Survey Report on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS)

Connecting Regional Strengths | Creating European Innovation

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SDG Activities in UAS4EUROPE Universities of Applied Science – Survey Report

Contents

Executive Summary

In February 2021, the UAS4EUROPE Governing Board committed to strengthen Universities of Applied Sciences' (UAS) role and visibility in their engagement with the SDGs. This report analyses the extent and content of Universities of Applied Sciences' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) activities, as reported by researchers, EU advisors and administrators. Secondly, it presents the respondents' suggestions for UAS4EUROPE's SDG activities. The SDG survey results serve as the cross-cutting basis of all our future initiatives to better include the issue of sustainability in our network's activities. This report also serves as a decision-making base for UAS4EUROPE's Executive Committee on what SDG-related services UAS4EUROPE could offer to its members in the future. It ends with the following recommendations for UAS4EUROPE's actions: Promotion of SDG research, organising events, facilitating networking, collecting data on SDGs, and setting incentives for SDG activities at UAS-level.

1 Introduction

On 23 February 2021, the UAS4EUROPE Governing Board set the cornerstone for UAS4EUROPE's strong dedication towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a joint commitment. Accordingly, the network pledges to "use its position in Europe to strengthen the role and visibility of UAS in their commitment to the SDGs". As key actors in regional innovation ecosystems, Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) are indispensable in addressing sustainability issues through the focus areas of learning/teaching, research, governance and external leadership. Together with the presidents' statement, a background paper outlines the contribution of UAS to achieve the SDGs and lays the foundation of an increased commitment of European applied research and innovation towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In order to evaluate the next steps, UAS4EUROPE consulted its member UAS by means of a survey to find out about existing opportunities and challenges on the ground with regard to the SDGs. This report firstly introduces the methodology and summarises the survey's main results. Finally, the report makes some recommendations on what further actions UAS4EUROPE could take to showcase the SDG activities of its members.

2 Methodology

The survey was distributed among researchers, EU advisors, and administrators in UAS4EUROPE member institutions via e-mail in spring 2021. It was open for replies between March and July 2021 for the duration of three months and 21 days. In this period, 103 respondents completed the survey. Most of the respondents (59.2 per cent) were researchers, followed by 33 per cent of administrators and 7.8 per cent EU advisors.

Based on their category (researcher, administrator or EU advisor), respondents replied to a specific set of questions that relates to their institutional function.

The survey encompassed several parts, the first asking for demographic data, the second inquiring about the actors' SDG activities, while the last part treated possible SDG-related activities that UAS4EUROPE could offer to its members. The survey closed with some general items such as "additional comments" and "Would you like to stay informed about UAS4EUROPE's activities?"

