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PAPER

From Mobility to Impact: Strategic Levers for Scaling Green Competencies in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions, HEIs, are increasingly expected to prepare society for life within planetary boundaries. This article asks how cross-border collaboration can accelerate that mission. We review 40 European and United Nations (UN) policy documents, scan four European University Alliances, and gather practitioner feedback from 30 program coordinators. Findings point to three enablers of rapid progress: aligned policy and funding that allow climate-centered joint degrees to run without bureaucratic delays; open digital platforms that give geographically dispersed learners equal access to specialist resources; and inclusive partnership models that bring underrepresented HEIs, particularly in the Global South, into the center of project design. When these conditions are present, interviewees report marked improvements in students' systems-thinking and futures literacy skills and in staff capacity to embed sustainability across curricula. We illustrate the point with two cases: the Una Europa micro-credential in Sustainability and the SEA-EU field courses in marine science, both of which couple physical mobility with low-carbon digital teamwork. Aligning internationalization strategies with the European Green Deal, the European Strategy for Universities, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emerges as a practical route for scaling such initiatives. We close with a roadmap that links funding calls to the GreenComp competence set, sets carbon targets for digital infrastructure, and proposes peer-mentoring schemes for smaller institutions. The paper argues that HEIs that adopt these measures can move from commenting on the climate crisis to driving systemic, equitable change.

KEYWORDS

artificial intelligence (AI), Erasmus plus, green competencies, higher education, internationalization, sustainability

1 INTRODUCTION

Rising global temperatures, record wildfire seasons, and accelerating species loss are no longer distant forecasts; they shape daily life from the Arctic to

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the Mediterranean. [14, 15] These intertwined pressures call for coordinated responses with education at their center.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a broad role through their teaching, research, and public engagement missions. Besides their mission to educate future professionals, HEIs also influence public debate, generate innovative solutions, and guide evidence-based policymaking. To meet the demands of the ecological transition, HEIs must integrate sustainability as the core of their curricula, research priorities, and institutional strategies. This integration should not just be a superficial or symbolic one. It should reflect a deep transformation that features environmental awareness and sustainable development principles in all aspects of academic life and governance.

Internationalization gives this effort an additional strategic dimension. It enables HEIs to develop collaborative networks, engage in joint research initiatives, exchange innovative pedagogical practices, and promote mutual learning among staff and students when it is structured effectively. It facilitates the sharing of ideas across borders and creates conditions for joint educational responses to global environmental challenges. Through international mobility programs, transnational education initiatives, and institutional partnerships, HEIs can jointly develop curricula to address sustainability from multiple perspectives and cultural contexts.

Recent policy developments in Europe and throughout the world have reinforced this intersection between sustainability and international collaboration. The European Green Deal [3], the European Strategy for Universities [4], and the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 [16] have placed education at the center of global efforts to support climate action, biodiversity protection, and social equity. These frameworks provide both the political mandate and the strategic orientation for aligning internationalization in higher education with sustainability objectives. They call for institutions to adopt coherent policies, promote inclusive and responsible mobility, and develop partnerships that contribute directly to green transformation.

Digital technology and AI serve as additional instruments to improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of this process [9] [17]. These technologies can enhance personalized learning, facilitate multilingual access to sustainability content, and promote international collaboration while limiting the negative environmental impacts associated with physical travel, if appropriately put in place. They can assist in monitoring progress, tracking outcomes, and informing policy decisions using real-time data.

The paper discusses how HEIs can make better use of international collaboration to improve their work on sustainability. It considers several European initiatives, including Erasmus Plus, Horizon Europe, [5] and the European Universities Initiative, as well as global efforts such as the Greening Education Partnership launched by UNESCO [13]. It also aims to suggest strategies that could help develop green competencies at a wider international level by reviewing current practices and identifying some of the main structural obstacles. The focus is on practical and feasible solutions that make it possible for internationalization to support the integration of sustainability into academic systems. Following the GreenComp framework [8], the analysis emphasizes the importance of values, critical thinking, long-term vision, and concrete actions as essential elements that international cooperation can help to promote.

