REPORT

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HIGHER EDUCATION'S ROLE IN ADVANCING THE SDGS IN THE G20: PROGRESS & OPPORTUNITIES

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TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION


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Overview

India's Presidency of the G20 has been informed by the theme of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" of

1 ONE EARTH
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and one of the priority areas for the G20 this year has been to accelerate progress on the SDGs.

This is especially critical as the G20 are

Progress within the higher education sector

In this report we will explore three aspects of progress:

- Measurement
- Engagement
- Impact

Measurement

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages assessments by member states that are expected to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven." These Voluntary Reviews have now been adopted more widely, with cities, and even universities developing their own reviews.

Voluntary University Reviews are a vital way that universities can self-evaluate at a detailed level. However, they do not, by themselves, allow for a systematic view of sector progress, and are resource intensive. Until wider adoption, an alternative view of progress can be achieved by other mechanisms such as rankings.

According to the UN Higher Education Sustainability Initiative working group "Rankings, ratings, and assessment (RRA) organizations have signi cant in uence - and thus signi cant responsibility - to guide the academic sector." (2)

Recognising our responsibility, in 2019 Times Higher Education launched the rst edition of its Impact Rankings. These rankings were a new development in the world of higher education, not just looking at sustainability but explicitly focusing on the SDGs and how higher education could contribute towards their delivery.

The Impact Rankings are now the largest global analysis of universities and the SDGs, with 1705 institutions participating in 2023. This is rapidly approaching more traditional, research focused rankings in terms of participation, and is attracting a wider range of universities from 120 different countries.

It also provides a unique dataset that underpins this report. Although we can only look at some of the larger trends, the fuller dataset can be used by universities and governments to explore their performance and to accelerate the drive towards delivering the Goals.

The adoption, by universities, of the Impact Rankings and other similar approaches has been a positive sign of progress in delivery on the SDGs. Assessment of progress and benchmarking are vital if we are to deliver on the Goals.

Engagement

Taken as a proxy for the commitment of the sector to the aims of the SDGs, the growth in participation in the Impact Rankings paints a very positive picture. Participation is free, but requires a signi cant commitment in time and energy on the part of the university. It is fair to say that participation, by itself, shows a commitment to the cause of sustainability.

Since our initial launch we have seen the number of institutions grow from 541 in 2019 to 1705 in 2023 (Figure 1).

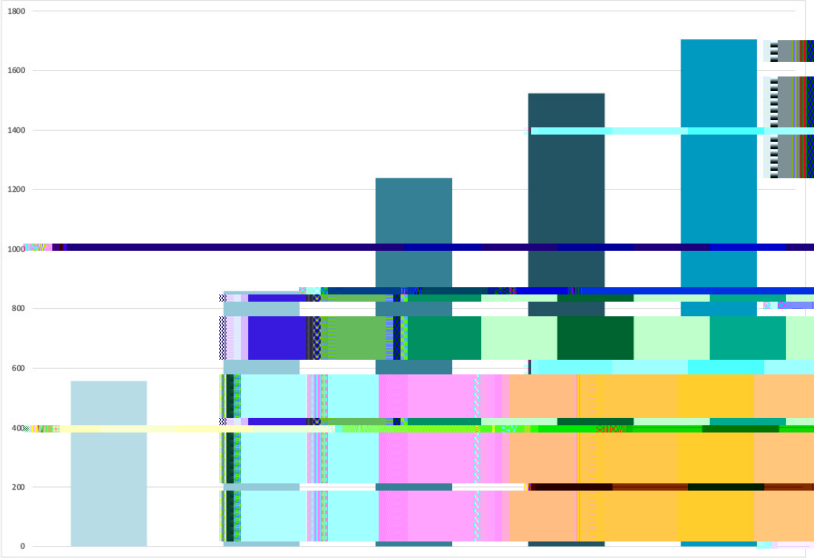


Figure 1: Growth in participation in the THE Impact Rankings 2019-2023.

