# Education for sustainable development as a catalyst and the role of students in the future management of HEIs

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**Abstract:** *Education, to which everyone should have equal access without any discrimination, is linked with all the issues present in the SDGs, so the approach needed in order to acquire skills to implement them is the transdisciplinarity. Students should be involved in all key aspects of the HEIs' work, in order to become active co-creator of their own education. They play a vital role of the sustainability processes but the institutionalization of this engagement is useful through structures that assign responsibilities and provide resources and funds.*

**Keywords**: *Education; Leadership; Students; Sustainability, Transdisciplinarity*.

Multiple crises affect our societies and manifold political actions threaten the global commitment for a better future. These crises  generally due to trade conflicts because of resources continue to rage in the world causing instability and underlining the extreme inequalities. The European Union, founded on the principles of peace, cooperation and solidarity, is not immune to instability, which is also reflected in the European Higher Education Area. Three years ago, the Brexit vote represented an aftershock. Barely a month before the European Parliament elections, the political scenario predicted by polls had seen the populists and the eurosceptics gaining votes, which fortunately did not come as true as forecasted and feared. Nowadays, many challenges remain central for the future of students: the defence of academic and press freedom, which are actually under attack; the fight against corruption; the redefinition of an asylum policy that could guarantee the fundamental right to leave in order to have a better life, with a real share of responsibility among states without any barriers. Furthermore, millions of students across Europe are raising their voices in the Fridays for Future movement to tell decision makers not to postpone the commitment for climate anymore. Young people all over Europe invaded streets and squares in the last months, demanding their right to have the sustainable future described in the 2030 Agenda.

In the rising collective social engagement on sustainability, in all its forms, Universities have a prominent and guiding role. Indeed, the Higher Education Action is decisive for kick-starting important steps towards the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals adopted four years ago. Among them, the human right for education is covered from SDG 4, and is based on Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights (1948)[1], whose ratification by the national states is mandatory. In contrast to previous development agendas, the Agenda 2030 does not  only explicitly mention the tertiary education for the first time in SDG 4.3, but also resends to the importance of the promotion of technological and innovational capacities in various sub-objectives and cross-references. Scientific research is framed as an implementation mechanism in many interconnected fields, for example in agriculture and food security, renewable energies, industry, innovation, infrastructure and climate change. Moreover, the Global Partnership repeatedly refers to science, technology and innovation. We can affirm that the role of higher education in knowledge, training and placement of expertise is

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[1] extended by Article 13 IPwskR (1966), Article 28 CRC (1990) and Article 22 CSF (1951).

properly recognized, above all referring to the implementation mechanism of teaching and learning. Diversity and inclusion are set indeed as cornerstones of Higher Education Institutions' cultures: they have to be consubstantial with all their functions (teaching, learning, research, outreach). Gender balance is still missing in many study fields, in particular within the Science Technology Engineering Mathematics'. Higher Education Institutions need to strive to achieve it by offering flexible learning paths and teaching forms, as well as by putting support mechanisms for special needs of students in place. According to the 4.7 target of SDG 4, all people have the right to access knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development in order to build resilient and sustainable societies (UNESCO, 2013). But despite the solemnity of this principle, the right for access to education, above all to the tertiary one, is not guaranteed on the same level around the globe. The lack of participation in tertiary education in the Global South, in particular in the Sub-Saharan area, reflects the strong disparities due to income differences. The beneficiaries of the undeniable expansion of tertiary education in this macro-regions are only upper and middle class citizens. In most of these cases, young women from poor families are more affected by this discrimination than young men from poor families.

Governments should ensure that economic reasons do not impede anyone from studying. Such reasons are not only restricted to tuition fees, but also include ancillary expenses such as transportation, housing, and general living expenses. In the context of equal access issues, participation in higher education of people with a refugee background, which is currently less than 1% (UNESCO 2018), increased attention in the international debate. Even if the need for  recognition of diplomas and different forms of learning is not controversially discussed. Every student and potential student should have good access to information available in accessible language. Universal accessibility is a central issue. There is the need of accurate and reliable information and guidance in Higher Education for pre-tertiary students in order to increase their access, participation in and completion of Higher Education studies. In this case, too, attention should be particularly given to vulnerable and underrepresented students.

Education is clearly linked with all the issues present in the other SDGs, so the approach needed in order to acquire instruments and skills to implement  them is the transdisciplinarity. This is a feature of the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), defined by UNESCO as the education that "empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, both for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity", in other words to reach "a safe and just space for humanity" (Hoffmann and Siege, 2018).
As a matter of fact, a  deep heterogeneity characterizes the discussion about the function of HE in relation to implementation of the SDGs. There are many interpretations of  "sustainable development": according to IAU, the ecological understanding is still dominant, at least in the Global North. Its most important feature is the conceptual dynamicity, so education for sustainable development must be heterogeneous in its content and implementation, open to contradictions and critical reflection (Kopnina/Meijers, 2014). In the Global South, instead, in a situation of promotion of the tertiary education, the contribution of Higher Education to achieve the SDGs is primarily viewed as training for managers and innovators for economic growth in an increasingly high-tech world (Begashaw/Hermawan 2018; SDGCA 2017).
Education for sustainable development has to be taken in consideration both in the current law and in reforms, as underlined also into the "Global Monitoring Report" 2016 (UNESCO), together with the principles of Social Dimension, also trough a cross-cutting cooperation across Ministries. Governments should reverse the shift of the public spending cuts that has accompanied the difficult economic situation in the recent decades, with a growing trend of increasing fees or private education. Given that

UNESCO assumes an indispensable increase in public expenditure for the implementation of SDG 4, the recommended plan of allocation from 15% to 20% of public budgets to the education sector is urgently needed (Education 2030, 2015).

