

## The Role of Universities in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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### KEY MESSAGES

- Education and research are explicitly recognized in a number of the SDGs and universities have a direct role in addressing these
- Universities hold a position of neutral and trusted stakeholders within society. They have a key role in educating the public and other sectors on the SDGs
- Universities, through their extensive research capabilities and activities, have a critical role in providing the necessary knowledge, evidence-base, solutions and innovations to underpin and support achieving SDG goals
- The SDGs provide a unique opportunity to higher educational institutions to demonstrate their willingness and capability of playing active and meaningful role in the development of their respective countries and their contribution towards global sustainable development.
- They also provide an opportunity for collaboration and partnerships – South-South and North-South

*This policy brief summarizes the significant benefits universities can gain from engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how universities can contribute to implementing the SDGs and steps to help universities engage with the SDGs.*

### 1. Introduction

Education and research are explicitly recognized in a number of the SDGs and universities have a direct role in addressing these. However the contribution of universities to the SDGs is much broader, as they can support the implementation of every one of the SDGs as well as the implementation of the SDG framework itself. Some of these main areas of contribution are learning and teaching, research and external leadership. Through the current actions in these areas, universities have already made important contributions to the achievement of the SDGs. However, for the SDGs to be truly successful at a global scale, universities need to become champions of sustainable development and play a leading role in the implementation of the SDGs.

#### Box 1: Steps to start and deepen the engagement of universities and SDGs:

1. Mapping what is the current state of knowledge on SDG Goals and Targets (in a given country)
2. Building internal capacity and ownership of the SDGs
3. Identifying priorities, challenges, opportunities and gaps
4. Integrating, embedding and implementing the SDGs within university strategies, policies and plans.
5. Monitoring, evaluating and sharing their actions on the SDGs

Though the size of the task of achieving the SDGs is immense, but it is high time for universities to get started and to accelerate action on the 17 SDG Goals.

### Box 2: The 17 SDGs

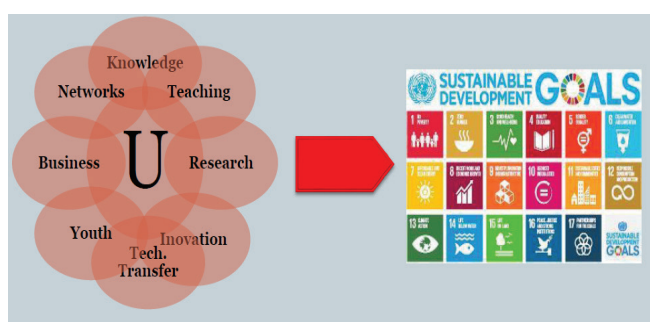


## 2. Why the SDGs need universities?

The tertiary education and scientific research sectors are explicitly recognized in a number of the SDGs; however, university contribution is needed much more broadly to achieve all of the SDGs. A quick look at the SDGs shows that they cover a very wide range of specific areas such as agriculture, health, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, industry and innovation, infrastructure, etc, and under almost all of them, higher education institutions can make a positive contribution (Figure: 1), whether in teaching, research, community engagement or advisory services. The unique functions and expertise of universities are critical for overcoming the wide range of interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges which is covered by the SDG agenda. Arguably the SDGs will not be achieved without this sector. The key roles for universities are:

1. University can provide the knowledge, innovations and solutions to underpin the implementation of the SDGs through addressing the challenges of the SDGs that require new knowledge and new ways of doing things.
2. University can develop and assess policy options and implementation pathways and also monitor the progress.
3. To achieve the SDGs we need everyone to contribute. Universities provide professional and personal skills and capabilities to create future leaders, decision-makers, innovators, entrepreneurs and citizens with the knowledge and motivation who can contribute to achieve the SDGs.
4. Universities hold a position of neutral and trusted stakeholders within society. They also have a key role in educating the public and other sectors on the SDGs and in advocating for the importance of the SDGs.

Figure 1: Support of universities to achieve SDGs



in the development of their respective countries and in contributing towards global sustainable development. They also provide an opportunity for collaboration and partnerships – South-South and North-South. Moreover, the importance of education for sustainable development is recognized in a number of the goals, particularly SDG 4, which calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Many targets within this goal are directly relevant to universities, such as for all learners to “acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development”. The SDGs are a global framework with strong buy-in and adoption among governments, business, civil society, funders, other universities and the community. Universities can draw a range of benefits from this broad support by engaging with the SDGs. Key benefits include:

1. The SDGs provide a new and integrated way to communicate and demonstrate to external stakeholders – including government, funders and the community about the contribution of universities to global and local wellbeing and therefore demonstrate their impact and relevance.
2. The SDGs speak to both young and old people, as global citizens want to make meaningful contributions to society and the environment. Nowadays different organizations are increasingly embedding the SDGs as a strategic focus and also creating demand for graduates who understand and can implement the SDG agenda.
3. One of the strengths of the SDG agenda is working together on shared interests. This will give universities opportunities to form new collaborations with government, industry, and the community in both research and education.
4. Universities are increasingly re-thinking their role in the twenty-first century and looking forward to becoming both more responsive towards societal needs. Universities can also become role models in case of solving global challenges. To fulfill this agenda the SDGs provide a universally agreed organizing structure for a university to make the university globally aware.

