The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the UK Higher Education Sector

An overview of the UK HE sector's contribution to the SDGs

Acknowledgements

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Contents

Please note that resources and sources are embedded in this document- simply hover your mouse pointer over a blue word.

What is the Sustainable Development Solutions Network?

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network produces and promotes practical guidance on and solutions to sustainable development, including realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Network of the SDSN mobilises individuals and expert in the area to create regional-specific guidance and solutions. In 2017, the Network created a guide titled, "Getting started with the SDGs in Universities."

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to concisely communicate how UK universities and the Higher Education (HE) sector are contributing to the SDGs using findings from "Getting started with the SDGs in Universities". Through highlighting UK Universities, one can deepen understanding of what it means to contribute and engage with the SDGs. This report also serves as signpost for online resources about initiatives as resources are embedded in the document and easily accessible. The report will also summarise parts of the SDSN Guide to highlight UK FHE contributions.

What is the SDSN Guide?

The guide,"Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities," provides insight into how the FHE Sector and the SDGs interact, particularly how they benefit one another and how they exist in tandem.

How do universities benefit from the SDGs?

- The SDGs offer universities an effective, integrated and uniform way to map and communicate their impact on society and the world

- Through the SDGs, universities can develop cross-sectoral partnerships, as the SDGs can act as a common goal and shared interest for public and private organisations. Partnerships are helpful in developing innovative, effective and long-lasting initiatives

- Through the SGDs, universities can access new funding streams that are framed around the goals

- The SDGs contribute to demand for education that the HE sector provides. As governments and companies rely increasingly on the SDG framework, individuals seek out education that allows them to understand and reflect on these paradigms. Also, the SDGs can instil in individuals the desire to learn more about sustainability, their society and the world

- The SDGs act as a uniform and globally-accepted framework for a responsible university. This provides some structure and insight into how an institution can contribute to society and a better future

How do the SDGs benefit from universities and the HE sector?

- Universities educate future leaders, decision-makers, teachers etc. with skills and expertise to effectively implement the goals

- Through research and teaching, universities develop new knowledge and understanding to address the challenges of implementing the SDGs

- Universities can advance the principles of the SDGs through their local and global influence and large economic, social and environmental footprints

- Universities can lead cross-sectoral, local and national responses to the SDGs due to their role in society and responsibilities

The 2017 Guide also elaborates on four ways universities can contribute to the SDGs, including:

1. <u>Learning and Teaching</u>

Learning and teaching are crucial for improving global capacity to realise the SDGs; for example, better education can improve health outcomes, gender disparities and strong institutions.

Learning and teaching also allows us to develop in-depth understanding of the interconnected and multi-faceted nature of the goals and consequently produce effective and holistic ways to implement the Goals.

The guide identifies what exactly universities can do to contribute to the SDGs through learning and teaching, writing that they can:

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

2. <u>Research</u>

Universities undertake research that allows us to better understand social, economic and environmental challenges. Through this research and the new knowledge and understanding it provides, we are able to develop effective solutions to achieve the SDGs.

The guide identifies what exactly universities can do to contribute to the SDGs through research, writing that they can:

- Encourage and promote the SDGs as a topic of research within the university
- 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

<u>3. Organisational Governance, Culture and Operations of the University</u>

Universties impact and influence social, environmental and economic realities, locally and globally. By aligning their governance, culture and operations to the SDGs, they are contributing to the advancement and implementation of the goals.

The guide identifies how universities can contribute to the SDGs through their organisational governance, culture and operations, writing that they can:

- Align university governance structure and operational policies with the aims of the SDGs

<u>4.   External Leadership</u>

The scale of the task of realising the SDGs is massive and collaboration is imperative. Universities can leverage their unique position and high level of influence in society to lead a response to the SDGs.

The guide identifies how universities can contribute to the SDGs through external leadership, writing: that they 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 HE sector in SDG implementation
- Demonstrate HE sector commitment to the SDGs

The SDSN Guide and the UK

"Getting started with the SDGs in Universities" explains how these methods of contribution may look by providing examples of case studies from different universities in their region. For more insight into how the UK HE sector contributes to the SDGs, this following section will highlight examples of work being done in the sector that aligns with the aforementioned identified areas of contribution. Information about these initiatives was collected solely via desk-based research on publicly available information.