3 What do your SDG activities look like?

Figure 1: Researchers', administrators' and EU advisors' involvement in SDG research.
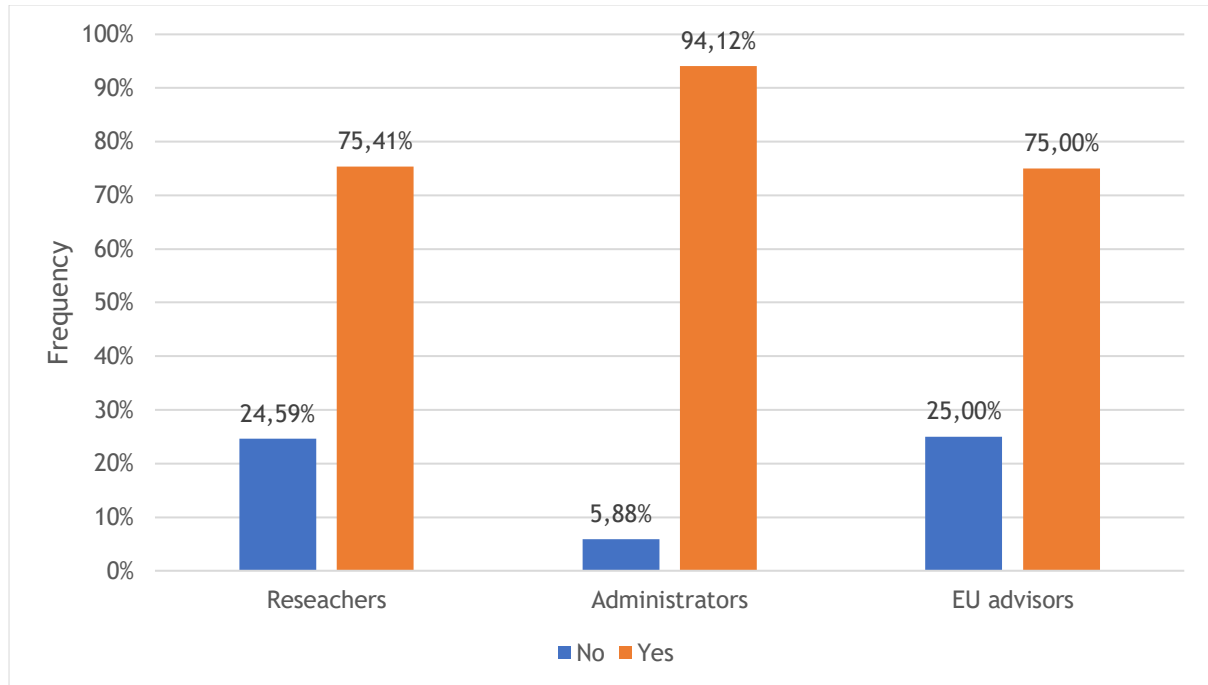
3.1 Researchers

According to the respondents' answers, UAS researchers are active in a broad spectrum of SDG research. 75.41 per cent of all respondents state that they personally conduct research which addresses the SDGs (see Figure 1). Examples of SDG-related research projects include, for instance: "Sustainable Packaging" (SDG: 12), "Inclusion of persons with disabilities: Ethically sensitive settings for persons with disabilities in institutions" (SDG 16+), or "Transformation of biomass into energy" (SDG 13). Finally, 81.97 per cent of researchers would be willing to participate in UAS4EUROPE's commitment to the SDGs by speaking at events or sharing knowledge and best practices with other actors within the network.

To sum up, SDGs are central to research among the surveyed UAS researchers and there is a high willingness among the respondents to participate in UAS4EUROPE's future SDG activities.

3.2 Administrators

94.12 per cent of the participating administrators stated that their UAS is active or engaged in activities (such as research, governance, external leadership, and teaching) which target the SDGs (see Figure 1). From the respondents' answers it becomes apparent that the UAS not only work towards the SDGs in research, but pursue a number of strategies in order to further embed the SDGs in their strategic initiatives. They mentioned that their UAS, among other things,

- host events surrounding the SDGs (e.g. SDG weeks),
- embed the SDGs in the university's strategy (e.g. by nominating an SDG coordinator, having an SDG Charta),
- develop curricula that address the SDGs and offer certificates on sustainability,
- establish working groups on the SDGs, which promote and support the goals,

- participate in knowledge centres and SDG alliances (e.g. one person mentioned that their UAS joined the United Nations Global Compact platform),
- reduce emissions of the university,
- publish sustainability reports,
- promote diversity among UAS staff, and
- participate in Horizon Europe, which has the SDGs as an integral part.

This is only a selection of the most frequently mentioned initiatives. For more specific information, consult the "Links" section in the Annex of this report.

3.3 EU advisors

The answers of administrators and EU advisors were quite similar content-wise. 75 per cent of participating EU advisors claim that their institution is active or engaged in SDG activities (see Figure 1). According to the EU advisors, some of their UAS have an explicit SDG strategy, while others embedded the SDGs in their UAS' strategy. Some advisors (and also administrators) stated that their UAS has a "Green Office" where students and employees work on the SDGs through study assignments, events, campaigns and activities (see Annex).

