# The Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Decent Work and Economic Growth

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## **Executive Summary**

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) significantly impact Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in promoting decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).
- HEIs play a crucial role in Skill Development and Employment, Research and Innovation, and Community Engagement and Policy Influence which helps to address SDG 8.
- This policy highlights significant accomplishments, best practices and recommendations to improve HEIs in various fields.

## Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) member states unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals aim to eradicate poverty, address health and social inequalities, foster economic growth, enhance education, and improve environmental health across all nations. Despite the limited mention of 'higher education' and 'tertiary education' in the UN's Global Indicator Framework for the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in implementing these goals. These institutions generate knowledge and promote awareness of the SDGs among students, equipping them with essential skills such as strategic vision, design thinking, social responsibility, problem-solving, anticipatory skills, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Therefore, embedding the SDGs in higher education curricula prepares future professionals to tackle the complex, interrelated challenges of the future, fostering mutual learning between high-income and low- and middle-income countries and promoting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to problem-solving.

However, sustainable development (SD) represents one of humanity's most critical challenges. For this Universities worldwide have endeavored to implement SD principles for decades. Integrating SD into higher education institutions (HEIs) is vital for educating future generations about upcoming challenges and providing them with the knowledge and tools to address these challenges. However, implementing SD in HEIs is challenging due to misconceptions and conflicting agendas among various stakeholders.

One approach to introducing SD in HEI curricula is through social innovation (SI). Over the past two decades, SI has become a widely accepted strategy for achieving SD, leading to an increase in SI programs aimed at community development and empowerment within HEIs globally. These programs are often part of broader HEI strategies to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and reflect

commitments to the common good, democratic values, and citizenship. However, aligning concrete community-based projects with traditional classroom education can be challenging, necessitating the exploration of alternative pedagogical approaches for teaching SD in community-oriented and field-based programs. In these programs, community participation should be standard practice since community members are the ultimate beneficiaries. Unfortunately, the extent to which HEIs implement participatory approaches remains underdocumented. Therefore, it is an important research question to examine how the participatory approach is integrated into these programs and assess its benefits to both students and communities.

In this policy brief, we define 'integration' as the inclusion of mandatory or elective courses, workshops, lectures, and other activities, which may differ between high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). However, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding how the SDGs have been incorporated into higher education. Addressing this gap is crucial for assessing and accelerating the integration of the SDGs in higher education, thereby contributing to their progress. To address this lack of comprehensive understanding, we conducted a scoping review focusing on two main research questions: How have the SDGs been integrated into higher education globally for economic growth? What are the differences in the integration of the SDGs in higher education between HICs and LMICs?

Also, implementing concrete community-based projects can be difficult to ally with conventional classroom education. This calls for exploring other pedagogical approaches for teaching SD in community-oriented and field-based programmes. In community-oriented programmes, the participation of the community members should be a natural practice, as they are the end beneficiaries of these initiatives. Whether and how HEIs implement the participatory approach remains unfortunately under-documented. Therefore, the first research question explores how the participatory approach is integrated into these programmes and to what extent it is beneficial to students and communities.

## **Problems - Current Challenges:**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face several challenges in integrating economic growth-based education and sustainable entrepreneurship that can be broadly categorized into institutional/regulatory, financial, cultural, and infrastructural challenges. This policy brief will specifically address issues within the institutional/regulatory category:

- 1. Lack of Vision and Strategy: In general HEIs are more focused on distributing degrees and diplomas and lack a clear vision and strategy for incorporating sustainability into their entrepreneurial activities. This results in ad hoc and fragmented efforts to implement a robust policy. In Indonesia, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face challenges due to a lack of clear vision and strategy for integrating sustainability into their entrepreneurial activities. This deficiency leads to disjointed efforts in implementing robust policies (Dziubaniuk, 2024).
- 2. Limited Faculty Expertise: There is often a shortage of faculty members who have expertise in both entrepreneurship and sustainability, making it difficult to provide the necessary education and

mentorship in this domain. Research by Leal Filho et al. (2018) discusses how the lack of faculty expertise in sustainability and entrepreneurship can result in a fragmented curriculum where sustainability-related topics are addressed superficially or omitted entirely. This fragmented approach may hinder students' ability to develop a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness between entrepreneurship and sustainability, limiting their capacity to address complex real-world challenges.

