

# Higher Education's Role in the 2030 Agenda: The Why and How of GUNi's Commitment to the SDGs

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## Introduction: the SDG Framework

In September 2015, at the UN headquarters in New York, the international community agreed on a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which at the same time included 169 targets to be reached by 2030. The latter compose the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a redefinition and expansion of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were to be implemented by 2015 and produced varied and contestable results. In opposition to the creation of the MDGs, which were compiled by a group of high-level technocrats, the SDGs were developed through massive consultation processes with all of society's stakeholders. The SDGs include a wide range of topics and six elements, as defined by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon: "dignity, people, planet, prosperity, justice and partnership". There is no doubt that societies have realised that it is imperative to work on sustainable development as the only way to improve our world and face the huge challenges that we are all facing. The SDGs have met both critics and defenders; according to Neubauer and Calame (2017), they suffer from at least three main weaknesses: First, even though they were agreed by the UN member states, they are not mandatory. Second, they are inconsistent with each other, since some goals contradict others, and third,

they do not address the root causes of imbalances (Neubauer and Calame, 2017:69). Some argue that the SDG framework is still focused on growth (there is even one SDG for growth - SDG8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth), and that sustainability cannot be achieved without tackling the real problem of our modern societies: uncontrolled capitalist growth. Hickel explains this well in his article "the UN's new Sustainable Development Goals aim to save the world without transforming it" (Hickel, 2015). This growth-based paradigm that impregnates our societies is also visible in the way that some university systems have integrated the neoliberal concept of maximum economic growth and turned HEIs into business-like enterprises and knowledge into a commodity (EDES-ACUP-FAS, 2017). Other critics argue that the SDGs are too numerous and broad, and therefore, difficult to implement. In other words, they seek to cover far too many items and topics and end up resembling a list of magic wishes rather than a real action plan. Others also argue that SDG 17 on Partnerships is more of a tool than a goal per se. Despite all this criticism, which is always essential in order to advance and improve, GUNi believes that the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda present a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of taking worldwide action and to start putting measures in place to reach the targets posed. The SDGs are not perfect, but they can function as a catalyst for real change. We might not achieve the whole Agenda, but we might be able to progress to a point that we did not expect a few years ago.

## SDG 4: Ensure Inclusive and Quality Education for All and Promote Lifelong Learning

The SDG framework has a specific goal on Education (SDG4 – Ensure Inclusive and Quality Education for All and Promote Lifelong Learning) and makes explicit reference to higher education, although this is only to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university" (target 4.3 of SDG4) – the MDGs did not even mention this. Although for some this might be too little, we must acknowledge that higher education institutions are in a distinctive position in leading the implementation of each and every one of the goals; they can encompass and address all goals from different areas of work and action. Universities have long been powerful drivers of change both at local, regional and global levels and they can support the SDGs in a myriad of ways. Some HEIs have already

started to implement and include the concept of sustainability within their campuses, governing bodies, curricula and strategies. A number of networks related to sustainable development have been created or promoted within existing networks (SDSN, IAU-HESD, ISCN, AASHE, UE4SD, SEPN, GHESP, ULSF...), relevant reports have been published, particularly the SDSN Guide to SDG Implementation, sustainability assessment tools and indicators have been proposed and tested (Sustainability Test, SDSN Indicators, Stars AASHE programme, etc.), specific journals such as the *International Journal on Sustainability in Higher Education* have been created (2015) and large numbers of HEIs have signed international agreements and conventions such as the Halifax Declaration, the Talloires Declaration, and the Copernicus Charter for Sustainable Development. GUNi has also demonstrated its commitment to sustainable development by opening spaces for debate and collaboration with the International Conference on Sustainable Development Goals: Actors and Implementation, which is a starting point for all the work that GUNi will do in relation to the 2030 Agenda. When looking at these facts, there is no doubt that HEIs have realised the importance of integrating sustainability in their strategies, both for the benefit of society and for the benefit that integrating it appears to have on the institution itself – according to SDSN, Universities benefit because they can demonstrate impact, capture more demand for SDG-related education, build new partnerships, access new funding streams, and make comparisons with other institutions via an agreed definition of a responsible university (SDSN, 2017:9). The latter is a very interesting aspect of the relationship between SDGs and HEI's. Although HEIs should idealistically encourage and promote sustainability because it is an ethical imperative, if HEIs see relatively short-term returns on their efforts they can be more motivated to integrate the concept and practice of sustainability. A visual way of analysing the scope and awareness among university staff is to check the results of the survey performed by IAU at its 2016 Annual Conference. According to the 2016 IAU Global Survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD), more than 70% of respondents (120 HEIs from all continents) were familiar with the SDGs and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Moreover, while sustainable development is still considered to be strongly linked to environmental issues (84%), respondents also underlined the importance of societal (68%) and cultural (60%) considerations.