As part of the writing process of this paper, we reviewed European and UN policy documents, alongside an in-depth look at several European University Alliances actively engaged in sustainability-oriented initiatives. To complement this, we drew on insights gathered through professional dialogues with HEIs' academic and leadership working at the intersection of internationalization and sustainability. This information, received from a survey prepared as part of the broader research activities

conducted by the first author within an ongoing doctoral project, offered valuable perspectives on how global agendas are being interpreted and implemented at the HEI level. Given their informal and exploratory nature, these contributions are referenced illustratively, without a full methodological elaboration in this paper.

2 THE POLICY FOUNDATIONS FOR GREEN COMPETENCE BUILDING

The integration of sustainability into higher education is not an isolated institutional trend but a priority continuously reflected in global and regional policy frameworks. These frameworks offer a foundation for coordinated action, provide strategic direction for national systems, and serve as a catalyst for institutional transformation. In particular, the European Union (EU) and the UN have placed education at the center of their sustainability agendas, aware that climate goals and ecological transitions cannot be achieved without equipping learners with relevant competencies, values, and mindsets.

At the European level, the European Green Deal [3] adopted in 2019 represents a comprehensive roadmap for making the EU climate-neutral by 2050. Even though it targets primarily economic and environmental reforms, it explicitly identifies education as a strategic enabler of change. It calls for the promotion of knowledge sharing, the development of green skills, and the engagement of young people as active participants in the transition toward a sustainable society. This vision has been reinforced by the European Strategy for Universities published in 2022, which invites HEIs to contribute more directly to environmental objectives through curriculum innovation, applied research, and cross-border collaboration.

A significant advancement in European education policy is the introduction of the GreenComp framework [8]. Developed by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, GreenComp details a collection of sustainability competencies designed for lifelong learning. These competencies are structured around four interconnected domains: embodying sustainability values, embracing complexity in sustainability, envisioning sustainable futures, and acting for sustainability. Going beyond just environmental knowledge, the framework also incorporates systems thinking, emotional engagement, ethical reflection, and participatory action. It's intended as a guide for educators, curriculum designers, and institutions looking to align their programs with broader sustainability objectives.

To support clarity and engagement, the key elements of the GreenComp framework are summarized in the following Table 1. These 4 domains represent an integrated set of sustainability competencies that serve as a reference point for curriculum design, teaching strategies, and international cooperation initiatives across higher education:

Table 1. Overview of the GreenComp domains

GreenComp Domain	Description
Embodying sustainability values	Understanding and living by ethical principles that support environmental and social well-being
Embracing complexity in sustainability	Making sense of interconnected systems and recognizing that sustainability challenges require holistic thinking
Envisioning sustainable futures	Imagining positive future scenarios and planning practical pathways to reach them
Acting for sustainability	Taking purposeful action, individually and collectively, to drive change towards sustainability

At the global level, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a universal blueprint for peace, prosperity, and planetary well-being. SDG 4 focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education and includes a specific target (SDG 4.7) aimed at ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. This encompasses education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity. Education is also seen as a critical enabler for the achievement of other goals, including those related to climate action (SDG 13), clean energy (SDG 7), and responsible consumption (SDG 12).

In operational terms, UNESCO has taken the lead in mobilizing education systems to respond to sustainability challenges. Its Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Roadmap [11] provides guidelines for integrating sustainability into policies, curricula, teacher training, and assessment systems. More recently, UNESCO launched the Greening Education Partnership (GEP) [13], a global initiative aimed at making every learner climate-ready. This initiative brings together governments, HEIs, civil society, and international organizations to develop coordinated responses and share best practices in sustainability education. It focuses on four key areas: greening schools, greening curricula, greening teacher preparation, and greening communities.

These policy developments are not only important for their content but also for their role in establishing legitimacy, coordination, transparency, and accountability. They provide a common language and set of priorities that help institutions navigate the complex terrain of sustainability and make informed decisions about where to invest their resources and how to structure their initiatives. Importantly, they create opportunities for alignment across sectors and countries, enabling HEIs to participate in joint efforts, benchmark their progress, and access funding and support for sustainability-related activities.