- **3.** Curriculum Integration: Integrating sustainability concepts into existing entrepreneurship curricula can be challenging due to rigid academic structures and resistance to change. In addition, the importance of sustainable entrepreneurial competencies for future change agents in entrepreneurial endeavors was emphasized as a critical element that should be nurtured in the educational environment.
- **4. Bureaucratic Hurdles and the Lack of Supportive Policies:** Complex and rigid regulatory frameworks can hinder the establishment and growth of sustainable enterprises within HEIs. Also, there is often a lack of supportive policies and incentives from the government to promote sustainable entrepreneurship in the education sector. A study by Alexander Brem and Matthias B. Sieger (2017) highlights bureaucratic hurdles such as complex university regulations, lengthy approval processes, and limited access to resources as significant challenges that hinder the establishment and growth of sustainable enterprises within HEIs.
- 5. Regulatory Issues: Regulatory issues, ranging from limited funding, to restrictive policies and bureaucratic red-tapism, further compound the difficulties faced in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship within educational institutions. These barriers can be overcome with a comprehensive approach that addresses the need for a clear vision and strategy, facilitates curriculum integration, and advocates for supportive policies and incentives.
- **6. Relevance and efficiency:** The HEIs have many curriculums that need to be adjusted to the new needs of the labor market. This means that higher education programs are not relevant to the needs of the economy
- **7. High dropout:** In many communities, students face challenges such as poverty, lack of access to quality education, and cultural expectations that prioritize work over schooling. These issues can force students to leave school prematurely to support their families financially or due to a lack of perceived value in continuing education. This dropout trend leads to a cycle of limited job opportunities, low income, and economic instability, which undermines the progress toward achieving SDG 8.
- **8.** Lack of basic skills: HEIs play a crucial role in equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the workforce. When there is a lack of basic skills among students graduating from HEIs, it can hinder economic development and contribute to unemployment or underemployment.
- **9. Quality of teachers:** Inefficient management of academic content and ineffective classroom practices. Teachers make limited use of available teaching materials, such as information and communication technologies. In addition, they do not encourage student participation in the classroom, nor do they manage to maintain optimal attention.

#### **Solutions:**

- 1. Vision and Strategy: To have a clear vision and strategy, HEIs should focus on developing a comprehensive approach that emphasizes the importance of sustainability in entrepreneurship programmes. By integrating the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into the institution's strategy and culture, HEIs can align their vision with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and create a roadmap for sustainable entrepreneurship (Al-Nuaimi & Al-Ghamdi, 2022).
- 2. Curriculum Integration: To overcome the challenges of integrating sustainability concepts into the entrepreneurship curriculum, rethinking the academic structure and fostering a culture of change within HEIs is required. By improving the curriculum system, increasing the faculty level, and promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, institutions can create an environment conducive to fostering sustainable entrepreneurial competencies (Yang, 2020).
- 3. Upskilling Teaching Staff: To address the shortage of faculty with expertise in entrepreneurship and sustainability, concerted efforts are needed to enhance faculty development programs and recruit individuals with diverse skill sets (Kuratko, 2005). By investing in training and mentorship programs, HEIs can build a strong faculty base capable of effectively educating students on sustainable entrepreneurial practices. Instead of offering a magic bullet or "grand remedy," Levine (2013) makes a number of more modest recommendations that policymakers would want to take into account before starting educational reforms. According to him, the teacher has the single biggest impact on the academic success of their students. Many of the large-scale solutions that have been tried in the past have failed because they are unrelated to the core issue of poor classroom instruction.
- **4. Policy Interventions:** To deal with bureaucratic hurdles and lack of supportive policies, HEIs can navigate complex regulatory frameworks and lack of supportive policies by advocating for reforms and incentives that encourage sustainable entrepreneurship. Governments play an important role in reducing market entry barriers and providing incentives for sustainable ventures, thus facilitating the growth of such initiatives within educational institutions (Kamran et al., 2023). The University of California (UC) provides a comprehensive example of how HEIs can navigate bureaucratic hurdles and advocate for supportive policies. For instance, UC has been actively engaged in state and national policy discussions about climate change and sustainability. The initiative aims to achieve carbon neutrality across all UC campuses by 2025, influencing state policies on renewable energy and sustainability (Kamran, et.al, 2023).
- **5. Multifaceted Approach to Addressing Regulatory Issues:** Promoting sustainable entrepreneurship within educational institutions is critical for fostering a new generation of environmentally conscious and socially responsible business leaders. Overcoming regulatory hurdles requires a multifaceted strategy that focuses on key areas such as Clear Vision and Strategy, Curriculum Integration, Supportive Policies and Incentives, Funding and Resource Allocation, Building a Supportive Ecosystem, and continuous Improvement and Feedback. The University of California, Berkeley, has integrated sustainability into its business curriculum through programs like the Sustainable and Impact Finance

