



Integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into Institutional Development Strategy: Recommendations for Vietnamese Universities

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ABSTRACT

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which were endorsed by global leaders at a United Nations meeting in September 2015, entered into force on January 1st, 2016. These objectives seek to coordinate worldwide endeavours to end inequality, combat climate change, and eradicate all forms of poverty while guaranteeing that no one is left behind. This study focuses on synthesizing reports and scholarly papers discussing the integration of the United Nations' 17 SDGs into higher education worldwide to propose recommendations for Vietnam. The results from document analysis show that universities play a significant role in the implementation of the SDGs. Moreover, the key areas to integrate the SDGs into the institution's strategic planning are education, research, cooperation and community services, and institutional governance and operations. It is suggested that to integrate the SDGs into the development strategy, Vietnamese universities should understand the SDGs, conduct a sustainable assessment, build sustainability policies, engage stakeholders, and regularly monitor and report progress toward the SDGs.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2000, 189 nations made a pledge at a United Nations summit to end severe poverty and other forms of hardships through the achievement of the eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Built on the success of these goals, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were endorsed by global leaders in September 2015 at a memorable United Nations summit and authoritatively started on January 1st 2016. With these new objectives that globally apply to all, “countries will mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change while ensuring that no one is left behind” (United Nations, n.d.-b, p. 1). The new goals also recognize that “ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities while tackling climate change and environmental protection” (United Nations, n.d.-a).

The SDGs serve as a framework for the global development network to advocate and fund activities aimed at achieving long-term progress (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Higher education institutions must play a more important and influential role in the transformation process sparked by the SDGs since they are key change agents. Universities are urged to join up and submit yearly reports outlining how they have incorporated the SDGs within their organization. Specifically, the curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular aspects of university education should directly address the overall objectives. All programs must give students the opportunity to think critically about sustainability issues, both within the context of their own fields and on a larger global scale, as citizens who will be affected and have an impact (Filho et al., 2019). Higher education institutions have also developed courses

related to sustainability. The primary goal of teaching these courses is to increase students' comprehension of the significance of the SDGs' achievements while also preparing them to consider their own ethical positions regarding sustainable development and the SDGs (Kopnina, 2018).

Education, research and innovation are reflected in several SDGs, making higher education institutions important contributors to accomplishing the goals. Related to Goal 4 and Goal 9, universities can conduct outstanding teaching, advanced research, and pioneering innovation. Related to Goal 16, universities can contribute to the policy development in each country and they are excellent supporters of international and national collaborations that are related to Goal 17. The accomplishment of the other goals can be aided by contributions to these four ones. This study, therefore, reviewed and analyzed documents related to the implementation of the 17 SDGs in higher education, particularly the four above-mentioned ones to propose recommendations for Vietnamese universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development comprises the 17 SDGs, which have 169 specific targets and 232 indicators. For the first time, the struggle against poverty and sustainable development are placed on the same agenda with a balance between the economic, social, and ecological aspects of sustainable development. By 2030, the SDGs must be accomplished globally and by all UN member nations. This implies that all governments are equally obligated to contribute to addressing the pressing problems facing the world (United Nations, 2018). With support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Vietnamese government has prepared a National Action Plan for the SDGs to assess how effectively existing development plans, policies, and programs connect with the SDGs. The plan was utilized to create Vietnam's SDGs (VSDGs). The VSDGs were approved by the Prime Minister in 2017 (Decision No. 622/QĐ-TTg) and also have 17 general goals, with 115 specific goals.

The 17 SDGs are organized around six themes including human dignity, people, planet, partnership, justice and prosperity. Many goals require cooperation and support between countries for successful implementation (especially the goals from 13 to 17), and success in one goal can add to the accomplishment of other goals. Table 3.1 provides the contents of the 17 SDGs (United Nations, 2018), and these 17 SDGs can be grouped into five elements: People, Planet, Partnership, Peace and Prosperity (UN Volunteer, n.d.).

Table 1. Contents of the 17 SDGs

No	Goals	Contents
1	No Poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3	Good Health and Well-being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4	Quality Education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
10	Reduce Inequalities	Reduce inequality within and among countries.