By embracing and acting on these policy frameworks, higher education institutions can transcend isolated projects and disconnected initiatives. They can evolve into influential players within a wider transformative landscape, employing international alliances and collaborative partnerships as tools to achieve systemic change. This alignment with broader policies also guarantees that sustainability education is considered a vital element of institutional goals and national education systems, rather than an optional extra.

2.1 Strategic levers for scaling green education

To effectively expand green education, higher education must implement strategic approaches that enable the structured development and dissemination of green skills. This ensures that sustainability is not limited to specific academic modules or research topics but is ingrained throughout the institution's mission. These approaches should be quantifiable, inclusive, and in line with long-term institutional and policy objectives. Among the most impactful mechanisms for this shift are international exchange programs, collaborative curriculum design, digital platforms, and innovative tools such as artificial intelligence (AI). When designed and implemented in an integrated way, these components create a dynamic system capable of promoting sustainable education across disciplines and national boundaries.

2.2 International mobility as a catalyst for transformation

Mobility schemes, long prized for language learning and cultural exchange, can also act as intensive workshops in sustainability. A semester comparing waste-sorting

policies in Warsaw and Valencia or measuring coastal erosion in Brittany gives participants a grounded sense of how ecological challenges vary by place and how solutions must be adapted accordingly. Carefully designed itineraries that pair field observation with structured reflection strengthen learning for students and staff alike. Virtual components, including remote internships with non-governmental organizations and real-time citizen-science data collection, further broaden participation for students who cannot afford extended travel. Follow-up surveys show that participants report significantly higher confidence in cross-cultural negotiation and project management, skills directly linked to future leadership in sustainability initiatives.

The expansion of blended mobility and virtual exchange formats has further democratized access to international learning. These models combine short-term physical mobility with longer virtual collaboration, enabling participants from less-resourced or geographically isolated institutions to benefit from global experiences without the financial or logistical barriers of long-term travel. Virtual components also reduce the environmental footprint of internationalization while maintaining high levels of academic and intercultural engagement. Programs supported by Erasmus Plus and Horizon Europe increasingly incorporate sustainability themes into mobility actions, creating communities of practice around issues such as renewable energy, circular economy, sustainable urban development, and climate justice.

2.3 Collaborative curriculum development and pedagogical innovation

Curriculum co-design across national and institutional borders provides another critical lever for bringing sustainability into higher education. When HEIs jointly develop degree programs, modules, or learning outcomes that reflect shared environmental priorities, in addition to sharing knowledge, they guarantee consistency and comparability across systems. These joint efforts can include co-teaching arrangements, collaborative supervision of thesis work, and interdisciplinary course structures that address complex sustainability issues from multiple academic perspectives.

The European Universities Initiative has become a laboratory for this type of collaboration. [4] By encouraging alliances among institutions across Europe, the initiative supports the creation of joint programs that integrate sustainability as both a theme and a competency objective. These programs often include challenge-based learning approaches, where students work in international teams to address real-world sustainability problems proposed by local communities, industries, or policy stakeholders. This model enhances the relevance of academic content and fosters experiential learning, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. Furthermore, the ongoing discussions at the EC about the creation of a European Degree aim to strengthen this model by providing a formal framework for joint transnational qualifications. Such a degree would not only facilitate recognition across borders but also reinforce shared academic standards and promote sustainability as a core element of Europe's higher education identity.

Introducing sustainability into curricula also requires going back again to the academic recognition systems, ensuring that green learning outcomes are reflected in diplomas, micro-credentials, academic transcripts, and their accompanying documents (i.e. diploma supplement). When sustainability competencies are formally recognized, they gain legitimacy and motivate students to pursue them intentionally. Faculty development and institutional support are also necessary to ensure that educators are prepared and encouraged to adopt sustainability-related content and methodologies.