- Initiative, which educates students on how to create financial strategies that benefit both the economy and the environment (Bauer, R. et al., 2020).
- **6. Internationalization of Knowledge:** One of the best practices implemented by South American countries is internationalization. The network of public universities in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay known as the Association of Montevideo Group Universities (AUGM) implements mobility programs for both students and professors, as well as workshops for young researchers; summer and winter schools; seminars; colloquiums; workshops; permanent research groups; scientific, educational, extension and management networks; and a variety of publications, among other achievements.
- **7. HEIs Integration of Sustainability Initiatives:** Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South America are actively participating in diverse sustainability initiatives. According to Leal Filho et al. (2023), over 80% of the universities in their sample have integrated sustainability into their operations, with a significant focus on campus operations.
- **8. Tutoring Courses:** One of the most prestigious universities in Bogotá-Colombia, implements peer tutoring sessions to improve students' academic performance, where through tutorials given by the students themselves, it is possible to improve the academic performance of students, as well as work among academic peers (Cortés, D & Robayo, M. A., 2023). This is very important to be implemented as good practice by higher education institutions because it reflects the effort of students to learn. Not only is the teacher's master class important, but it is also important to encourage cooperation among the students themselves. This can be done through tutoring programs.

# Recommendations

- 1. Lack of Vision and Strategy: Efficient communication of strategic vision and consideration of stakeholders' diverse sustainability values are crucial for HEIs (Dziubaniuk, 2024). It is important that universities form a collaboration with regard to promoting entrepreneurship. Universities that have such a partnership may offer high-quality entrepreneurship modules, which in turn leads to their students developing more entrepreneurial attitudes and a strong entrepreneurial passion. These students are also more willing and capable of starting their own businesses (Tehseen & Haider, 2021).
- 2. Limited Faculty Expertise: The administration should encourage mentorship programmes where every junior staff is assigned to closely work with an experienced staff in executing their professional duties (Olayide, Obisesan & Odunola, 2021). Limited faculty expertise in entrepreneurship and sustainability can be a challenge in providing comprehensive education and mentorship in this area. To address this issue, institutions may consider innovative approaches to faculty development and onboarding programs. For example, the Faculty Success Initiative (FSI) at New York University offers structured orientation and professional development programs to improve teaching effectiveness and foster stronger relationships with academic units (Farakish et al., 2022).

