



Universities for a Sustainable Future: Beyond the 2030 Agenda

24-26 February 2027
Brussels



UNICA DAYS 2027

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1. Introduction and context

As the world approaches the final years of the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand at a decisive moment. Progress has been uneven across regions, and in some areas - climate action, inequality, peace and justice - the **global community is moving backwards**. The last decade has been marked by **overlapping crises**: geopolitical tensions, climate-related disasters, democratic erosion, global health emergencies, and the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. These shifts have **reshaped the environment in which universities operate** and have exposed the fragility of the global commitments made in 2015. Against this backdrop, UNICA Days 2027 will convene an international dialogue on the role of higher education in advancing the SDGs in the final stretch to 2030 and in shaping the next global agenda.

The SDGs were conceived as a universal framework, but their **implementation has been deeply affected by regional disparities**, political instability, and unequal access to resources. Universities worldwide face similar pressures - from the need to expand access to quality education, to the challenge of supporting cities under climate stress, to the difficulty of sustaining international cooperation in a fragmented geopolitical landscape. Yet they also share a unique capacity to act as global connectors: institutions that generate knowledge, foster critical thinking, and build bridges across borders. UNICA Days 2027 aims to harness this potential by creating a space where **global perspectives can meet, compare, and inspire one another**.

The **opening plenary** will provide a **global reality check on the SDGs as 2030 approaches**, examining what has been achieved, where progress has stalled or reversed, and what lessons can be drawn from the past decade. Rather than focusing

solely on isolated success stories, the session will consider the broader picture across regions and the structural factors that have shaped outcomes, including inequality, geopolitical tensions, climate-related crises, technological transformation, and democratic pressures. It will reflect on the contributions and shortcomings of universities in advancing sustainable development and explore what higher education institutions can realistically achieve in the remaining years to 2030. By establishing a shared understanding of both progress and persistent challenges, the session will set the foundation for considering the priorities and forms of cooperation needed beyond 2030.

Three thematic sessions will then examine **what has been achieved under the SDGs, what lessons can be drawn from the past decade, and what priorities should guide action beyond 2030**. Focusing on SDGs that are particularly relevant to universities and resonate across continents, the sessions will connect global progress and setbacks with the practical experiences and responsibilities of higher education institutions.

SDG 4 (Quality Education) will be examined through the lens of achievements, persistent gaps, and the priorities that should shape education beyond 2030. The session will consider progress in expanding access to higher education and advancing digital learning, while also addressing persistent inequalities between and within regions. It will explore how universities can ensure that education remains inclusive, relevant, and resilient in a rapidly changing world, including through the responsible use of artificial intelligence, lifelong learning, and the development of skills for an uncertain future. The discussion will also reflect on the conditions needed to safeguard academic freedom and ensure that technological and educational transformation benefits learners across diverse contexts.

SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) will focus on what has been learned from efforts to build more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban environments. Universities are increasingly embedded in communities facing climate stress, demographic change, housing pressures, and social fragmentation. From coastal cities threatened by rising sea levels to megacities grappling with pollution and overcrowding, institutions have developed diverse approaches to supporting urban resilience and sustainability. The session will examine which approaches have delivered meaningful results, where important gaps remain, and how universities

can work with local communities and other partners to address housing, climate adaptation, mobility, and social cohesion in the years ahead.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) will address the lessons and limitations of international cooperation over the past decade, as well as the priorities for building more resilient partnerships beyond 2030. Universities are navigating a world where mobility is disrupted, research partnerships are increasingly scrutinised, and trust between countries is strained. At the same time, the need for international collaboration has never been greater. This session will explore what makes partnerships effective, ethical, reciprocal, and resilient; how universities can sustain meaningful global engagement in a fragmented geopolitical environment; and how higher education institutions can continue to act as bridges between societies even when political relations are tense.

The **closing plenary will look beyond 2030 and invite participants to consider what should come next.** Rather than simply extending the existing framework, the session will reflect on the lessons of the SDGs and the principles that should shape a future global agenda for sustainable development. The world beyond 2030 will face challenges that were barely visible in 2015, including AI governance, climate-induced migration, global health risks, and the fragility of democratic institutions. The discussion will explore how universities can contribute to shaping this next chapter through knowledge, scientific integrity, critical thinking, international cooperation, and a long-term commitment to equity and global solidarity.

UNICA Days 2027 will thus serve as a **platform for global reflection and collective foresight.** It will bring together diverse perspectives to assess what the SDGs have achieved, learn from the gaps and challenges that remain, and consider what should guide global action beyond 2030. In doing so, it will reaffirm the essential role of universities as global actors committed to knowledge, dialogue, cooperation, and the long-term wellbeing of societies.

2. Programme

Day 1 | Wednesday 24 February

📍 Venue: UNICA Office (tbc)

18:30

Welcome reception

Day 2 | Thursday 25 February

📍 Venue: University Foundation

8:30-9:00

Welcome coffee

9:00-9:30

Welcome addresses

9:30-11:00

Opening plenary – The SDGs at 2030: achievements, lessons and the road ahead

11:00-11:30

Coffee break

11:30-13:00

Thematic session 1 (SDG 4) – Education for the future: achievements, gaps and priorities beyond 2030

13:00-15:00

Lunch

15:00-16:30

Thematic session 2 (SDG 11) – Building sustainable cities: what we have learned and what comes next

19:30

Dinner

Day 3 | Friday 26 February

📍 Venue: University Foundation

8:30-9:00

Welcome coffee

9:30-10:30

Thematic session 3 (SDG 17) – Partnerships for a new global agenda: from commitment to collective action

10:30-11:00

Coffee break

11:00-12:30

Closing plenary – Beyond 2030: shaping the next chapter of global cooperation

12:30-13:30

Farewell Lunch