



Defining indicators for a sustainability self-assessment tool for HEIs: A participatory approach within the GET-AHED project

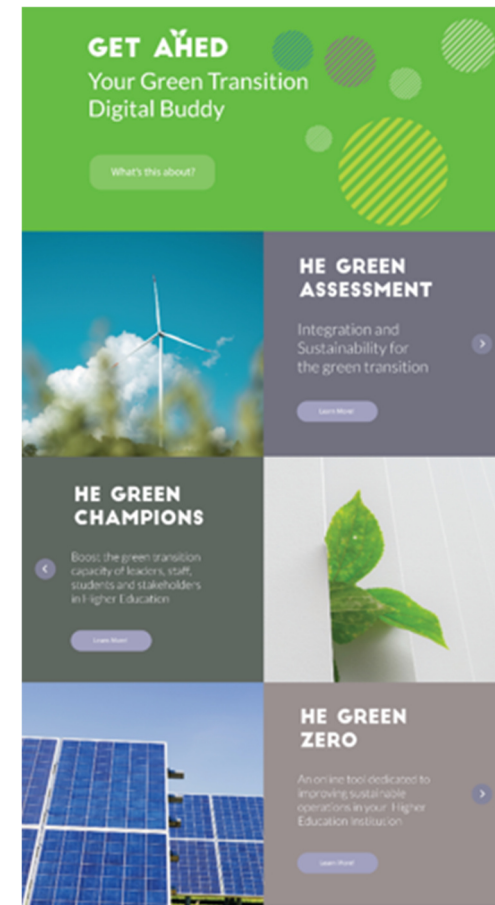
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What is GET-AHED?

Green Education & Transition – A Higher Education Digital buddy





- 🌱 The GET-AHED project aims at supporting HEI-strategies and sustainability reporting practices
- 🌱 ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PI-FORWARD-LOT1
- 🌱 February 2023 – January 2026
- 🌱 A **digital platform** developed in consultation with several associate partner EU ministries, HEI representative bodies and an existing European University alliance which will provide HEIs across the EU with a range of online tools to **enable them to implement the EU's Green Transition and Green Education and Training priorities.**



HEIs' role in the green transition

-  Science, Research and Innovation Performance Report (EC, 2022) highlights: **HEIs play a critical role in supporting the diffusion of sustainable solutions**
-  HEIs as “**priority organisations and agents of change**” (Findler et al., 2019; Karatzoglou, 2013; Prieto-Jiménez et al., 2021; Weber, 2012)
-  Kekäle & Pinheiro (2025) see HEIs as **one of the key players in climate change** next to political decision makers and companies/investors (long-term time-span, highest potential in producing knowledge, innovation and education)
-  HEIs' role stands out in at least 4 interconnected fields (Guitérrez-Mijares et al., 2023; Fissi et al., 2021):
 - HEIs (esp. larger ones) increasingly adopt energy-efficient habits to reduce greenhouse emissions
 - HEIs train and socialise students, provide competences on the topic
 - HEIs conduct basic and applied research on environmental sustainability, and develop green solutions
 - HEIs inform and involve relevant non-academic stakeholders, can inspire sustainable attitudes and behaviour
-  HE-sector will have to reflect strategically how to boost its own visibility and performance (Lucaci, 2022), while safeguarding their institutional integrity (Kekäle & Pinheiro, 2025)

Sustainability assessment practices

-  Sustainability self-assessment tools (SATs): “(...) instruments that offer HEIs a systematic set of procedures and methods to **measure, audit, benchmark, and communicate their sustainable efforts**” (Findler et al., 2019, p. 3)
-  Meta-studies of existing tools (e.g. Tumbas et al., 2015, Mapar et al., 2020) find:
 - In parts: Poor applicability for the HE-context
 - Strong focus on operations
 - Core activities (education, research and third mission) underrepresented
 - Qualitative indicators are widespread, but difficult to interpret
 - Lack of representativeness of cultures, sustainability dimensions, socio-economic contexts
 - Strong focus on outcomes
-  The prevalence of sustainability reporting/sustainability assessment in the HE sector has increased in recent years, but different levels of implementation can be seen (Leal-Filho et al., 2022)
-  But: if well-tailored, SATs have the potential to enhance HEI sustainability (Singh et al., 2023)