Looking at the G20 we see similar levels of commitment. In total, 749 universities in the G20 participated in the THE Impact Rankings in 2023 (excluding those in countries represented by their membership of the EU alone). This gives us a statistically relevant set on which to draw conclusions about the role and focus of universities around the SDGs.

Figure 2: Number of universities participating in each G20 country ordered by participation in the Impact Rankings. For comparison the number of universities participating in the World University Rankings are given in red.

On a country-by-country basis we can see the reach of the Impact Rankings within the G20 (Figure 2). Three countries, Indonesia, Russia and Turkey, now have more participants in the Impact Rankings than in the more traditional and research focused World University Rankings.

Impact in India and Brazil

India, as presidents of the G20 for 2023, and Brazil, as presidents of the G20 in 2024 are good countries to focus on. They provide very different examples of the varying focus of higher education in different countries.

India is demographically a much younger country than many of the G20, with only ten people aged 65 or older for every 100 people of working age. At the same time, it currently has a lower level of educational achievement than average across the world, with only 12% of the population educated to rst degree level. It is also one of the members of the G20 with the lowest GDP (PPP) at $6502 in 2020 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Key statistical information for India.

Brazil has 14 people who are 65 or older
every 100 people who are working age, b
the world average (14).

For every 100 people, 21 have a bachelo
degree or equivalent education level, abo
the work average (17).

Brazil's GDP per capita is US$ 14830, lo
than the world average (US$ 21526).

Brazil has a higher old-age dependency at 14% - in line with global averages, and also has a higher level of educational achievement. It's GDP (PPP) is more than double that of India at $14830 in 2020 (Figure 6).

Both countries have seen a steady rise in the number of universities providing data for the Impact Rankings, but the universities in each country have provided data for (on average) different SDGs.

To account for the underlying distribution of submissions we can use the distribution across all G20 countries as our baseline, and measure how much more universities in India and Brazil submit to an SDG than the G20 average.

When we do this we see striking differences between countries.

In India there is a tendency for universities to provide data for fewer SDGs than for the G20 as a whole. In this diagram we can see that only SDG 6: Clean Water and sanitation, and SDG 7: Clean and affordable energy are above the average for G20 nations (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Submission by universities across India by SDG, compared to the G20 distribution. SDG 17 is not included as it is mandatory for inclusion in the overall ranking.

In Brazil, in contrast, we see many more universities providing data, with 13 out of 16 SDGs being present above the G20 average. The focus on SDG 1: No poverty and SDG 2: Zero hunger is especially notable, and a distinguishing feature of Brazil's participation (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Submission by universities across Brazil by SDG, compared to the G20 distribution. SDG 17 is not included as it is mandatory for inclusion in the overall ranking.

These analyses help us to understand the demand within countries for delivery of speci c SDGs, but it is also important to understand relative performance.

Areas where Indian universities out-perform the global average are often in the much more practical arena: water reuse, and awareness of the usage of water. Although in traditional measurement systems these activities may be seen as less important, in the context of sustainability they are vital.

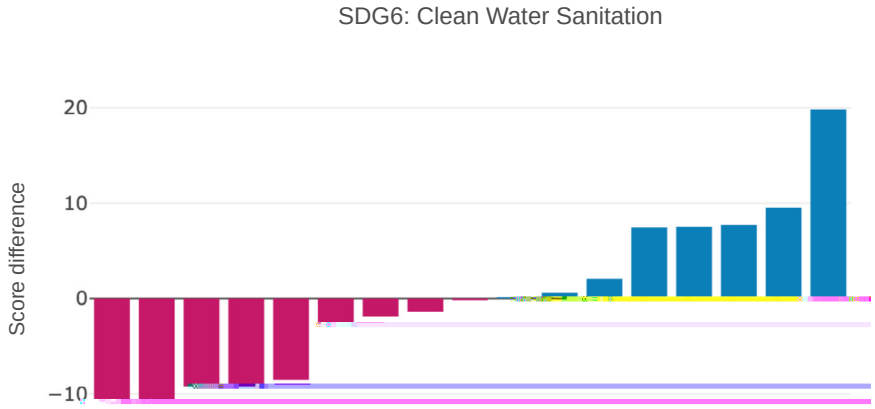


Figure 11: Average performance of Indian universities within SDG 6 compared to global average.