## Higher Education's Role in Achieving the 2030 Agenda: Opportunities and Obstacles

The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) is one of those networks involved in promoting Sustainable Development in Higher Education. After the above introduction to the state of affairs of the topic, the answer to the question “**why** GUNi has decided to work on the 2030 Agenda in the following years” seems quite clear. GUNi believes that HEIs' involvement in the 2030 Agenda is essential for several reasons.

First, according to SDSN Australia/Pacific, HEIs are in a unique position in societies because they are neutral and trusted stakeholders within them (SDSN, 2017:8). That gives them the chance to promote dialogues and spaces for collaboration between different types of stakeholders and promote certain issues and values without being swayed by corporate interests. Secondly, the 2030 Agenda and the current changes our planet is going through show that we cannot rely on governments alone to make the right decisions, we need the involvement of all actors, and citizens need to be educated, informed and committed in order to make the right decisions. The SDGs will not be met without the active participation of every citizen, and for every citizen to be able to actively participate in the implementation of the SDGs, a set of skills, attitudes and values needs to be fostered. This connects in a big way with the concept of lifelong learning; the current state of affairs of the world makes lifelong learning imperative. Universities work with the people and leaders of the present and future, and they can and must teach them relevant skills and capabilities. There are two main factors in connection to the impossibility of relying on governments and nations alone to solve today's issues: on the one hand, the fact that our increasingly interconnected and globalised planet presents both conflicts and opportunities that are transnational in nature and that cannot be addressed by a sole government, and on the other hand, the parallel emergence of a myriad of non-state actors and their increasing empowerment in different domains of our societies. In this context, knowledge/academic diplomacy has become an essential tool for widening and strengthening partnerships and collaborations between different actors from around the globe. According to Jane Knight, knowledge diplomacy, understood as “the role that international higher education, research and innovation can play in the strengthening of relations between and among countries” (Knight, “University World News”) can help to use the expertise and research underway

in different contexts within the higher education domain, together with other actors, to address global issues that cannot be solved by a country alone (Knight, "University World News").

Third, HEIs have the ability to help policymakers make decisions based on real evidence that at the same time are made in the light of research based on the principle of RRI – research for and with society. At the same time, universities play a key role in the evaluation and follow-up of policies undertaken by governments. Universities, in their traditional role, are the institutions that create and disseminate knowledge. Universities can put forward innovation and innovative solutions, they train current and future implementers and they have the chance to establish meaningful partnerships. Finally, SDGs need technical capacity, but they also need moral capacity. What does this mean? It means a capacity to commit and to stand for certain values, to live our lives in accordance with ethical standards. SDGs need this type of capacity, and at the same time they provide the opportunity to, according to Neubauer and Calame, "reinvent and build on the humanist and emancipatory tradition of universities, to emphasize the value and agency of human beings, to prefer critical thinking over acceptance of outdated dogmas, and to promote research and education as political issues (in the best sense of the word), thereby contributing to building a fair worldwide community of emancipated citizens" (Neubauer and Calame, 2016:72).

HEIs can and must provide a holistic approach to the 2030 Agenda and advance it, since the SDGs are a key aspect of the social responsibility of universities understood as their duties and commitments to society through their activities and the impacts those activities have. But, are there any specific ways in which universities can proceed with this approach? What can and should HEIs do to support the achievement of the SDGs? How can HEIs promote critical thinking with regard to the SDG framework, its limits and its possibilities? As Eva Egron-Polak stated at the 2016 UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO), "We need to build awareness and show in concrete ways how universities do and can contribute."<sup>1</sup>

According to the SDSN guide titled "Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities", one the most complete and concise documents on the topic published so far,

