



**7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)**  
 Students' Forum: 11–14 May 2019 | Rectors' Conference: 12–14 May 2019  
 Bucharest, Romania

**Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:  
 Perspectives from Asia and Europe**



## Interview | Conducted by Carina Lykke SVINDBORG

### The Issues of SDGs, Equality and Internationalization at Aalborg University

*Interviewer Carina Lykke Svindborg is currently the communication manager of United Nations Youth Association in Aalborg, Denmark, where she promotes knowledge of UN's Sustainable Development Goals to local youth through events and workshops. From a young age, she has been active in promoting youth rights and politics all over Denmark as she has previously been a board member of the Network of Local Danish Youth Councils. She holds a Bachelor in English and International Business Communication from Aalborg University, Denmark and HELP University, Malaysia. Currently, she is studying for a master's in development and International Relations.*

*Interviewee Inger Askehave is the pro-rector of Aalborg University, the best university in Europe in the field of engineering. She holds a Masters in English and International Relations and a PhD in Business Communication and has a background in teaching at both Aalborg University and Aarhus Business School. She has her finger on the pulse of the university and knows what is important to the students.*

The Sustainable Development Goals are becoming increasingly important, and so it only seems natural that it should be kept in mind at universities both in terms of teaching and research but also the everyday operations of universities. Aalborg University is already incorporating the SDGs into said areas, however more could always be done. From a student perspective, it seems especially important that Aalborg University makes a greater effort when it comes to equality and opportunities for internationalisation as the university due to recent budget cuts has had to only provide certain courses in Danish, thereby making it harder for international students to study at the university.

What measures do Aalborg University (hereinafter AAU) take to work towards the SDGs? Currently AAU does not have a specific strategy for reaching the SDGs, but it has been an important part of the agenda for the last year, both in the areas of operation of the university, education and research. Automatically, it will be on AAU's agenda, as it is increasingly important to the society.

AAU Campus service has been ahead of the time and has for a while been working on a project concerning the maintenance of the outside areas of the campus. They are developing a sustainable method for maintenance without the use of herbicides, chemicals and petrol.

Looking at the area of education, AAUs' entire learning philosophy is Problem Based Learning, where the students on each semester work on a project based on a case from real life. An initiative currently being developed at AAU is mega projects, where students from all faculties will work together on solving cases revolving around sustainability. An example of a mega project is a cooperation with Aalborg Municipality, which has asked for guidance on how they can teach the citizens of Aalborg how easy it can be to live a sustainable life. All faculties have agreed to be part of the mega project, and everyone can contribute. Students of humanities could work on human behavior, preferences, nudging, etc. Students in technology can develop technological solutions and helpful apps, and students in the area of social studies could help with methods for cultural change. Besides from being a way to incorporate SDGs into education, this is also a way for AAU to develop their learning philosophy, their desire for incorporating more cooperation between faculties, and teach their students about project management.

As research should always concern the challenges of society, the SDGs are naturally a part of this. In Denmark, we are already good in sustainability, so this is a natural aspect to consider in research. In the University's strategy from 2016, AAU stated that researchers and scholars should work together across scientific areas. AAU granted DKK 40-50 mil. for five interdisciplinary projects on sustainability.

### **What more do you feel like could be done?**

In the areas of operation and partnerships, more could definitely be done. AAU Campus Service is already looking into recycling and sorting trash, as well as other initiatives such as light and energy saving in the labs which consumes quite an amount of energy. Not only would this make AAU more environment friendly, but it would also reduce costs for the university in the long run, even if it initially is an investment.

In terms of partnerships, one which the university definitely would want to look into is the catering company running the cantinas at AAU. It would be interesting to see sustainability as a focus when

the next agreement has to be made. People are usually unhappy about the food in a cantina, but even if it will mean having less choices, people would most likely be happy about having organic, non-processed, healthy food made from local produce.

