

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SDG4

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Series Editor

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Higher Education and the Sustainable Development Goals is a series of 17 books that address each of the SDGs, in turn, specifically through the lens of higher education. Adopting a solutions-based approach, each book focuses on how higher education is advancing delivery of sustainable development and the United Nations global goals.

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND SDG4

Quality Education

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This edited volume is dedicated to my parents Ntihila Kupe and the late William Kupe who were teachers and education administrators dedicated and committed to advancing quality education.

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SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

Wendy Purcell PhD FRSA, Series Editor

Higher education (HE) makes an important contribution to realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Teaching and learning support the development of responsible citizens as scholars, leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals. Curiosity-driven and socially impactful research and innovation help advance knowledge frontiers and find solutions for the world's most pressing issues. As anchor institutions, universities and colleges are also active in civic and community settings, working in partnership with other stakeholders. Given the fierce urgency of (un)sustainable development, the climate crisis and widening inequity within countries and across the globe, HE institutions (HEIs) need to do more and go faster to deliver fully on their potential to help achieve the SDGs.

This book series focuses on the role of HE in advancing the SDGs, identifying some actionable and scalable initiatives and pointing to opportunities ahead. In sharing the ways and means universities and colleges across the world are engaging with the SDGs, the series seeks to both inspire and enable those in the HE sector and stakeholders beyond to transform what they do and how they do it and thereby hasten progress towards Agenda 2030. Insights gleaned from case studies, reflective accounts and student stories can help the HE sector both deepen and accelerate its engagement with the SDGs. Each book seeks to capture examples of how HEIs are fulfilling delivery of their academic mission *and* progressing the SDG concerned. Illustrating the work of students, faculty and staff of the institution, and that undertaken in collaboration with others, positions HE as a change agent operating at a systems level to help create a world that leaves no one behind.

This book focuses on HE and SDG4 'Quality Education' and highlights the work of universities and colleges in achieving this goal to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and

promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. SDG4 is intimately entwined with all the other SDGs and is a key determinant in their delivery, advancing equity and enabling solutions in pursuit of sustainability. A key driver of transformation, HE has the power to change lives and advance a fairer society where everyone can enjoy quality of life. However, the HE ecosystem does not serve everyone and of those it does serve many are not served equitably. Neither is the HE sector optimally situated or HE institutions suitable organised to fully enable the knowledge and human assets they steward and are custodians of to be fully uplifted to realise the SDGs.

Here, the issues, challenges and approaches in amplifying all that is right in the sector and tackling what is wrong with HE are explored as they relate to SDG4. Nascent, emergent and small-scale initiatives seeking to advance sustainable development abound across HE and are testimony to the creativity of students, faculty, staff and leaders. However, efforts to work across disciplinary and/or organisational boundaries within HE or co-creatively with others in business, health systems, civic settings and with other public, private and plural actors are often stymied by competitive or colonial models of education and typically lack the incentives to scale and/or operate over the long term. In addition to other systemic barriers, ranking systems that usefully call out the work of HE in advancing sustainable development can at times diminish innovation with a focus on metrics that lack face validity. So too, professional and statutory bodies involved in accreditation of courses and programmes can interfere with the agile academic innovation needed to tackle the 'polycrisis' encompassed by the SDGs.

Quality education needs to be viewed as an investment in a shared future, not a tax on individual benefits, a future able to meet our needs now without depriving future generations of the same opportunity. However, access to HE is uneven, and only a few of the countries that are signatories to the SDGs are on target to meet SDG4 by 2030. Unemployed and under-employed graduates are an urgent call for HE to refashion itself to better serve the workforce needs of now, those emergent, and others yet unknown. Viewing HE as an ecosystem calls us to connect it more closely with educational pathways for children, youth and adults throughout their life. It invites us to embrace technology to advance access

and student success and facilitate more inclusive, personalised and wisdom-led learning journeys. It also prioritises collaboration locally and globally, building connections north to south that seek to tackle education disparities so that human talent is not wasted, and people are enabled to realise their purpose.

Given the central role of quality education to enable people to transform our world at the pace and scale needed, we need to tackle the inequities that plague HE systems. Access to HE without ongoing support to fully realise the actual potential of every person is not acceptable – simply opening the gates to so-called non-traditional learners without setting them up for success is inherently inequitable. Educational justice is explored in this book as central to fostering more equal societies and fundamental to sustainable development. It also highlights new programmes that navigate the theory-practice continuum with HE institutions working locally and globally.