## 3. Why universities need the SDGs?

The SDGs provide a unique opportunity to higher education institutions to demonstrate their willingness and capability of playing an active and meaningful role

### Box 3: Role of Universities

- Leadership from the top of society/politics ←
- Consultancy and tools
- Technical and social solutions ← New social and technological approaches/tools
- Pressure from the bottom ← Awareness

## 4. How universities can contribute to the SDGs?



### 4.1 Learning and Teaching

Education is one of the bedrocks of the SDGs. Quality education leads to significant sustainable development which is beneficial for individuals, communities and countries. It is also a critical means of supporting and accelerating global capacity to implement the SDGs. As such, universities, through their extensive learning and teaching activities – including undergraduate and graduate teaching, professional training, executive and adult education, online learning, co-curricular activities, and student clubs and societies – have a very important role to play in SDG implementation.

To contribute the SDGs through **education**, universities can:

- Integrate the SDGs and the principles of ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) into all undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as graduate research training
- Provide training on the SDGs and ESD to all curriculum developers, course coordinators and lecturers
- Offer executive education and capacity building courses for external stakeholders on the SDGs and the knowledge and skills needed to address them
- Advocate for national and state education policies that support education for the SDGs
- Engage students in the co-creation of learning environments and opportunities that support learning on the SDGs

#### Box 4: Learning and Teaching

1. Provide students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to understand and address the challenges of the SDGs
2. Empower and mobilize young people
3. Provide in-depth academic or vocational training to implement SDG solutions
4. Enhance opportunities for capacity building of students and professionals from developing countries to address challenges relating to the SDGs

- Structure courses around real-world collaborative projects for change, in which the students have the opportunities to act and reflect iteratively, and to develop adaptive capacity while working towards a purpose
- Promote student volunteering activities that address the SDGs
- Help students set up a network or club to mobilize the campus and student groups behind the SDGs through events, campaigns and projects
- Support students to engage in national and global leadership programs for young people on the SDGs
- Form strong links with business and industry to monitor employer trends and skills requirements, for example through business communities of practice.
- Develop exchange relationships with universities of developing countries and the countries that provide training programs for addressing the SDGs

## 4.2 Research

To achieve the SDGs, the global community will need to overcome many difficult and complex social, economic and environmental challenges, some of which will require transformations in how societies and economies function and how we interact with our planet. Universities, through their extensive research capabilities and activities, have a critical role in providing the necessary knowledge, evidence-base, solutions and innovations to underpin and support this task.

To contribute to the SDGs through **research**, universities can:

- Support the full spectrum of research approaches needed to address the SDGs, including interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research
- Support and incubate innovation for sustainable development solutions
- Actively support national and local implementation of the SDGs
- Advocate for national support and coordination of research on the SDGs
- Support capacity building for developing countries to undertake and use research on the SDGs
- Encourage and promote the SDGs as a topic of research within the university
- Encourage and support researchers to engage in global research community efforts to support the SDGs (such as international assessments and syntheses of the current state of knowledge)
- Help researchers to understand how their research currently relates and connects to various goals
- Map how the university's research and research strengths align with the SDGs and identify the key researchers
- Arrange innovating challenges to address the SDGs for researchers across the university and external stakeholders

### Box 5: Research is the basis for

1. Understanding the challenges
2. Localizing the SDG agenda
3. Developing solutions
4. Identifying and evaluating options and pathways
5. Supporting the operationalization of the SDG framework

## 4.3 Organizational governance, culture and operations of the university

As universities contain large entities so they and can have significant impacts on social, cultural, and environmental wellbeing within their campuses, communities, and regions – and sometimes far beyond. These impacts directly relate to all areas of the SDGs and by acting responsibly universities can make significant contributions to their achievement.

