

Guest editorial: Sustainable education futures

We completed the special issue “Problematizing Development and Education for Sustainability” while working on assignments in Hong Kong and Japan in the record shuttering hot summer of 2024. In the cities of Hong Kong and Sendai, the preparations for the upcoming 2024 *UN Summit of the Future* in September were widely visible. Counting a decade of achievements towards the global agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) logos were everywhere, from streets and campuses to rural community shops and corporate websites, featuring a large amount of policy work over the decade of the SDGs. The celebratory commitment to sustainability was in the air, but so were the extreme heatwaves, heavier rains and severe floods that were affecting communities all over the world.

Japan was still recovering from cascading effects of the disastrous 2024 Noto earthquake, which took a toll of hundreds of lives. The heartfelt commitment to the sustainable development agenda contrasted with the notable vulnerability of these economically developed places and their communities to the rapid, unpredictable and unsustainable effects of the ongoing evolution of our planet and people (Vernadsky, 1944). This contrast brought the understanding that it is not just the Hong Kong SAR and Japan, but all the developed and developing economies that are now being closely scrutinized in the wake of balancing their escalating social and environmental concerns with an economically driven idea of growth and development.

The upcoming UN summit has prompted heated discussions among researchers, educators, academic practitioners and policy makers on possible directions and fates of the developmental agenda and its SDGs (Sachs *et al.*, 2024). Despite the well-documented failure of the decade-long SDGs’ implementation efforts, international discussants and politicians tend not to challenge the conventional idea of the SD framework, but rather focus on the further extension of the same policy structure and agenda to 2050 with some minor modifications (Nerini *et al.*, 2024).

Among the three pillars (economy, society and environment) of the dominant sustainable development (SD) framework, the economic growth is commonly viewed as the main driving tool to ensure that mankind is developing and will continue to develop. Such an instrumental approach to development assigns the leading role to the economic mechanisms, rather than people, who are the living creators, propagators and beneficiaries of the developmental processes. Despite the instrumental and economy-centered direction of the current SD agenda, there is also an emergence of people-centered alternatives (Nickerson, 2009). That call for the change of directions aims to empower all nations to choose their own trajectories and driving mechanisms to SD, thus, to achieve authentic planetary progress and sustainability (Savelyeva *et al.*, 2019).

Meanwhile, in the global discussion on education and development, there is an increasing concern about achieving SDG4-Quality Education by 2030 (Liu, 2022). It has been argued that in addition to its instrumental nature, this global goal is dominated by a faith in modernity, and, as a result, tinted with neoliberalism, developmentalism and colonialism, “which survives the demise of empires” (Nandy, 2009, p. xi). To address this issue, scholars have been calling for a fundamental shift in the nature of development and education for a more sustainable collective world (Klees, 2024; Rappleye *et al.*, 2024) and arguing that this shift can only be activated by alternative solutions and scientific evidences.

We editors of the present special issue share the assumption and belief of our authors that the conceptual powers of the SD framework require a major change of focus. Shifting from the instrumental SD approach and its economic centrality to the value-based approach, which views humans and our planet as the key agencies, drivers and beneficiaries to SD, gives the



powerful alternative to the existing SD framework. To make this alternative work, nurturing sustainability-minded people becomes a task of paramount importance (Savelyeva and Douglas, 2017).

Inevitably, such a change of focus (from assessing economic numbers to growing sustainability-minded people) challenges the current SD framework and the ways sustainability is taught and learned. The important role of education, in general, and higher education institutions, in particular, in the process of implementing the developmental agenda through sustainability-related curricula, educational structures and research, has long been acknowledged by international organizations and scholars (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Savelyeva and McKenna, 2011; Savelyeva and Park, 2012; SDSN, 2020). In the rapidly developing arena of sustainability education studies, sustainability is to be defined through a value-centered “question of relationship” of humans to one selves, others and nature (Savelyeva, 2017). This conceptualization of sustainability, through the non-instrumental value-lenses of human relationships, empowers researchers and practitioners in the field of education for sustainability (EfS) by promoting pedagogical transformation, disseminating scientific, digital and humanistic literacy, advocating intercultural and interdisciplinary teaching and learning, and generating innovation through collaborative research and local and international cooperation (UNESCO, 2021).

The five guiding principles of SD, which were highlighted in the pre-summit UN SDSN report (Sachs *et al.*, 2024) – People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity and Partnership (5P) – signify the importance of the value-centered, relationship-based notion of sustainability, where EfS plays a key role. The crucial task of growing sustainability-minded people requires implementation of the value-based educational policies, practices and approaches at all levels of academic, teaching, and research cooperations and collaborations, both locally and internationally. The EfS arena of studies strives to implement sustainability-related changes at all levels of the educational system by propelling educational opportunities and growing sustainability minded people who create a harmonious, peaceful and prosperous future for one selves, other people, communities and the planet.

This special issue appeals to sustainability education researchers and practitioners by offering alternative understandings and concepts through practical and empirically derived means of research for growing sustainability-minded teachers and learners. It also aims at empowering fruitful international collaborations that transform educational policies and practices. Researchers from Australia, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, China, India, Austria and Thailand suggest a combination of the research informed responses to the challenge of development and proposed ways forward. The studies presented here are calling for greater ambition in rethinking and enacting the SD agenda in educational institutions in the East Asian region and beyond.

It is our hope that this special issue inspires international scholars and practitioners for exciting collaborations, meaningful research advancements and fruitful curricular innovations to grow sustainability-minded people for a truly sustainable world and lasting reality.