4 How can UAS4EUROPE support you?

The respondents' suggestions on what UAS4EUROPE could do to support the SDG activities of its members can be grouped in two clusters: communication activities and networking activities. Among the **communication activities** requested by respondents, UAS4EUROPE should

- support through PR, e.g. by highlighting the importance of SDG-related research,
- collect data on UAS' SDG activities and publish them,
- organise events to showcase projects, and
- share information on SDG-related publications, in a newsletter and announce relevant events.

Secondly, respondents requested that UAS4EUROPE facilitate **networking activities** by

- providing networking opportunities with respect to the exchange of project ideas, partners and funding,
- setting incentives for SDG activities, e.g. by awarding an SDG prize, and
- providing a digital sharing platform to exchange best practices.

For researchers, it seems to be particularly useful to have a stakeholder platform where they can showcase their projects, exchange experience and ideas, and build a network. Administrators request the same services and ask UAS4EUROPE to promote best practices. Finally, EU advisors state, on the one hand, that the language of SDGs on a global level should be translated into daily practice, and UAS4EUROPE could contribute to this goal. On the other hand, they ask whether UAS4EUROPE could support UAS in coming up with common metrics and indicators for the assessment of the SDGs and the environmental footprint of UAS. Furthermore, they support the call for the collection and sharing of best practices.

5 Recommendations for UAS4EUROPE activities

Based on the respondents' answers, the UAS4EUROPE Secretariat, in close collaboration with the Executive Committee, made a few recommendations to the UAS4EUROPE Governing Board as well as to the Management Committee. These recommendations are a basis for discussion and subject to approval in the relevant bodies. Thus, they may change.

Furthermore, it is important to note that UAS4EUROPE is driven by the input of its members and by their collaboration. UAS4EUROPE's Secretariat usually takes a coordinating role within the network. Thus, these recommendations focus on activities that encourage and welcome initiatives from the UAS4EUROPE members, including actors affiliated to UAS, such as researchers, administrators, EU advisors, and students.

5.1 Promotion of research
UAS4EUROPE could offer its members to promote their research in the UAS4EUROPE newsletter (first version: November 2021). The newsletter could include a reoccurring section in which UAS research and SDG initiatives would be portrayed. Researchers, EU advisors, administrators as well as students could submit their contributions.

5.2 Organising events
A couple of times a year, UAS4EUROPE could host events where UAS actors could present their best practices and exchange their experiences. The formats could include a one hour "fireplace talk" or "research café" where researchers, EU advisors, students or administrators could give a presentation of a certain research project or strategic initiative, followed by a discussion session in the plenary. This format targets researchers, EU advisors, administrators and students. Ideally, these exchanges are organised in a low-threshold fashion to limit preparatory work to a minimum and allow for an informal and lively discussion atmosphere.

5.3 Facilitating networking
Future high-level UAS4EUROPE events could have an SDG-component. Each event could highlight how the event's topic addresses the SDGs. This communicates the commitment of UAS towards the SDGs to external stakeholders and emphasises the importance of the SDGs both to external and internal stakeholders.

5.4 Collecting data on SDGs
To make UAS engagement in SDG-related activities more visible, UAS4EUROPE could collect data on the SDGs from its member associations. These data on SDG-related research, initiatives and their impact within the region could inform future network initiatives and/or serve as a brochure for future consultations with EU institutions and other R&I stakeholders.

5.5 Setting incentives
By setting incentives, SDG-related research is encouraged. With all of the above mentioned activities, UAS4EUROPE could contribute to setting incentives. Furthermore, UAS4EUROPE could establish an "SDG Award" that awards the most innovative, impactful research project or strategic initiative.

