

POLICY BRIEF

No. 13, 2018

Beacons, not Towers: How Higher Education Can Help Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

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Highlights

Higher education is often idealized as a tool for implementing sustainable development. Yet the structures of higher education institutions (HEIs) often inhibit the types of problem solving and pedagogical design that are needed to advance the sustainable development agenda. Policymakers, both within government ministries overseeing higher education and within HEIs themselves, should better streamline and coordinate communication on global, national, and local sustainable development priorities.

HEIs should:

- Create direct communication channels with government ministries/departments on implementation of the sustainable development agenda.
- Prioritize building the capacity of educators to incorporate sustainable development into their respective fields.
- Ensure graduates develop the skills to understand sustainable development from a trans-disciplinary perspective that is universal, integrated, and transformative.

Higher Education: Potential and Pitfalls

Institutions of higher learning have always served the societies in which they are situated. From serving as archives of knowledge in antiquity, to applying new technological developments and training workforces in how to use them during the industrial and the digital revolutions, HEIs have continuously been at the forefront of new endeavours in human development. However, when it comes to sustainable development — perhaps the greatest task facing humanity yet — the response from the world of higher education has been largely muted, as voices from the public, private, and NGO sectors predominate in modern media. While HEIs appear generally enthusiastic about the uptake and upscaling of sustainable development within their education and research programmes, the overall approach appears piecemeal, with individuals and departments lacking institutional support for receiving up-to-date information about sustainable development, training to address these challenges through research and curriculums, and/or understanding of how their disciplines can play a role in addressing a given sustainable development challenge.

Universities and other HEIs are unique entities, often known within organizational psychology for their siloed nature — within their own departmental structures, between one another, as well as between themselves and the wider

community (Manning 2017). While the idea of the “ivory tower” may be a contemporary misnomer, like any complex organization HEIs struggle to actively and adequately communicate between their many varied departments, provide enough support for iterative staff training to capitalize on new developments in their given fields, and keep up to date on the global sustainable development agenda and its implications for their own countries and communities. This is especially true of university and college campuses in developed countries, where higher education leaders have a demonstrably vague understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their own potential role in achieving them (Egron-Polak 2016).

This policy brief outlines recommendations for better bridging the potential of the higher education sector with the goals set forth in the global sustainable development agenda. It advocates improving communication and increasing awareness around sustainable development, building the capacity of educators within HEIs, and promoting more integrated learning outcomes on sustainable development for graduates.

Recommendation 1: Increase Awareness and Streamline Communication about Sustainable Development among HEIs

Educators around the world face a growing list of demands that society places at their feet, oftentimes with shrinking budgets for meeting them. Higher education is no exception to this trend, and while higher education has been touted as a mechanism for implementing sustainable development (Mohamedbhai 2015), HEIs often lack awareness of what development issues are priorities at the local or national level (Butin 2010). Therefore, regular communication about national sustainable development objectives should be delivered to HEIs by the ministry or department responsible for higher education. Ministries of higher education and their counterparts should adopt policies on communicating national objectives and government priorities in relation to the global sustainable development agenda, and communicate these regularly and succinctly to the HEIs within their country. This will require ministries that oversee higher education to coordinate and communicate with other government ministries on the implementation of sustainable development at the national level. This can prove challenging, as departmentalized bureaucracies often have their own organizational culture and approach to communication. However, coordinated action and communication between government departments, as well as the sectors they oversee, is a prerequisite for effective implementation of sustainable development (Mullan et al. 2015).

One approach would be to engage the communication channels of the numerous higher education alliances and networks, many of which already have a focus on sustainability. While ministries will doubtless have their own channels for communicating with the HEIs that they oversee, utilizing university networks can reinforce this message. Furthermore, university networks focusing on sustainability can help ministries of higher education contextualize sustainable development objectives in terms with which HEIs can more readily engage.

In addition, policymakers within HEIs themselves (both administrators and faculty chairs) need to develop policies or protocols for communication between their HEI and the surrounding communities, to learn about sustainable development challenges that are playing out at the local level. This would not only help to locally contextualize national objectives, but could also help to identify local challenges that are being overlooked or under-emphasized in national sustainable development priorities. While university administrators may have limited influence over curriculum content, they do have convening and communication powers. Policymakers in HEIs can open dialogue both between departments within their campuses, and between their institutions and the surrounding community. Utilizing these convening and communication powers more effectively would allow HEIs to become part of a vital feedback loop between local communities and national governments, as both local and national levels of government iteratively adjust their goals and approaches to sustainable development.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize Capacity Development of Faculty and Staff