Universities and colleges play a critical role in developing new systemic and transformative solutions through interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder collaboration and a purposeful focus on the SDGs. As organisations that have stood for many centuries in some cases, this demands that they adapt with new models of learning, research partnerships and leadership and governance frameworks. Immersive engagement with the SDGs can catalyse pedagogic innovation, serve to refresh curricula and stimulate new programme development. It can also open new avenues for research, attract new sources of funding and energise people to deliver on the academic mission.

SDG4 is an enabler of sustainable development and vital to the pursuit of sustainability and the health of people, planet and shared prosperity. This book illustrates this approach with HEIs bringing their key assets of curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge and its application to partners seeking solutions and driving innovation, operating in both local and global networks and connecting the worlds of learning, work and entrepreneurship in support of more sustainable development. Sustainability is a goal for today and sustainable development an organising principle for universities and colleges.

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Pretoria, Johannesburg and Montpellier

2024

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND SDG 4

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THE GRAND CHALLENGES FACING HUMANITY

From their inception and the commitment by United Nations (UN) member states to their achievement, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are well recognised as an aspirational framework towards creating a better shared future for all. The 17 SDGs, which are to be attained by 2030, reflect the complexity of the world's challenges. At the same time, they are a call for many institutions across the world to work together to overcome these challenges, which, if left unattended to, will have catastrophic consequences for humanity and the planet.

The SDGs are interrelated and cannot be attained in isolation. SDG 4¹, which is designed to address challenges related to providing quality education, is integral to attaining all the goals. It is, in this sense, a cross-cutting goal and one that requires special attention if we are to expedite development that is inclusive and meaningful.

This book focuses on higher education as a key driver for effectiveness in the sector as a whole. Specifically, it looks at how this effectiveness is largely contingent on providing equal and equitable access to higher education, forming relevant partnerships that bring

about transformation in the sector and adopting people-centric approaches that ensure lifelong learning and productive knowledge sharing that leads to sustainable outcomes. This is in the context of (mostly positive) technological disruptions that, if used correctly, has the potential to achieve SDG targets at an exponential rate.

Higher education plays a critical role in shaping broader educational ecosystems at the national, regional and global levels. This includes influencing the direction of education and related policy developments, as well as building the capabilities needed for quality education, from early childhood development all the way up to tertiary education. Higher education is not exempt from the inequalities that persist in society. So, meeting the aspirations of SDG 4 requires intentional reflection and responses to inequality at all stages of the higher education lifecycle. Accordingly, this book will also consider the wide array and different forms of discrimination that drive inequality. In doing so, it offers insights and interventions that should make a difference.

Tertiary institutions exist in a complex, disrupted, uncertain and globally connected landscape. Despite the many threats they face, there are also opportunities for them across political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental domains and ecosystems. Not only are challenges discrete within these ecosystems, but there exist multiple interfaces, interdependencies and feedback loops between them. Shocks and dramatic changes to circumstances are frequent and inevitable, such that we no longer speak of a 'new normal' but are coming to understand a 'new unusual', which is dynamic and uncertain.

The manifestation and implications of our landscape dynamics are myriad, and only a few will be highlighted here. Conflicts and wars that are raging in countries and regions across the world are evidence of a broader conflict that has a global footprint. The essence of the latter lies in the desire to solve differences, mostly through violence, to serve only narrow interests. The very global dimension that this violence assumes is very much rooted in underdevelopment at the community and individual levels.

Rising populism, corruption, misinformation and disinformation are commonly associated with the rejection of science and the facts that arise from it. Where knowledge is valued, it is often ring-fenced through mechanisms such as pay walls and unfair pricing

to benefit only a few. This is often protected through nationalistic and competing agendas. Democratic systems and fair global rule making are under severe stress, and the many fault lines in global economic systems are preventing just, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. As a result, issues of poverty, inequality and unemployment persist and remain ubiquitous.

Technological advancements that are mainly, if not exclusively, digital present a plethora of opportunities to influence models of education and access thereof. But paradoxically, these opportunities are left untapped because the high costs of technology prevent equal access and only serve to deepen the digital divide. Even within the context of pursuing the attainment of the SDGs, there is increasing recognition of resource scarcity and how development itself impacts negatively on the environment, especially in terms of climate change.

In this complex milieu, deficiencies in the higher education sector are profound and are made clear in the way its macrosystemic structures are configured. Pervasive and entrenched inaccessibility and inequalities that are related to resourcing and capabilities underscore these configurations. While universities are perfectly placed to create spaces for dialogue, where multiple voices can contribute to the understanding of the problems we face as well as begin to create the necessary solutions as a collective, we are currently not fully positioned to fulfil this role. At the same time, our very existence is under threat. As societal stakeholders are increasingly questioning the exclusivity of universities, their perceived dislocation/alienation from societal needs and their contributions to advancing sustainable futures, there is a crisis of funding (whether by the state or the private sector) for public institutions.

