Workshop Notes

Values-based leadership for engaging with SDG, Pam Fredman, IAU President

The workshop was attended by approximately 20 participants and began by the presentation by the President of the International Association of Universities (IAU), Pam Fredman (see PPT).

She stressed the view that the UN adopted SDGs can serve as a legitimate platform, embraced by various sectors, including the private sector and governments. She expressed her view that the private sector was strongly committed often assigning specific individuals to look after implementation. She urged universities to use this platform to press for policy development and change.

Prof. Fredman introduction the IAU as a global voice for Higher Education and reminded participants of the long history of the Association’s involvement in sustainability.

She suggested that Higher Education’s engagement with the SDGs is a win-win situation as sustainability is part of what universities are doing. She did however point out that there may be a risk to academic freedom if universities were to be too strongly pressed to measure everything they do by the framework of the SDGs.

She went on to report on the results of the recent IAU Global Survey on HESD (see PPT)

The IAU President ended her presentation by posing four questions as follows:

What are common fundamental values to HE and how are they reflected in institutional values in their mission and vision?

How do get faculties, students and staff involved?

How to continuously communicate the values with politicians and stakeholders to have them respect and support the values of HE

How do HEIs as a community get involved in policy- making activities on local/regional/global level?

During the Q and A, one of the participants acknowledged the positive development of IAU’s Sustainable Development Cluster but also queried whether this cluster was working successfully. The IAU president responded by stressing the need for more time for this initiative, and its various components, to take root and develop fully.

In response to another question, concerning the difficulties inherent in reconciling multiple and often competing agendas within higher education institutions, she stated that linking up various agendas is important, and in her view it would be most successful if universities adopted a mainstreaming approach, removing the specific offices that deal with issues such as internationalization, gender and other issues.

The IAU President, stressed the importance of respecting dissenting views in the classroom, finding more support for social sciences and humanities which receive low amounts of funding in comparison to other areas and which are at risk. She agreed with one of the participants who underlined that universities must demonstrate the value of these disciplines and showcase the ways in which humanities and social sciences address societal challenges.
In terms of disciplines, the group agreed that knowledge must be organized differently to address the 17 SDGs, but that disciplinary knowledge must not be sacrificed in this effort. The IAU president indicated that it remained difficult to find funding for such interdisciplinary work at a time when increased specialization and ever-narrower definition of disciplines. It was underlined that engaging in interdisciplinary projects can actually help improve disciplinary expertise and bring increased confidence because such disciplinary expertise is shared in a broader group.

Pam Fredman concluded the workshop by focusing on students, stressing that if universities are living their values, they are preparing students to be active citizens, including engaging in politics. She is also sure that students will be more effective political advocates, with more success than HEI leaders.