



Meeting Summary

University Sector Support to the UN's Decade of Action: A Meeting of Asia, Europe and the Middle East University Presidents (Virtual)

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Executive Summary

The Asia, Europe and the Middle East University Presidents Meeting brought together University Presidents, UN and Government representatives, along with experts from the region, SDSN Network Chairs, Managers, and members of the SDSN Leadership Council, to discuss how universities can contribute to the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement and engage with local governments and communities through their key functions. Throughout this 3-hour meeting, speakers and participants emphasized the importance of making universities global leaders in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Introduction

Professor Jeffrey Sachs, President of SDSN

Prof. Sachs welcomed the participants by stating that universities have an important role to play and carry a unique responsibility in the world. The complexity of our shared challenges has been stressed by the global pandemic. These challenges, including environmental degradation, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as widening inequalities and rising geopolitical tensions, is overwhelming governments all over the world. Such interconnected challenges, and a common desire for sustainable solutions, is what brought university presidents together for this SDSN meeting.

The unique role that universities play in society lies in the capacity of universities to connect across generations, stakeholders, and lines of thinking. The challenges of sustainable development, or the interweaving of the economics, social justice, and environmental issues, are at the very core of the mission and purpose of universities.

Opening Remarks

H.E. Ms. Niki Kerameus, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece

Minister Kerameus echoed the key role played by universities in promoting sustainable development. Education, and universities in particular, are instrumental for the achievement of the 17 SDGs. The Minister shared her government's efforts to promote education for sustainable development: at the university level, by establishing specific units dedicated to sustainable development, the country

succeeded in including sustainable development in various educational, research and operational activities. By launching a network for sustainable development, Greece enabled the sharing of best practices, and by integrating the SDGs in its strategic plans, it managed to link the funding to the sustainable development performance of universities. In primary and secondary education, Minister Kerameus stressed the importance of introducing the SDGs in all school curricula, as well as in the skills labs, a new feature that put the skills at the heart of the learning process. Finally, when developing vocational training curricula, the Greek Ministry decided to involve social partners in order to ensure that what students learn is also useful for society. Minister Kerameus concluded that for sustainable development education to reach everyone, it must be deployed as soon as possible and at all educational levels.

The Role of Academia in Achieving the SDGs and the Paris Agreement

Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

Stefania Giannini reiterated the vital role of universities and research institutions in society. Being international, innovative, and interdisciplinary are at the core of the mission of universities, and all three dimensions are required for achieving the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. In a world facing common and connecting crises, thinking across disciplines, institutions, and continents is imperative. Giannini shared the early findings of the forthcoming report of the UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the University and the 2030 Agenda, stating that many higher education institutions are moving in the right direction but that there was still a need for deeper, dramatic transformations and radical change. Such transformation within academic institutions can be achieved through three dimensions: interdisciplinarity, openness and policy linkages. Working in silos will not lead us to the fulfillment of the SDGs. While this does not mean doing away with specialization, which is in the DNA of universities, complex issues cannot continue to be approached as one-dimensional.

Sir Andrew Haines, Professor of Environmental Change and Public Health, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM)

Professor Haines reiterated how vital interdisciplinarity is in higher education, and how cross-cutting research is required to address the problems of our time. For example, health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4) rely on the achievement of all the other SDGs. Whilst the LSHTM focuses on health, it increasingly has to broaden its perspective of what knowledge is needed in order to promote and sustain health. Such knowledge can clearly no longer reside in the traditional disciplines of public health (e.g.: epidemiology), which are important, but are not sufficient. As trans-disciplinarity and inter-sectoral working are instrumental in addressing sustainable development problems, the focus must be placed on creating career pathways for transdisciplinary knowledge. However, academic funding usually works in silos. Therefore, it is challenging to finance transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Professor Haines gave the example of the Pathfinder Initiative, which aims to demonstrate how implementation of well-designed policies and technologies can yield multiple benefits for both the people and the planet.