GET-AHED HE Green Assessment

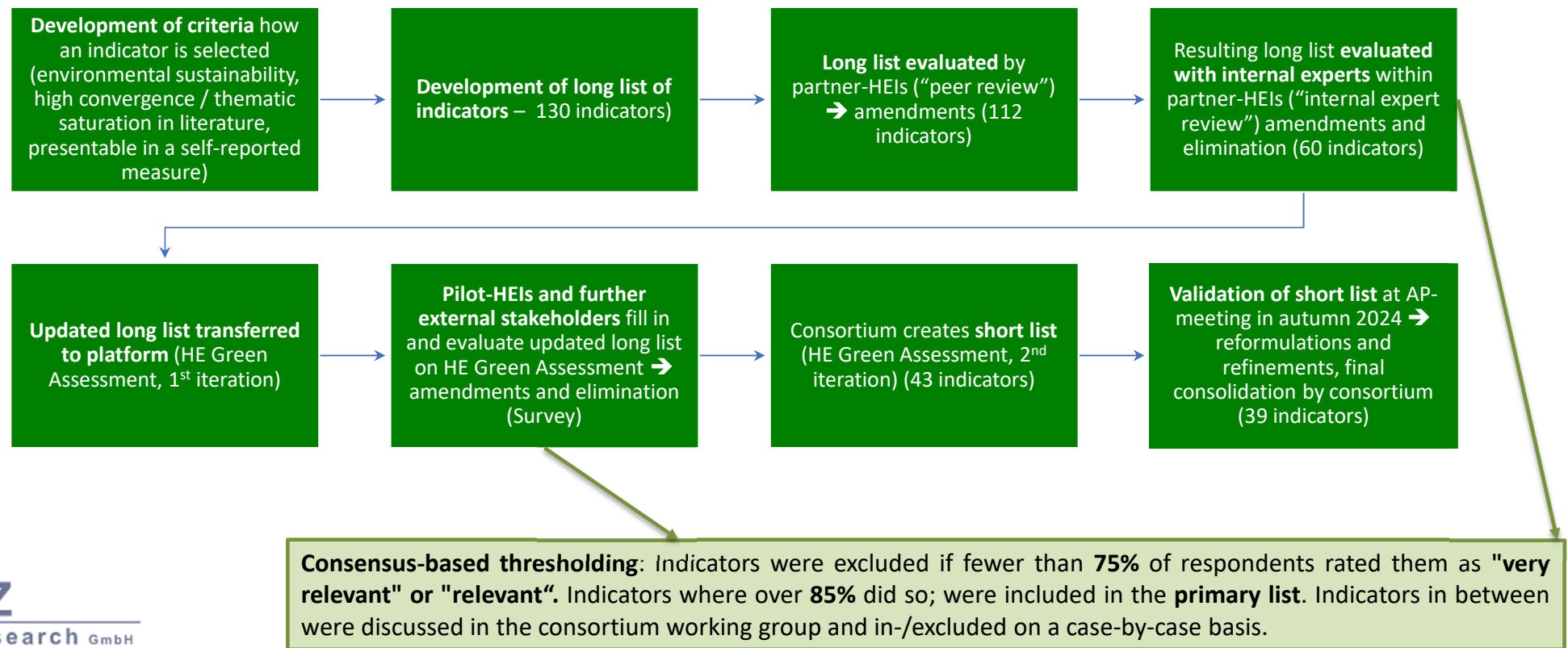
How HE Green Assessment wants to fill the gap:

- It has been built under strong involvement of HEIs (participatory approach)
- HE Green Assessment follows a **whole-university approach**
- It fosters **intra-institutional collaboration** by involving different HEI-missions and activities
- The tool is **process-oriented** much rather than results-oriented (no benchmarking etc.)
- It serves an **educational purpose**, promoting awareness and encouraging the generation of new ideas

The screenshot displays the GET-AHED HE Green Assessment website. At the top, a dark green navigation bar includes a 'Profile' button and the GET-AHED logo. A user profile dropdown menu is open, showing 'Hi, Christina!' and buttons for 'Edit Profile' and 'Sign Out'. The main content area features a large image of a hand holding a coffee cup, with the text 'HE Green Assessment' and a placeholder paragraph. Below this, a grid of six icons represents different assessment dimensions: Organisational Management, Assessing and Reporting, Operations, Community and Outreach, Education and Curricula, and Research. A 'Get Started' button is positioned below the grid. The footer contains contact information for WPZ Research GmbH, a disclaimer, and a 'Stay up to date' section with a 'GET-AHED news' link.

