

International seminar

The world beyond 2015: is higher education ready?

The role of universities in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda

11 December 2014

9 am – 2 pm

Art Nouveau Site of St. Pau, Barcelona

On 11 December the seminar “The World beyond 2015: Is Higher Education ready?” was held, organized by the Global University Network for innovation (GUNI) and the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) in collaboration with the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the International Association of Universities (IAU). The seminar reflected on the role played by higher education and research in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and to contribute to the Post-2015 Agenda. Rectors, vice-rectors, representatives of public administrations and civil society analysed in this global context the current situation of the Catalan universities highlighting the vital role that higher education institutions play in contributing to sustainable development, as well as in the establishment of systems to measure impact in the implementation of the development goals.

The speakers and attendees felt that universities have a key role (that will be bigger in the next few years) in the contribution to sustainable human development, both locally and globally. During the seminar specific projects and experiences were also analysed that allow activating the role of the universities in the deployment of the SDG in their various fields: training, scientific research, innovation and development.

Words of welcome

Francesc Xavier Grau, academic director of GUNI, explained the background to the GUNI network created by UNESCO, the United Nations University and Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC). In the last few months the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) has acquired the role of *host institution*. GUNI has always been characterized by focusing on emerging issues in the field of higher education, a sample of which are the five global reports, in particular the recent report “*Higher Education in the World 5: Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education contributing to social change*” which presents many burning issues. The report highlights the absence of the universities in the reflection on key topics for humanity, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 Agenda. The reason for this

limited presence of universities in the forums of global reflection could lie in the fact that universities are having to focus on day-to-day survival, currently struggling to achieve adequate funding, to be competitive in the current context, and little space remains for participating in reflections of a global nature.

Francesc Xavier Grau underlined the role of the Catalan university as a university that is highly involved in the region, and that this concept is firmly in place. However, he questioned the role of the Catalan universities in the world. Is it possible for this local involvement to be compatible with being present in the challenges of the world? The universities are the ones that generate and contain knowledge, therefore he believes that indeed, they can be “locally and globally engaged”.

The GUNi academic director revealed that the 6th GUNi report will be dealing precisely with this issue: the university committed to the region and at the same time to the world, the concept of “glocally engaged universities”. In this respect, he invited all those present interested to participate in the process of preparing this new report.

Sergi Ferré, head of the Department of Scientific and University Cooperation of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) began his words of welcome with a provocative response to the question of the seminar: *“Is higher education ready? It had better be ready!”* The Sustainable Development Goals are not achievable without the support of the universities, explained Farré. The universities must help define the post-2015 development agenda. He commented that the AECID believes in the transformative role of the universities, which are key players in the development process, and backs this role with its programmes, such as the Inter-university Cooperation Programme (ICP). Although often the universities do not appear explicitly, according to Farré none of the SDG are feasible without higher education institutions.

He took the opportunity to mention some of the conclusions of the [third symposium of the University Cooperation for Development Observatory \(OCUD\)](#) which was held in Granada on 6 and 7 November 2014 and also dealt with the role of higher education in the Post-2015 Agenda:

- The ability and need to work in a network
- *“Date revolution”* -an effort should be made measure and possess data
- The university must define itself as a specific agent of development cooperation

Sergi Farré reported some actions of AECID to tackle these challenges and requirements:

- to acknowledge the role of universities as agents for cooperation
- funding effort to carry out projects
- announcements that encourage scientific and academic cooperation and the development of innovation aimed at the priority countries of Spanish cooperation.

He proposed joining forces with all present and continuing to support the work of GUNi.

Joaquim Llimona Barcelona City Council commissioner of International Relations and Cooperation welcomed all participants to the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, a world heritage site that aims to become a global space for reflection from a local space - the city of Barcelona.

He congratulated the organizers on helping to improve the problems and inequalities of our planet through higher education and culture. According to Llimona, everyone must participate in the agenda of the future, not only the States but also organizations such as town and city councils, universities and social institutions. He expressed the commitment of the city of Barcelona to cooperate and announced an increase in the budget for the next academic year and the commitment to cooperate with a broad perspective that includes new actors.

Session 1: The Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 development Agenda

Saul Weisleder, former Alternate Ambassador of Costa Rica to the UN and Independent Consultant and Researcher participated in the process of defining the SDG. In his presentation he explained the background to the process (Millennium Development Goals - MDG), the process itself, that has included consultation with a multitude of actors from around the world, and the envisaged approval timescale that foresees that the process will finish in late 2015 and that all SDG will be defined.

