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Wilton Park



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Report

Higher Education: global engagement to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Monday 27 – Wednesday 29 January 2020 | WP1755

In association with:





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In partnership with The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and with support from Coventry University and the University of Sussex

This Wilton Park and Association of Commonwealth Universities dialogue explored how the higher education sector can actively engage with - and be supported to contribute fully to - the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals in the next decade. With support from the University of Coventry and the University of Sussex, 48 participants from 18 countries were brought together for a three-day roundtable conference.

Currently there are multiple global challenges like climate change, sustainable cities, peace, justice and equality which demand a collaborative and comprehensive approach across sectors and multiple stakeholders. The globally shared objectives of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), provide a framework to work together to address these challenges.

The Higher Education (HE) sector has the potential to globally contribute to, and engage with, all the SDGs at various levels. Universities research can inculcate the knowledge and innovation needed to address the most complex and intractable global challenges.

Introduction

Last year ACU launched a new strategy 'The Road 2030', which re-orientated the work of the ACU around the SDGs agenda. The Commonwealth has also adopted the SDGs framework harnessing its 2.4 billion citizens (including 1.5 billion under the age of 30) through shared activities for tackling poverty, inequality, disease and climate change.

The ACU recognises that Universities have an established track record in delivering innovation, economic development and societal wellbeing. The SDGs represent a globally agreed organising principle for practising global citizenship, for communicating to the world the commitment and the breadth of universities contribution to local and global development, and for developing partnerships.

University research generates knowledge and innovation to address global challenges and provides evidence for informed public policy. Teaching and learning shapes generations of graduates and leaders who will go on to tackle these challenges in their professional lives. Through community engagement, universities work with a wide variety of stakeholders including governments, the private sector and civil society, to contribute towards local, national and global impact.

At the start of 2020, ACU is examining what it can do to help accelerate progress towards the SDG goals in the next ten years. ACU's overall aim is to enable universities to play their

full role in creating more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable societies.

This will mean ongoing work within the UN process: by 2025 the global community will be thinking about the next iteration of the global development goals and the ACU will be working with its partners to have HE recognised as a key delivery partner in all areas of development. It will continue to call for government to invest in strong higher education systems.

Although best practice sharing within the sector will help universities scale up, it must not remain just inwardly focused. Broad-based, equitable, multi-disciplinary, international partnerships are universities core development work. Yet the HE sector's practice often lags behind that of the international development sector. It still has to make progress, for example, in building equity and fairness in partnerships, ending extractive research relationships and in reaching out to non- traditional partners.

HE and the SDGs: past, present and future

1. The Wilton Park round table observed that major progress has been made towards increasing access to education at all levels, particularly for women and girls. Progress is being made in critical areas, and some favourable trends are evident. Extreme poverty has declined, health has improved, inequalities have been reduced and progress is being made in creating sustainable cities and communities and responsible consumption and production.
2. There are however significant areas where progress remains slow. This includes “left behind” communities, high rates of unemployment amongst young people, numerous barriers to the education of girls across the world, slow progress in indicators around biodiversity, new wars and violent conflicts and increasing natural disasters.
3. Awareness and literacy about the SDGs themselves is uneven and extremely low in some contexts. A concerted effort is required to build awareness and understanding of the SDGs, particularly in Africa and developing country contexts.
4. Meaningful measurement of the implementation of the SDGs through targets and indicators is challenging, given the diversity of contexts and priorities across different countries. Drawing effective parameters for measuring the SDGs may be different for different countries. There needs to be greater focus on research to help align the SDGs for individual country context.
5. The lack of data, and the capacity to collect data, related to the SDGs was also noted as a key challenge. Often, the standard data sets which are available (like per capita income) do not offer great insight. The HE sector has a role to play in improving the collection of data relevant to SDGs activities.
6. Attention also needs to be given on how to incentivise the work of academics who are traditionally rewarded for research published in top tier journals. Ways need to be found to recognise and incentivise academic engagement with the SDGs It is also important to monitor how universities engage with the SDGs across the range of their operations. Would there be further engagement with the SDGs if SDG contribution was a component of the major Universities rankings?
7. Policy makers are focussed on GDP, and increasingly on the SDGs. But the critical question remains unanswered; where do academicians and Universities come in the picture? Should policy makers give greater consideration to how they might facilitate universities' contribution to the delivery of the SDGs?
8. Many universities are struggling to fully embrace the concept and agenda of sustainability and their achievements to date have frequently been scattered and unsystematic. Transformation and integration are required to drive the change needed for universities to realise their full contribution towards meeting the SDGs. This will entail a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary and challenge focused research, and on projects in partnership with local communities, as well as instilling