1.Learning and Teaching

Global Goals Teach-In

Launching in 2018, the National Union for Students' sustainability charity and partner, Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS) runs the annual "SDG Teach-In" where institutions and lecturers from all disciplines are asked to pledge to embed the SDGs in their lectures for one week. The campaign emphasises the breadth of the goals and encourages all disciplines to take part as the goals are relevant and meaningful to varying disciplines. The campaign also encourages lecturers who are critical of the SDGs to join in order to not just engage, but engage critically with the goals for deeper understanding. In 2019, the University of Exeter lead the way with 38 lecturers pledging to embed the SDGs in their lessons, reaching 15% of students at the University.

In 2020, De Montfort University led the scoreboard for percentage of students reached at 29%. They also had 38 staff, from engineering and economics to design cultures and digital design, pledge to reach the SDGs. During SDG Teach-In week at the University, lecturers in fashion and design taught students about the environmental impact of the textile industry and circular economies. A politics course saw students implement project tackling the various SDGs. The Global Goals Teach-In contributes to the SDGs through Learning and Teaching as the initiative provide students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to understand and address the challenges of the SDGs.

Vertically Integrated Projects for Sustainable Development (VIP4SD) at the University of Strathclyde

VIP4SD is a programme offering student opportunities to work on long-term projects based on real world problems presented in the SDGs, ultimately contributing to solutions for sustainable development. Students work in teams comprised of students from different years and disciplines, incorporating vertical integration (working across university levels) and horizontal integration (working across disciplines) for diverse and collaborative experiences.

This initiative began in 2008 in the United States by Professor Ed Coyle at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Now, 37 members from 12 countries form the VIP Consortium, a network of institutions that have successfully implemented VIPS. The University of Strathclyde adopted the VIP model in 2012 and began aligning the programme to the SDG Framework in 2016, a novel approach that saw the programme renamed to Vertically Integrated Programmes for Sustainable Development (VIP4SD). In March 2019, there were 200 students involved in VIP4SD at the University of Strathclyde.

Some projects include:
1. Energy for Development, which focuses on providing affordable and clean energy for all, contributing to SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
2. Drug Discovery, which seeks to develop new tools for drug discovery and contributes to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being and
3. Text Lab which works in the field of digital humanities and have made influential discoveries on the representation of gender in Shakespearean works.

VIP4SD contributes to the implementation of the SDGs by embedding SDG-related knowledge and skills in curricula. These skills include integrated problem-solving, critical thinking, systems thinking and collaboration competency, which are all useful in tackling the SDGs. Also, the programme mobilises and empowers students, by "[engendering] a sense of collective responsibility among students to support each other and positively impact the target communities they serve."

2. Research

SDG Analysis: Bibliometrics of Relevance by Aurora Network

The Aurora Network is a group of nine universities, including the University of Aberdeen and the University of East Anglia. The Network learns from each other through the development of projects following four common interests: Diversity and Inclusion, Societal Impact and Relevance of Research, Student Involvement and Innovation of Teaching and Learning.

Under Societal Impact and Relevance of Research, the Network has created an interactive proof-of-concept tool using bibliometrics to understand the impact of research undertaken at its member institutions, particularly on the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Using 33, 000 academic papers from Scopus, an academic database, the tool analyses:

1. papers' relevancy to the Goals
2. papers' levels of open access (or availability to the public)
3. number of papers in top 10 percentile of most cited journals, and
4. the use of these papers in non-governmental policy documents.

Users can look at the data visually through maps and graphs in the tool. They can see the data based on specific Goals, or specific institutions. The impact on the SDGs from 3685 papers from the University of Aberdeen and 4928 papers from the University of East Anglia between 2010-2018 are analysed through the tool.

The Aurora Network contributes to the implementation of the SDGs as its comparison of data can advance and advocate for coordination on research to realise the SDGs. The tool provides insight to member institutions on their impact on the SDGs and therefore encourages research on the SDGs. The tool also provides insight into which papers are highly successful based on citations, and whether or not they are used in policy, showcasing opportunities to strengthen the impact of institutions' research on implementing the SDGs. For example, 58% of Climate Action Research is in the 10% percentile of most cited journals, although only 8% of research is used in policy. Therefore, we see an opportunity for this evidently good research to be more widely used to implement the SDGs.

