

Integrating Sustainable Development Goals into Strategic Planning at Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

On January 1st 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at a United Nations summit, officially came into force. These goals aim to mobilize globally efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind. Based on the document analysis method, this study aims to reflect the important roles of higher education in supporting countries to achieve the SDGs, to identify which goals within the SDGs are popularly related to higher education missions and common activities adapted to SDGs from higher education institutions around the world, and then to suggest which SDGs and related activities should be integrated into strategic planning at Vietnamese higher education institutions in order to reflect the government current priorities in implementing the United Nations SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Vietnam's Sustainable Development Goals (VSDGs), Higher education, Strategic planning.

1. Introduction

In 2000, 189 nations made a pledge at a United Nations summit to free people from extreme poverty and multiple deprivations through the eight Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. Built on the success of these goals, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at a historic UN Summit and officially came into force from January 1st 2016. With these new goals that universally 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.a). The new goals also recognize that “ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and addresses a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection” (United Nations, n.d.b).

Education, research and innovation are reflected in several SDGs, making universities key contributors to achieving the goals. Related to Goal 4 and Goal 9, universities can provide cutting-edge research, high quality education, and ground-breaking innovation. Related to Goal 16, universities can contribute to the policy development in each country and they are excellent promoters of global and local partnerships that related to Goal 17. Contributions to these four goals can facilitate the achievement of the other goals.

Several universities in Vietnam have incorporated the SDGs into their strategies, both in management and in teaching and research. Sustainable campus management has become important to some universities, Ton Duc Thang University for example (as highly ranked in UI GreenMetric in recent years (TDTU, 2020)), and is considered part of the institution's societal responsibility. Based on a Google search of the author in September 2021 (with the keywords “sustainable development goals of United Nations” and “university” in Vietnamese), however, just around 20 institutions (among around 240 institutions) shown information related to the SDGs on their websites. This data may also reflect the status that the strategic plans of most higher education institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam have not integrated the SDGs into their goals or activities.

2. Overview of the 17 SDGs

The 17 SDGs, with their 169 specific targets and 232 indicators (United Nations, 2018), form the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They balance the economic, social and ecological dimensions of sustainable development, and place the fight against poverty and sustainable development on the same agenda for the first time. The SDGs are to be achieved around the world, and by all UN member states, by 2030. This means that all states are called upon equally to play their part in finding shared solutions to the world's urgent challenges.

The 17 SDGs are based on 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 contribute to the achievement of other goals. Figure 1 provides a quick view of the 17 SDGs (United Nations, n.d.c) and Table 2.1 provides the contents of the 17 SDGs (United Nations, 2018). The 17 SDGs can also be grouped into five elements People, Planet, Partnership, Peace and Prosperity. These elements are all connected as shown in Figure 2 (UN Volunteer, n.d.).



Figure 1: The 17 SDGs

Figure 2: Five elements of sustainable development

Table 2.1: 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. Roles of higher education in implementing the SDGs