2.4 Digital ecosystems and the role of artificial intelligence (AI)

Robust digital infrastructure widens access to sustainability education. Open platforms host interactive datasets, virtual field trips, and peer-review spaces that allow widely dispersed groups to collaborate without the emissions burden of frequent travel. AI can add personalization and efficiency, providing live translation, curating resources to match prior knowledge, and tracking project milestones against carbon-reduction targets. Projects such as EUSTEP [https://www.eusteps.eu/] show that combining these tools with participatory tasks, like auditing campus energy use, can translate abstract goals into concrete behavioral change. Equally important is the commitment to open-source code and transparent algorithms, allowing smaller institutions to adapt advanced tools without prohibitive licensing costs. Open science principles ensure that datasets on campus emissions can be reused in coursework, faculty research, and local policy briefs, multiplying the return on the original data collection effort.

We believe that while the potential of AI in education is clear, its role in advancing sustainability also invites a more critical perspective. Alongside its many benefits, AI raises valid concerns, from bias in algorithms and lack of transparency in decision-making to ethical questions surrounding surveillance and data use. Also, attention should be paid to the fact that AI systems may unintentionally replicate inequalities embedded in their training data or overlook the nuanced needs of underrepresented learners without careful oversight. Furthermore, the environmental impact of AI itself, in particular the energy demands of training large-scale models, must be part of the sustainability discussion.

Artificial intelligence brings a new perspective to this transformation. Platforms powered by AI can tailor sustainability learning experiences [9, 17] adapting content to match students' existing knowledge, preferred learning styles, and language needs. Sophisticated systems can facilitate real-time translation, offer virtual tutoring, and streamline collaborative project management, thereby making international education more accessible and effective. At the institutional level, AI can be employed to monitor carbon footprint, assess the sustainability of campus operations, and guide strategic planning through predictive analytics.

Nevertheless, the successful integration of AI depends not only on its technical capabilities but also on the digital readiness of HEIs. Many HEIs, especially in less-resourced contexts, still lack resources in infrastructure, training, and support. These challenges risk deepening the digital divide and limiting who can fully benefit from technological advances if left unattended. AI must really be accompanied by investments in digital literacy, thoughtful design, and shared access to tools and platforms to support inclusive sustainability education.

Projects such as EUSTEP [7], Una Europa [10], and SEA-EU [6] have demonstrated how digital ecosystems can support ecological literacy and behavior change. By engaging students and staff in carbon footprint measurement and sustainability audits, these initiatives combine digital innovation with environmental action. They also provide a model on how HEIs can use technology to bridge the knowledge-practice gap.

At the same time, it's essential to approach the integration of digital tools and AI in sustainability education with a critical eye, keeping ethical considerations, data privacy, and equitable access at the forefront. HEIs must guarantee that the digital transformation of green education is supported by sufficient infrastructure, thorough digital literacy training, and inclusive governance frameworks that protect the rights and interests of everyone involved.

3 BARRIERS TO TRANSFORMATION

The transition toward embedding green competencies at scale remains uneven and fragmented, while internationalization and sustainability have increasingly become shared priorities across higher education systems. Numerous barriers prevent a full recognition of this transformative agenda, both at the institutional level and across national and regional systems. These barriers are not only financial or logistical but also often systemic, rooted in longstanding structural inequalities, policy misalignments, and cultural resistance to change.

Despite strong declarations, many national guidelines still keep internationalization and environmental policy in separate silos. [2] The result is overlapping forms, incompatible deadlines, and funding streams too small to build coherent programs. Institutions are left to patch together short projects rather than develop sustained strategies.

So far, one of the most pressing barriers to the transformation of higher education through sustainability is the lack of coherence between policy frameworks and HEIs practices. International declarations and regional strategies frequently emphasize the importance of sustainability and cooperation; nonetheless, national education systems do not continuously translate these priorities into practical guidance or financial assistance, thereby affecting the transformation process from the national to the HEI level.

In many cases, policies on internationalization and policies on sustainable development are developed in parallel, rarely interacting. This disconnects leads to missed opportunities for creating synergies between mobility programs, curriculum reform, and institutional sustainability strategies.

