



AIEA SERIES: 5 THINGS AN SIO SHOULD KNOW

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What SIOs Should Know About the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Jolynn Shoemaker, *University of California, Davis*
Joanna Regulska, *University of California, Davis*





Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), was adopted unanimously by every UN member state in 2015. The SDGs are a powerful platform for action because they are accepted by all countries in the world. The shared commitment provides a foundation for higher education internationalization efforts, including institutional partnerships, academic cooperation, global learning, and community engagement locally and globally. The important role of higher education institutions is recognized in the 2030 Agenda. Higher education institutions need to be intentional in integrating the SDGs throughout teaching, research, service and operations. Here are 5 key considerations to know:

1. The United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) are broader than environmental sustainability.

The 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs situate human and planetary challenges beyond environmental sustainability. They include three dimensions - social, economic and environmental. The SDGs are intended to be intersectional and indivisible. In fact, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes poverty as the “greatest global challenge” and a requirement for achieving sustainable development, and it was intentionally chosen as the first SDG (SDG1-No Poverty). The 2030 Agenda reflects five key areas of focus, often referred to as the “5 Ps”: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. This demonstrates the full scope of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

2. The SDGs require multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration.

The broad scope of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs is applicable to all disciplines, including STEM, social sciences, arts and humanities. Because the SDGs cannot be addressed in isolation from one another, they require systems-level thinking and multi- and trans-disciplinary approaches that bring many expertise areas and perspectives together. The SDGs can catalyze new ways of approaching teaching and research, facilitating collaborative projects among faculty and students, while also linking efforts across sectors and countries.



3. The SDGs support university social justice and diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging goals.

The 2030 Agenda was developed through a consultation process over two years that involved people from around the world, with specific attention to vulnerable and marginalized communities. The agenda contains an explicit pledge by all countries to support the principle of “Leave No One Behind.” The 2030 Agenda also specifically references human rights and gender equality principles, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international commitments. SDG5 focuses on gender equality and SDG10 on reducing inequalities. The agenda commits all countries “to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies.” The SDGs offer a framework to support diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) that is recognized around the world and carries the power of global consensus. Advancing the SDGs also offers the opportunity to strengthen the involvement of international students and scholars in DEIB by connecting the campus commitments with global principles.

4. The SDGs apply to all countries and contexts and depend on partnerships at all levels.

The 2030 Agenda highlights that it is a global agenda that applies to all countries, considering different contexts and priorities. Partnerships at all levels are necessary to advance the SDGs. Partnership is called out in the 2030 Agenda and partnerships are the specific focus of SDG17. Partnerships are necessary across campuses, in communities, and around the world to realize the vision behind the SDGs. The SDGs cannot be achieved by any single unit, institution or country alone. The very nature of this agenda requires collaboration, supporting the mandate of international offices on campuses and providing new opportunities to join global with local and campus engagement activities.





5. The SDGs necessitate a holistic approach that promotes reflection, innovation and transformation.

If universities are doing business as usual, they are not advancing the SDGs. The agenda is intended to be transformational, and this requires new and bold thinking and action. Committed leadership is a key factor to ensure that the SDGs are weaved into strategy, programs and operations of every higher education institution. There are many starting points that offer the chance to build on an institutions' existing programs and institutional strengths. Incentivizing and supporting faculty involvement, creating student learning and leadership opportunities, building community partnerships based on trust and mutual respect, and engaging in multi-faceted collaborations through global networks are some ways that universities can accelerate the realization of the SDGs. It is important to continue to push forward in new ways, with committed leaders and partners, so that higher education can play its vital role in this agenda.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions cannot afford to sit on the sidelines of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Integrating the SDGs into institutional priorities and programs can lead to innovative collaborations and transformative approaches. Global challenges cannot be solved by any single entity or sector. The SDGs provide a framework to build on the strengths that academic institutions have to offer, while also challenging the sector to infuse new creativity and bold ideas to global engagement.

See, Shoemaker, J. and J. Regulska (eds.), *Global Goals, Global Education: Advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (NAFSA, 2024) for case examples and insights from higher education institutions around the world. <https://www.nafsa.org/bookstore/global-goals-global-education-advancing-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals>