We identify three clear opportunities in this report:

- Building more relevant research bases
- Identifying appropriate cooperation
- Developing stronger government and higher education linkages

Relevant Research

In the introduction we identi ed four key areas where higher education is able to support the delivery of the Goals. The second of those, and one that we assess throughout the Impact Rankings was research.

When thinking about the work done by higher education in sustainability it is important to understand biases in the overall picture when it comes to research.

The SDGs are not all equivalent in terms of the volume of research that is performed (Figure 12). When looking at the total volumes of research published across all institutions within Elsevier's

This is partially explained by the type and frequency of publication in subjects like

The variation between countries, and within countries is a good indicator of the potential areas of demand for action (Figure 13).

This is a powerful insight that can be combined with local and national knowledge to support the development of concrete sustainability strategies.

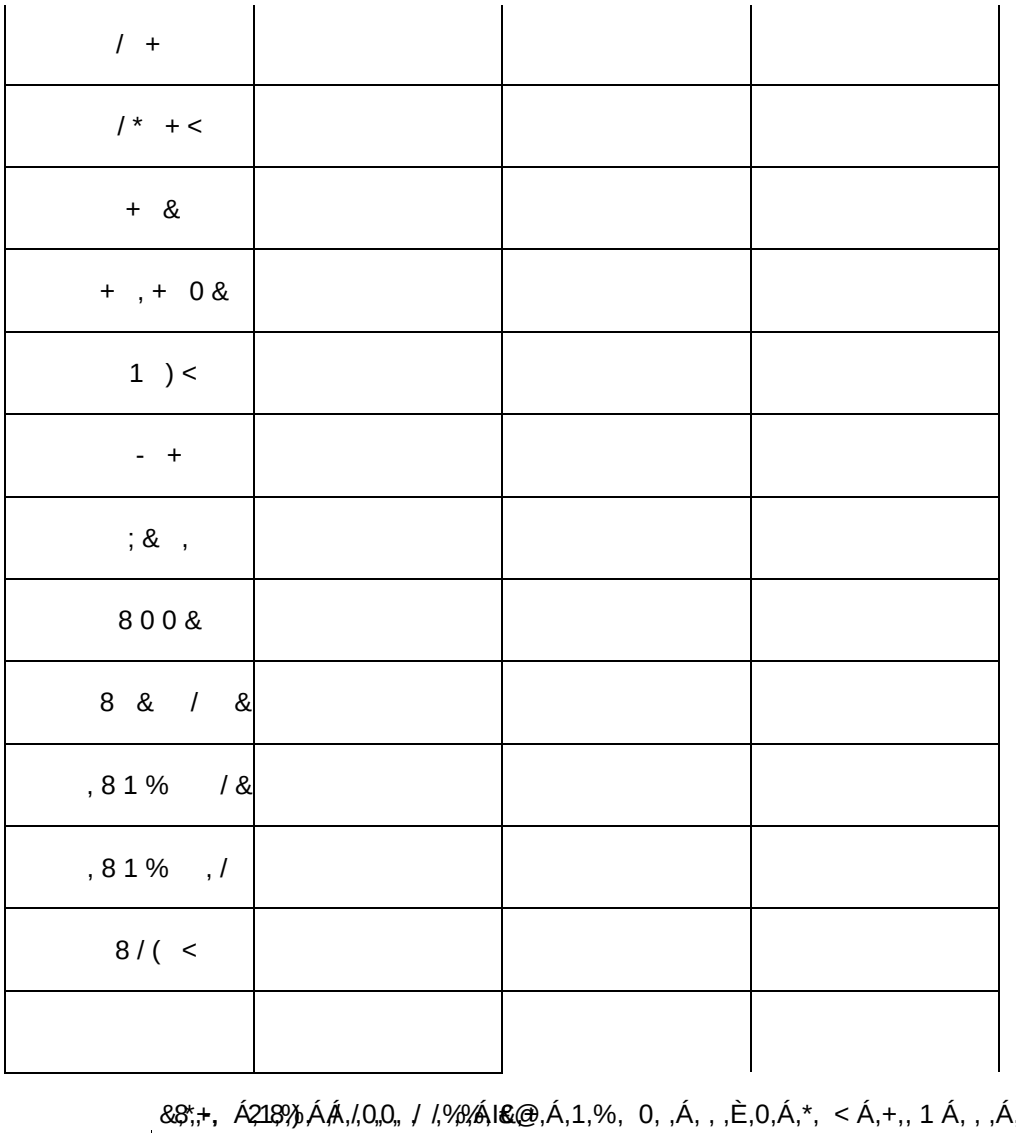


Figure 13: The SDGs where universities provided most data, normalised by the average distribution, as a proxy for need. Argentina is excluded due to low participation numbers.

However, we can also see from the analysis of performance that demand and performance are not perfectly balanced. Demand shows that more universities are working on the challenges provided by certain SDGs; it does not show that they necessarily have the strongest global performance.

This provides a key opportunity: for institutions to reach out to others in order to build cooperative research, and to deepen ties.

This cooperation can help to reduce the economic inequalities that are evident in the world of higher education as well as the broader world.

For example, universities and policy makers in Mexico and Turkey with their focus on SDG 1: Zero poverty could look to universities from other G20 countries as well as their

Conclusion

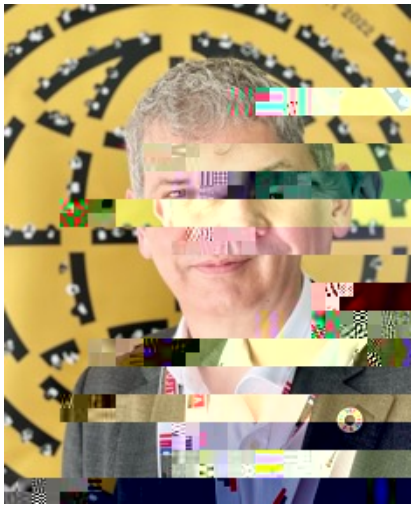