the necessary skills and attitudes required by graduates to advance sustainable development.

Partnerships

9. Partnerships and skill-building play a vital role in achieving the SDGs. For example, African universities provided large scale funding for / played a significant role in developing vaccinations against Ebola. Partnerships led by universities and the World Bank, analysing big data, are tackling corruption and reducing the threats of corruption.
10. In many universities Student activism has led initiatives to achieve the SDGs. For example, student campaigns to divest investments in fossil fuels and to “green” campuses have raised awareness of the impact universities own actions have on climate change. Over the last two decades students’ mindset around the issues of climate change and sustainable development has been shifting. A collective compassion and understanding of the need to build a better world for the future generations is increasingly evident. Universities are responding and increasingly providing taught courses related to the SDGs, and research mapped against, or aligned to, the SDGs. There is however a need to balance to the research investment portfolio - for example 55% of funding is focussed solely on the health sector, which is discouraging for all remaining SDG stakeholders.

The challenge

11. In 2016, fewer than half of African countries adopted Science Technology & Innovation (STI) policies. Most of them do not consider sustainable development imperatives holistically; instead, they tend to focus on funding scientific research with less emphasis on technology development and innovation. This may stimulate the production of knowledge for short – term economic growth but fails to spur the social inclusion and environmental sustainability that is necessary for long-term sustainable development.
12. Challenges around STI policy literacy, weak human capacity, insufficient monitoring and accountability, and inadequate budgets for STI policy has led to ineffectiveness. Enhancing these capacities is essential to achieve the SDGs. Even the greatest investment has not reached the target of one per cent of GDP adopted by the AU in 2007.
13. Weak coordination and collaboration between the scientific research and science policy communities has resulted in misalignment of research design and prioritisation with the SDGs. This is evident in the lack of ownership and even familiarity with the SDGs among African scientists.

Positive progress

14. Many African countries have institutions and programmes for promoting Science, Technology and Innovation (STI’s) to achieve sustainable development. A recent survey indicated that eighty per cent of researchers and many of their institutions have either existing programs or plans in development. However, there is limited understanding of the specific goals of the SDGs. Most scientists have not studied or analysed the SDGs and associated targets.

Power of African universities

15. Leading universities in Africa have actively engaged in sustainable development programmes. Networks such as the Education for Sustainable Development in Africa (ESDA) and Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA) reach more than 80 universities in Africa with the aim of playing a critical role in developing metrics for measuring progress in green economy initiatives and sustainable development education. Training, research and outreach activities are

undertaken in sustainable development education, particularly in areas of natural, environmental, social and health sciences by the universities, colleges and institutes.

Approaches and solutions

- In the past few decades, communities of practice (CoP) have been credited for building platforms allowing co-creation of knowledge and co-innovation to solve societal problems.
- Launching of a decade of global sustainability science action, alongside the decade of action for the SDGs (2020-2030).
- Create a forum for research funders to network, exchange ideas and discuss opportunities for potential future multilateral activities to address the SDGs.
- Identify where research can contribute to and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.
- Identify the role of research funders. What are the expectations on research funders and how can these be addressed?
- Identify how funding agencies can add value to existing activities by bringing investments together.
- Align and prioritise future activities to avoid duplication and maximise impact.
- Work at scale to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda.
- Long-term and sustainable partnerships are needed to bring universities, government and communities together in addressing pressing challenges and transforming societies.
- Mapping Agenda 2030? onto National Development Plans and their cycle of Development –NDP's should monitor the SDGs for a country.
- Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts to achieve SDG13.