The most recent version of the SDG contains 17 goals and 169 milestones. Having such a large number of goals and milestones involves a high degree of complexity. Unlike the MDG that were designed to be implemented in developing countries, the SDG should be implementable in all countries of the world. He stressed that in this respect there is still an open discussion on how to reduce the number and be more effective with a view to implementing the goals.

Weisleder's final reflection referred to the presence (or absence) of the university in the SDG. He commented that higher education institutions are present, and have been taken into account. He stressed, however, that the work of the universities is only just beginning. In this context, academia should be a core player in providing answers and solutions to problems (*problem-based research*). He stated that he sees the role of universities as key players that must be present in all the different goals through teacher training, education for sustainable development and applied research, etc. To be able to fulfil this role, the traditional role of universities must change. This, according to Weisleder, is the major challenge facing universities.

Jordi Fexas, in charge of monitoring the international agenda at the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD) structured his speech around the main question of the seminar. "*Is higher education ready?* - I don't know but it should be." In this context, Fexas presented three main ideas:

1. Without the scientific community, according to Fexas, the SDG are totally unfeasible. If there isn't a knowledge network it will not be possible to build good indicators and it will be impossible to achieve them. We must seize the territorial actors, so that they participate in the debate, definition and monitoring of the indicators, etc. In a globalized world, where individuals relate horizontally, it does not make sense that the regions are not present in the reflection process. The ACCD sets as a target that the role of local actors should be adequately reflected in the SDG.
2. The ACCD has made an inverse reflection in its master plan, changing the local focus for a global perspective: human rights (human rights of women and collective rights of peoples (global equity and peace) as a starting point).
3. The importance of research. The ACCD's master plan greatly emphasizes the need to build a knowledge pole/cluster where multiple actors can play a part and can develop locally and globally. In this sense, universities are obviously fundamental.

Round table: Higher education and the post-2015 development agenda: how do we contribute as higher education institutions?

Patrice Ajai-Ajagbe, representative of the campaign "The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready? of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) started her [presentation](#) with a brief introduction of the organization she works for. She stated that ACU has a special concern for higher education and development. They engage with their members on development and questions such as "Where are we?, What are we doing now?, and Where are we going?".

As other speakers had mentioned before, Ajai-Ajagbe stated that the Millennium Development Goals have not all been achieved, even though there has been some progress. In her opinion they have basically contributed to creating a dynamic for working together on global development issues. Ajai-Ajagbe regrets that higher education has not been central in this process, even though it is evident that higher education is a key agent in addressing development and global challenges – via its research, training highly skilled people, providing education on development and raising the awareness of and finding solutions for global problems. According to the work ACU has produced over the last years there is much evidence of the role of higher education for development, but still a lack of recognition.

Ajai-Ajagbe refers to an international conference, organized by ACU in 2012, on 'Measuring the impact of higher education for development' ([summary](#)) which, among others, discussed the [baseline study](#) on evaluating interventions by higher education institutions One of the main conclusions of this conference was that there is more research needed, but that higher education does have a positive impact on gender, health and democracy.

ACU is currently running the campaign "[The world beyond 2015: is higher education ready?](#)" which inspired the title for this seminar. The main goal of the campaign is to raise awareness

of the role of higher education in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and development ([campaign video](#)). With this campaign, ACU tries to demonstrate that higher education has a huge potential. They will present the findings of the campaign at the 2015 ACU conference to try to raise yet more awareness and introduce the dialogue to all their member institutions. As far as the campaign is concerned, Ajai-Ajagbe states that the biggest setback is engaging universities. For her the central question is “Is it relevant for universities to explain how they make a difference in society, instead of producing papers and appearing in rankings?”

Arjen Wals, professor of Social Learning and Sustainability and director of the Centre for Sustainable Development and Food Security, Unesco Chair, at Wageningen University reflects in his [presentation](#) upon what higher education can do to contribute to sustainable development. He affirms that academia does a lot to contribute to precisely the opposite and recommends studying more carefully what exactly universities do. He stated provocatively that education is contributing more and more to the economy than to families. He suggests thinking about the term *sustainability* as he identifies a need for a real understanding of the terms *sustainable development* and *critical thinking*: “we are drowning in information while starving for wisdom”.

Wals argues that global problems have no right or wrong answers, solutions that will work in one place may not work at all in another, they are not quantifiable, they are diverse and hard to pin down. He concludes that universities optimize the existing systems but that there is a need for transition to a system that relies on different paradigms. He proposes we think of the world in a more holistic manner - seeing the world in its interconnections, in its interdependencies and blur the boundaries between institutional and hybrid learning.

