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

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The special experience of Cyprus and the University of Cyprus (UCY) related to the SDGs

Firstly, I would like to explain briefly some events that took place in Cyprus. Starting from 1974, a Turkish invasion took place in Cyprus and since then half of the island is still occupied. Nicosia, the capital of the island is the only European capital which is half occupied today for more than 44 years. Despite that, in 2004 Cyprus joined the European Union as a de-facto divided island. After 30 years of uninterrupted economic growth, in May 2011 the country was cut off from international markets due to the start of the Cyprus financial crisis. This not only affected business but also the universities, the government and the society as well as introduced several social impacts. Since its recovery from the 1974 Turkish invasion and until the start of the ongoing crisis, the average unemployment rate was 3.5%. However, from 2011 till 2017, unemployment reached 14%, with some estimates reaching 25%. Young people who obtained their degrees after 2011, have been staying unemployed for a long time (Zenios, 2013). I am not aiming to justify the position of Cyprus, but to drive conclusions about the gaps that exist in Cyprus related to the SDGs.

The UCY has also suffered from reduced public financing due to the political and economic conditions prevailing in Cyprus over the last few years. In the last two years, the effects of the economic crisis have started decaying and the unemployment rates decreased. The Cyprus Research Promotion Foundation has also started giving funds to the universities, and research has started moving ahead.

UCY is becoming more efficient and sustainable year by year and is established as a modern, distinguished organization, which serves as the vehicle of culture and innovation for the next generation of Cyprus. Undergraduate degrees at the UCY have no tuition fees. A student can gain an undergraduate position at the UCY by being successful in a series of entrance exams, meaning that the positions are given to the top Greek and Greek-Cypriot students. As it offers only programs in Greek at the undergraduate level, I believe this is a strong disadvantage in relation to the context of internationalisation. Though, post graduate courses do exist in English. To mitigate the transition at the

undergraduate level, Erasmus students coming from non-Greek speaking countries to UCY receive handouts and notes in English and they spend extra hours with the tutors than the other students. There are also some positions each year offered to students with disabilities, which gives emphasis on widening participation. UCY also promotes all forms of discrimination and exclusion and empowers women.

Even if UCY is a young university, it can take important steps to enhance and retain international competitiveness and recognition based on the SDGs. These are the following:

- Attract, recruit and retain outstanding students, researchers, academic and administrative staff members.
- Foster strategic partnerships and stronger collaborations with universities, research centres, business and other stakeholders.
- Strengthen support and recognize innovative research.
- Excel teaching, educational experience and study programs.
- Develop state-of-art infrastructure for world-class research and excellent teaching.
- Ensure optimal exploitation of intellectual property and patents.

Since 2008, two new and important undergraduate programs of study have been added UCY- law and medicine. UCY encourages the free circulation of ideas and the development of scientific thought, facts and knowledge, pertaining to all aspects of society's organisation and functioning.

As such, UCY must build a leadership position by being an outstanding contributor to society. This can be achieved by:

- Conducting research and provide expertise for the benefit of society.
- Fostering an inclusive community environment that favours diversity through interaction for problem-solving purposes.
- Being established as an essential partner in both current and new alliances and strategic partnerships.
- Focusing on enhancing excellent governance and organizational stewardship.
- Improving governance structures and processes.
- Establishing interactive leadership that fosters teamwork and collectivistic behaviour.
- Ensuring strategically effective human resources planning.
- Developing efficient planning for long-term economic management.
- Seeking new revenue sources and enhance existing ones.
- Supporting business efforts of students and alumni.
- Enhancing existing cultural activities and develop new ones.

One of my main worries about the SDGs is the way we can ensure long-term access to SDGs, instead of short term. This should be addressed through inclusion of targets and goals into long-term and comprehensive development

programs and visions, backed up with adequate budgeting and financing. Ideally, all development projects should be linked to national or local development planning. For example, the Development Aid Assistance mechanism in some countries ensures connectedness of projects implemented by donor organization with their country priorities and long-term vision.

When it comes to the UCY, I believe that cross-disciplinary research is very important. As the UCY is “small” compared with other universities abroad, it must focus on interconnection between its faculties because inter-collaborations will enable the staff and researchers to be part of internationalization. Moreover, nowadays technology is in our lives, and I think it is important to create online academic platforms where people working in academia or not can discuss and solve regional and global issues.

In my opinion, UCY as a state university has an essential role and responsibility to provide the necessary means and knowledge to the society to accept internationalization and differentiation. SDGs are providing the required path for the university to shape the society. It is my responsibility to build the bridge and establish long-term practice of the goals with all the related benefits to UCY and Cyprus in general.

References

Zenios, S.A., 2013. The Cyprus debt: perfect crisis and a way forward. Cyprus Economic Policy Review, 7(1), pp.3-45.