What should university management do?

16. University management needs to be less risk-averse and take an aggressive approach in promoting the SDGs. Promotion and evaluation criteria should be dependent not only on publication in high citation journals, but on research aligned with the SDGs. For example, Professors of Practice in Singapore and other countries are beginning to do this. The leadership of academic institutions has the capacity to change the incentives and to influence early career academics. Collaboration with industry for postgraduate research in connection with SDGs should be made more accessible. Development of a culture of mentoring in Africa can be crucial so that junior academics get coached by their seniors to take the SDGs seriously.

How is higher education expected to contribute to the SDGs?

17. Universities have the potential to pave the way for becoming ethical leaders whilst working to achieve the SDGs. The Council for Higher Education accreditation/ international quality group and UNESCO's International Institute for Education Planning have issued an advisory statement on combating 'corruption' in higher education.
18. The statement, however, uses 'corruption' as a general term to distinguish a wide variety of malpractice in institutions of higher education, such as appropriation, bribery, cheating, deceit, favouritism, fraud, embezzlement, extortion and nepotism.
19. To deliver these ambitious targets it is necessary to have trustworthy, ethical, honest and impartial government institutions exercising public power fairly and taking into account the complexity of the problem. These institutions are much more likely to

promote trust and social capital, which in turn will improve health and wellbeing.

20. There is a need for higher education institutions to teach necessary skills. These should be taught and implemented throughout people's life span. It is crucial that higher education institutions start leading by example to increase future decision-makers motivation and ability to act ethically.
21. In order to recognise the university sector's potential and responsibility to help shape the moral contours of society, universities and institutions of higher education should shoulder their role as the key agent of change.
22. Universities have the authority to teach the teachers through the provision of pedagogical resources and training. The development of online resources such as web sites, discussion boards, case studies, and e-learning tools can be an effective way to share information. The hosting of conferences to exchange good practice on the implementation of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets of SDGs agenda 2030, can help academics to build networks with other experts in the domain. Coordination amongst national education authorities and social partners is vital in order to fulfil the state's obligation under the 2030 SDGs Agenda.
23. For example, the University of Mauritius provides open access to online library resources. The university has also worked alongside other universities and bodies to scale up research-based knowledge. This is an example of building knowledge beyond the walls of universities.

Challenges facing Universities with the SDGs

24. The education 2030 framework for action for implementing SDG4 stresses the interdependency of all education levels, from pre-primary education to higher education, and formal and non-formal education.
25. Higher education institutions need to be informed and mobilised to engage in the overall SDG agenda. This is especially important for universities in industrialised countries and for those not well-versed in the UN discourse.
26. The SDGs are still not on the radar of many higher education leaders in industrialised nations. Even if they are aware of this agenda, it is often limited to issues of environment, greening the campus or climate change. Greater awareness of the comprehensive nature of the SDGs needs to be built along with concrete examples of how Universities can contribute. Universities need to address the challenge of translating the lofty goals and targets of this global agenda into meaningful and feasible strategies and actions at institutional and government levels.

Higher Education and the SDGs: partnerships in practice

27. There are a lot of developments in Higher Education partnership models which are starting to positively contribute to the SDGs. For example, the British Council has been involved in, and highlighted, some of the common features which have contributed to making these partnerships successful.
28. "TNE in the Philippines" is a unique transnational education partnership the British Council has been supporting with the Commission on Higher Education in the Philippines. It is a government-driven model, and its primary intent is to build the capacity of universities in the Philippines. It brings together academic experts and industry from the Philippines and the UK to offer joint university courses in subject areas which were not previously available. These niche areas are directly relevant to the SDGs and include sustainable food systems, disaster risk reduction, design and public health.

29. Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) is developing a pedagogical model which can be scaled up to assist universities across East Africa to produce graduates with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed to solve real-world problems. This innovative partnership model is led by INASP in the UK with four university partners in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.
30. INASP is an international development charity which is taking a collaborative approach, mainly acting as a convener to ensure the partnership is led by African universities. It has also set up joint advisory groups to make sure local employers are a key part of the collaboration. It is estimated this partnership is going to transform the learning of over 3000 graduates.

Conclusion

These are a few effective models of partnership that universities are forming to achieve the SDGs. Whilst strong, none of these partnerships have been without their challenges. These types of multi-country and multi-partner models are not always easy to establish; they need time, support, funding and recognition within institutions and from governments. In the early stages, there is a lot to work out in terms of the partnership, decision making, where the funding comes from and how it is held - as well as how to make the partnership equitable.

There are four common features that are essential if a partnership around the SDGs is to be established:

Trust - This is an essential ingredient for effective partnership, but it takes time to build. Partnerships need time and support to develop effective ways of working which recognise different priorities, motivation and perspectives of those involved.

Mutual benefit - When international partnerships work, they are win-win for institutions, enabling them to contribute to societal challenges but also build their profile, reputation and learning. They must be embedded within each institution's leadership and strategy to make sure changes are sustainable, and that those involved feel incentivised and recognised by their effort.

Involvement - To bring in different expertise and ideas, and to give the partnership a voice to influence policy and ensure systematic change allowing collaboration with multiple countries, institutions and actors, ideally from government, industry and the community.

In addition to the above mentioned, too many partnerships have been entered into on the basis that collaboration is a good thing, with insufficient attention paid to the essential questions: What is the power of collaboration as a mechanism? What intrinsic added value does it bring towards delivering on SDG? And how will each partner gain net value from its participation?

Recommendations

University management

- Integrate impact towards the SDGs in the next review of their university strategy.
- Support innovation in non-conventional / non-traditional research outputs and partnerships (e.g. through knowledge exchange etc.) for impact towards the SDGs
- Review incentives and recognition for academic and professional staff to address the SDGs in their work.
- Support engagement with other stakeholders (e.g. industry, civil society) who to advance the SDGs agenda.
- Consider establishing SDGs offices to coordinate institutional action.

Governments and Funders/ Donors

- Adopt a programme (rather than project) approach with respect to the SDGs, recognising the urgency of the 2030 deadline, the need for innovation, transdisciplinary and the engagement of multiple sectors in order to address complex problems.
- Engage with the Higher Education sector systematically and in a more coordinated fashion, consulting with the range of sector networks and organisations, and clearly articulating priorities and expectations for the sector. Conduct an analysis of the impact of investments in tertiary education (possibly through the OECD education division).
- Seek the engagement of Higher Education national review processes- for example National Voluntary Reviews of SDG progress and reviews of development assistance.
- Greater recognition and funding of higher education's contribution to advance the SDGs.

Networks and partnerships

- Share good practices across networks and partnerships through case-studies, discussion materials, etc.
- Advocate for donors and governments to support Higher Education's efforts to address the most salient issues, barriers and solutions for sustainable development, where progress on the SDGs is falling short.
- Act as a channel to decision-makers for data, evidence, information, and recommendations from their members, supporting the effective communication of research in consumable and impactful formats.
- Highlight the existing work of universities, university partnerships, clusters and networks, and their contributions to regional and thematic initiatives to advance sustainable development.
- Highlight and support the contribution and engagement of scholarship programmes (such as Chevening and Commonwealth Scholarships) in addressing the SDGs.
- Advocate for increased open source data and scholarship related to sustainable development and increase awareness of currently available open source data and journals.

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