



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



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Are Students Being Supported in Contributing To The SDGs?

Introduction

With over 4.3 million students studying abroad, I believe the best way to affect the international community is by properly educating second and third level students in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD, 2013). The current system is not educating all students studying at home and abroad effectively as of yet. By educating all, SDGs will touch all corners of the world. The 17 SDGs' attempt to cover all areas that have been and continue to face crisis globally; from ending global poverty to strengthening institutions; from achieving gender equality to aiding in the fight against global warming. These Goals need all fields of work, all communities and all institutions to take responsibility and work on achieving them, I propose we do this by educating all students and universities properly in the SDGs who can then take this knowledge and apply it to institutions and companies as well as in their daily lives. Currently, it is the responsibility of the students to involve themselves in SDG societies or to enroll in courses specific to them, usually under the Political or Social Sciences. This is leaving out important areas that are directly linked to SDGs. I propose embedding the education system in the next coming years with SDGs for all courses, promoting their aims specific to the varied fields and aiming to get students to spread this knowledge in their own communities; thus, creating a global interest in achieving the UNSDGs.

Student Contributions

Modern day students are attempting to combat the problems created by those who came before us. The previous generations begun to engage with these issues by first creating the Millennium Development Goals and now, the SDGs. The pressure is on current students to make the changes – specifically the SDGs which combats many of the global crises. Students are talking, protesting and making changes to their day to day life (O'Kelly, 2018; Hertsgaard, 2018).

From my experiences, students are engaging with the SDGs in their own time and with specific university courses. There are societies with the SDG's in mind, who

allow the Goals and what they aim to achieve become general knowledge. This is not sufficient as they have a limited outreach to who they connect with and have engagement with; those that already have an interest are already involved. This methodology is not accessing those who are unaware, uninterested or to those who have other commitments and cannot attend outside of university hours events. Applauding the student contributions is fundamental, universities are taking note of what students care about and how they want things achieved; but the fact remains there is limited engagement without structuring the SDGs as a core value of all fields.

University involvement

Universities are supporting students by aiding student societies and discussing their implementation at an institutional level; however, the SDG knowledge is not yet permeated into all courses as it should be. The point of the UN Goals is so that they touch each aspect of the globe that are facing crisis and raise overall standards of social, political and economic aspects of nations. This means all fields must be connected with the SDGs in order to properly address the Goals. Unfortunately, this knowledge is only reaching students primarily in political or social fields rather than that of engineering, business or sciences with the majority of students in these areas having to seek out information. The European University Association states “Sustainable Development Goals rests on knowledge, new research, innovation and citizens who are empowered by critical thinking. The Sustainable Development Goals clearly need strong societal actors, like universities, to ensure their success” (Eua.eu, 2019). A fundamental problem is the lack of knowledge sharing, for the SDG’s to properly be implemented and a core value for students across the globe universities must make them a benchmark in all fields.

Implementation of SDGs

Universities and students must implement the SDGs into their day-to-day teaching and learning. Many universities across Europe and Asia have a large proportion of international students and by making SDGs mandatory to curriculums, that knowledge becomes more accessible and spreadable. The involvement of students will increase and options to develop international programs relevant to the different fields in SDGs will be far more widespread than what is currently occurring. My current university, University of Sussex, is attempting to create changes at the institutional level and has developed programs that will internationally relate institutions to one another in order to achieve the UNSDG’s to which the outcomes are yet to be seen (University of Sussex, 2019) and my former University – University College Dublin – seemingly has one course specifically addressing the SDGs “Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals” (UCD Undergraduate Courses, 2019). I believe whilst these acts are encouraging, they are only a small step in the correct direction. The UN needs to develop educational programs in order to accurately represent the SDGs to third level students and make them relevant to the individual fields. By making the SDGs relevant to academics the national and international interests

will increase (Albareda-Tiana, 2018, p. 488-489). In conjunction with courses specifically on the SDGs, the curriculums already in place must be reviewed in order to be mindful of the SDGs. This in turn will aid future leaders in their long-term goals in implementing the Goals.

Conclusion

By having the UNSDGs as instrumental markers in all fields within universities, the knowledge they provide will spread. SDGs play an important role in creating a better, equal and just world, they will protect the environment, educate all and end political corruption, if they are implemented as intended. For these goals to be met, the future generations must be involved, educated and willing to change systems in place. This can be achieved by having universities invest their efforts in supporting the SDGs in their education programs. By educating all students, in all fields, we are spreading UNSDG knowledge and innovation.

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