To contribute to the SDGs through **organizational governance**, university can:

- Align university governance structures and operational policies with the aims of attaining the SDGs
- Identify and address any key gap in the university in a response to the SDGs
- Map how high-level university strategies, policies, plans and reporting indicators align with the SDGs and identify which organizational units are relevant to specific SDGs

## 4.4 External leadership

Success in achieving the SDGs will depend on action and collaboration by all actors. By leveraging their unique position within society, universities – both individually and collectively – can help to lead, guide, and support the local, national, and international responses towards the SDGs. In most countries the public has little knowledge of the SDGs and little opportunity to actively participate in implementation. Universities can act as key driver to include the mass generation in the SDG agenda by increasing participation through disseminating knowledge. Universities devoted to knowledge creation and teaching for the benefit of society and traditionally occupied a unique position in society that makes them particularly suited to provide leadership on SDG implementation.

To contribute to the SDGs through **external leadership**, universities can:

- Strengthen public engagement and participation in addressing the SDGs
- Initiate and facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue and action on SDG implementation
- Play a lead role in policy development and advocacy for sustainable development
- Demonstrate the importance of the university in SDG implementation
- Demonstrate the commitment of a university to the SDGs



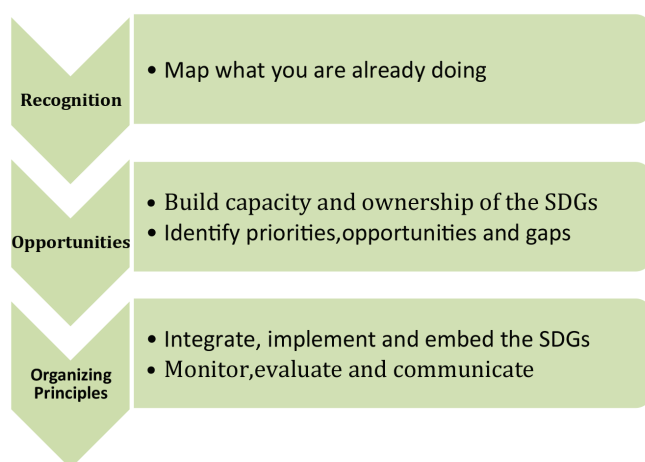
## Box 6: External Leadership

1. Host public lectures by leading thinkers, community events and forum to raise awareness
2. Facilitate interactive workshops
3. Work with policy makers to identify problems, options, and solutions
4. Build partnerships and networks with other universities
5. Develop guidance and synthesis of knowledge on particular SDG areas

## 5. Tools for SDG integration

The SDGs are a new agenda for providing a framework for governments, business, industry, civil society, and education to collaboratively work towards the future we want. This new agenda builds on and provides an enhanced space to introduce, progress, and normalize inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches. The below mentioned tools (Figure 2) will assist universities to address the new aspects of SDGs agenda:

Figure 2: Overview of the step-by-step SDG integration



## Box 7: Tools for SDG integration

1. Mapping university contributions to the SDGs
2. Running a stakeholder engagement workshop
3. Building the business case for university engagement
4. Commitment of university to the SDGs
5. Managing interlinkages between the SDGs
6. Reporting on SDG contributions

## 6. Conclusion

The United Nations' Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is one of the most ambitious and important global agreements in recent history. To create a more sustainable world and to engage with sustainability-related issues as described in the SDGs, individuals must become sustainability change-makers. They require the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development. Education, therefore, is crucial for the achievement of sustainable development

However, not all kinds of education support sustainable development. Education that promotes economic growth only may lead to an increase in unsustainable consumption patterns. The well-established approach of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations. All educational institutions must consider it their responsibility to deal intensively with sustainable development issues, to foster the development of sustainability competencies and to develop the specific learning outcomes related to all SDGs. Therefore it is vital not only to include SDG-related contents in the curricula, but also to use action-oriented transformative pedagogy.

The above short review provides general tools and guidance of achieving SDGs for the universities that can be customized to different contexts and needs. There is no 'right' way for a university to engage with the SDGs. How universities choose to act will depend on their size, context, research or educational strengths, funding availability, values, priorities and the needs of the communities that they serve. This review outlines general concepts, steps to help tailor an approach.

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## ABOUT US

### CSD

ULAB launched the Center for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 2006 in order to carry out research pertaining to sustainability and to serve the national interests. CSD is dedicated to interdisciplinary research which explores and documents practices of sustainable development. It has evolved into a global platform to share research and policy decisions on issues around sustainable development and environmental conservation. Moreover, CSD envisions a knowledge-based society through interdisciplinary research, quality teaching, producing and disseminating knowledge, establishing networks with universities and research centers for collaborative research, and organizing actions to promote the greening of Bangladesh.

### ICCCAD

The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) conducts research, builds capacity on climate change and fosters the growth of networks in Bangladesh and globally. Our vision is to gain and distribute knowledge on climate change, specifically adaptation, helping people to adapt to climate change with a focus on the global South. Contact Us [www.icccad.net](http://www.icccad.net) Level 5, House 27, Road 1, Block A, Bashundhara R/A, Dhaka 1229, Bangladesh.

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