Another harsh reality that we face while trying to respond to these challenges is that we do not have the luxury of time to save the planet. We may speak of a commitment towards 2030, but we are already immersed in a storm seems unlikely to abate by then. So, when we think of the future, we must remember Neil LaBute's famous words: 'The future is now. It's time to grow up and be strong. Tomorrow may well be too late'. We should also keep in mind the words of Chief Albert Luthuli, the first Nobel Laureate from Africa: 'The test is action'. We should not, therefore, theorise interminably, procrastinate or limit access to knowledge.

As we introspect and chart our way forward, the time for action is now, and while our actions must be considered and inclusive, they must also be swift. They must be accompanied by a preparedness to champion a cause that we and the world we share depend on. Transformational and intentional leadership is the call of the hour.

A REIMAGINED ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES AS AGENTS FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

A good starting point is to reimagine the role of universities in society. Institutions of higher learning exist because of society, and it follows that they should function for the good of society. It is their duty, then, to ensure and expand their relevance and increase their efforts to be more impactful in society. This should be characterised by inclusivity and clear contributions to just, inclusive and sustainable development. Through its collaborative design and aspirational outlook, SDG 4 provides the higher education sector with an adequate and acceptable framework to shape its actions in a way that is relevant to society. The question is not whether the sector will attain the goals but what it does to achieve them.

In a reimagined role, higher education institutions are for the public good. Ensuring this would mean responding to Chris Brink's incisive commentary in 'The Soul of a University', where he contends that we should not ask 'What are we good at?' but 'What are we good for?'. In response to this overarching question, it suffices to say that what society needs from higher education are institutions that embrace excellence and strive to be relevant and effective in the pursuit of fundamental knowledge and challenge-led research. The higher education sector, in this sense, needs to leverage its strengths and capabilities to demonstrate responsiveness to the contexts in which it is embedded. As a collective, players in the sector must value and embrace collaboration to fully respond to and deliver on the needs of society. Overall, there must be a restoration of trust in higher education and research, and strengthening of the pact between universities, the state, the private sector and civil society.

Such a proposition is neither philanthropic nor a 'nice to have'. Rather, it serves to point out that means of collaboration within and among universities must change at a rapid pace. There are increasing

expectations for universities to demonstrate their relevance in society. These expectations inadvertently compel them to adequately respond to the ‘wicked’ and grand challenges facing humanity. To do this, they must shift from solely generating knowledge to translating that knowledge into meaningful and effective solutions. This is why open knowledge systems matter, because in such systems the traditional, silo-driven approach is abandoned for more inclusive, and ultimately more enriching, approaches to higher education.

In essence, SDG 4 emphasises the importance of innovation when it comes to how institutions are organised. The targeted outcomes of the goal, therefore, encourage an innovative shift away from rigidly focusing on the efficient management of dwindling resources, as well as pandering to those who demand more training and less education that supports and upholds democratic values and principles. This reimagined university will be involved in a double act of transforming itself and the society in which it operates. When put together, the SDGs are about fundamentally transforming society to achieve sustainability. Without accepting and participating fully in this double act, the university’s credibility and legitimacy as a transformative agent will be questioned and its impact will be blunted.

The transformed university of the future will be in touch with societal needs and will thrive off its ability to collaborate within itself and across its boundaries. It will be a university that is defined by its broad, inclusive and forward-looking approaches and being connected to its peers and other stakeholders. Ultimately, it will be a university that at its core promotes mutual benefit and empowerment in the interests of the public good. This ‘next generation’ university will also be future literate, that is, it will be able to suspend pre-existing mental models and paradigms to envisage the future in different and unconstrained ways. Relevant and truly innovative solutions will flow as talent is unearthed and used productively to realise multiple streams of value.

CREATING LEVERAGE IN THE REIMAGINED UNIVERSITY

Within a value network of peers and stakeholders, the reimagined university functions as a system and as a set of interrelated systems. A major source of leverage in this situation is advancing

transdisciplinarity, which in its true and full meaning must include engaged scholarship. It involves the ability to collaborate across different disciplines, fields of knowledge and sectors around complex, real-world problems. Its underlying intention is to find and co-create meaningful societal solutions that expand the life chances of those who are most in need. This means embracing and valuing all forms of validated knowledge and expertise – from the embedded knowledge of ‘street experts’ to the formal, celebrated and peer-reviewed experts that we know.