Within HEIs, sustainability efforts are frequently concentrated in specific departments or research centers rather than enhanced across governance structures, curricula, and administrative procedures. Academic programs may include isolated modules on environmental issues, but without broader institutional commitment, these efforts risk remaining superficial. The lack of strategic integration can result in duplication of efforts, low scalability, and limited impact on institutional culture.

3.1 Unequal access and participation gaps

A second major challenge can be found in the unequal distribution of opportunities to engage in green international education. While mobility and collaboration programs have expanded over the years, participation continues to be favored in towards more wealthy educational institutions and learners from elevated socio-economic backgrounds.

Many HEIs in the Global South, as well as smaller ones within Europe and other regions, face structural limitations [11] that prevent them from fully participating in international initiatives. These include lack of infrastructure, limited administrative capacity, insufficient funding, and language or technological barriers.

Students from marginalized communities or underrepresented regions may be less likely to access mobility programs, online learning platforms, or sustainability-related educational content. Gender disparities, disability-related obstacles, and digital exclusion contribute to these inequalities. Sustainability education risks reinforcing rather than reducing existing gaps in access to quality education if targeted inclusion mechanisms are not considered in the process.

3.2 Short-term project culture and funding insecurity

A third barrier is the prevalence of a short-term project culture in both sustainability and internationalization work. Many initiatives are funded through competitive calls [5] that emphasize innovation and novelty but do not provide the structural support necessary for long-term impact. Projects often operate on limited timelines and lack continuity, making it difficult to sustain collaborations, institutionalize practices, or measure outcomes over time. Once the funding ends, many partnerships dissolve, digital platforms become inactive, and curricular innovations are no longer maintained.

For HEIs, especially those with fewer employees or less expertise in coordinating international projects, this dependence on short-term grants also adds administrative costs. Sustainability initiatives are less likely to be included in important operational and academic frameworks due to the lack of essential funding. This results in replication and fragmentation, compared to systemic change.

3.3 Digital gaps and technological constraints

Although digitalization has opened new avenues for scaling green education, it has also introduced new challenges. The digital divide remains a significant barrier, particularly for HEIs and learners in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Lack of access to reliable internet, digital devices, or user-friendly platforms can prevent meaningful engagement with online or blended sustainability programs.

Moreover, the rapid adoption of digital tools and AI in education often exceeds the development of ethical guidelines and inclusive design standards. [9, 12] Without thoughtful planning, digital systems could deliberately leave out students who are unfamiliar with the use of technology or who have trouble with language or accessibility. Concerns about data privacy, surveillance, and the environmental cost of large-scale digital infrastructures also require attention.

4 STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to make higher education a meaningful contributor to sustainability, it is necessary to go beyond individual projects or general commitments. What is needed is a coherent and long-term approach that connects policies with institutional practices and encourages active cooperation across sectors. For universities, policymakers, and international actors, aligning internationalization with environmental goals requires integrating sustainability into all dimensions of academic life. This includes teaching, research, governance, mobility, and partnerships. It is also essential to ensure inclusive participation and support long-term impact. The GreenComp framework offers useful guidance in this direction by identifying key areas such as sustainability values, systems thinking, future-oriented planning, and responsible action.

4.1 Aligning internationalization strategies with sustainability objectives

One of the most urgent priorities is to include sustainability goals directly into institutional internationalization strategies. Rather than treating green education as

a separate or optional activity, HEIs should ensure that environmental and social sustainability are reflected in their mobility schemes, partnership choices, and research agendas. HEIs can revise their mission statements, international collaboration frameworks, and funding priorities to reflect this alignment.

When it comes to policy, national authorities should really push for, or at least encourage, adding sustainability goals to international education programs. National strategies for making higher education more global should specifically aim to build green skills, use climate-friendly infrastructure, and promote environmentally responsible ways for students to move around.

4.2 Fostering inclusive partnerships and twinning models

To ensure that green education does not reinforce global inequalities, it is essential to promote partnerships that are inclusive, balanced, and mutually beneficial. HEIs with advanced capacities can engage in twinning or mentoring models that support less-resourced partners in building sustainability programs, developing digital infrastructure, and accessing international funding opportunities. These partnerships should prioritize the co-creation of knowledge, the recognition of local expertise, and long-term institutional development.