Methodology indicator development (1)

- Definition of **dimensions** (i.e. sections of the tool) **based on literature review**
- Development of **indicators** based on analysis of existing SAT and meta-studies (e.g. Du et al., 2023; Mapar et al., 2022) as a starting point, followed by a multi-step procedure:



Methodology indicator development (2)

Pilot-HEI online survey

- Snowball-sample (Call for pilot-HEIs was spread in consortium and associate partners' networks, via social media, at conferences etc.)
- 32 HEIs from all over Europe completed the online survey, e.g.
- Pilot HEIs were asked to:
 - rate the relevance of each of the 60 indicators (4pt-scale from 1=„not at all relevant“ to 4=„very relevant“)
 - suggest the merger of indicators or the shift to another dimension
 - suggestion reformulations and provide further comments
 - Provide further information on their institution
- Analysis: frequency analysis as basis for consensus-based thresholding and qualitative data analyses

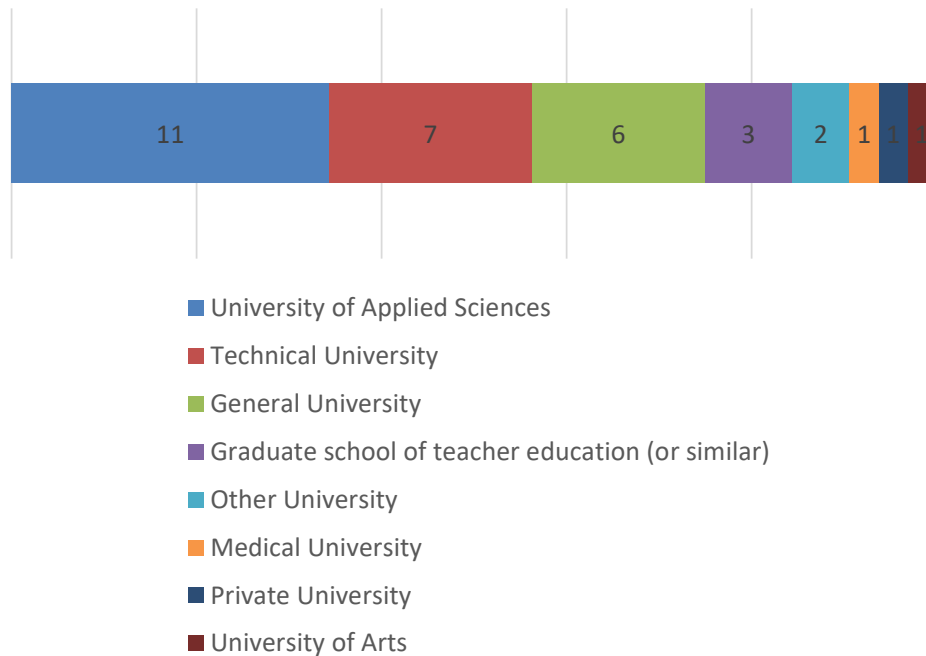


Example analysis grid

| Code | Indicator | Percentage >= 3 | Comments | Correct dimension? | Merge? |
|-------|--|-----------------|--|--------------------|--------|
| B1.3 | The HEI's procurement and tendering policy prioritises environmentally sustainable investments. | 0,91 | | 95,65% | |
| B1.4 | The HEI's leadership demonstrates commitment to environmental sustainability as a priority in its decision-making processes. | 0,87 | I think that the mentioned indicators don't fit to organisational management in a narrow context. I think to use the category it must be explained what you understand under this term. From my point of view I see it very narrow to organisati Example of the Green Deal could be eliminated or go into the explanation box | 90,91% | B1.6 |
| B1.5 | The HEI has a clearly defined strategy for sustainability that aligns with international strategies and policy frameworks. | 0,71 | Example of the Green Deal could be eliminated or go into the explanation box | | |
| B1.7 | The HEI has dedicated structures, such as a staff committee, for coordinating and integrating environmental sustainability activities across the HEI. | 0,91 | | 91,30% | |
| B1.8 | The HEI utilises educational, training and awareness-raising activities to disseminate the principles of environmental sustainability among its students, staff and external stakeholders. | 0,96 | The HEI utilises research-based educational training and awareness-raising activities to disseminate the principles of environmental sustainability. The university should foster the integration of research-based findings in educational training within the medical field | 59,09% | |
| B1.12 | The HEI promotes environmental sustainability across all its departments, both academic and non-academic. | 0,82 | | | |
| B2.2 | The HEI implements an environmentally sustainable campus strategy by incorporating elements of green building into the design, construction, renovation of its infrastructures and land use. | 0,87 | eliminate "has a green campus/land use strategy" | 87,50% | |
| B2.3 | The HEI implements measures and actions to reduce water consumption. | 0,87 | | 95,83% | |

