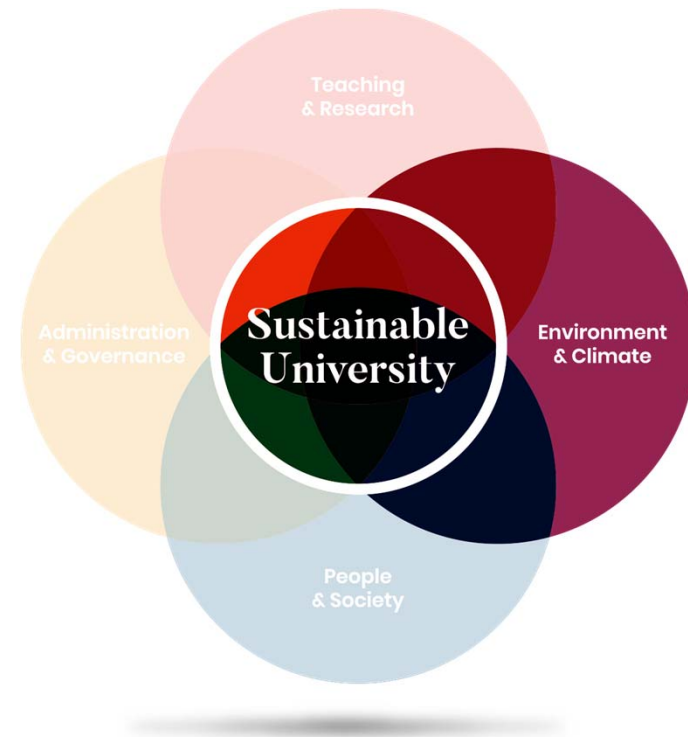
1. Environment & Climate

The Carbon Management Hierarchy (*below*) is a useful approach to take. In terms of greatest climate impact, for a typical university its energy, buildings and travel. Look at these first.

The carbon management hierarchy



Whilst the impacts of your university on the environment and climate are many and large, your sustainability journey does not stop here. Arguably your universities biggest environmental impact is the students leaving your campus and living their lives as citizens and employees with their associated impacts on the environment and climate. Therefore, working out how you engage the student body on his journey so that the University offers chances to nudge minds and behaviours and inspire new habits that could then stay with the students for the rest of their adult life. The [UNEP Little Book of Green Nudges](#) will be invaluable here.





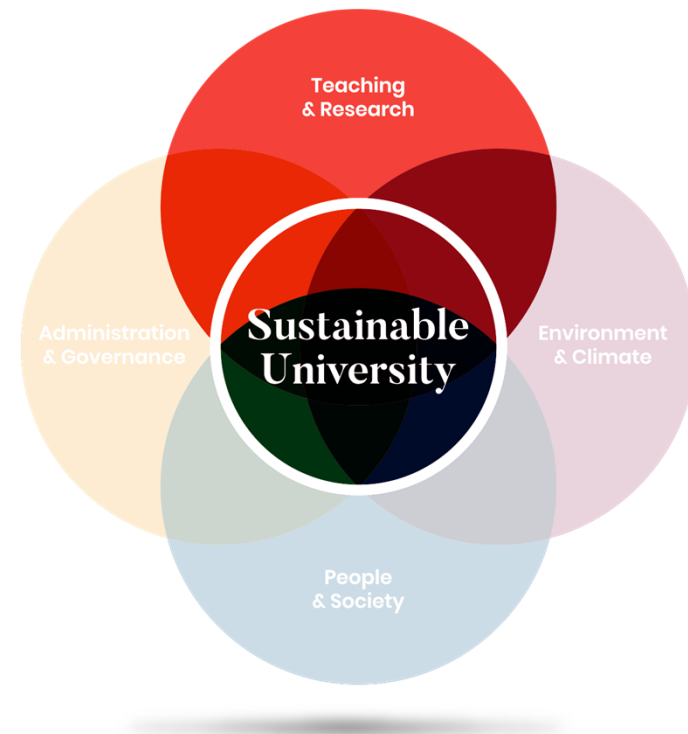
7. Getting started quick wins

2. Teaching & Research

Students passing through university, often at a formative stage in their lives, offer a unique and powerful opportunity to use the formal and informal curriculum to shape sustainability-minded people. Influencing the curriculum can be daunting and can meet academic resistance. Many universities have found the UN Sustainable Development Goals a useful mechanism to start a conversation across faculty and researchers. The Goals are often seen as a critical 'to do' list for the world and present a powerful cross-sector perspective on solving complex world issues, so they are rich territory for sustainability-minded universities. Often a good starting point is to map course content and research output against the Goals to identify strengths, gaps and opportunities for cross discipline teaching, co-creating the curriculum with students, and new research collaborations. Most report this to be a really positive and productive experience. Consider using the [UNSDSN SDG Impact Assessment Tool](#). This is a free online tool for learning and strategic decision support that visualizes the results from a self-assessment of how an activity, organisation or innovation affects the SDGs.