Times change, and with them, so do best practices within any respective field. This is just as true for universities and other HEIs as it is elsewhere in the public, private, or non-profit sectors. Not only does technology and social media continue to change and expand its influence in everyday life, but new research is rapidly revealing how educators and researchers can harness new tools, updated pedagogies, and better communication platforms to revise their own teaching and research (Nickerson & Zodiates 2013). Professional development should be part and parcel of any modern workforce; however, too often HEI faculty and staff are asked to squeeze such opportunities into already overcrowded schedules. If higher education is to seriously engage with sustainable development, then HEIs need to allow for professional development of staff and faculty without overwhelming an already overburdened workforce. HEI personnel should not only be aware of sustainable

development challenges (see Recommendation 1), but also be given the necessary support to incorporate sustainability into their work within their respective field. Indeed, it is often noted that insufficient attention is being paid to teacher development in general within HEIs, at the exact moment when the number of students is at a historic high and the impacts of successful curriculum development and pedagogy can be multiplied to a much greater extent than ever before (Nicholls 2014). While numerous universities tout the sustainability credentials of faculty and staff when recruiting students or seeking research funds, few actually offer any type of professional development for academics focused on how to approach sustainable development in teaching and research (Holdsworth et al. 2008). While numerous key competencies have been demarcated for designing curriculums and research on sustainable development, little evidence exists that HEIs have developed these into any kind of widespread professional training programmes for faculty and staff (Wiek et al. 2011).

Therefore, HEIs must begin supporting capacity development of personnel to help them incorporate sustainable development into their teaching and research. It is widely recognized that capacity development for staff and faculty is necessary for HEIs to remain competitive in student recruitment (De Rijdt et al. 2013). This will be of particular importance in the context of teaching and training about sustainable development concepts and practices, which will require adult learners (many of whom are already experts in their respective fields) to re-train and re-conceptualize how they engage with teaching and

extra training sessions, and may call for a re-evaluation of how sustainable development can be incorporated into existing capacity building programmes for employees.

Recommendation 3: Break Down Academic Siloes for Trans-disciplinary Problem Solving

One of the central tenets of the SDGs is that the goals themselves are integrated — attention must be paid to the effects of implementing a solution for one of the goals on the other sixteen. If a development project is to proceed sustainably, it must seek co-benefits for as many of the other goals as possible, and avoid taking action towards achieving one of the goals that could hinder efforts towards reaching other goals. HEIs should create graduates skilled in the multi-disciplinary problem-solving required of the emerging workforce, and HEIs need to facilitate processes whereby students emerge at graduation not only aware of how sustainable development relates to their own discipline, but how their discipline relates to sustainable development in other disciplines as well. This by no means implies that HEI faculty should be experts on anything and everything. Indeed, specialization will be critical for addressing some of the complex issues related to research and implementation. However, it is imperative that HEIs train students to be able to examine a given sustainability challenge through different disciplinary lenses, if higher education is to play a key role in training a workforce that can meaningfully engage with sustainable development. Just as learning outcomes shifted during the industrial and digital

revolutions, they will now have to adapt so that graduates are able to advance sustainability in the workforce and society at large. And policymakers within HEIs will have to provide guidance into what learning outcomes and skills are needed to tackle sustainable development holistically.

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research. While few models exist for creating a professional development policy for educators, Luke and McArdle (2009) suggest that it is possible to create such policies with enough flexibility to fit the contexts in which they are implemented. Just like industrialists at the turn of the 19th century, HEIs are going to need to invest time and resources into the training of their employees if they wish to extol expertise and experience to the sustainable development agenda as a core element of their institutional identity. This must be done without overburdening faculty and staff with

Siloed approaches to problem solving will not be effective for implementing a development agenda that is both universal and integrated. The presence of academic silos in learning outcomes prevents sustainability principles from being embedded within campuses and their graduates (Ralph & Stubbs 2014). At the same time, a lack of meaningful cross-disciplinary communication leads to consistent bottlenecks affecting implementation of successful sustainable development strategies once graduates complete their studies (Zilahy & Huisingsh

2009). Given the critical role that HEIs and their graduates can play in the successful implementation of local and regional sustainable development initiatives, it is essential that HEIs translate these critical interdisciplinary skills into curriculums with learning outcomes that will ensure graduates have the skills they need to tackle sustainable development challenges (Holdsworth & Hegarty 2016). This will require coordination and planning between various departments within HEIs so different faculties are able to understand the intersections between their work on sustainable development and the work of others in different fields. Workshops and regular meetings held between departments can improve the ability of faculty members to communicate their research both to the public and to experts in other disciplines (Lohwater & Storksdiack 2017). These types of meetings can also develop much-needed skills for training students to communicate to these audiences.

Note

This policy brief is based on research conducted for the UNU-IAS project Education for Sustainable Development. The project seeks to generate, accelerate, and mainstream education on sustainable development, by advancing local and regional solutions to sustainability issues through education and training. It manages a series of capacity development and leadership training programmes that target various stakeholders including policymakers, young professionals, youth, and practitioners.

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