there are four main areas where universities can contribute to the SDGs: research, education, operations & governance, and external leadership (SDSN, 2017:10). First of all, education needs to be meaningful and address sustainable development; universities can include sustainable development within their curricula and methodologies, foster necessary capabilities and skills, promote humanistic values, evaluate students in sustainability, develop courses aimed at teaching global awareness, and include online and lifelong learning opportunities. Secondly, universities must include the concept of RRI in all their research activities, support research on topics that address the SDGs, support social entrepreneurs, and support capacity building and science for and with society. Thirdly, university governance structures should be in line with the principles of sustainability, and all actions within the university should be directed towards the sustainable goals: green campuses, campaigns on recycling and energy and water waste, ensuring gender equality, etc. Finally, universities should advocate for sustainable development, provide opportunities for inter-stakeholder dialogues and actions as well as developing joint courses and programmes or research groups with other institutions in topics related to sustainable development and the promotion of capacity building. The aforesaid list of actions is just a small and general sample of what HEIs can do. Several networks have started to compile good practices and cases from HEIs to show and serve as examples to other HEIs of how they can take action on the matter. ISCN's 2017 Sustainable Campus Best Practices from ISCN and Gulf Universities "Educating for Sustainability" are good examples of that. IAU's Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development webpage ([www.iau-hesd.net/](http://www.iau-hesd.net/)) and the compilation made by the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) at [www.ods.cat/en/](http://www.ods.cat/en/) are good examples too, and serve as inspiration and motivation for other HEIs and help display how universities are committed and socially responsible.

There is a myriad of options through which HEIs can integrate and promote the SDGs, but Higher Education's commitment to the 2030 Agenda does not come free of obstacles, including both external structural factors and internal limitations. These include the difficulty to institutionalize sustainability in higher education because of its trans-dimensional nature and reductions across the board in the funding of research and education (University of Siena, 2017:19). A recent study published in the Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences titled "Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles to the Imple-

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/three-challenges-higher-education-and-sdgs-3556>

mentation of Sustainable Development at Universities" highlighted, through quantitative and qualitative methods, that the main challenges were the following: lack of support from management, lack of awareness and concern and lack of appropriate technology, among others. An in-depth explanation of those obstacles exceeds the scope of this article, but much research is currently being done in this respect and it is extremely important to pay attention to the results since it is vital to know what the obstacles are in order to overcome them.

## GUNi's Strategy on the SDGs

Considering the abovementioned opportunities and challenges for the higher education sector and the importance of working through partnerships between different types of actors around the globe, GUNi has realized that it can - and must - play a key role in the years to come. GUNi needs to help build on new, relevant expertise, strengthen partnerships, generate exchanges between different cultures and knowledge, and help HEIs to adopt the SDGs. It is for these reasons, among others, that GUNi has opened up a new strategic line of action as part of its working plan for the coming years. This line of action around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda will be based on three main activities:

- ◆ A biennial International Conference on Sustainable Development Goals. The book you are reading is one of the results of the 1st edition of the Conference held in Barcelona in September 18-19, 2017.
- ◆ A Group of Experts in Higher Education and SDGs. The Group of Experts is a long-term project and an essential aspect of the International Conference. The Group is formed by representatives of different networks of Higher Education and SDGs from around the globe and will meet to discuss and present recommendations to universities and policymakers on the achievement of the SDGs.
- ◆ Several research projects related to the different areas of SDGs in partnership with other organizations.

The establishment of this new strategic line around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda aims to provide a timely answer to the current challenges our society is facing - identified by the international community - as well as staying true to the core values and objectives of the network. GUNi's commitment to the SDGs framework is in line with the values of knowledge and training, social responsibility, collaboration, creativity and excellence, and it is essential in order to achieve GUNi's goals, these being:

- ◆ To encourage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to reorient their roles in order to broaden their social value and contribution and strengthen their critical stance within society.
- ◆ To help bridge the gap between developed and developing countries in the field of higher education, fostering capacity-building and North-South and South-South cooperation.
- ◆ To promote the exchange of resources, innovative ideas and experiences, while allowing for collective reflection and co-production of knowledge on emerging higher education issues.
- ◆ To contribute to and reflect on the role of higher education and the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs for a better and more sustainable future.

## Conclusion

The present article has sought to offer a clear explanation of why the role of higher education is paramount for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, and why GUNi is therefore committed to undertaking projects and activities aligned with the agreements reached by the international community. Throughout the article we have highlighted the privileged position held by higher education institutions within society in the sense that they can approach and engage with society in a neutral way. Universities have a social responsibility that needs to be addressed and fulfilled, and the Sustainable Development Goals in all their dimensions are an essential part of this responsibility. We have seen that universities can help achieve the SDGs in a holistic way, through their core activities (teaching, research and dissemination), but also in other more innovative ways. Cooperation, collaboration and the exchange of knowledge among different state and non-state actors and different parts of the globe (different cultures, perspectives and ways of working) are vital in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda. GUNi, as a network of institutions and networks of higher education from around the globe, has a key role to play in this respect.

At GUNi, we are convinced that the years to come will be full of challenges, but also opportunities. We will only get to see many improvements if we work together and strengthen our ties and cooperate for the betterment of higher education and, therefore, society.

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