Identifying staff and student Education for Sustainability champions in each academic and research department is useful to mobilise understanding and opportunities to influence teaching and research content and practice. A Sustainability Champion is an individual who seeks to lead change in an organisation to transform that organisation into a smarter, more successful, and more sustainable enterprise. This individual may exist at any level within an organisation and in any type of organisation, from Governor to administrative assistant, from university President to student leader." Invite the most passionate people from across the university. Teams work best when members are passionate about their mission.

Sustainability is huge, so focusing on how students and researchers can receive a basic carbon/climate literacy makes an excellent starting point. Regardless of their course, every graduate will leave university and face the home and work-place challenges and opportunities of a fast-changing climate, so creating initially generic then subject integrated climate literacy is going to be something they expect.





7. Getting started quick wins

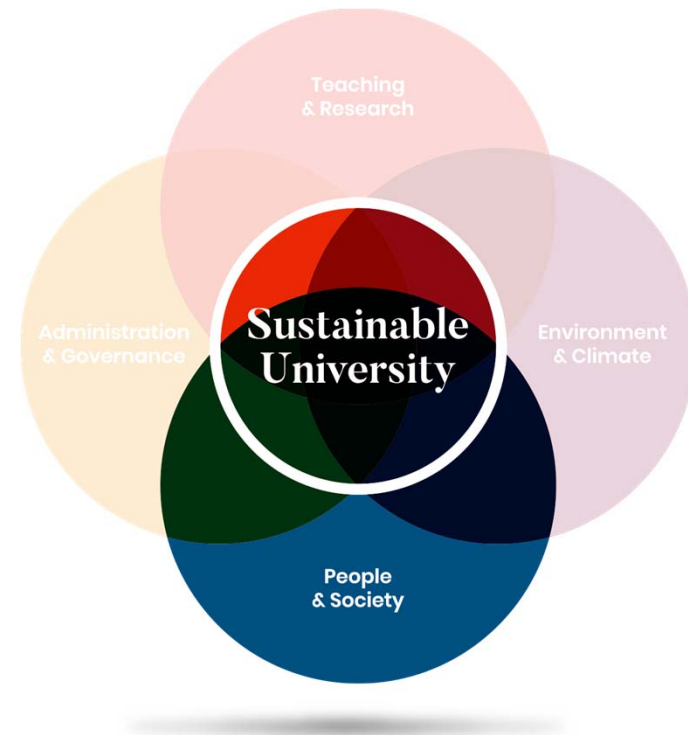
3. People & Society

Universities are in a unique position to initiate and implement actions to create just, resilient and sustainable communities. Recognition that universities can do more and to ensure they are not reinforcing exclusion has grown and this is now a key area for a sustainability focus.

A good starting point is to ensure that all sections of the university community can engage with your universities sustainability ambition and have a voice in the dialogue and decision-making. It's important to ensure that your messaging isn't just about 'green' issues but includes social and financial aspects too. This will widen the range of people who see sustainability as relevant and useful to them.

People's health and wellbeing is also a great place to start. Focusing on food, travel and other lifestyle choices is a powerful way to bring people into the conversation and to help them see the wider social and environmental aspects of their choices. Commitments to buying Fair Trade products or becoming a health promoting university e.g. by signing the International [Okanagan Charter](#), are a good way to show commitment and credibility.

Increasingly, how a university connects to its local city area, employers and local community is being acknowledged. A 'civic' university will examine how it interacts with and influences the local community, analysing not just what it's good at but what it's good for. It then goes a step further and explores what it can do for its local area and community, and how it can be a positive force for change. This has huge potential to spark substantial and wide-ranging positive changes to its local communities through for e.g. opening up its campuses, student and staff volunteering or applying learning and research to benefit real-world local issues. The implications of the Covid 19 pandemic outbreak on the worlds universities stretch far beyond the short-term impact on teaching and research and the sector faces challenges that will take months and years to overcome. Despite this, almost immediately, universities and their communities began responding to the crisis. Numerous examples from across the world show that universities are doing all they can to contribute to the national effort against the outbreak. In the UK [this inspirational collection of case studies](#) forms part of the #WeAreTogether campaign and shows how everyone in our society benefits from universities.