Two fundamental dimensions are important in this setting – the nature of relationships and engagement, and the nature of knowledge and solutions. Engagement within relationships may be underpinned by either low or high levels of trust. Knowledge and solutions may be protected or may be open and accessible. Where there are low levels of trust and where knowledge is protected, we find ourselves in a transactional space characterised by silos, the pursuit of personal interests that often lead to dysfunction and absolute outcomes that are aimed at creating winners and losers. This low-trust, protected model is unlikely to adequately address the complex challenges that we face. We should rather seek the opposite, which is a transformed and transformational space of engaged responsiveness characterised by high levels of trust, and open and innovative knowledge-sharing. In this more productive situation, knowledge is very likely to be translated into solutions that make a difference in a truly accelerated way.

In moving from transactional silos to engaged responsiveness, higher education institutions will, as a matter of course, adopt a two-pronged approach. This entails changing the way it nurtures and strengthens trust-based relationships, and the way knowledge is generated and used. Trust-based relationships are underpinned by a shared understanding and common purpose among stakeholders across the higher education value chain. They have the same commitment to co-designing and co-creating solutions for the public good. Embedded in this new paradigm is a compelling case for open data, science and education. To this end, there is effective knowledge-sharing, a mutual valuing of different sources of knowledge and talent, building broad-based and even capabilities to address challenges and capitalise on opportunities.

ENGAGED RESPONSIVENESS THROUGH COLLABORATION: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are clear barriers to realise this aspiration. The imbalances that exist within global education ecosystems, such as the vast disparities between institutions in the Global North and the Global South, inevitably create powerful resistance to change. In this context, those who have remain content in their comfort, while the voice of those who have not holds little sway and is easily dismissed.

Current paradigms of unequal advantages are somewhat reinforced by the many university ranking systems. This is shown by how siloed and anti-collaborative institutional cultures have become to participate in them. The cycle becomes more difficult to disrupt because the criteria for ranking high on these systems often speak to the extent to which universities are siloed.

In reflecting critically on the higher education system, we must also recognise that the system itself has evolved from being concerned purely with specialisation to one that, through its rigid focus on specialisation, reinforces rather than alleviates inequalities. This recognition is necessary when attempting to push the frontiers of disciplinary knowledge. However, there is still much work to do in the way of retaining disciplinary excellence while transcending limited disciplinary focus towards connecting and collaborating across diverse fields of knowledge and interest. Only once this is achieved will higher education be able to drive meaningful change and shift societal dynamics in fundamental and sustainable ways.

The metrics that are currently being used to measure success and impact are flawed. This is because they fall short when critically assessing our involvement in societal transformation. At best, indicators such as research output and productivity, the quality of the journals that academics publish in and citation counts only feed into performance assessments in a low-trust, protected academic ecosystem. These outputs, important as they are, should be a means to an end and not an end in themselves. In isolation, they are weak surrogates for the impact that universities should be making. For example, at macro-societal levels, universities should be involved in addressing poverty and inequality, while at micro-societal levels, they should enhance the lives of people and the

communities that they live in. Such impact is not easily measured by extant academic metrics.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO NAVIGATING DYNAMICS, ADDRESSING BARRIERS AND TAKING OPPORTUNITIES

A next-generation university is one that embraces collaboration and openness. The challenge in developing strategies that promote this lies in crafting new approaches to operating within varied but interrelated ecosystems (these include the politico-legal, economic, social and biophysical spheres of society). Ecosystem resilience should be central to this new approach, which would inadvertently be given expression through the meaningful existence of people and the societies in which they live.

But there are certain prerequisites for responding effectively to the challenge. At the outset, universities must demonstrate focused transformational leadership, individually and collectively, across the higher education sector. This is the type of leadership that is in touch with society, is resolute in upholding and promoting basic human rights and is devoted to unlocking human potential that serves the greater good. Such leaders are also mindful of the impact of human development on the environment and embrace co-existence with all forms of life.

Once there is visible and felt leadership, universities must play a critical role in securing a just and sustainable future for the world. This would entail leveraging the growing expectations from society that universities will play a role in change for the better. This should, in turn, enable a positive shift in the dynamics at play in global education ecosystems. Through this shift, we will become more capable of influencing the configuration of the politico-legal, economic, social and biophysical spheres that operate within a broader ecosystem.

Individual leaders and universities acting independently and in isolation cannot bring about this kind of structural change. Rather, there is a need to establish and strengthen 'a coalition of the willing' that serves as a catalyst for change. Progressively increasing the size and influence of this coalition has the potential to reach a critical