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

Opinion | Klaudia Ecker

Implementing Sustainability as a Strategy Goal – The Hungarian Approach

In order to provide a complex picture of Hungarian perspectives, I have decided to include three pillars into my essay. I would like to introduce the latest approaches taken by Hungarian HEIs, to summarise the dynamics of national HEI contributions, and last, but not least, to draw your attention to promising youth-led actions.

1. Baby steps towards implementing the SDG's

“Just the tip of an iceberg.”

As flagship initiatives, selective waste management projects have taken place at several Hungarian universities. Based on the idea of The Three R's: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle", three higher education institutions implemented the system of the Recobin¹ company and achieved positive results. Two of the pilot projects have been executed at Kaposvar University and Budapest Business School. At both institutions ~3000 students and university staff members managed to set up and use 130 selective bins, sparing appr. 12.000 EUR/year. Budapest University of Technology And Economics took it to the next level, when 24000 students proved, that a multi-million investment can pay-off in 1,5 years. Not to pass on Eötvös Lóránd University, their well-organized Sustainability Centre managed 210 volunteers, 2150 activity hours and 100 actions only in 2018. The framework, which brings all these initiatives alive is:

- The project has been “tailor-made” based on institutions and its functions.
- All the local stakeholders were involved actively.
- The institutional governance provided full support both financially and

¹ <https://recobin.hu/>

strategically.

- The project-based execution made the activities and their results easy to develop and monitor in the long run.
- They gave way for bottom-up initiatives being heard and realized.

Besides representing the importance of sustainability, in the meantime, they become a good tool for shaping students' mindset and building a community.

In my opinion, even the above-mentioned, successful sustainability-related initiatives are necessary but not enough in delivering a strong response to environmental challenges. University governances should take responsibility to put a long-term strategy on the table and create a well-designed structure to address real-life sustainability issues. In my experiences, Hungarian higher education institutes are tackling global problems with a "one day at a time" attitude, which leads to serious questions being left behind such as accessibility, quality education or decent work and economic growth.

2. Higher education's key role in sustainable development

"Where is will there's a way"

International rankings and the approach of higher education institutions regarding sustainability speak for itself when it comes to evaluation. Taking a look at the Hungarian Rectors' Conference activity, not a trace of sustainability-related topics occurs on the agenda of the Conference. HRC, as a consultative organization, comprising 64 rectors, operating with 13 academic and 5 functional committees, is participating in legal regulations but doesn't take initiatives to suggest a complex solution in order to introduce SDGs to universities. The strict hierarchy of Hungarian HEIs and the poor level of organizational entrepreneurship results in a static status quo, which is not prepared for future challenges.

While studying the mission of the National Council for Sustainable Development Hungary, I almost have come to the same conclusion. The Council's program structure doesn't mention or involve consultancy with higher education institution, however in the Voluntary National Review of Hungary on the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda is including a special chapter for education. Although, stated as best practises, the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme (SHCP) aims to increase the number of foreign students in Hungary and the Childcare Fee Extra program promotes student parents with childcare benefits, the document briefly suggests further

cooperation with local governments and higher educational institutions only regarding the SDG Goal “Partnerships for the goals”.

As I see, Hungarian government and consultant bodies don't represent the topic of sustainability effectively, furthermore, higher education institutions don't state a commitment to sustainability as an anchor in their statements and don't reflect on it in their institutional policy. According to my discussions with higher education experts, universities are paying attention to sustainability just in cases, when it's required in order to satisfy international ranking requirements or to comply with EU project eligibilities.

I believe, that real commitment would be to implement sustainability perspectives in every academic field, launching community activities and adjust the curricula to the relevant SDG goals.

3. Taking action through bottom-up initiatives – The V4SDG solution

“Optimists First!”

Even if the big picture shows disappointing results on Hungarian higher education approaches, bottom-up initiatives are able to bridge the gap between legislation, institutional governance and university citizens. The Visegrad for Sustainability group provides solutions for global challenges and prepares future leaders to take action in their communities. As a youth-led NGO being active in all Visegrad countries (HU, CZ, PL, SL), facilitates action on the SDGs by empowering and connecting key agents. Their team is always on the way to share the idea of sustainability not only in higher education institutions but in high schools and non-formal youth communities as well. One of V4SDGs utmost priority is the create a young expert's think tank collecting and developing best practices to create strong intersectoral and intergenerational synergies at the V4 level.

Conclusion

Since the Hungarian Government and the HEI sector haven't recognized the crucial need to link sustainability with policymaking, at this very moment there is not much left but unleash the potential of younger generations and non-formal initiatives. Discussing SDGs as a framework in a global context and act locally with a long-term perspective can be an effective way to inspire decision makers to make a difference.