11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13	Climate Action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14	Life below Water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15	Life on Land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17	Partnerships for the Goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the Vietnamese higher education context, the SDGs have been implemented into the management, teaching, and research agendas of several universities. For some institutions, Ton Duc Thang University, for example, (as highly ranked in UI Green Metric in recent years), sustainable campus management has become crucial (Nguyen et al., 2021), and is regarded as a component of the institution's societal duty. Several other universities in Vietnam have also planned for national or international conferences with topics related to the SDGs, for example, the 6th International Conference on Green Technology and Sustainable Development co-organized by Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Nha Trang University, Lac Hong University, Kun Shan University, and National Penghu University of Science and Technology (held on July 29-30, 2022 in Vietnam). Based on a Google search in April 2022 (with the keywords "sustainable development goals of United Nations" and "university" in Vietnam), however, just around 20 institutions (among around 240 institutions) showed information related to the SDGs on their websites. This data may also reflect the status that the strategic plans of most higher education institutions in Vietnam have not integrated the SDGs into their goals or activities.

This study employed a document analysis approach. The authors purposefully searched for documents related to SDGs and sustainable development within the higher education sector. The main sources were Google Scholars, Web of Science and Scopus database. The documents were in the form of academic articles, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, newspaper articles, reports, policies, etc. By reviewing related research papers around the world and official reports from UNESCO and affiliated organizations, the authors highlight the roles of higher education in implementing the SDGs and recommend ways of integrating the SDGs into higher education institutions' strategic planning.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Roles of higher education in implementing the SDGs

In order to counteract negative phenomena like poverty, child mortality, unemployment, poor education levels, and a lack of possibilities for the younger generation, education is a crucial instrument. It can also improve agriculture by boosting food production and ensuring that it is distributed more fairly around the world (UNESCO, 2016). The term 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD), developed by UNESCO, has become the popular keywords in education development around the world in recent years. UNESCO (2012) points out that: ESD seeks to enable citizens around the globe to deal with the complexities, controversies and inequities arising out of issues relevant to environment, natural heritage, culture, society and economy. Simply put, ESD is education for the future, for

everyone everywhere. It is an essential ingredient to ensure quality education and a successful transition to green societies and economies (p. 12).

Among the 17 SDGs, as part of the promotion of possibilities for lifelong learning for everyone, Goal 4 (Quality Education) demands equal access to postsecondary education, including universities. Universities also play a significant role in other SDGs, acting as a catalyst for the fulfillment of the entire set of objectives through their contributions to social services, innovation, and knowledge production.

Based on the analysis by Ivison (2020) on the reasons that higher education should participate and play an active role in the implementation of the SDGs and the overview by Chankseliani and McCowan (2021) on the contributions to the SDGs that have been made by higher education systems around the world, and the analysis of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the authors summarize the key roles and reasons for this participation as follows:

- The SDGs can contribute to orienting research and education activities at higher education institutions on contemporary global issues;
- The SDGs provide a “global language” for political activities and social reforms. As the centers of knowledge sharing and creation, higher education institutions can and need to participate and contribute to these activities;
- Societies are expecting higher education institutions to demonstrate their capacities in solving current problems through research and education activities;
- Researchers at higher education institutions are expected to be a source of advice and solutions for governments and businesses; to help public media interpret complex events; and to participate in contemporary scientific, economic, social and cultural issues;
- The SDGs are investment priorities for Research and Development (R&D) activities from global, regional and national funds, from international cooperation projects. Higher education institutions actively participating in the implementation of the SDGs will have more opportunities to receive investment from these funds;
- The world is facing global epidemics, such as COVID-19, which requires transnational cooperation in epidemic prevention, in finding effective drugs and vaccines, and in dealing with the consequences of the epidemic in all areas of society. Higher education institutions can be models for such collaborative efforts;
- The SDGs help establish and develop a culture of cooperation among higher education institutions, government, business and the public to solve common problems, for long-term benefits for each country and for the world.