7. Getting started quick wins

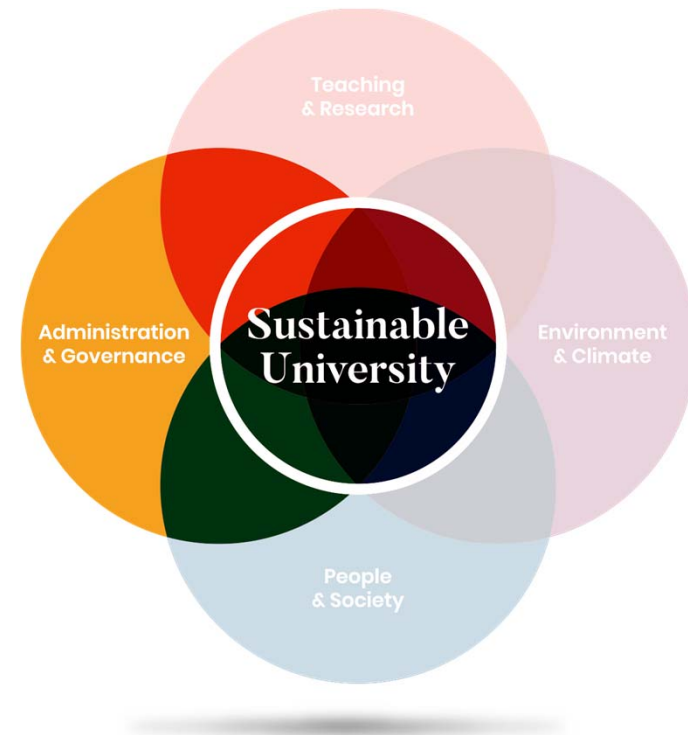
4. Administration & Governance

A strategic commitment at all levels within a university is a fundamental prerequisite if the institution is to be successful in taking forward sustainability, but this takes time.

Effective leadership and administration of sustainable development are necessary at all levels, not just the Executive team. Leaders gathering the views of the university community and formally appointing a sustainability committee make a strong start to your institution's sustainability journey. Having identified the natural champions and leaders across university staff and students, it is critical that a member of the Executive is appointed to Chair the committee. This will ensure it has the commitment and authority to act and report into governance and management processes.

With this in place, a cross institution dialogue can start to identify opportunities for e.g. sustainable procurement, divestment from unethical entities, to set climate emissions targets and to use a tool such as the UNEP Sustainable University Framework to advance and publicly report on the universities performance and its ambitions to progress higher up the Framework.

A powerful early win is to make a public commitment to action. Examples include the [SDG Accord](#), [The Presidents' Climate Leadership Commitments](#), and the [Global Climate Letter](#). All are a commitment to action but will recognise your institution is at an early stage with much to learn and improve. But, signing commitments such as these will build staff and student confidence, and inspire support and action.





8. Join us and be a part of this

Through the use of the Framework, it is our vision that it can play a key role in universities advancing sustainability.

Our aim is that the world's students and universities, supported by existing and yet to be formed national and international sustainability networks, use frameworks such as this one to integrate sustainability and environmental best practices into their curricula, civics and across their campuses.

This is the first draft of the UNEP Sustainable University Framework. We know that it can be improved and we look to our partners in university sustainability networks and across the UN system who have inspired the Framework, to suggest refinements and additional resources to be embedded into it.

Across the world many universities do not benefit from access to a local or national university sustainability network and we are encouraged that new sustainable university networks are emerging across Africa and Asia. Our hope is that this Framework will support the emergence and sustainability ambition of these new networks, stimulate the founding of others and a new reality of partnership and collaboration between them all. Also, post Covid 19, that it will provide a universal platform to facilitate re-imagined and sustainable universities.

Iain Patton - January 2021 - ipatton@eauc.org.uk

For more national and international sustainability networks for you to learn from and engaging to support you, go to:

- The Global Alliance of University Sustainability Networks
<https://www.gausn.org/>
- UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative -HESI
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/education/>
- UNEP Youth and Education Alliance- YEA!
<https://www.unep.org/education/education-environment/what-we-do/youth-and-education-alliance>