In addition to all these possible ways forward, UAS4EUROPE will ensure that it also considers the SDGs in its regular activities, e.g. when drafting the communication and mid-term strategies, when collecting best practices or during the planning process of events.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey conducted among UAS4EUROPE's members shows that the SDGs are very present in both research projects and strategic initiatives. A majority of respondents state that it would be useful for their SDG-related work if UAS4EUROPE would support them through both communication activities and networking opportunities.

In a next step, the UAS4EUROPE Executive Committee will consider which concrete activities to implement and what the scope should be. The SDG survey results will serve as the cross-cutting basis of all our future initiatives to better include the issue of sustainability in all of our network's activities.

7 Annex

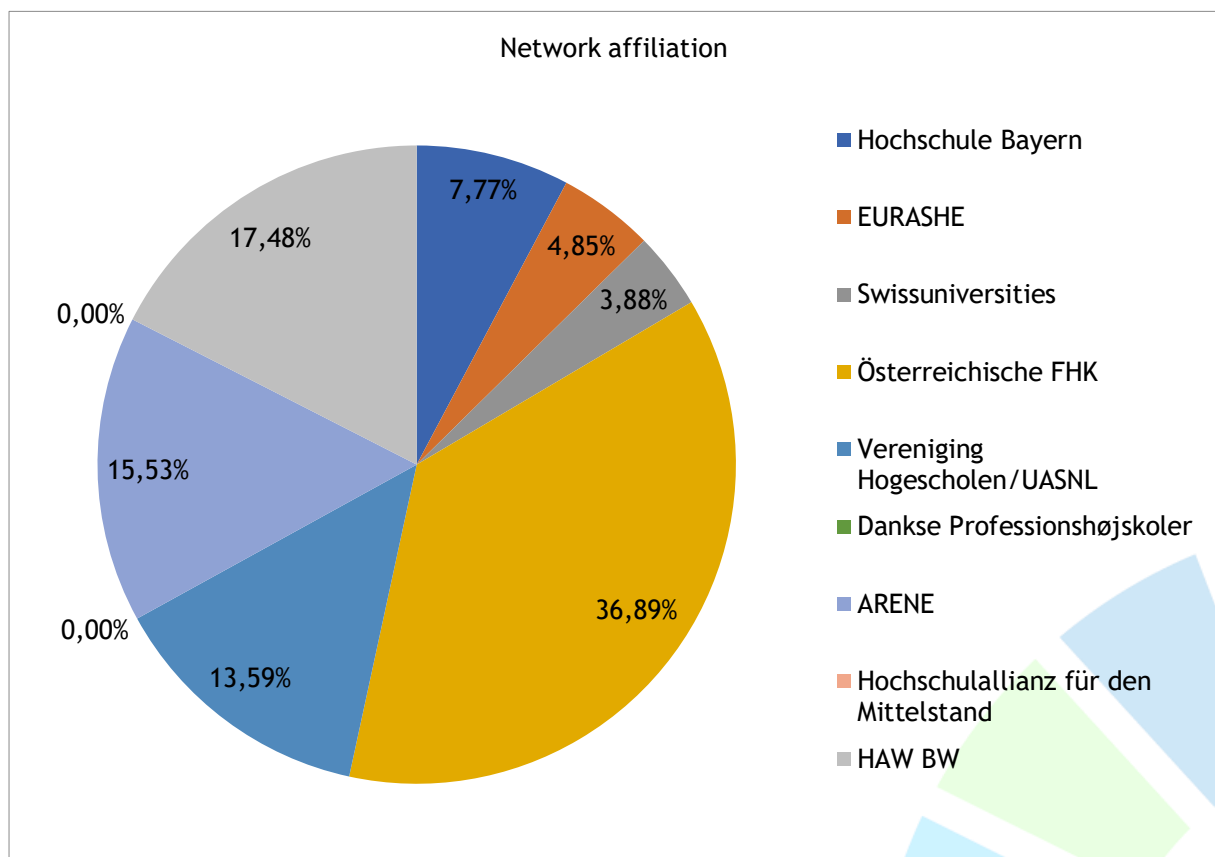*Figure 2: Respondents' network affiliation.*
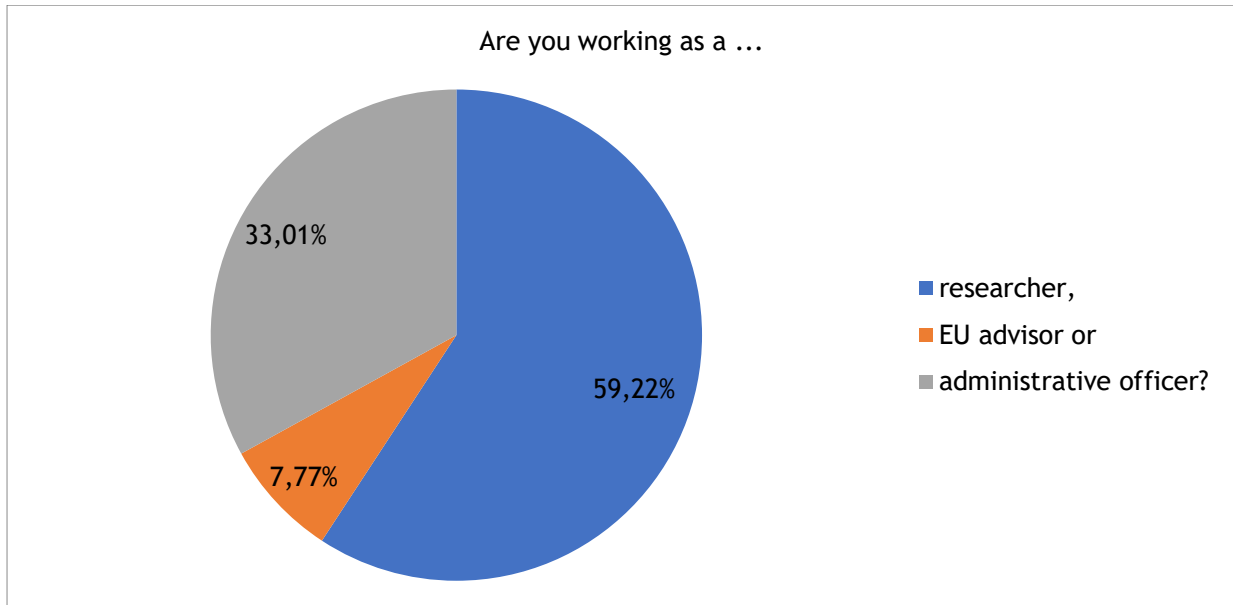
Figure 3: Respondents' job function.