Cristina Escrigas, advisor to the development of the GUNi project, based her participation on the main idea that universities should serve society. She stressed that the post-industrial model of development has reached its limit and is no longer capable of meeting the needs of collective progress. Therefore, the development model should be based on sustainability. Given the geopolitical context and other factors such as perhaps the desire to be happy, she concluded that today, the priority innovation, over and above technology, is social innovation. To achieve this change requires a change in attitude, a change in the understanding of how reality works and how to live coherently in this context, i.e., a change in paradigm. According to Escrigas, the concept of interdependence must be integrated, understood and applied in everyday life.

This completely changes the context for higher education which, in Escrigas’s opinion, is still responding to a post-industrial development model and market needs. Universities are not at the heart of the debate on the current crisis nor in the critical renewal of ideas for social innovation. Escrigas points out that universities have numerous mandates, at all levels and from all stakeholders. In the current context she identified as an urgent task reconsidering the profile of graduates beyond specific disciplines and qualifications. We must go beyond training professionals to prepare global citizens with an open mind, a critical eye, ethical awareness

and civic commitment. She concluded her speech by asking for the creation of an institutional link with the local and global development agenda, especially with the SDG.

Round table: Are higher education institutions ready to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals? Experiences from China, Norway and Catalonia

Wang Xin, vice-dean of the UNEP-Tongji Institute of Environment for Sustainable Development, of the Tongji University in Shanghai, China, first presented some general figures on the Chinese university system, emphasizing that all top universities are public. He then introduced his university and explained in which ways this institution is a sustainability-oriented university. Xin mentioned that Tongji University is strong in social services and that many of its study programs focus on environmental education as well as education on sustainable development. It also fosters interdisciplinary research in these areas. Serving as a good example, Tongji University is expanding its green campus to a network of 200 Chinese institutions ([presentation](#)).

Victoria Thoresen, associate lecturer in education at Hedmark University College in Norway and project manager of Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living ([PERL](#)) answered the question of the seminar like this: “Are we ready? We should first look at where we come from? I think something has happened.” Victoria Thoresen defended a positive approach and stated that the basic definition of sustainability has changed, broadened and been mainstreamed through the many conferences, seminar and working groups that have taken place over the last few years. According to Thoresen, there has been a great deal of research on sustainable development and it is now on the agenda as an issue that has to be touched upon. She sees more evidence for this in the increase of interdisciplinary research in the last decade and stated that there has been a discussion going on in universities and research circles on what development actually means and implies. Thoresen animated the public expressing her conviction that if we want to influence these global processes we have to lobby and champion for it - everyone can participate in the SDG, it’s an open process! The sad thing is that few people know about it, something which Thorsen corroborates through various questions to the public that show that only one person from the audience has actively participated in these international processes. Thoresen explained that there are channels for participation and that there are still opportunities for universities to be heard. She called for all participants to send in their feedback and be active in the SDG process.

Jordi Prat, director of the Fundació Autònoma Solidària (Solidarity Foundation) of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, shared the project led by the Fundació Autònoma Solidària: [Promoting Education for Development \(EpD\) at the University](#) which receives funding from Barcelona City Council. The main aim of the project is to promote EpD in the university so that it becomes a critical space to generate knowledge and train critical, active and engaged citizens. The [project](#) seeks to articulate an effective means of including EpD in the curricula of undergraduate degrees and enhances the field of non-formal education.

The project is based on three areas: networking, la curricular change and non-formal education. It highlights the launch of the Minor in "[Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship](#)", an inter-faculty programme targeting undergraduate students to take optional credits as well as the Working Groups in Development in Faculties (GEDEFs), made up of teaching staff, students and social organizations in the Veterinary Medicine and Economics and Business Faculties for the curricular promotion of food sovereignty and economic solidarity.

Conclusions of the working groups

Working group 1: How can higher education institutions position themselves strategically and act as change agents for a sustainable future?

Hillegje van't Land, director of Membership and Programme Development at the International Association of Universities (IAU), asked the participants of the first working group to answer three questions:

- 1.) Being wishful, where do you see the university in 30 years from now?
- 2.) What is preventing universities from moving in this direction?
- 3.) What are you going to do to attain the model of university you wish to have in 30 years?

Referring to the first question, the participants stated that there needs to be a holistic approach to higher education, with sustainable development fully integrated in the universities' DNA. Inter- and transdisciplinarity must reign both in training and in research. In regard to training, this means fostering transversal competencies and curricula not based on subjects but on solving important problems for society. In regard to research, society must be more involved in setting the research agenda. Still, there should be space for basic research. Universities should be institutions with open doors, cooperative, sharing their facilities with the neighbourhood, really committed, more proactive and overcome reactivity. A long-term vision should be part of every higher education institution's strategy.