As also ÖFSE affirms, the global growing tendency to commodification of HE and the anchoring of it in a modernist-western narrative that dates back to the colonialism, with the establishment of strong asymmetries in what is considered legitimate as knowledge, that according postcolonial criticism (Stein, 2016; Andreotti, 2016) is a" global epistemological phenomenon cemented", affecting the potential of tertiary education and the achievement of the targets of sustainable development. This situation leads to a system of hierarchical stratification of the global landscape of higher education, that locates the "opinion-leading" universities in the Global North, and is defined by Eurocentric Curricula and Ranking according to international excellence criteria. Instead SDGs call for educational equality, that also has the positive consequence to enabling the capacities necessary for the development (McCowan, 2016).

Universities and higher education institutions clearly reveal themselves as fundamental, both for its educational and social role, as underlined also in the Paris Communiqué. Many higher education institutions in the EU committed themselves to sustainability and have created national or regional networks in order to share and promote best practices in sustainability with the aim to cooperate towards reaching the SDGs (such as 'RUS', the Italian Network of 60 Sustainable Universities, or 'Hoch-N', network of 11 Sustainable Universities in Germany). Their monitoring (for example from Interim Results of 'Hoch-N Governance', 2018 or RUS 2018 Report) showed that sustainability at higher education institutions is strongly linked to committed individual change agents. Students usually play a vital role as initiators, drivers and contributors of the sustainability processes (compare 'network n', a network of student sustainability initiatives), but the institutionalisation of this engagement is useful through structures that assign responsibilities and provide resources and funds. Examples of Green Offices run by students (such as offices at Maastricht and Bologna University) or sustainability departments illustrate, that a cooperation between all actors of the university environment is possible and desirable. The two-way relation between university management and students has positive effects such as avoiding the hand in hand dispersion of responsibility raising awareness and creating participation models which include the civil society.

HE(I) must "transform itself" in order to promote sustainable development (Tilbury, 2011). But the integration of sustainability into curricula and didactic frameworks needs support. The integration is already ongoing in the international framework with 515 courses, masters or PhDs, which present various references to it in their names and contents (according to the Italian Universities' Rectors Conference). Developing leadership, as an understanding of participation and democracy in decision-making structures and in order to face the complex challenges towards a more equitable society, green economies, eradication of poverty, food security and other steps are important. This requires increasing the transdisciplinarity of teaching and learning programs and also the respective research, because it will facilitate the inclusion of vulnerable groups in education. A key point should be surely addressed at the level of governance, where is very rare to deal with an important issue such democracy. HEI should question about the fact that very often they play as actors into the process of reproduction of social inequalities, and merely anti-discrimination strategies are not enough to reverse the trend, above all in the Global South (Muller et al. 2017). The commitment has to be the removal of the obstacles that undermine the transformation of Universities from HEIs to SDG-relevant actors, namely, according to the IAU, the lack of funds firstly; secondly, the insufficient unfavourable incentive systems for implementing the SDGs in higher education worldwide (BMZ 2017a). Research is indeed mostly oriented towards disciplinary excellence, because of the excellence criteria, rankings and

research promotion strategies on which is based the global science, instead inter- and  transdisciplinary approaches or partnerships with institutions (ÖFSE).

The open access to educational resources and the Open Education strategies would be useful in order to guarantee the core principle of equal access for those who want to pursue education. But in this perspective, digitalization must be seen as an opportunity, not as an unavoidable end. We need good and future-oriented teaching and learning as necessarily as always. Actually, in part - but not only - thanks to new technologies, we have chances to embrace the chance of teaching and learning even better. Digitalization must not be a driver for considering education as an object of commodification. There is the need to avoid the fragmentation of the institutional structure and the interpersonal dialogue.

What is needed the most is a continuous involvement of students in all key aspects of the HEIs' work. Allowing their participation into study programs design and delivery, considering the diversity within students and guaranteeing  flexibility and use of difference approaches of teaching and learning, helps to create a successful relationship between faculty and students. In the environment promoted should be possible, between students and teachers, to learn reciprocally and communicate. In this context, also to academic staff should be put in condition to work with appropriate resources and funds, and allowed to access constantly to training programs aimed to increase their knowledge on teaching and learning and students' proactivity. The capacities of students must be increased in order to conduct them gradually towards the new student-centered system, in which they become  active co-creator and responsible of their own education. Taking charge of responsibility of themselves, experiencing different modes of assessment and feedbacks in order to evaluate their planned learning outcomes, supports students not only to be absolutely autonomous learners, but also aware individuals. Individuals that could develop system's thinking, alternative futures' envisioning, a critical thinking to evaluate sustainability values and principles and the ability to be collaborative and benefit from the mutual motivation.

Aware individuals, then, will be ready to take charge of collective responsibility to deliver a more equal world to the next generations. A world when no one is left behind.