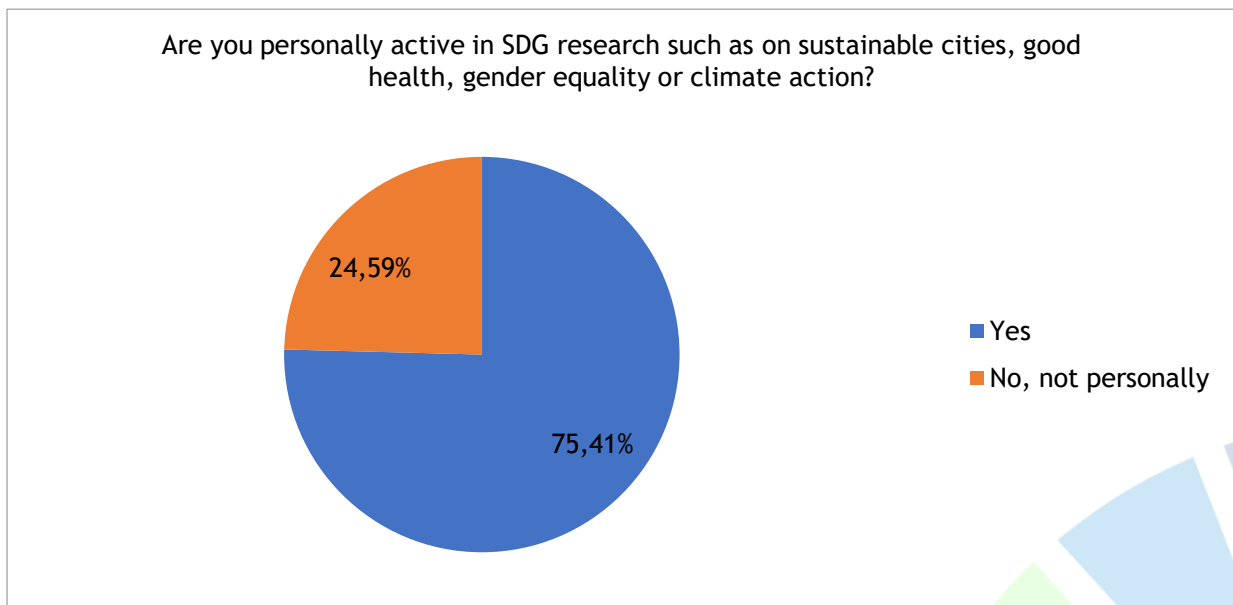*Figure 4: Researchers' involvement in SDG research.*