Transnational projects should be encouraged to include diverse partners, especially from underrepresented regions such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, Africa, etc. Such diversity enriches the learning process, fosters intercultural dialogue, and contributes to more globally relevant sustainability solutions.

4.3 Mainstreaming green competencies in curricula and credentials

Sustainability shouldn't just be a side thing in universities, such as optional courses or extra projects. It needs to be a core part of everything they teach. Universities should really look at their courses and figure out where they already touch on sustainability and where they could do more. They should mix different subjects together, get students working on real-world problems, and involve the local community in what they're learning.

In parallel, academic credential systems should be adapted to recognize and validate students' acquisition of green competencies. This may include the development of digital credentials, sustainability badges, or transcript supplements that document environmental learning outcomes. Such recognition provides incentives for students, improves employability, and signals institutional commitment to sustainable development.

4.4 Leveraging digital innovation and AI responsibly

Higher education institutions should also use digital tools and AI to make sustainability education more available and personalized. They should put money into online platforms that can handle content in different languages, support teamwork on projects, and assess how well sustainability goals are being met in real time. They should also find and share open-source learning materials about the environment so more people can use them.

However, the adoption of digital tools must be guided by principles of equity, ethics, and environmental responsibility. HEIs should establish clear policies on data protection, algorithmic transparency, and accessibility. Capacity-building programs should be offered to students and faculty to ensure digital literacy and effective use of technology for sustainability purposes.

Higher education institutions can also use AI to make their campuses more sustainable. For example, they can use it to track how much energy they're using, find ways to use fewer resources, and measure their carbon footprint. By using these practices in their teaching and research, they can turn the whole campus into a living lab that connects what they do as an institution with what they teach.

The roadmap below (see Figure 1) synthesizes the core pillars of green internationalization in higher education. It links key policy frameworks with institutional strategies, highlighting the levers and enabling conditions needed to achieve long-term, sustainable outcomes. Designed as a guiding tool, it helps institutions align their global engagement with environmental and social responsibility in a structured and actionable way.

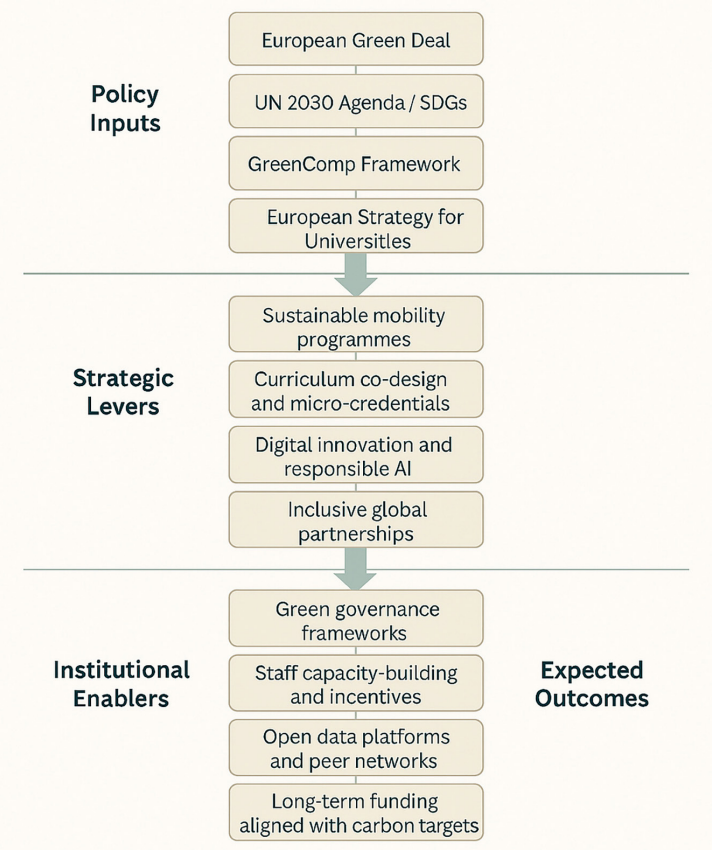

Fig. 1. Roadmap for green internationalization in higher education

5 ENCOURAGING LONG-TERM PLANNING AND STRUCTURAL INVESTMENT

It's not enough to just fund projects for a short time; sustainability and internationalization need to be built into how universities get their money and plan for the future. Governments and international organizations should create funding