As the main barriers that prevent moving to create this university the participants identify the lack of support structures, the absence of clear visions and missions, and inertia (too many things to do). Currently there is no specific evaluation that targets sustainable development outcomes. Current rewards systems based on publications as well as financial barriers and lacking political support impede advancing towards sustainable development. There is still a high degree of isolation between different disciplines, transversality and interdisciplinarity are missing and monodisciplinary projects predominate. In this sense, Van't Land encourages looking at the National University of Singapore that has developed an interesting strategy on how to change mindsets and foster problem solving research. Finally, the participants stressed that universities are focusing very much on commercial aspects nowadays, producing graduates for the market place, without taking into consideration more social and cultural issues.

Thinking about concrete actions to achieve a sustainable university, many participants of the working group admit that despite their desire to innovate, they don't really know where to start. They identify the possibility of lobbying and advocating through international university networks and associations such as GUNi, IAU or ACU and call for the establishment of a common framework. They also consider there is a need to foster a critical debate on what evaluation systems are in place today and what kind of evaluation systems we need.

Working group 2: How can collaboration between universities and local communities be stimulated in order to achieve regional development?

Cristina Escrigas, chair of the second working group, said that at an initial stage the participants identified the barriers that currently hinder collaboration between universities and local communities. On the one hand there are external barriers such as a lack of social recognition of the university community and the lack of social visibility in some areas. On the other they identify internal characteristics of universities, such as their organizational culture (slow response, lack of confidence in their own abilities, lack of dialogue and coordination between the various internal stakeholders), the system of organization (lack of leadership and rigid structures) and the pedagogical model (absence or misuse of the active methodologies). In the middle of these two environments, acting as an interface, are also intrinsic problems in communication between universities and stakeholders, due to differences in languages, cultural problems, diverging interests or lack of communication.

With regard to possible solutions, the group put them into similar categories. As internal measures, the group proposes:

- defining a common vision
- building trust with some key players like the students
- promoting the possibility for researchers to be able to devote a percentage of their time to social projects
- introducing social impact indicators
- making more transparent use of information and communication technologies
- considering indicators of sustainable development within the field of social responsibility and in the quality assurance systems
- establishing participatory dynamics in the processes of drawing up the curricula.

Regarding external initiatives, the need to implement policies to foster synergies between the universities and their social context was pointed out. Finally, several solutions were proposed designed to rectify the problems of university-society interface and to improve communication. In this sense, there is a need to promote engagement with various stakeholders and begin to work properly on a multi-actor level. Students should also be included in this dialogue, creating networks and clusters, working in multidisciplinary teams and promoting participatory research.

Working group 3: How can we promote the participation of higher education institutions in international organisations and processes?

Kathrine Raleigh, head of programmes and contents at the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site who chaired this last work group, explained that the group concluded that there are many opportunities and ample space for work. There is one principal question that needs to be answered: what is it that we want to achieve for higher education in the UN processes? The group thinks that on the one hand, a success would be that higher education institutions are regularly involved in UN projects for the implementation of the SDG, with a leadership role. On the other hand, there should be more commitment within higher education institutions to stimulate civil society.

As for the question “why are HEIs not represented as they should be?”, the group concluded that this is because there is no strong single identity as a group, and that HEIs do not speak with a single voice. This works to the detriment of the sector.

What actions could be taken? The group proposed a comprehensive framework that leaves space for involvement. It identifies the need to integrate this idea in our consciousness, to identify resources to bring bottom-up solutions, to improve communication as well as to take advantage of opportunities that exist.

Conclusions and closure

Francesc Xavier Grau closed the proceedings referring to one of the comments that arose during the seminar: the need to move from words to action. We must start moving holistically. If anyone is responsible for doing something it's the universities, they must prove to the rest of society that they are working with this global vision. The difficulty of moving from words to action is that whatever is done must be measurable. The responsibility of ACUP and GUNi is to propose measurement systems to be able to communicate what is and what will be done. We must provide figures and indicators, even if they are wrong, to measure progress.

Grau also referred to another topic discussed during the symposium: does the university exist? What is the university? What is the relationship between university students and the institution? He underlined that the relationship between individual and institutional objectives is a universal problem. Universities are part of a system, they do not exist in a (*systemless*) vacuum, and we must think about this system and bear it in mind.

Grau concluded by expressing that GUNi and ACUP wish systematically to make constructive proposals that provide solutions to these local and global problems.