Results (1): Sample description

- Participating institutions (n = 32)



Job titles of participating HEI representatives:

- Vice Rector
- Dean
- Head of Department
- Head of Sustainability
- Head of quality management
- Professor for Sustainability Management
- Representative of sustainability unit
- Member of Green Team
- (Senior) lecturer for sustainability
- Impact manager

Results (2): Descriptives

- 50% of participating HEIs have a dedicated “**Sustainability Unit**”
- 63% are **not yet familiar** with (environmental) sustainability self-assessment tools (SAT)
 - Out of those familiar with SAT, less than 1/3 use them for their sustainability reporting
- 72% do **not have any kind of sustainability reporting** installed at their institution
- 50% of participating HEIs have **high interest in sustainability assessment**, as per their willingness to be indicated on the project website

| Institution type | % having Sust. Unit | % familiar with SAT |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| General Uni. | 33% | 0% |
| Grad. Teach. S. | 33% | 33% |
| Medical Uni. | 100% | 0% |
| Other Uni. | 0% | 0% |
| Private Uni. | 100% | 100% |
| Technical Uni. | 43% | 86% |
| Uni. of Applied Sci. | 64% | 18% |
| Uni. of Arts | 100% | 0% |

Results (3): Indicators assessment

| Dimension | Avg. Relev. Score [SD] | Avg. Appropri. Score* |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Organizational management | 3.21 [0.81] | 84.89% |
| Operations | 3.19 [0.87] | 91.14% |
| Education and curricula | 3.29 [0.75] | 96.40% |
| Research, development, innovation | 3.08 [0.87] | 96.41% |
| Community and outreach | 3.08 [0.84] | 97.39% |
| Assessment, reporting, evaluation | 3.01 [0.91] | 93.07% |

* Percentage of respondents selected “Correct dimension”.

Results (4): Short-listing the indicators

| Dimension | # Indicators initially | # Short-listed indicators | “Retention rate” |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Organizational management | 12 | 5 | 42% |
| Operations | 12 | 9 | 82% |
| Education and curricula | 5 | 5 | 100% |
| Research, development, innovation | 11 | 8 | 73% |
| Community and outreach | 13 | 7 | 54% |
| Assessment, reporting, evaluation | 7 | 5 | 71% |

Examples of indicators

Dimension „Operations“:

The HEI promotes waste avoidance and reduction measures, including circular economy approaches (e.g. in food waste management), across its campus.

Description:

The HEI encourages waste reduction on campus to foster environmental sustainability. It includes ways to reduce food waste, hazardous waste and promote recycling.

To score highly, HEIs should:

- *Use digital documents and implement a needs-based purchasing practice to minimise paper waste.*
- *Promote recycling programmes for plastics, paper and electronics.*
- *Practice organic waste composting through waste management staff.*
- *Implement sustainable food waste management strategies at the campus level.*

Dimension „Education and Curricula“:

As part of its future skills strategy, the HEI incorporates a range of competencies into curricula, therefore preparing students for a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle.

Description:

The HEI equips students with practical skills to address sustainability challenges effectively, preparing and motivating them to develop innovative solutions and drive positive environmental change.

To score highly, HEIs should:

- *Promote activities that require students to critically analyse environmental issues (e.g. debates, simulation, and other projects)*
- *Offer courses on sustainable resource management, health, nutrition, green shopping and technologies.*
- *Explore sustainability from multidisciplinary perspectives.*

Mind our current calls for contribution! (1)

Platform usability test – Call for Pilot HEIs!

We're kicking off the **second pilot phase** of the GET-AHED platform – and we're looking for **higher education institutions** ready to test, explore, and help refine our tools.

As a **pilot HEI**, you'll get:

- Exclusive early access to the platform
- Insightful tools: self-assessment, training resources, good practices
- A quick and easy feedback process (just 15–30 minutes!)

Your input will directly shape a European initiative supporting the green transition in higher education.

 Pilot testing begins **May 15, 2025**

Register here:

 Questions? Reach out: get-ahed@wpz-research.com



Mind our current calls for contribution! (2)

Final Conference – Call for Papers!

For our final conference in Cork, Ireland, on October 20 and 21, 2025, we are searching for interesting contributions in the realm of our topic **Advancing Sustainability in the Higher Education Sector**.

For further information, see attached conference call or go to: <https://www.get-ahed.eu/conference-2025/>



Thank you for your attention!

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