Organization of the special issue

The volume is organized in three parts: Problematization, Educational Policies for Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainability Implementations, and it contains nine articles. Although certainly it is not intended for an in-depth presentation of all related topics, the articles in this volume attempt to problematize development and address challenges of EfS from a variety of perspectives. Although the articles are presented individually, the parallels and connections among them reflect the interrelations and multi-level associations in the core problématique of this special issue: sustainable development and EfS. We editors view a holistic approach (that is, when interrelation among the presented ideas make the whole greater than the sum of its parts), to the structure of the special issue being of a particular strength. The research discussion on the key topics touch upon significant themes of quality education,

developmentalism, technocracy, universities' diversification and internalization policies, implementation of indigenous practices into curricula, teacher professional development and training programs.

Part one: Problematization

The first article, entitled Developmentalism, technocracy and legitimacy crises of humanities: a *Third World* perspective by Sanchari Bhattacharyya and Reena Sanasam from the National Institute of Technology Silchar, India (Bhattacharyya and Sanasam, 2024), draws on the first-hand accounts of the researchers, social scientists, activists, and environmentalists to provide a deconstructive-transdisciplinary critique of the pervasive developmental ideology, based on the three nodal points: rise of technocratic modern science; making of the Third World, and delegitimization of indigenous knowledge paradigms. The authors highlight the need to decondition the social imaginary from the hegemony of developmentalism, scientism, and "technological rationality" for an inclusive, pluralistic and democratic social order.

The second article by Yuko Ohira from Tohoku University, Japan, entitled *Beyond the classroom: the evolving spectrum of ESD research in Japan* (Ohira, 2024), reports results of the systematic literature review study on ESD in Japan that reveals research trends, identifies ESD research gaps, and proposes areas for future research in the field. A comparison of Japan's specific advancements and challenges in ESD with global trends, particularly in pedagogy, teacher education, and institutional management, highlights the areas for future research.

The third article, entitled *Reasonable adjustment for inclusive development: a cautionary case study of Australian VET teachers' experience* by Sonal Nakar and Richard G. Bagnall (Nakar and Bagnall, 2024) from Griffith University, Australia, reports how economic imperative and growing marketization of the country's 'reasonable adjustment' policies in vocational education and training institutions cause moral dilemmas and bring about reverse effects on student diversity.

Part two: Educational Policies for Sustainable Development

The fourth article, entitled *Internationalization of higher education institutions: a comparative study in Taiwan and Japan*, is written by a group of international researchers from Taipei and Japan: Robin Jung-Cheng Chen from National Chengchi University, Taiwan; Sophia Shi-Huei Ho from the University of Taipei, Taiwan; Futao Huang from Hiroshima University, Japan; Ying-Yan Lu from Kaohsiung Medical University, Taiwan (Chen et al., 2024). The authors investigate effects of the institutional internationalization policies on higher education internationalization and report that clear internationalization strategies and financial support for the researchers' overseas studies significantly influence internationalization in the teaching-oriented and research-oriented higher education institutions in Taipei and Japan respectively.

The fifth article, entitled *Universities as cities of flows: decoding cross-regional university partnerships for sustainable development in China* by Zhou Zhong and Jing Zong from Tsinghua University, uses the case of the East-West University Partnership University project to explore strategic enhancement of universities' connective and collaborative capacities, which facilitate diverse flows of talent, knowledge and other resources in the broader context of China's sustainable development (Zhong and Zong, 2024).

The sixth article, entitled *Education for sustainability as a way-out to nurture citizens: a reframing in policy practices of Chinese higher education* by Chong Xiao from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Xiaoxin Du from Fudan University-Fudan Development Institute, China (Xiao and Du, 2024), lies in the field of EfS. The authors identify comparative patterns that cultivate sustainability citizenship in Hong Kong SAR and Chinese higher education institutions by means of university strategic planning, curricula and instruction, and educational outreach resources.

Part three: Education for Sustainability Implementations

The seventh article by Ashish Kumar and V. P. Joshith from the Central University of Kerala, India, entitled *Vedic mathematics for sustainable knowledge: a systematic literature review* (Kumar and Joshith, 2024), explores the increase in teaching applications of the ancient Vedic sutras in mathematics and engineering branches of technical higher education in India and Europe.

The eighth article, *Envisioning quality education for sustainability transformation in teacher education: perspectives from an international dialogue on Sustainable Development Goal 4* by Sunet Grobler and Ann-Kathrin Dittrich (Grobler and Dittrich, 2024) from the University of Innsbruck, Austria, investigates the global perspective of quality education as SDG4 and reports the three aspects of successful educational transformation to sustainability: collaboration, well-being and individuals contexts, strategies for skill development.

The ninth article, entitled *Promoting sustainability literacy for students in Thai higher education institution: a case of the Siam University* by Chanita Rukspollmuang and Tachagorn Chansema from Siam University, Thailand, explores sustainability literacy of university students within the university's general education program (Rukspollmuang and Chansema, 2024).

The articles in this special issue carry important thoughts that deepen understanding of sustainable development and EFS ideas, processes, practices, and our human role and relation to them. Undoubtedly, the special issue has neglected some related topics and included those that one may consider irrelevant, yet, we editors hope this issue is helpful and worthwhile.

In conclusion, as Vernadsky (1944) wrote in his seminal *Biosphere and Noosphere* "a human is a freely living individual, who freely moves on our planet, and freely builds their own history" (p. 239). For us humans, to cultivate our own sustainability consciousness and secure sustainable future, we need to work together in full cooperation. We believe this volume will stimulate critical analysis of the development and inspire cooperative research and teaching actions that will transform the EFS field.

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Further reading

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