Vladimir A. Mau, Rector of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA)

Rector Mau described how the SDGs have gained popularity over the last few years, with the 2030 Agenda now being considered one of the most topical issues in Russia. He explained the strong engagement of SDSN Russia, and its host institution, RANEPA, in influencing the rollout of the SDGs through research and education projects in the country. RANEPA recently created a special Institute of Finance and Sustainable Development which provides graduate and post-graduate programs in sustainable development, management, and ESG transformation, including MBA and MPA programs. A new task force within RANEPA conducts discussions and research with leading Russian experts and policymakers and provides the government with policy advice.

He further praised the role played by SDSN Youth Russia, with volunteers in more than 10 cities promoting and driving sustainable campus principles. Mau noted that further discussion on cultivating new ideas around the 2030 Agenda implementation was needed, along with promotion of sustainable initiatives among young people and the support to the grassroots movements. Finally, Mau called for increased practical implementation of the SDGs in the economy.

Vuk Jeremić, President of the Centre for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD)

Vuk Jeremić, former President of the UN General Assembly, turned back to 2015, which marked a great year for multilateralism, thanks to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, demonstrating a universal recognition of the necessity to coordinate change in environmental policy. Moreover, Jeremić noted the importance of leaving no nation behind in the grand vision of a sustainable future. In a world that now faces a deep, geopolitical recession, and which will take decades to recover from populism and the lack of multilateralism over the past years, education must play a greater role in strengthening international cooperation. When political leaders fail to show leadership due to their short-term focus, universities, which are not directly tied to the political calendar, have an outsized role to play. Universities need to step up, fill in the gaps, and lead the national, regional and international debate. Apart from helping set up policies and defining national and regional targets, universities need to advocate for sustainable development.

Discussion

In the discussion session, several university presidents and leaders shared some of the most recent and most innovative steps taken by their institutions in aligning their actions with the Agenda 2030. Participants found that the sector's response to COVID-19 demonstrates the leading role that higher education institutions can play in tackling global challenges. Universities are capable of driving climate protection forward by teaching, researching and advancing climate relevant knowledge.

Aligning curricula, degrees, strategic plans and KPIs with national development plans and the 2030 Agenda in universities is also accompanied by the establishment of centers of excellence and development hubs that aim to address the SDG gaps in the country, build communities of practice across sectors and disciplines, and provide vital connection points for building new partnerships.

In addition to such existing efforts, university presidents underlined the need for working across disciplines and recognizing the interconnectedness of the SDGs and focusing on complex systems challenges such as the link between infectious diseases and climate change. They also warned against the exacerbation of the digital gap, and against the acceleration of the brain drain in the Global South. University leaders called for greater use of online tools, greater collaboration beyond institutional and national boundaries, greater funding for international research consortia, as well as greater advocacy efforts in speaking with confidence, evidence, and ability to influence policy.

Breakout Sessions

Education Programs for Sustainable Development

Thematic Group No1 on Education Programs for Sustainable Development was co-chaired by Paul Walsh, Full Professor of International Development Studies and an elected member of the Governing Authority in University College Dublin, together with Mr. Omar Hernández, Public Information Officer at the UN, and Prof. Smriti Das, Associate Professor at TERI School of Advanced Studies.

The group agreed that, in order to meet the goals of the Mission 4.7 and the SDGs, there was a great need for upskilling of teachers and capacity building in low-income countries. Moreover, sustainable development ought to be fully integrated in the university curricula and professors ought to be provided with training to be able to integrate the SDGs in their classes. In addition to the discipline in which they are teaching, a professor should be able to teach and broadly speak about the SDGs. Several successful examples emerged from the discussion: introducing common compulsory subject on the SDGs across universities; requesting academic staff to connect their courses to one or more relevant SDGs and dedicating 10-15% of the course to the SDGs; facilitation by the Vice-Chancellor's office in developing multidisciplinary teachings; use of online free resources such as the ones of the SDG Academy; offering leadership courses on sustainable development for postgraduate students in order to enable them to become active SDG players. SDSN published a guide for universities looking to [Accelerate Education for the SDGs](#) available in 7 different languages and has an accompanying [website with examples coming from around the world](#) that can also be used as inspiration.