Institute for Sustainable Future at Keele University

The Institute for Sustainable Futures, which was launched in 2018 at Keele University, undertakes research and training in six challenge areas. These challenge areas are mapped against the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and ensure the institute's holistic, interdisciplinary contribution to the implementation of the SDGs. The challenge areas include:

1. Providing Clean Energy and Reducing Carbon Emissions

The Institute is involved in working with industry leaders to test low carbon solutions in real world conditions. The HyDeploy trial is one such project that blends hydrogen into natural gas and is being tested in University buildings as a living lab. These sorts of projects contribute greatly to SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy, SDG 13: Climate Action, SDG 9: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and communities, amongst others:

2. **Protecting Air, Land, Water and Ecosystems** which contributes to SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 14: Life below water and SDG 15: Life on Land amongst others.
3. **Providing Food Security**, contributing to SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, amongst others.
4. **Creating Responsible, Sustainable Communities and Governance** contributing to multiple SDGs, some which include SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 5: Gender Equality, SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and strong institutions
5. **Creating Healthy Societies** contributing to SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
6. **Communicating Sustainability** contributing to SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 16: Peace, Justice and strong Institutions

Through research and training that is linked to the SDGs, the Institute for Sustainable Futures contributes to the implementation of the Goals. Specifically, the Institute supports mapping work to the SDGs and also supports work of interdisciplinary nature which is crucial to implementing the SDGs. The institute, through projects and living labs like ones with HyDeploy, also actively support the local implementation of the SDGs by supporting on-the-ground implementation of the SDGs, like clean and affordable energy.

3. Organisational Governance, Culture and Operations of the University

The University of Manchester: Sustainable Development Goals

The University of Manchester is the first UK university to make social responsibility one of the three core goals in their strategic plan. Within the core goal of ensuring social responsibility, contributing to the SDGs is a priority. The University is also a signatory of the Global SDG Accord. Consequently, the institution and its Office for Sustainability have launched a pioneering report assessing their contribution to the SDGs across research, learning and students, public engagement and campus operations. A short video summarising the institutions' contributions to the SDGs accompanies the report.

The report is aimed at local, national and international audiences, as well as varying sectors including education, public, private and policy sectors. In the report, readers can pick a Goal and learn how the University contributes to that specific goal through the aforementioned themes. The report earned the institution a spot as a finalist in the reporting category at the 2019 Green Gown Awards.

For example, for SDG 5: Gender Equality, the report shows that the University published 5, 598 papers between 2009 – 2018 addressing gender equality. It also highlights the work done at the institution to understand Shared Parental Leave and its impact on gender equality, which has informed the Government's wider Shared Parental Leave campaign. In terms of public engagement, the University showcases DragonFly Day, an event where year 8 and 9 girls are invited to participate in interactive workshops and activities with female scientists, engineers and mathematicians on campus, alongside another event, Girls Night Out. For the learning and students theme, the report highlights how gender equality is embedded across curricula, including through the MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture.

Lastly, for operations, the report shows that over 50% of staff and over 54% of students starting their first degree are women. The report also discusses an 8% increase in senior female academics between 2009-2017 and subsidised nursery care for children of staff.

For SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, the report shows that in terms of operations, the University of Manchester encourages low carbon commuting by offering discounts on parking permits for low-carbon vehicles, a car share scheme and an interest free loan for public transport annual tickets. The University also partner with Nationwide Cycling Academic to provide over 600 discounted, secondhand bikes to students.

To compile the report, the Office for Sustainability collected data from research metrics, teaching metrics and case studies. Put simply. research metrics were found from an SDSN list of keywords and an Elsevier and SciDev. methodology to understand the SDGs. Teaching metrics included creating a list of SDG keywords and auditing curricula with those keywords.

Through identifying social responsibility as a core principle and signing the SDG Accord, the University of Manchester aligns their operations and culture to the SDGs. Consequently, producing an accessible report for diverse, cross-sectoral audiences encourages others to do the same.

Impacting the Global Goals by DEGREEs by the University of Leicester

Similar to the University of Manchester, the University of Leicester also reports on how research, teaching, engagement and operations contribute to the implementation of SDGs. In their Social Impact Strategy, one of nine strategies used to guide the University of Leicester's curriculum, research and typical operations, the institution includes the objective to practice leadership by promoting and contributing to the implementation of the SDGs. One of the project outcomes in the 2017-2020 strategy is to undertake a mapping exercise to understand how the University is contributing to the SDGs and identify opportunities to maximise impact. In 2017, the University was also one of the first signatories of the EAUC-led Global SDG Accord. With this commitment to interacting with the SDGs, in 2019 the University of Leicester published Impacting the Global Goals with DEGREEs (developing Education for Good with Research Excellence and Engagement). The report was launching during SDGs at Leicester Week and was accompanied by a short video .

To compile the report, researchers audited modules to see how their Intended Learning Outcomes engaged with any SDGs. Researchers used Elsevier's Scopus Database to map published articles from 2013-2018 against keywords relating to the SDGs.