4.1.2. Integrating the SDGs into higher education institutions' strategic planning

Based on the specificity of education and research expertise, the capacity of resources and the national context, each higher education institution can make different contributions to the 17 SDGs. To assist higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to easily study and develop a plan to implement the SDGs, SDSN - Australia/Pacific (under the United Nations, with the homepage <https://ap-unsdsn.org/>) has developed and disseminated the document “Getting started with the SDGs in universities - A guide for universities, higher education institutions, and the academic sector” (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017). Based on this report, other related documents and the requirements of the SDGs, the authors propose a number of core activities and policies in the key areas of institutional management that higher education institutions can refer to in their strategic planning as follows:

Education

The education area is directly related to Goal 4: Quality Education (Ensure quality, open, equitable education and enhance lifelong learning opportunities for all). According to Khurshid et al. (2020), Saini et al. (2023) and UNESCO (2022), to adapt to this goal, higher education institutions can explore the following activities and policies:

- Developing policies that ensure access to quality education for all students, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status;
- Integrating (selectively) the SDGs into the objectives and learning outcomes of academic programs;
- Developing subjects or integrating activities related to the SDGs in academic programs;
- Enhancing learners' awareness and attitudes towards sustainable development requirements for economic, social and technological activities;

- Fostering a culture of lifelong learning by providing opportunities for students to continue learning beyond their formal education;
- Incorporating technology in education to enhance education quality and increase access to education;
- Regularly evaluating and monitoring progress towards achieving quality education goals;
- Increasing college education opportunities for disadvantaged students.

Research

There are many SDGs that can become higher education institutions' orientations in research such as 2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 14, 17. Berchin et al. (2021), Guo et al. (2022) and Salman et al. (2020) point out the following exemplary activities and policies to promote research for sustainable development:

- Giving priorities to support studies related to the SDGs;
- Providing funding for research projects related to sustainable development;
- Building interdisciplinary research groups in line with the SDGs; integrating sustainability in disciplinary and interdisciplinary research activities;
- Cooperating with businesses and communities to research and transfer technology, and to provide policy advice;
- Promoting research and innovation in education to improve teaching methods and educational outcomes;
- Incorporating sustainability into their research ethics policies to ensure that research is conducted in an ethical and sustainable manner;
- Expanding domestic and international cooperation in research under the SDGs;
- Disseminating research findings related to sustainable development through academic publications, conferences, and public events.

Cooperation and community services

This area is directly related to Goal 17: Partnering to Realize Goals (Strengthening the way it is done and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development). Zainuri and Huda (2023), Amador et al. (2021) and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2017) state the following activities and policies:

- Expanding cooperation with all stakeholders (local and international) to achieve the SDGs through programs and projects;
- Advocating for policy changes at the local, national, and international levels to promote sustainable development;
- Enhancing the position and capacity of institutions to participate in social issues;
- Sharing knowledge, supporting human resource development for communities and businesses;
- Engaging in service-learning programs as service-learning programs provide students with hands-on experience in sustainable development projects while also benefiting local communities;
- Establishing community outreach programs that provide resources, education, and training to local communities on sustainable development topics;
- Participating and supporting national action plans towards 17 SDGs;
- Incorporating sustainability into the curriculum by offering courses, programs, and degrees focusing on sustainable development.

Institutional governance and operations

Each higher education institution can be considered as a miniature society and should be considered as a model towards the SDGs, so it is necessary to pay attention to a number of related goals in governance and administration such as 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 13, 15. Barbier and Burgess (2021), Filho et al. (2021) and OECD (n.d.) support the following activities and policies:

- Developing a thorough sustainability plan with detailed objectives, targets, and strategies for reducing the institution's environmental impact and promoting sustainable development;
- Developing and effectively implementing policies on protection and improvement of living environment quality, saving resources (e.g., electricity, water), and gender equality in learning;
- Adopting sustainable practices in their operations, including reducing energy and water consumption, promoting sustainable transportation, reducing waste and greenhouse gas emissions, and sourcing environmentally sustainable products;
- Being a 'green' campus: supporting and leading campus projects including the installation of solar panels and bike sharing, recycling shops for textbooks, etc.;
- Timely responding to academic, medical, and health services;
- Providing clean water for everyone; ensuring food safety in the school;
- Well-serving the needs of physically disadvantaged people.

