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

Opinion | Gijs Vincent van den Berg

## Universities must take the lead to develop ethical leaders and professionals

We know that human activity is pushing the world and all her resources to its limits. Therefore, we need to understand better how social responsibility is coupled to all aspects related to the SDGs and how higher education can play a role in this. It requires us to think and act knowledgeably, ethically and critically across disciplines and sectors.

I am convinced that we all believe that higher education plays a key role in achieving the SDGs. Leaders of universities and other higher education institutions, academic and administrative staff, students and other stakeholders are essential and should be the engine towards a more sustainable present and future. In my opinion, higher education is a major player in re-shaping future generations and therefore, we need to take a fresh look at higher education. The SDGs are given on a silver platter and only the translation to educational reforms need to be made. The question is how to implement reforms to ensure collective responsibility and inspire us to see a new role for universities in achieving better health and wellbeing for everyone on the planet.

Universities are an essential component because these are institutions that have the power to inspire and equip future professionals and leaders to take up global challenges. However, I believe that changing society takes time. The power of habit and beliefs are strong and therefore, forcing people to think differently needs time, effort and is most effective for a new generation. Defining where to start and how to induce societal changes by universities is complex.

An example of an initiative for integrating SDGs in higher education is the Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) global portal, which is a tool developed by the International Association of Universities. The portal provides access to actions and initiatives developed around the world to promote sustainability. This initiative is a great start to exchange ideas and increase exposure, since this global endeavor directly engages universities in addressing all 17 sustainable development goal (SDGs). The 16 lead universities,

which are based all over the world, work with ‘satellite’ universities to tackle one specific SDG. “We are not seeking to duplicate the existing work in this field, but rather to find new ways to effectively join forces and work together,” was previously stated by the IAU Secretary General Hilligje van’t Land.

Even though this sounds like a logical and great step, the question remains how university governance and educational programs can be adapted to rapidly changing topics important for society and go beyond traditional boundaries. I believe that universities educate highly skilled professionals, but the discussion on how to contribute to a sustainable and equitable world is often overlooked. In addition, universities should be proactive and be involved in the public debate. While universities have always been considered independent scientific bodies, the current political support and recent changes in Europe and elsewhere, have put this at risk. To increase the chance of success in achieving the SDGs, higher education institutions must educate and train current students to both, think critically and act ethically. They must also learn to cope with ethical dilemmas which can only be done when scientific facts are considered a base of decision-making. I believe that nowadays scientific knowledge and facts does not ensure a supply of information that is considered superior to one’s opinion. Even though the argumentation with a rigid scientific base should be valued higher. Therefore, even if scientific data is solid and irrefutable, scientists and students need to be trained in persuasive skills on the science-policy interface. Universities and her students need to understand the responsible role they have, but also translate it to the public.

To achieve the SDGs, we need ethical, honest, skilled and independent government institutions that exercise the public responsibility and oversee policy implementation. These institutions are much more likely to promote trust. There is no place for corruption and political polarization in this. Instead the base should be science and knowledge provided by universities. This requires a systems-thinking approach to address complex and important societal problems.

Within education, especially rather science-technical education, students need to explore the social and political factors of their major focus and develop collaborative plans based on critical, ethical and systems thinking. Students need to be aware of the local, regional and global contexts in which they make decisions and conduct research. Many of today’s students do not see, or perhaps do not care about, their role in the world. Therefore, universities must take the lead and should be present within the broader development of young skilled professionals and leaders. The critical-ethical analytical skills and systems-based approach are indispensable prerequisites to educate young professionals and leaders.

Also, not only university education has an impact on the development of their students. Many other factors influence young people, varying from their family background, media, religion, and pre-university education. I believe that

universities are an integral part of society and can also play a major role in all other aspects' students are exposed to. Universities can teach the crucial and necessary skills such as communication skills, argumentation skills, analytical skills and the use of information technology. These skills should be taught and implemented throughout people's entire life span. It is crucially important that leading universities are the societal examples to increase future decision-makers' motivation and ability to act ethically.

I believe that recognizing the essential role and responsibility of universities would help to shape the moral values of society. Moreover, I believe that universities are the major player in shaping future generations, either directly via their education or indirectly because of a universities' role in society. It requires modernization of the higher education worldwide to utilize the unique opportunity to shape society. At universities, the norms and boundaries of acceptable behavior are to a large extent set, but universities have the responsibility to help shape society. Universities have the position and ability commit for the long term, which is needed because sustainable behavioral changes are a slow process. To achieve this, universities should build partnerships with other universities, networks, civil society, etc. and be the center of this cooperative web.