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

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Universities should encourage students to take action towards the SDGs

In my opinion, often the university's social community project is limited to understanding the surface of the SDG issue, rather than addressing or engaging students to tackle the core issue that exists in our society. Through ARC7, I would like to explore ways to improve the status quo and make the learning in depth with greater social contribution.

First of all, I would like to highlight two main problems that exist regarding the SDG programs that I have participated in the past. The first point is that there is hardly any student involvement for 'tackling' the actual SDG issue. This means that the program is structured to allow for passive participation as a third person rather than first-person, which encourages thinking and being exposing to the issue. The second point is particular to Japan in that some of the SDG involvement lacks academic insight. This means that students cannot acquire a full learning experience or understanding. Although the program is well-coordinated and funded, it does not provide an analytical tool for students to 'think' about the issue in depth.

Regarding the first point, SDG programs often are structured in a way for students to be the leaner, instead of being able to take action and tackle the issue with the local community. For instance, I have participated in the 2 night 3 days - WAVOC (university organized) Tohoku Earthquake Rebuilding programme as a volunteer. Although students volunteered at the local marathon, the role was limited to ticker officer or cleaner. Moreover, other times we were taken onto tours with local earthquake victims. This is a traditional way of involving with the community, which only lasts for a short period. There is a need to innovate such projects for students and local communities to gain more from participation. Where students can take part as a first-person, and physically learn from a local's point of view.

Regarding the second point, there is a shortage of professors or activists who can provide valuable insights for the student to ‘think’ and ‘tackle’ the existing issues of SDGs. For example, I took a sponsored class on “Environmental Sustainability and culture” and went to the Amami Islands to research about the animal eco-system of the region. There was an opportunity to conduct interviews with municipal government and local NGO and field studies of the local natural museums. However, there was a general lack of guidance research or analysis, and the result was to produce a trip reflection and personal opinion. To create an opportunity for students to understand in depth about SDG issue, it is important to have academic and professional guidance to ensure full learning and engagement.

One of the successful instances I have is when I have participated in TEMM20 – Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting in 2018. During this event, students were provided support to come up with their proposal for the micro-plastic issue and propose to the environmental ministers. Later, the organisers(?) hosted a Beach Clean Up event on the Marine Day to promote along with the local community. This event enabled students to engage in the research process as well as initiate the SDG themed event and allowed students to learn the difficulty of both policy formulation and calling for public involvement.