



Higher Education Institutions – Key Drivers of the Sustainable Development Goals

A special event of the 2017 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

19 July 2017, 3.00-5.00 PM, Conference Room 1, UNHQ, New York

Summary

On 19 July 2017, on the occasion of the 2017 session of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development - United Nations' central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - and in conjunction with the 2017 Global Forum for Responsible Management Education, the partners of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) organized an event to showcase how higher education institutions are integrating the SDGs into sustainability strategies in the form of research, teaching, pedagogy, and campus practices, and to position Higher Education Institutions as key drivers for achieving the SDGs.

Formed in 2012 in the lead-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, a partnership between the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), UN Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative, UNESCO, UN Environment, United Nations University, UN-HABITAT, and UNCTAD, provides higher education institutions with a unique interface between higher education and global policy making.

Over 500 participants from governments, the United Nations (UN) system, academia, and Major Groups and other relevant stakeholders attend the two-hour event, which presented concrete case studies from a wide range of higher education institutions and initiatives on how they are contributing to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Opening panel

Mr. Jonas Haertle, Head, PRME Secretariat, United Nations Global Compact, opened the meeting by reminding the audience that the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals represents a paradigm shift in transforming economies and consumption and production patterns, while protecting the environment and the dignity and rights of everyone. The 2030 Agenda has reaffirmed the notion of working together in true partnership, and higher education institutions can support implementation by inspiring future generations of learners to have the skills, mindsets and attitudes to truly transform organizations and societies, and by supporting innovative research, and embodying sustainable campus practices. Mr. Haertle also stressed that HESI provides a unique platform for higher education institutions and key UN system entities to engage with the academic sector and come together to share their knowledge and expertise in working on sustainable development issues.

Before introducing the first keynote speaker, Mr. Haertle presented the outcome declaration from the 2017 Global Forum for Responsible Management Education, which strongly emphasizes PRME's new vision of realizing the SDGs through responsible management education.

In a special keynote address, H.E. Peter Thomson, President of the 71st session of the General Assembly, recalled a High-Level Event on Education, which was convened in June 2017 in partnership with key proponents of SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning), to drive a new push for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. SDG 4 is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, and essential for the success of all SDGs.

Mr. Thomson also noted that higher education institutions - which act as hubs for innovation and critical thinking, nurturing each generation of leaders, policy makers, entrepreneurs, scientists, researchers, and educators - have a crucial role to play in raising awareness and fostering better understanding about the SDGs and their interconnectedness; all key elements of making progress towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. Mr. Thomson recalled that, during his presidency, he has urged world leaders and university deans all over the globe to make the SDGs an integral part of school curriculum and research.

Ms. Isabelle Durant, Deputy Secretary-General, UNCTAD, highlighted that the 2030 Agenda recognizes trade as a key driver of the SDGs. UNCTAD, which recently joined HESI as a partner, has launched the Business Schools for Impact initiative to address a key component to unlocking finance for development and aligning corporate strategies. The initiative aims to equip future business leaders with the necessary skills to impact the SDGs. Ms. Durant also underscored that the HESI initiative and the Business Schools for Impact initiative are two mutually reinforcing platforms, with great potential for synergy in carrying out their respective activities.

Ms. Marie Paule Roudil, Director, UNESCO New York Office, noted that HESI is one of the key implementation partners of the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP). GAP, which was launched in 2014 in the follow-up of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (2005-2014), seeks to generate and scale-up Education for Sustainable Development and accelerate progress towards sustainable development. The GAP also aims to contribute substantially to the 2030 Agenda by 1) Reorienting education and learning so that everyone can acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to a sustainable future, and 2) Strengthening education and learning in all agendas, programmes and activities that promote sustainable development. Ms. Roudil further highlighted that higher education institutions can provide research advice and guidance on how to strengthen national educational systems.

Mr. Jamil Ahmad, Deputy Director of UN Environment, New York, informed the audience that in May 2016, the United Nations Environment unveiled a resolution entitled, "*Investing in human capacity for sustainable development through environmental education and training*" during the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi, Kenya. The resolution highlights the history and importance of environmental education in a global context, while recognizing the unique role the UN can play in strengthening it. Mr. Ahmad also highlighted the Global Universities Partnership on Environment for Sustainability (GUPES), one of the flagship programmes of UN Environment's Environmental Education and Training Unit (EETU), aimed at promoting the integration of environmental and sustainability concerns into teaching, research, community engagement, greening of university infrastructure, facilities, and operations, as well as enhancing student engagement and participation in sustainability activities. The programme today includes a network of over 800 partner universities.

Presentation

In support of the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda, the Division for Sustainable Development of UN DESA has collaborated with the Sustainability Literacy Test (SULITEST) to include relevant SDG-related questions in its online training and assessment platform. The results will help identify gaps in knowledge on sustainable development among students worldwide.

