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

Opinion | Agata Krzastek

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

World development has always been closely connected to education. Today as we face especially demanding problems such as climate change, an ongoing technology revolution and a growing population, we have to reconsider our attitude. Without achieving the SDGs by 2030, the world that we know will irreversibly change. I believe that this kind of revolution cannot happen without the support of higher education institutions. Without an educational focus on the SDGs, we will not be able to achieve much.

Leaders of universities and institutions, academic and administrative staff, students and other stakeholders are essential in moving towards a more sustainable present and future. They are responsible for most significant changes both bottom up and top down. Many of those who we can educate now will influence country policies, private companies' strategies and many, many others. Those people may be agents of significant changes if they will have chance to learn.

In my homeland, Poland, we have started with the first steps to implement Agenda 2030. The establishment of this cooperation in Poland manifested itself through the initiation of the Partnership for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in June 2017, which unites representatives from a variety of backgrounds in striving for the achievement of these goals. Many of those initiatives are set up by students and youth eager to be part of change. However, there are not many tools to engage them directly into policy making and educational processes.

According to the Central Statistical Office in Poland, there are more than one million young Poles deciding to continue their education in universities¹. That amount is getting bigger every year. That is why I strongly believe that every change connected with sustainability should start from a good quality of education which is necessary to create conscious decision-makers, experts, and leaders in society. I strongly believe that by educating young people, we can with time change the whole of society in the end.

Last December my homeland hosted a conference devoted to global climate policy: the 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24), together with the 14th Session of Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 14). Almost 40,000 delegates from around the world participated in the event, including heads of government and ministers responsible for environment and climate issues. The aim of COP24 was to adopt a full package implementing the Paris Agreement, the first international agreement where all countries in the world commit to take climate protection measures. This event was also a unique chance for students across Poland to participate, show engagement and the power of our voice. We could learn from decision-makers, experts and organization from all round world.

Climate change is an issue that is not tackled enough in Poland at every step of education starting from primary school and ending at higher education. I strongly believe that COP24 was a big step forward towards achieving better quality of climate education, sensitizing our minds to both small steps we can take every day and influencing decision-makers to take bottom up approaches to legislation and policy. As Polish Prime Minister Mr Mateusz Morawiecki said, we believe that the Polish approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will contribute effectively to achieving the ambitious vision of the development of the world by the year 2030.

The key challenge to implementation of a meaningful and inclusive policy is the lack of statistical data for different sectors of society. For example, the situation of youth is

¹Szkolnictwo wyższe w roku akademickim 2017/2018(https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5488/8/5/1/szkolnictwo_wyzsze_w_roku_akademickim_2017-2018_dane_wstepne.pdf)

accounted for in the general national data, thus disregarding the particular situation and voices of youth in issues such as unemployment, satisfaction with the air quality and difficulty finding an affordable housing.

The issue of sustainability is not considered enough in higher education. While we have started our effort of achieving more sustainable education, I still feel that there is still a lot more to do. Issues of mental health are still not taken under serious consideration. The fight against unpaid internships has achieved first successes, however, there's still a lot to do. I believe we can achieve those goals by close intersectional and international cooperation. I hope sustainable development will be the bridge between today and tomorrow for higher education. Without implementing those solutions, we might not have a world to show to future generations. I hope together with delegates from around Europe and Asia we will be able to create universal solutions to make our higher education sustainable and at the same time, simply better.