programs that reward universities for having a clear strategy, showing they're committed, and making a real, measurable impact over the long haul [5, 11, 16].

Higher education institutions should establish sustainability offices or coordination units that work across departments to ensure alignment and continuity. Indicators and evaluation systems should be designed and established to track progress not only in terms of project outputs but also in terms of organizational change, cultural transformation, and student outcomes.

Engaging leadership at all levels is essential. Rectors, deans, and department heads must be empowered and held accountable for promoting sustainability within their areas of responsibility. Staff development and recognition systems should include sustainability-related competencies as part of performance criteria.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Higher education institutions are now at a critical point. They can either remain on the sidelines as ecological and social challenges deepen or take an active role in shaping solutions that matter. The experience shared in this paper shows that when sustainability is genuinely embedded in teaching, research, and international cooperation, HEIs can lead meaningful change. Yet this potential cannot be realized unless key barriers are addressed. Regulations are often fragmented, access to resources remains uneven, and too many promising initiatives are limited by short-term funding. What is needed is a culture that supports long-term collaboration and recognizes environmental responsibility as part of academic excellence.

When sustainability is included in staff development, hiring, and evaluation processes, it becomes part of institutional identity. It allows new educators and researchers to enter environments where these values are already lived. Public reporting that is open and accessible to communities and partners also builds trust and makes progress visible beyond academic circles.

This paper argues that internationalization has a powerful role to play in building green competencies, especially when it is rooted in shared values and real responsibility. Through collaborative curriculum design, student mobility, and thoughtful use of digital tools like artificial intelligence, HEIs can create more inclusive and relevant models of education. But this only works if those efforts are intentional, well resourced, and inclusive of institutions with different capacities and perspectives.

In reviewing practices across Europe and beyond, we have also seen persistent challenges. Policy frameworks do not always align. Many HEIs still lack the resources or the support to act. And the way most projects are funded continues to reward short-term innovation over long-term transformation. Without stronger investment and clearer coordination, even the most ambitious strategies may struggle to take root.

The roadmap presented here offers a way forward. It connects policies, strategies, and institutional tools in a coherent and practical format. It is meant to guide HEIs in aligning internationalization with sustainability and equity, not only in theory but also in everyday practice.

As the effects of climate change and social inequality continue to unfold, HEIs are being asked to rethink their purpose. Sustainability should not sit on the sidelines of academic work. It should become part of how HEIs teach, research, plan, and collaborate with the world around them. This shift is not just about creating new programs. It is about creating a culture where environmental and social responsibility are treated as core values.

To support this shift, international cooperation must evolve. It should not be limited to exchanges of students or project deliverables. It should focus on long-term partnerships built on trust, mutual learning, and shared goals. Policy frameworks such as the European Green Deal, the European Strategy for Universities, and the UN 2030 Agenda give us the structure. What they need is strong leadership and the will to put inclusion and sustainability at the center of education [1].

In closing, HEIs have a unique opportunity to lead. Not just through academic excellence or innovation, but by helping societies imagine and realize more sustainable futures. If internationalization strategies reflect environmental values and are shaped by care and fairness, they can become more than tools for exchange. They can become drivers of lasting and positive transformation. The reflections offered in this paper are not final answers. They are an invitation to keep experimenting, collaborating, and moving forward together.

7 AI DISCLOSURE

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT tool exclusively to assist with language refinement and formatting adjustments during manuscript preparation. No AI tools were employed for content generation, data analysis, scientific interpretation, or intellectual contribution. The authors remain fully responsible for the content, scientific accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

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