Climate Change and Research Programs

Thematic Group No2 on Climate Change and Research Programs was chaired by Phoebe Koundouri, University Professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business and Director of ReSEES Research Laboratory.

Speakers stressed the need for finding a common vision across SDSN membership on sustainable development in universities and adopting a common SDG charter that may have a particular focus on climate mitigation and adaptation. Such a common vision and charter could build on SDSN's Guide on [Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities](#), as well as on the leadership examples coming from the SDSN members.

Another proposal was the creation of a Global Climate Hub, which would gather all the research of the SDSN member institutions on climate (e.g., land-use, oceans, social engagement) and structure that work around different missions, similar to what is being done by the EU institutions. For that, universities need to follow interdisciplinary and systemic approaches, commercialize the innovation, engage different stakeholders (entrepreneurs, policy makers, researchers etc.) and develop transition pathways. Moreover, to inspire new generations, research projects should actively engage with youth. Research Programs on Climate Mitigation and Adaptation also need to promote greater gender balance, engage with universities in small countries, and support the younger and less funded stakeholders through the network. SDSN networks may also serve as a forum for disseminating and amplifying the most innovative research findings of the academia that will address climate change.

Building Forward Better

Thematic Group No3 Building Forward Better was chaired by Zulfiqar Bhutta, University Professor at Aga Khan University and Founding Director of the Institute for Global Health and Development.

Being aware of the position of universities at the societal level, university leaders found that the greatest impact that their institutions could achieve in building forward better was through their students. Leaders of the future, students are an enormous resource that universities can tap into. To strengthen the connectivity with and amongst students, professors, and partners, universities can build platforms, which rely on low-resource technologies, to create networks. Such networks can operate internally, regionally, and globally, thus creating connectivity between well-resourced geographies and those emerging and middle-income countries. Platforms and networks will allow an exchange of information and open-access materials.

When engaging in networks, universities have a particular role to play in reaching students and communities of low socioeconomic and marginalized populations. The issue of equity through education was underscored as a primary function of universities in building forward better. Such a role also contributes to supporting resilient communities - communities that will be able to protect themselves from global pressures and challenges such as those that the world has encountered recently.

Universities ought to reconfigure existing resources to invest in and support cross-cutting initiatives and platforms that give rise to interdisciplinary work. Some topics that can facilitate communication between different disciplines include live data systems and informatics, artificial intelligence, gender equity work, and work on climate change and development. Those are some of the important steps to take in building forward better, more fairly, and more sustainably.

Next steps

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs, President of SDSN

By way of conclusion, Prof. Sachs focused on 5 take-away points from this unique meeting.

1. *Connections* - Prof. Sachs expressed the willingness of the SDSN to ensure and cultivate the connections of the universities in this meeting. He also voiced his hope that a future meeting of university presidents could take place in person, and that a special, global session on education, would be held in September 2022 during the UN General Assembly.
2. *Curriculum Development* — It is clear, at all levels - from pre-school to lifelong learning - that there is a need and the opportunity to help develop the curriculum of sustainable development. SDSN is already working on the [Mission 4.7](#) Project to this end, together with UNESCO and other international bodies. Participants wishing to contribute to such development are invited to contact the SDSN Secretariat.
3. *Global Partnerships of New Kinds* — Thanks to the digital breakthrough, there is now an opportunity to have all kinds of projects (MOOCs, seminars, webinars, joint courses, joint research projects, etc.) at low cost and high productivity. All sorts of partnerships can be made, including with those universities that are in specific locations and lead on certain topics.
4. *Joint Active Research* — Given that everyone has the same homework, as every region has to decarbonize, more active research programs are needed to achieve the common goal - common pathways analysis, common climate adaptation strategies and common tools (GIS tools, planning and modeling tools, common programs, etc.). Finally, students have to be involved and must be brought into research activities.
5. *Funding and Finance* — Greater support is needed for the consortium of universities so that they can make investments to be able to participate fully and actively in the above activities. SDSN will seek funding to enable better online access to particular shared tools, resources, organizing events, common projects, etc.

SDSN's next meeting of university presidents will take place on March 10th from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm CET and will bring together the leaders from the African continent.