The G20 have the ability to use their in uence to signi cantly accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, but to maximise their impact they should draw on the experience and insight of their higher education sectors.

In particular we recommend that they recognise the signi cant strides that higher education institutions have made in measuring their own progress, committing to a sustainable future, and generating practical, real-world impact.

The key opportunities that can be leveraged to assist governments are equally clear: better focused research, relevant partnerships to deliver change, and stronger and more effective links between governments and universities.

> "We all have a choice. We can create transformational action that will safeguard the living conditions for future generations. Or we can continue with our business as usual and fail."
>
> GRETA THUNBERG (3)

About the author



Duncan Ross is the Chief Data Of cer at Times Higher Education where he oversees a team that generates university rankings and related data products. In 2019 he launched the THE Impact Rankings, the rst global university rankings that focus on delivery of the UN SDGs.

He started his career in data mining, and in 2013 co-founded DataKind UK, a not for pro t that supports UK charities to make the most of the value of data.

In 2022 he was announced as one of DataIQ's 100 Most In uential People in Data, and has been shortlisted for Data for Good Champion in 2023. He is a member of the UN HESI working group on Rankings, Ratings and Assessments.

He was an invited speaker at the C20 Education & Digital Transformation Summit in 2023.

Footnotes:

(1) The Guardian, 20/07/2021: 'Reckless': G20 states subsidised fossil fuels by $3tn since 2015, says report.

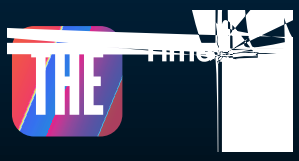
(2) https://sdgs.un.org/HESI/rankings-ratings-and-assessment

(3) Greta Thunberg at the World Economic Forum, 2019.

The Impact Rankings Methodology

The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings consist of a set of rankings for each SDG, plus an overall ranking.

Universities have to actively choose to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