



Report Summary 2020

The SDG Accord

The University and College Sector's Collective Response to the Global Goals

What is the SDG Accord?

The SDG Accord is a high profile international initiative that the Global Alliance developed to allow the tertiary education sector to demonstrate its commitment to playing its part in meeting the SDGs, and sharing best practice. This is a partnership initiative, endorsed by the UN's HESI and many other global partners. It was launched in 2017, and it currently has official commitment from 178 institutions, 170 support organisations and 1534 individuals – all spread across 102 countries.

What is SDG Accord reporting?

It is mandatory for institutions that sign the SDG Accord to report on their progress each year. This is an online reporting process and we are flexible with ways in which submissions are made. The reporting process was extended this year, and ran from 2nd March - 3rd July. This was to give signatories more time, with the added pressure Covid-19 was placing upon their institutions. There is more explanation about this towards the end of the summary.

Preliminary findings

This year, there were 84 institutions that submitted annual reporting, across 26 countries. The majority were in Europe, but there was representation from other UN regions. The reporting has shown that integrating the SDGs has really started to come to fruition, with a huge amount of SDG activities reported per signatory. This makes sense, given the majority (50%) have been embedding the SDGs for 1-3 years and 90% of those reporting have started to or have successfully mapped the SDGs within their institution. That is up 20% on those reporting last year.

Impact and integration

When asked about the impact of integrating the SDGs – signatories were almost unanimous in saying it was positive or extremely positive (95%). One signatory wrote: “The positive impact has been simply that the SDGs have been the most successful engagement tool I've known.” This is supported by a question that looks at the benefits of aligning with the SDGs within an institution; the biggest benefit, reported by just under 90% of signatories, was that it ‘opened a more relatable and clearer dialogue on sustainability within the institution.’ The SDGs are a powerful engagement tool, and they are beginning to address the language and disengagement barrier that has been felt in the sustainability sector for a long time.

We are starting to see a pattern on how institutions start to integrate the SDGs as well. It looks like the most common starting place to integrate SDGs is across the campus estate (68% reported the most success in the area), through things like biodiversity strategies, GHG emissions reduction plans and activities, improving recycling practices etc.

Integration Cont'd

After that, the most likely area for SDGs to be integrated is into learning and teaching (61%) – so this is things like content of lessons, lectures and curriculum. Then it is most likely institutions will integrate into student engagement activities (58%) – so, in extra-curricular activities, student engagement campaigns, marketing, etc. Signatories were able to select more than one to reflect if they had integrated in several areas already. This is interesting, because it can act as a map for other institutions to follow in terms of a starting point for SDG integration. It also highlights areas in need of improvements; only a quarter (27%) reported successful integration of the SDGs into staff training.

Which SDGs were focused on?

Looking in more detail at the SDGs themselves – The SDGs institutions have had the biggest impact on over the last year were: SDG 4 (55.3%), SDG 13 (44.7%) and SDG 3 (42.1%).

While SDGs 3 and 4 were reported as the SDGs institutions had the most impact on last year as well, SDG 13 has moved up the list, replacing SDG 5 from last year. This makes sense, given that last year 72% of signatories suggested SDG 13 will be the goal they are prioritising over the course of the next year. This prioritisation of SDG 13 is interesting because it shows that SDG integration and prioritisation is fairly fluid and responsive to institutional and societal needs – there is no strict way to work towards the SDGs. The world is focused on tackling the climate crisis at the moment, and this is reflective in education settings. While institutions this year have outlined their priority SDGs for the next 12 months as a continuation of these SDGs (3, 4 and 13) – it will be interesting to see if they move toward SDGs 11 and 16 post Covid-19 as they become more community-orientated.

Barriers to SDG integration and progress

Barriers to SDG integration remain similar to last year but with some new concerns raised.

A lack of funding and capacity remain the biggest barriers. Despite 60% of institutions reporting they do have access to some kind of funding for the SDGs (primarily internal funding), most are concerned about budgets being squeezed given the financial impact of covid-19 on institutions.