In a presentation of the results received through the SULITEST platform, Mr. Aurélien DECAMPS, Associate Professor, KEDGE Business School / General Secretary, SULITEST, presented a mapping of the current level of awareness of the challenges addressed by the SDGs. The module on the SDGs Framework shows that candidates are on average more aware of specific SDGs than of the 2030 Agenda itself and related UN processes.

As the SULITEST is taken by a diversity of candidates in different contexts, it can be mined for data to map the current level of sustainability literacy and monitor progress overtime. Since its launch, 61,667 candidates from 612 universities in 57 countries have taken the assessment.

Moderated Dialogue - Integrating SDGs into sustainability strategies of Higher Education Institutions

The dialogue was moderated by Ms. Raina Fox, Partnerships Director of the Millennium Campus Network (MCN), a Boston-based global non-profit organization, aimed at training the next generation of social impact leaders on university campuses across the globe.

Ms. Michaela Rankin, Deputy Dean, International, Monash Business School, Monash University, noted that the Monash Business School has been a signatory to PRME since 2010, and in 2016 they joined the PRME Champions initiative. In carrying out the actions and projects of the PRME Champions initiative, the Business School, with its 16,000 students, is helping develop the capabilities of students and educate future leaders on sustainable development practices. Ms. Rankin further noted that the Monash Business School has taken a multi-pronged approach to integrating the SDGs into their activities, through research, student engagement, and university policies. The School is also currently working on a new module to integrate SDGs into its school curricula across all disciplines. Full understanding of the SDGs by faculty members, and the gain for business practices, remain one of the largest challenges to fully integrating the SDGs into school curricula and practices at Monash Business School. Furthermore, Monash University has launched the Monash Sustainable Development Institute which focuses on large-scale, interdisciplinary projects that address global issues aligned to the SDGs.

Ms. Maria Virginia Lasio, Dean, ESPAE-ESPOL, one of the original PRME signatories, stated that the University has developed a partnership with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development to integrate environmental issues into its university strategies. The partnership, currently in its eighth year, has resulted in an annual conference that brings together relevant stakeholders to present best practices and lessons learned in supporting the SDGs. At this year's Conference, five companies will present their experiences and progress in aligning their strategies with the SDGs through use of the SDG Compass.

Ms. Katrin Muff, Dean, Business School Lausanne, highlighted the Gap Frame - a national and global framework for business and other key stakeholders to work towards a better world in concrete and measurable ways. Its easy-to-use data visualization tool, designed to give practical support to everyone working towards a sustainable and safe future, translates the SDGs into four sustainability dimensions: planet, society, economy, and governance. Ms. Muff noted that the Gap Frame provides a concrete starting point for strategic discussions on sustainability, and is an effective decision-making tool to help business, governments and academia focus on activities that can produce the best outcomes in closing the gaps and reaching a safe space for all.

Ms. Julie Newman, Director of Sustainability, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), highlighted the extensive work on sustainability that is being undertaken at MIT, through innovative research, campus sustainability practices, and the development of a new generation of sustainability models that advance the mission of academic excellence, and putting higher education at the forefront of developing pioneering ideas for tackling today's global challenges. The MIT Office of Sustainability (MITOS), whose mission is to transform MIT into a powerful model that generates new and proven ways of responding to unprecedented challenges, organizes its work into four areas of responsibility 1) Sustainable Campus Systems: Reimagining systems on campus to advance the well-being and resilience of people and the environment 2) Campus as an Urban Living Laboratory: Utilizing the campus and its urban surroundings as a test-bed for innovation and knowledge generation through research and education 3) Collaborative Partnerships: Harnessing the collective intelligence of networks and communities to solve shared problems, and 4) Leadership and Capacity Building: Engaging and empowering faculty, students, and staff in shaping, applying, and continuously improving the sustainability of MIT and beyond.

Mr. John Holmberg, Senior Advisor to the President/CEO, UNESCO Chair, Chalmers University of Technology, provided three concrete suggestions on how higher education institutions may address key elements of the 2030 Agenda relating to transformation, integration and universality. 1) As current ideas and needs are locked in today's policies, legislations, knowledge, markets, norms and values, there is a need to work backwards, from the issues at hand, to identify policies and programs to guide challenge-driven innovation. 2) Put more emphasis on trans-disciplinary work with stakeholders outside universities, to not only search for answers together, but also define questions together. In this regard, organizational structure can be critical, and moving away from traditional line organizational structures to challenge-driven co-creation with faculty, departments and divisions at the core could generate great impact. 3) Create an enabling environment for students to be a part of sustainability transitions, as students often challenge underlying assumptions, are inherently curious, eager for change, and seldom represent anyone but themselves. As an example, the ChallengeLab.org of Chalmers University of Technology provides a

broad platform for students to engage and take on the planet's biggest challenges in collaboration with industry, governments and academia.