Higher education institutions' strategic plans also require targets or key performance indicators within each key area. In addition to the above activities and policies, higher education institutions can refer to the targets and indicators set by UN (United Nations, 2018) and also by each government to identify such requirements.

4.2. Discussion

Integrating the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into a university's strategic plans is a valuable initiative that can help promote sustainable development and social responsibility within the institution and beyond. To integrate the SDGs into its strategic plans, a Vietnamese university should first understand the SDGs, then conduct a sustainable assessment, develop a sustainability strategy, engage stakeholders, and finally monitor and report progress. Specifically, the university should have a good comprehension of the SDGs and their targets to determine how the institution might support the global sustainable development agenda. This entails going over and examining the objectives, then figuring out how the activities and operations of the institution might be in line with them (Agusdinata, 2022; Ashida, 2022).

Next, universities should undertake their sustainability assessment or audit. The university will be able to determine its SDG-related strengths and shortcomings with the use of a sustainability analysis. This involves assessing the university's effects on the environment, society, and the economy as well as identifying opportunities for improvement (Blasco et al., 2019; Calderon, 2021; Findler et al., 2019). The university subsequently creates a sustainability plan. The higher education institution may establish a plan of action for sustainability outlining its objectives and steps to address the SDGs in accordance with the sustainability assessment. This strategy needs to be part of the university's overarching strategic plan, which includes the institution's mission, vision, and core values (Filho et al., 2019; Kohl et al., 2022).

Furthermore, to make sure that the sustainability strategy corresponds with the needs and interests of lecturers, staff, students, alumni, and the broader community, the university should involve these stakeholders in its sustainable programs. This will foster a culture of sustainability within the organization and help to increase support for the effort (Purcell et al., 2019; University of Galway, 2021; University of Worcester, 2029). In addition, the university should routinely review and report on its progress toward the SDGs, using suitable indicators and measures to gauge its success. This will guarantee that the sustainability plan is accomplishing its objectives and aims and point out any areas that need improvement (Calderon, 2021; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2020).

Last but not least, the university should create a sustainability policy outlining its adherence to the SDGs. Specific objectives and indicators for assessing progress toward the SDGs can be included in the policy. (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017; University of Sydney, n.d.). Moreover, the institution can incorporate the SDGs into its educational programs by adding sustainability-related themes to current courses or creating new ones with the SDGs as its primary focus. This will assist students to learn about sustainability and get them ready to help achieve the SDGs (Amorós Molina et al., 2023; Fransen, 2022). Apart from integrating the SDGs into the programs, on campus, the university can put sustainable policies in place, like lowering energy use, encouraging recycling, and utilizing renewable energy. By doing this, the university will be able to lessen its environmental impact and advance the SDGs (Dawodu et al., 2022; University of California, 2022; University of New South Wales, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

The 17 SDGs of the UN have come into force for more than five years but these goals have not been reflected popularly in strategic planning at higher education institutions in Vietnam. To overcome such a gap, each higher education institution needs to identify its strengths and weaknesses related to the SDGs and then select priorities when designing its strategies. The aforementioned activities and policies in key areas of higher education can be examined by each institution when developing its strategies with better adaptation to the SDGs. The implementation of the SDGs is not only the obligation of higher education institutions but this focus also brings benefits and advantages to them in key areas of higher education.

Currently, many Vietnamese universities are taking various initiatives to include the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their strategic planning. Several universities are developing curricula that align with the SDGs to raise awareness and educate students about sustainability. Moreover, some other higher education institutions are promoting research on SDGs, which promotes the discovery of novel answers to social, economic, and environmental issues. These universities are also implementing sustainable practices in their campus operations, such as reducing carbon emissions, promoting recycling, and using renewable energy. Vietnamese universities are also working with a variety of partners such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and businesses, to achieve the SDGs. These activities and programs will obviously help the university contribute to the global sustainable development agenda and promote a culture of sustainability within the institution and beyond.

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