
Guest editorial: Making an impact – UN Sustainable Development Goals and university performance

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Universities play a key role in advancing global development and sustainability through the inclusion in their academic missions of teaching and researching education for sustainable development (Agbedahin, 2019).

Universities' performance on Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024) is vital for driving societal change, fostering innovation and promoting sustainable practices. Universities can be considered key agents in advancing sustainability efforts by integrating SDGs into their operations, curriculum and research activities, thereby contributing significantly toward a more sustainable future. Through these core activities, new knowledge can be developed and disseminated across society to develop realistic and realizable approaches that enable the continuance of improving the global human development index while ensuring the effective stewardship of the planet's ecosystem. For example, the gains achieved in the past (between 1990 and 2014) of raising over one billion people from poverty (United Nations, 2024) must be continued and extended to elevate the remaining population above the poverty line and continually improve their living conditions. These, and similar, achievements are under continual threat from environmental deterioration, climate change, economic marginalization and political exclusion. Through informed purposeful action, human society can lock in the advances made and sustain the upward path. By integrating the United Nations' (UN) 17 SDGs into their research profiles, institutions can leverage their academic and research capacities to contribute to sustainable social innovation (Hansen *et al.*, 2021). This integration helps mitigate the negative impacts of university operations and fosters the development of a more sustainable society. It also enhances student awareness and responsibility toward sustainable issues.

This Special Issue provides an avenue for institutional experiences and research that have not received wider attention to foster broader discussion related to achieving the UN's SDGs. Increasingly universities are adopting the UN's sustainable goals into their institutional and research strategies adopting environmental, social and economic sustainability objectives into policy, sharing best practices with their communities, and engaging students in sustainable practices, all contributing to the realization of the SDGs. The papers contributed here provide evidence of the contributions being made across universities, globally. Adopting various methodological approaches, innovations in teaching methods, curricular design and development, impacts on surrounding communities and the role institutions can play in providing community leadership are all explored. The challenges facing SDG implementation and the progress demonstrated in a literature review are also reflected in the papers included.

The papers in this Special Issue also demonstrate the global and multidisciplinary interest in this topic, with contributions from researchers across various countries and fields. This widespread engagement is expected because sustainability is a global necessity and a shared concern. While unilateral actions are positive and welcome, they are truly effective only when integrated into a universal approach. We cannot address our collective problem individually; instead, we must adopt the development mantra to *think locally and act globally*, as illustrated in the paper on internalization at home.



The importance of collaborative research and knowledge sharing is paramount in addressing this universal challenge. This significance extends beyond merely meeting key performance indicators or measuring initiative progress. Instead, it lies in fundamentally re-envisioning how humanity interacts with nature and establishing a new balance that equally respects environmental fragility and the necessity of human development. It is crucial to ensure that our hard-earned gains are not squandered through unsustainable and irrevocable choices.

We believe that the papers in this Special Issue will further raise awareness about sustainability. Higher education institutions can lead by example, preparing tomorrow's leaders who understand the importance and urgency of addressing this critical issue.

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