Mr. Derek Ouyang, Stanford University, noted that, in pursuing its academic mission, Stanford University is committed to being a leader in research, teaching and action of environmental sustainability, and provided several examples in his remarks, including Sustainable Stanford - a university-wide effort to reduce Stanford's environmental impact, preserve resources, and show sustainability in action, and the Sustainable Urban Systems (SUS) initiative - an initiative which applies multiple engineering knowledge fields in an integrated approach to shape the future of cities. For the past year, SUS has been working with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and a variety of local stakeholders in the California Bay Area to test SDG localization strategies, collecting relevant actionable data at the city level to achieve the SDGs. Collected data will be made publicly available online, and communicated in a way that motivates understanding, critical analysis and effective decision-making.

Ms. Tatiana Landysheva, Global Vice President of Public Relations, AIESEC stated that AIESEC - a global network with over 34,000 members in over 120 countries worldwide - has launched the Youth 4 Global Goals initiative to activate the leadership potential of young people by engaging them in purposeful and cross-cultural projects around the globe designed to impact the SDGs. The initiative has engaged more than 55,000 students in various activities and reached over 12,000,000 people globally. AIESEC has also launched the SDG Curriculum, which is designed by, and targeted to, young people between the ages of 15 and 25. Ms. Landysheva reiterated that the best way to engage young people in the SDGs is to allow them space to figure out - by themselves - how they can contribute meaningfully. She also stressed that it's crucial to communicate the SDGs in a way that makes sense for youth if we want to see their full engagement.

Discussion Questions

The moderator, Ms. Raina Fox, then posed the following questions to the panel members:

1. Where do you see higher education institutions having the greatest impact in supporting implementation of the SDGs?
2. What are some of the major challenges of integrating the SDGs into your curriculum and institutional strategies? What approaches have worked to address these challenges?
3. What is the role of partnerships for Higher Education Institutions, among students, faculty, governments and various stakeholders?
4. How has the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals, transformed the work of your higher education institution?

Panelists stressed that higher education institutions can have a great impact in supporting implementation of the SDGs by being conveners for multi-stakeholder engagement, addressing the data gap, informing policy makers through academic research, and developing sustainable solutions in broad collaboration with society.

It was also noted that there is often too much focus on institutional structures and hierarchies within universities, which often impede interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research and studies. A self-organizational approach to management could therefore have a considerable impact on spurring innovation and actionable research. Focus should be placed on supporting students, rather than teaching them, and providing space for students to be a part of management and informal institutional governance.

One panel member stressed that the current ranking system of universities, which sometimes impedes universities' progress, also needs to be revised.

Many panel members stressed that it is crucial for higher education institutions to work collaboratively in partnership with other stakeholders, including the private and public sector. One panel member pointed out that for private data collectors reluctant to share their data in fear of loss of intellectual property, academia could act as a neutral third party data repository, therefore avoiding possible privacy concerns. By setting up the right partnerships, students can be directly involved in informing policy making, and provide a gateway for students to be engaged in making the public sector more effective.

Many panel members agreed that the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs has opened the door for higher education institutions to engage more actively in interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary studies, work and research. The 2030 Agenda also provides an immense opportunity for innovative and interdisciplinary thinking, due to its integrated nature.

Dialogue with audience

The moderator then opened the floor for questions and answers.

In a question relating to how to engage students more actively with the broader community, one panel member gave the example of project-based learning with corporations and communities, which provides students with immersion into real life experiences. The importance of teaching students about the value of education was also raised, moving beyond profit-based motives. As an example, an SDG focused higher education degree could open students to more interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work, positively transforming their moral and ethical path in life.

In response to a question related to how to better engage students in university government, one panel member gave the example of providing more space for students to engage with deans, education and research committees, and academic board members. In addition, providing leadership training for students on how to conduct dedicated focus groups for gathering input and feedback from fellow students, as an input to senior management, was also cited as an example.

Responding to a question on how to ensure no student is left behind in areas of war and conflict, it was suggested by one panel member to have pop-up universities in these areas, and that the overall focus should be placed on developing the human mind, rather on constructing physical institutions.

In a question from a student relating to how to ensure that higher education institutions in developing countries are not left behind, one panel member suggested that students join, and be actively engaged in, national and international student organizations, to ensure their voice is heard and receive necessary support.

The moderator closed the meeting by reminding participants that the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative remains fully active, and will continue to provide higher education institutions with a forum for dialogue and for sharing how universities are integrating the SDGs into sustainability strategies in the form of research, teaching, pedagogy, and campus practices.