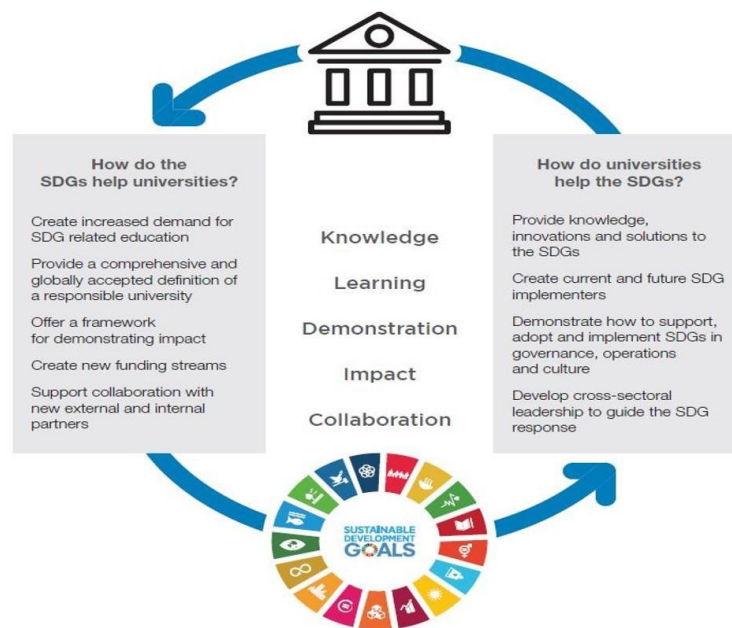


Figure 3: The case for university engagement in the SDGs

Education is an essential tool for contrasting negative phenomena - such as poverty, child mortality, unemployment, low education levels, lack of opportunities for the younger generation; to transform agriculture, increasing food production and its fairer distribution in the world (UNESCO, 2016). “Education for sustainable development” (ESD), developed by UNESCO, has become the popular key words in education development around the world in recent years.

“ESD seeks to enable citizens around the globe to deal with the complexities, controversies and inequities rising 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” (UNESCO, p. 12, 2012).

Among the 17 SDGs, Goal 4 (Quality Education) calls for equal access to tertiary education, including university, as part of the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. Besides, universities have another important role in other SDGs, as a driver for the achievement of the full set of goals, through their role knowledge production, innovation, and social services.

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, 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) as summarized in Figure 3 (SDSN, n.d.), the author summarizes the key roles and reasons for this participation as follows:

- The SDGs can contribute to orienting research and education activities at HEIs on contemporary global issues.
- The SDGs provide a “global language” for political activities and social reforms. As the centers of knowledge sharing and creation, HEIs can and need to participate and contribute to these activities.
- Societies are expecting HEIs to demonstrate their capacities in solving current problems through research and education activities.

- Researchers at HEIs 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. HEIs 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. HEIs can be models for such collaborative efforts.
- The SDGs help establish and develop a culture of cooperation among HEIs, government, business and the public to solve common problems, for long-term benefits for each country and for the world.

4. Integrating the SDGs into HEIs' strategic planning

Based on the specificity of education and research expertise, capacity of resources and national context, each HEI can make different contributions to the 17 SDGs. To assist HEIs 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, n.d.). Based on this document and the requirements of the SDGs, the author proposes a number of core activities and policies in the key areas of institutional management that HEIs can refer in their strategic planning as follows:

4.1 Education

Education area is directly related to Goal 4: Quality Education (Ensure quality, open, equitable education and enhance lifelong learning opportunities for all). To adapt to this goal, HEIs can explore the following activities and policies:

- 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.
- Increasing college education opportunities for disadvantaged students.

4.2 Research

There are many SDGs that can become HEIs' orientations in research such as 2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 14, 17 with the following exemplary activities and policies:

- Giving priorities to support studies related to the SDGs.
- Building interdisciplinary research groups in line with the SDGs. Integration of sustainability in disciplinary and interdisciplinary research activities.
- Cooperating with businesses and communities to research and transfer technology, and to provide policy advice.
- Expanding domestic and international cooperation in research under the SDGs.

4.3 Cooperation and community services

This area directly related to Goal 17: Partnering to Realize Goals (Strengthening the way it is done and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development) with the following activities and policies:

- Expanding cooperation with all stakeholders (local and international) to achieve the SDGs through programs and projects.
- Enhancing the position and capacity of institutions to participate in social issues.
- Sharing knowledge, supporting human resource development for communities and businesses.
- Participating and supporting national action plans towards 17 SDGs.

4.4 Institutional governance and operations

Each HEI 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; with the following activities and policies:

- Developing and effectively implementing policies on protection and improvement of living environment quality, saving resources (e.g. electricity, water), gender equality in learning.
- Being a ‘green’ campus: promoting and leading campus initiatives such as solar panel installation, bike sharing, recycle 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.

HEIs’ strategic plans also require targets or key performance indicators within each key areas. In addition to the above activities and policies, HEIs can refer to the targets and indicators set by UN (United Nations, 2018) and also by each government to identify such requirements.

5. Conclusions

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 HEIs in Vietnam. To overcome such gap, each HEI needs to identify its strengths and weaknesses related to the SDGs and then select priorities when designing its strategies. The forementioned 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 HEIs but this focus also brings benefits and advantages to them in key areas of higher education.

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