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The report covers how the University of Leicester contributes to the SDGs through teaching, research and operations. For example, For SDG 1: No Poverty, the report communicates that the University offers three modules that directly relate to this SDG with 1305 students permitted to take these modules as part of their course. For research, the report finds that the University published 413 papers in Scopus between 2013-2017 that contributed to the SDGs. In terms of general operations, since 2015 the University has committed to paying the Living Wage, directly contributing to SDG 1. Therefore, the University of Leicester contributes to the SDGs by including them in organisational governance and operations of the University, as seen with the Social Impact Strategy and the outlined report.

4. External Leadership

On Target for 2030? - University of the West of Scotland and Oxfam

In 2012, the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and Oxfam-Scotland formally established a partnership to tackle inequality, poverty and climate change combining academic expertise from UWS and the advocacy strengths of Oxfam-Scotland. In 2019, the partnership in collaboration with the Scotland SDG Network, edited, produced and published On Target for 2030?. The report features independent self-assessments by 22 civil society organisations in Scotland mapping themselves against the SDGs. While the report features no government involvement, it is part of a wider call to report national contributions to the SDGs as its release intentionally coincided with the UK's report on the SDGs as part of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) and the Scottish Government's Supplementary review charting Scotland's progress.

The report is structured around the SDGs, with a civil society organisation, whose mission contributes to a specific Goal, summarising their organisation's work, discussing how they believe Scotland has progressed on the Goal, what more can be done and providing further reading. For example, Nourish Scotland, a charity campaigning for a fairer and more sustainable food system, covers SDG 2: Zero Hunger. They write that Scotland has made little substantive progress toward realising the Goal as shown by data on food insecurity, malnutrition and sustainability of agricultural practices. Nourish Scotland believes that the Scottish Government needs to more strongly lead on contributing to this goal as certain regulations and legal frameworks would be needed to ensure Zero Hunger, particularly amongst businesses.

Although the editors did not want to provide analysis of assessments to make sure the voices of civil society organisations are not spoken over, they do flag themes about Scotland and the SDGs that are shared by all contributors, including:

- Scotland needs to do more to achieve the Goals by 2030
- Poverty and Inequality need to be addressed in all the Goals
- Cross-sectoral coordinated action is needed to implement the Goals and
- There is a lack of good quality, Scotland-focused data on some areas of UK policy that can help realise the SDGs.

This initiative highlights external leadership from the HE sector. The report led by the UWS- Oxfam partnership initiates public engagement and participation in addressing SDGs by providing civil society organisations a platform to share their thoughts that is accessible to the wider public. This report provides vary sectors and communities insight into how civil society organisations working on-the-ground in Scotland feel about the nation's contributions to SDGs and thus facilitates cross-sectoral dialogue on SDG implementation. As this is the first report of its sort in Scotland, the UWS- Oxfam partnership plays a lead role in advocacy for sustainable development.

Bristol and the SDGs: A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019

In 2019, the University of Bristol's Cabot Institute for the Environment launched the United Kingdom's first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) titled, Bristol and the SDGs: A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019. VLRs complement Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) and share local experiences, challenges and opportunities to implementing the SDGs. The report is a part of a wider local initiative to implement the SDGs in Bristol. For example, the One City Planwas launched in January 2019 and is a report highlighting challenge areas and a shared vision for the city to realise the SDGs. The University of Bristol contributed resources to the One City Plan which enabled the localisation of the SDGs.

The report reviews progress on each SDG and provides data on over 140 indicators for the Goals. Data was collected through reviews of statistical indicators and an extensive consultation exercise. The report is categorised by SDG; readers can choose an SDG and learn how different organisations and sectors in the City of Bristol contribute to and interact with the specific Goal. For example, for SDG:10 Tackling Inequality, the report communicates the work of the British Somali Resource Centre in tackling barriers new immigrants face to accessing services. It also discusses Babbasa, a local youth empowerment that works to improve the lives of marginalised youth and Ujima Radio, a community radio station highlighting and celebrating African and Caribbean cultures.

This report highlights how the HE sector can contribute to the SDGs through external leadership as it facilitates cross-sectoral engagement and dialogue on the SDGs by communicating work from the government, civil society organisations and universities that implement the SDGs. It also demonstrates the importance of the HE sector in contributing to the SDGs as academics from the Cabot Institute undertook work to launch the very first VLR in the United Kingdom, localising the SDGs and facilitating more public engagement in the process.

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