There are new barriers this year, probably being experienced as institutions are now further along in their bid to integrate and align with the SDGs. Signatories reported a lack of guidance on how to deal with the complexity of action needed to authentically integrate in a cross-cutting interdisciplinary way across an often decentralised structure.

They also reported issues around trying to measure impact – an infamously difficult area – as well as a lack of communication and co-ordination in their institution.

Progress on recommendations and solutions

We asked for follow-up information from last year's recommendations – did signatories manage to implement them?

Just under half (43%) of submissions said their institution requires researchers to outline which of the SDGs their work contributes towards in the research application process. This is an increase of 10% on last year.

Progress on recommendation cont'd

Two thirds (66%) reported that when updating new processes over the last year, the SDGs had been incorporated, and just under three quarters (72%) said based on last year's recommendations their institution had found innovative ways to increase staff and student capacity to address the SDGs. These figures were similar to the number reported last year, though interestingly, the numbers that said 'no' to both these questions decreased this year. The addition of an 'other' option has allowed institutions the flexibility to provide nuance.

A new question for this year, based on recommendations from last year, asked signatories if their institution offered funded extracurricular opportunities for students to get involved with sustainability initiatives linked explicitly to the SDGs – and 57% reported that they did run these, with 28% saying they didn't.

Students

SOS International and SOS-UK are currently conducting research into students and sustainable development. The survey was still in the field when we discussed this with them, but preliminary findings communicated to us personally are showing that 81% of students asked globally had heard of the SDGs before – of these, 46% knew what they were about and 35% did not. Previous research on this topic in 2018 found globally that 72% of students had heard of them, though of these only 40% knew what they were about, while 32% did not know. This year, only 17% had never heard of the SDGs before, whereas in 2018 25% had never heard of the SDGs. This shows there is a shift in awareness among students about the SDGs, and it is going in the right direction – but it suggests this is fairly slow, and needs to speed up.

COVID-19 and the SDGs in education

Covid-19 is the elephant in the room this year. Its impact on the institutions and the reporting process itself should be discussed. To ensure we did not add pressure to institutions at a difficult time, we pushed the deadline for reporting back from April to July.

Most signatories did manage to submit an update, but there were some that have been in discussion with us as they are not able to. The full SDG Accord report will not be published until later in the year and we hope to incorporate as much feedback as possible and provide updated recommendations.

In terms of the pressure institutions have been under themselves – many staff have been furloughed and unable to deliver teaching and learning on SDG orientated topics. Projects and forums on the SDGs have been unable to go ahead. And probably the biggest impact – funding has been and will continue to be squeezed as priorities compete at a strategic level. However, we really want to encourage leaders of institutions not to let Covid-19 exacerbate deprivations and injustices, instead, use the SDGs to help you tackle them, within your institution and wider society.

Conclusions

Never has it been clearer that we must have sustainable development that prioritises people and wellbeing. The pandemic has no doubt brought challenges, financial, as well as behavioural as we see some people slip backwards when it comes to a reduction in public transport usage and an increased amount of single-use plastic in the form of PPE.

Conclusion Cont'd

But institutions across the globe have risen to the Covid-19 challenge so admirably, and we urge them to lock-in the environmental improvements felt over lockdown periods, continue to climb, and push sustainable development forwards through the SDGs.

As one signatory says, you need to find the opportunities: "The coronavirus pandemic has presented the biggest challenge but also the greatest opportunity to use [our] delivery model to educate the built environment professionals of the future safely to become future ambassadors for sustainability." This is just one of a myriad, across many areas of institutions.

We must be better prepared for the next crisis - in the words of David Attenborough: "There can be no greater legacy than giving young people the tools they need to save our planet."

There is certainly marked improvement this year across the sector globally on its work towards the SDGs, but the pandemic is a stark reminder that we must go further and with speed. There are only 4000 days to meet the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 deadline. And it is a deadline, not a target - change must happen now, and the education sector must be, as ever, a key pillar.



A full report is expected later in the year. This will contain case studies and recommendations. Summary findings have been presented to the July 2020 UN High Level Political Forum. This has been recorded and is available to view. .