### **Which effect do universities in general have in relation to the SDGs?**

Despite of the obvious effect through education and research, universities should do more in terms of operation in order to make a grand difference and be a role model to other institutions. We are not at that point yet. Universities do have the knowledge and competencies to be a front- runner and that comes with a certain responsibility. We will have to live up to this as it is becoming increasingly important to both students and staff. In this sense contributing to the SDGs will also be a solid business case for universities. In the case of AAU and its learning philosophy the SDGs are easy to incorporate, so AAU should use more energy on

making a greater effort on the area.

### **Do you feel that Universities are restricted in terms of working towards the SDGs?**

The main way in which AAU is restricted from working more towards the SDGs is economy. All universities in Denmark are financed by the government, and the financial cost of greater SDG projects would have to be taken out of the university's core tasks, education and research. This is of course not something that can be compromised.

Another restriction, making it hard to work towards the SDGs are societal structures and norms. In the area of gender equality AAU has a challenge, which they are trying to solve with an equality committee. In the area of university leadership and doctorates, the largest issue AAU is tackling is the fact that many women fall behind due to maternity leave.

Also, among students, AAU is experiencing a challenge in gender equality as students are still making traditional choices regarding their line of studies, meaning that there are more female students in the "soft areas" such as humanities and more males in the "hard areas" of studies such as technology. In order for this to be changes, there should be a more ground-breaking change in societal norms all the way down to preschool.

AAU is the best university in Europe when it comes to engineering, and in this area, the university is trying hard to make changes in order to attract more female students. This is done by creating a study environment more attractive to females, as well as showing that engineers can make important impacts and improvements to society, as this is scientifically proven to be important to women. It is highly important to AAU to have diversity and equality in engineering, as it can change the way technology is designed to help solve certain issues.

A special case where AAU has been restricted on the matter is in terms of SDG 4 (quality education) and 10 (reduced inequality) has been about reducing the chance for acceptance of international students, can you tell me more about the background for this case? This is a restriction made from the government. It has been decided by the government that AAU must reduce the number of accepted students by 300 per year already from 2020. It has also been chosen that this should not be a burden to Danish students, as education is free in Denmark and has been paid by taxpayers. In order to make this as little discriminatory we have chosen that certain courses in bachelor's degrees will be taught in Danish, and that a high school level Danish exam is required for certain bachelor programs. In master's programs, where an international study environment can be important this will not happen. What has usually been the philosophy of AAU regarding this issue was that internationalization was a good thing, both for the university's students and to Denmark, that international students can do their education here, and then go home and develop their countries and be ambassadors for Danish education. Of course, this is an expense, but in the long

run it can have a positive effect on Danish trade relations and diplomacy. However, this does not seem to be taken into account by the government. In this way, universities can often be challenged by the government in working towards the SDGs, but AAU tries to juggle and create a balance.

Another struggle for AAU making it harder to create equality is the local business community. In Copenhagen this is not a big issue, but in the Region of Northern Jutland, where AAU is placed, SMEs are not ready to hire foreigners, which will also be an issue for the international students wanting to stay after finishing their education.

**You have initiatives to help internationalization as well, can you tell me more about this?**

In order to improve the chances for both international and Danish students to get a job after graduation, AAU is offering job fairs, an internship semester for master students, a career center ready to help, as well as a start-up program to help students start their own business. Further, there it is also easy for AAU students to be allowed to do a semester abroad, for some programs it is even expected that students do this.

**Do you cooperate with other universities to work towards the SDGs internationally?**

To AAU it is most important to develop this in relation to education and research. AAU is working with MIT as well as smaller universities in the US to develop the previously mentioned mega projects about sustainability. There is no grand plan made yet, it is still on the drawing board.

When it comes to research internationalization is a natural part, and most projects are set in an international context.

**Do you think that the international networks between universities can be a way to work towards the SDGs?**

AAU is a member of ECIU (European Consortium of Innovative Universities), and all universities are in some sort of network. It would be relevant to inspire each other and share knowledge on how to incorporate the SDGs in a forum like this.