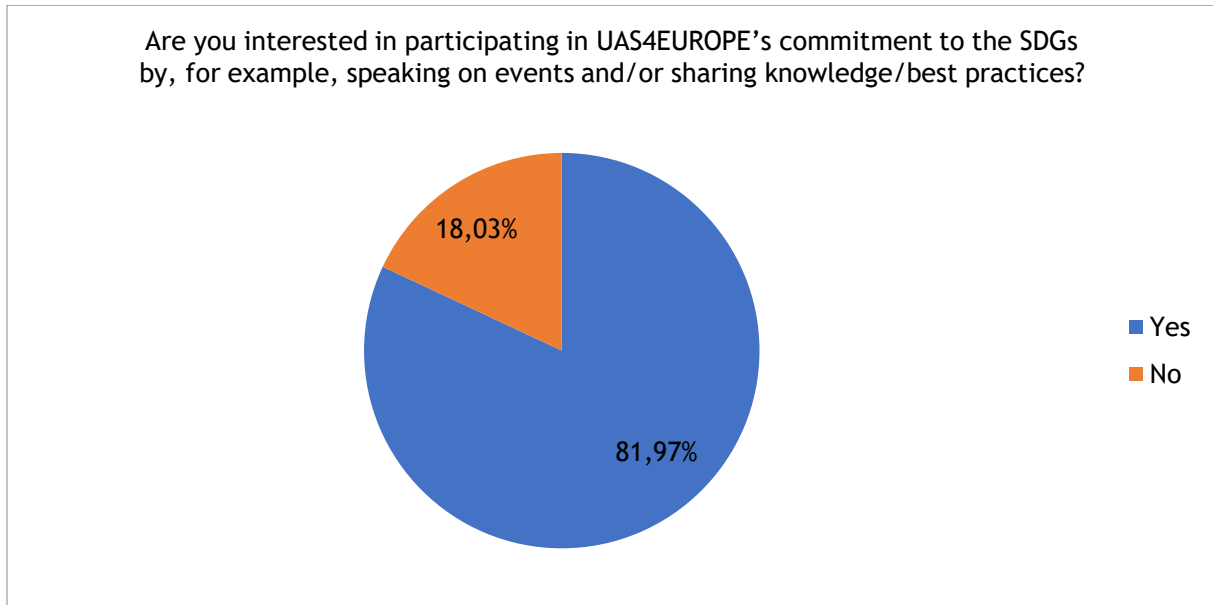*Figure 5: Researchers' willingness to participate in UAS4EUROPE's SDG activities.*

Are you interested in participating in UAS4EUROPE's commitment to the SDGs by, for example, speaking on events and/or sharing knowledge/best practices?