- 3. Curriculum Integration: The administration should deconstruct the current curricula and redesign it to become more transformative, addressing societal needs at local and global levels (Algers & Wals, 2020). Integrating the concept of sustainability into the entrepreneurship curriculum poses challenges due to the inflexible structure of academic programs and resistance to change. Nevertheless, developing sustainable entrepreneurial competencies is essential to prepare future change agents in entrepreneurial activities globally. Recent studies have shed light on the crucial intersection between sustainability and entrepreneurship education. Several studies point to the need to align curriculum content with specific knowledge and objectives, highlight the importance of incorporating sustainable entrepreneurship education into an integrated model, placing it within the realm of sustainable entrepreneurship, and focus on the impact of entrepreneurial knowledge literacy curriculum on sustainable entrepreneurship competencies, underscoring the importance of curriculum content in fostering competencies (Agu et al., 2021; Isa et al., 2019; Wang & Mangmeechai, 2022). There is a definite need to develop and implement integrative entrepreneurship education programs to enhance students' entrepreneurial attitudes (Nafiati et al., 2023).
- 4. Bureaucratic Hurdles and the Lack of Supportive Policies: Adapting regulatory and normative frameworks while reducing bureaucratic barriers is needed (Dürr and Sili, 2022). This is in line with the suggestion of Karacabeyli et al. (2018) to engage in evidence-based recommendations that involve building sustainable partnerships with schools, studying community culture, and carrying out ongoing program evaluations. In addition, it is necessary to highlight the importance of business model experimentation in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles to identify and overcome bureaucratic hurdles that hinder the implementation of sustainable business models (Keulen & Kirchherr, 2021). Another recommendation is to focus on cognitive development and implement internal incubation for innovative business ideas in entrepreneurship teaching, which can help students overcome bureaucratic hurdles and develop sustainable ventures Naqvi et al. (2022). In addition, Sukhwani & Shaw (2022) underline the need for streamlined policies and coordinated efforts among stakeholders to support sustainable entrepreneurship in the education sector.
- 5. Regulatory Issues: Addressing regulatory challenges requires a coordinated effort involving policymakers, HEI administrators, faculty members, students, and relevant stakeholders. Flexible regulatory frameworks that prioritize innovation, collaboration, and social responsibility can help HEIs align their activities with the principles of SDG 8 while navigating the complex regulatory landscape. Some common regulatory challenges and considerations include Curriculum Integration, Funding & Resource Allocation, Complying with Labor Regulations and Employment Practices, Industry-Academia Collaboration, and Accessibility-Inclusivity to higher education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, it is important for HEIs to have the necessary accreditation to ensure that their programs meet industry needs.
- **6.** Relevance and Efficiency: It is important to integrate enterprise and employability into higher education (Rae, D. 2007), this is important for the social and economic development of a country

because it is related to the creation of human capital. In this sense, higher education institutions, economies, and companies have a great task, which is to create study opportunities in line with the needs of the labor market and to train professionals with a vocation who work to generate knowledge, production strategies, etc. According to this, it is also important that HEI's train all selected teachers, and the creation of a curriculum related to the current needs of each country. However, this issue does not only belong to higher education institutions, the joint work between economies, the labor market, and educational institutions is important.

- 7. Low Graduation Rates: Students who have not demonstrated proficiency in college-level curriculum must complete remedial or development coursework (Rattray, 2019). It is also important to ensure that students have a sense of social belonging, especially before being integrated into the university community, because social seclusion can lead to poor academic performance (Wolf et al., 2017).
- **8.** Lack of Basic Skills: There is a need to improve the soft skills of graduates. Employers must actively support the development of soft skills in both students and graduates; conversely, academic institutions must forge closer ties with businesses and collaborate more successfully to ensure that graduates are prepared for the workforce (Succi & Canovi, 2020).
- **9. Quality of Teachers:** Investing in teacher training and professional development is paramount for ensuring the quality of education, aligning with the broader objectives of economic growth and decent work highlighted in SDG 8. Preference should be given to applicants with strong academic backgrounds, relevant teaching certifications, and practical experience. Pedagogical knowledge and subject matter expertise can be evaluated through standardized examinations or assessments. Inclusive selection processes involving various stakeholders such as administrators, educators, and students should be implemented. Offering online classes, workshops, and seminars while encouraging educators to pursue further education or certifications is essential. Additionally, fostering cooperative professional learning communities where educators can share techniques, tools, and best practices is crucial for continuous improvement (Lanning, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Through the implementation of innovative curriculum, faculty development, supporting policies and comprehensive student assistance, HEIs can effectively enhance their contributions toward sustainable economic growth and decent work by tackling these issues. This comprehensive approach will drive long term economic development in accordance with global sustainable goals, enhance educational outcomes and nurture a generation of socially and ecologically dedicated entrepreneurs.

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