University Engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals

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Mr. Corcoran set out to explain that "sustainability and the university" featured among the four central policy and action areas of the IAU, the other three being value-based leadership in universities, the internationalisation of higher education and research, and digital transformation in this sphere. Unsustainable lifestyles cause planetary destruction, endangering human survival. The United Nations adopted a comprehensive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, postulating 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be achieved by 2030. Participants felt that, in realising the SDGs and creating sustainable societies, universities had a central role to play.

The central role of universities in this respect flowed from the key role these institutions play in any society. Universities are places of the highest levels of teaching, learning, and research. They produce highly qualified graduates for the market and prepare young persons to fully embrace their responsibilities as future citizens in a free society. They engage in frontier research. However, universities also contribute to the vibrancy of cities, generate millions of jobs, produce research and innovation, which, in technology hubs closely linked to universities, can be commercialised, and they provide a major opportunity for networking between students and companies, between academics and industries, and between university communities and the public, whether local, national, or international. All these factors meant that universities were able to decisively drive forward the achievement of the SDGs, thus the conviction of participants.

Participants identified a number of ways in which universities could contribute towards advancing the realisation of the SDGs. Hence, the crucial role of *"education for sustainable development"* in the sphere of higher education was emphasised. On the one hand, students needed to acquire relevant knowledge, competences, and skills in fields that could yield solutions to problems of sustainability, on the other, they needed to learn the values, attitudes, and lifestyles required for sustainability. Accordingly, sustainable development needed to be mainstreamed into all fields of study. Some universities applied the mechanism of tagging courses to indicate which SDGs were advanced by a certain module. A general sentiment expressed was that conservativism on the part of teaching staff constituted an obstacle in mainstreaming the SDGs into teaching.

Research on sustainable development issues needed to be promoted. Some contended that financial incentivisation should constitute an important instrument in advancing such research. Funding should thus focus on research that is clearly related to the SDGs. It was, however, also pointed out that universities are places of "frontier", that is, "pure" research. The relevance of such research could never be demonstrated initially, but was crucial to advance in society. Curiosity rather than "usefulness" guided such research. While investment in SDG focused-research was important, pure research needed to be

funded at high levels, as it formed the basis for potential future solutions in the sphere of the SDGs. There was general agreement that research seeking sustainable solutions needed to be *transdisciplinary* in nature. Some of the participants reported that their universities had formed interdisciplinary hubs on the SDGs, others however stated that such projects were missing in their institutions. Research also needed to be *transboundary* in nature. It was reported that some universities in the global North had initiated co-operation in the field of research with universities in the global South, specifically envisaging joint research on sustainability topics. Researcher exchanges were crucial in this context. The consequences of unsustainable lifestyles were particularly felt in the global South, though predominantly caused in the global North.

Universities should, moreover, *further the SDGs through their community engagement work*. Alongside teaching and research, community engagement is nowadays regarded as a key responsibility of academics, students, and the wider university community. Participants felt that community engagement programmes could, on the one hand, convey knowledge, skills, and values to local communities that could be translated into sustainable practices and lifestyles by these. On the other hand, community engagement programmes could be directly aimed at attaining specific SDGs. Hence, it was reported that some universities expected their medical students to render health services to local communities. Such work was directed at achieving SDG 3, which aspires to ensure health and well-being for all.

Crucial to universities being able to effectively contribute towards the SDGs was the adoption of *a "whole institution" approach to the SDG commitment*. This meant that the sustainability commitment needed to be infused into all of a university's activities, engaging students, academics, and all other persons working at the university, through a holistic approach, visible in all the university's plans, policies, and structures. University leadership and administration themselves needed to acquire sustainability knowledge, competences, and skills, and endorse related sustainability values. It was mentioned that some universities expressly incorporated the sustainability commitment in their mission statements. Certain universities had appointed a Vice-Principal for Sustainability. In other universities, sustainability officers were required to attend all administrative meetings. It was considered crucial that the SDGs formed a key element of a university's development plan.

Participants emphasised that *campus sustainability* and *campus "greening"* were other important aspects of the university's commitment to sustainability. The former referred to the fact that the university, in its relation to students and staff, needed to observe the SDGs. Hence, it was reported, for instance, that, in accordance with SDG 5 on gender equality, some universities had implemented employment policies requiring staff appointments to reflect a gender balance. Others reported that their universities had opted for individualised staff health care services and facilities, promoting SDG 3 on improved health and well-being. Campus "greening" referred to the implementation of measures which ensured campus infrastructure and facilities were environmentally sustainable. It was reported that some universities had opted for "creating eternity" solutions in their

choice of building materials used on campus. Others reduced the consumption of meat in university restaurants and cafeterias. In one instance, a university had acquired land to construct a whole sustainable city on campus.

Finally, Mr. Corcoran underlined the need for *networking for sustainable development* in the university context. This would help consolidate relevant knowledge, experiences, and impact for use by others. He pointed out that the IAU maintained an interactive Portal on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, providing an inventory of best practices followed by universities around the world in their effort of facilitating the achievement of the SDGs.

Attention was drawn to various international policy documents which reaffirm the role of universities in realising the SDGs, namely, the IAU Iquitos Statement on Higher Education for Sustainable Development of 2014, the Tokyo Statement on the Need for Long and Substantial Investment in Frontier Research at Research Intensive Universities of 2016, adopted by universities, and UNESCO's Nagoya Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development of 2014.