18,03%

81,97%

■ Yes
■ No

Figure 6: EU advisors' assessment of how active their UAS is with respect to the SDGs.

Is your UAS active or engaged in activities (research, governance, external leadership, learning/teaching) related to the SDGs?

25,00%

75,00%

■ Yes
■ No

Is your UAS active or engaged in activities (research, governance, external leadership, learning/teaching) related to the SDGs?

5,88%

94,12%

- Yes
- No
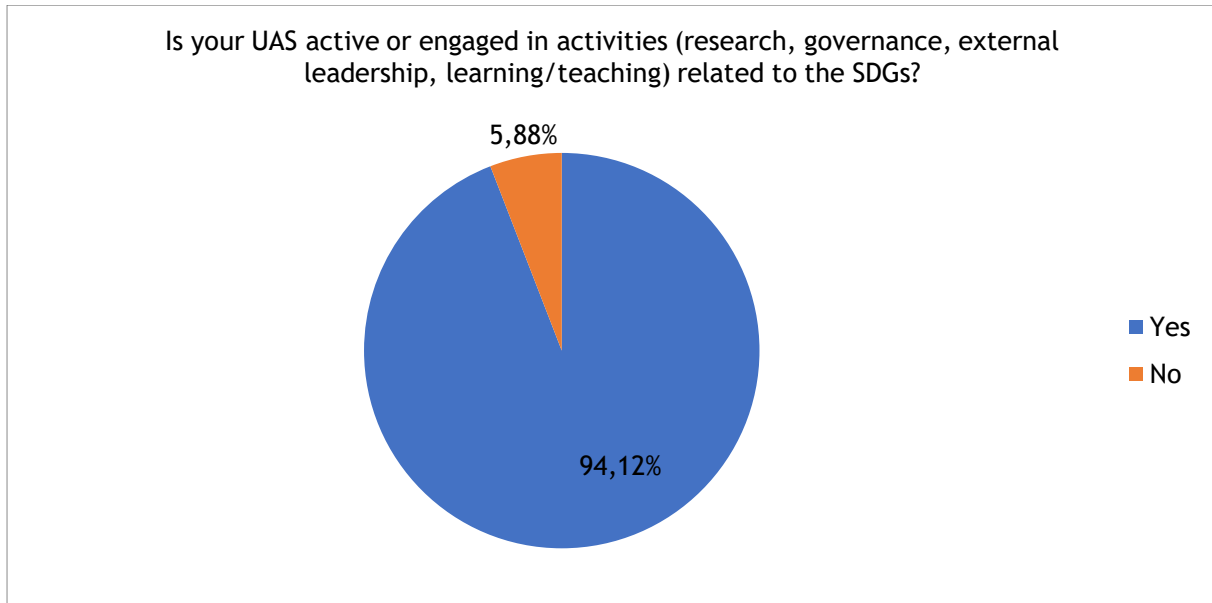
Links to initiatives, projects and networks (as provided by the respondents in the survey)

- Nachhaltigkeit @ FH Kärnten, Austria (German only)
- SDG Alliances and coordinators, Netherlands (Dutch only)
- Strategic Plan 2021-2021 of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
- Programme for the sustainable development and responsibility of universities of applied sciences by ARENE
- A teaching and learning resource for sustainability in nursing by Hochschule Esslingen, Germany
- Karelia 2030 strategy, Finland
- Sustainability and responsibility at the Police University College , Finland
- MCI Community Projects at the MCI – The Entrepreneurial School, Austria
- Green Offices, Netherlands
- SmaCuMed project, European Union project
- Mensch in Bewegung project, Germany (German only)

Alliances mentioned by the respondents

- Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), see case study on EMAS and the education sector here.
- Upper Rhine Cluster for Sustainability Research
- SDG Alliances, Netherlands
- Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)
- United Nations Global Compact platform