

**Dialogue Workshop**  
**Working towards the SDGs: Mapping University and Student Perspectives in ASEAN**  
18 July 2023 | Zoom

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**NARRATIVE REPORT**

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### Background and Rationale

The **Dialogue Workshop on Working towards the SDGs: Mapping University and Student Perspectives** was an event organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in partnership with the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and Universitas Airlangga (UNAIR). The session, held on 18 July 2023 via Zoom, gathered 50 university managers and student leaders from ASEAN Plus Three higher education institutions (HEIs). It had the following objectives:

- Convene university managers and student leaders from ASEAN Plus Three HEIs who have a good understanding on sustainable development initiatives in their institutions to:
  - Discuss the findings of the [9<sup>th</sup> ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC9\) Project](#) research report; and
  - Exchange thoughts and good practices on localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their own institutions.

The dialogue workshop is part of a series of policy dialogues slated for this year under ARC9, through which ASEF hopes to engage a diverse group of stakeholders and build a better collective understanding of how higher education policy and practice may be aligned across various levels and geographies to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

The ARC project series is the Official Dialogue Partner of the [ASEM Education Ministers Meeting \(ASEMME\)](#) and the only bi-regional multi-stakeholder dialogue platform for university and student leaders, policymakers and ministers to discuss higher education issues and shape the education landscape in Asia and Europe. A research initiative titled **“Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs,”** was undertaken under ARC9 and launched in March 2023, which seeks to shed light on the current state, policies, and practices of promoting sustainable development in higher education and identifying areas where stakeholders could work better together to address opportunities and challenges in pursuing the SDGs. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

Findings and recommendations that emerged from the workshop are detailed in this narrative report, which was first presented in the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEAN+3 Rectors’ Conference in September 2023 and will be submitted to the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEM Education Minister’s Meeting (ASEMME9) in January 2024.

### Setting the Stage

Ms Reka TOZSA  
Director, Education Department  
Asia-Europe Foundation

Ms Reka Tozsa gave an overview of the programme structure and topics to be covered during the dialogue workshop. In her presentation, she discussed the programme structure, which consisted of a plenary introduction session and two main workshop discussions. This was followed by an introduction on ASEF and its work as an intergovernmental organisation connecting civil society across Asia and Europe and providing inputs at the political level—an important process significantly facilitated by consultations and dialogues such as this workshop.

The ARC project series was also given the spotlight along with ARC9’s capstone research report which was conducted in 2022. It consists of two parts:

- Higher education policies contributing to SDGs covering 31 national contexts in Asia and Europe
- Higher education institutions’ efforts to addressing the SDGs based on 240 institutional responses from 42 countries in Asia and Europe

## The ARC9 Report on Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs

Dr Miguel Antonio LIM  
ARC9 Research Project Lead and  
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The findings of the research shed light on several points for deliberation at the policy and institutional levels. Below are key takeaways from the policy level research:

- Governments play a key role in SDG implementation
- Government's top role: provide a common vision
- SDGs 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 are top priorities
- Most respondents have an existing government document for SDGs implementation
- HEIs are involved in SDG implementation at the national level
- Education and training and research are focus areas
- Incentives in the form of financial support are the most commonly employed policy tools

Taking on the perspective of universities, below are the highlights of the ARC9 report's findings made possible by the International Association of Universities' (IAU) 3<sup>rd</sup> Higher Education and Sustainable Development (HESD) Survey:

- SD is well integrated across all areas in ASEM HEIs
- SD cuts across all levels of implementation
- There are different units managing SD at ASEM HEIs
- Students and academics are most involved in SD
- Funding is the major challenge for SD implementation
- HEIs want more engaging initiatives, training and leadership support
- HEIs prioritise SDGs 3, 4, 5, 10, and 13

### Breakout Sessions

After the introduction session, two main breakout sessions were conducted. The participants were divided into four groups—two for university managers and two for student leaders. The workshops focused on the following:

1. **Session A: Localising the SDGs in ASEAN HEIs.** This topic revolved around gathering good practices from the participants on how they localise the SDGs in their institutions based on their roles and capacities as either a university manager or student leader.
2. **Session B: Challenges in ASEAN HEIs.** Participants shared views on the challenges they face in addressing SDGs and the kind of support they need from within their institutions and from policymakers.

For both sessions, university manager discussions in Group 1 and Group 2 were moderated by Dr Miguel Lim and Ms Reka Tozsa, respectively. Student leader discussions were facilitated by Ms Cleo Cachapero for Group 3 and Mr Miguel Pangalangan for Group 4.

#### **Session A: Good Practices on Localising SDGs in ASEAN HEIs**

The discussion affirmed the importance of a university's vision, mission, and priorities in steering the direction of its implementation of SDG initiatives. Central and component units that facilitate sustainability-driven action in the institution also play a key role, and students are recognised to have strong contributions to implementing SDG initiatives. Approaches to localising the SDGs vary and there is a good mix of top-down and bottom-up efforts.

Almost all participating universities have integrated the SDGs into their institutional priorities in some form. In 2019, De La Salle University published its own sustainability report and this year, the university will restructure its sustainability vision, mission, and delivery. This is similar to Prince of Songkla University's recent reorientation of its mission and vision relevant to the SDGs. In the case of the National University of Singapore, an institutional sustainability statement focused on sustainability in education was issued in 2021 to aid in developing students' transdisciplinary thinking about sustainability issues, foster research and innovation, and improve campus operations and administration.

Universities have varying structures and arrangements in their efforts to localise SDGs, but having a central body to coordinate policies, implementation, and conduct activities is common among participating universities. DLSU has sustainability offices per campus responsible for compliance with environment-related commitments. These units report to a university sustainability office. Universitas Airlangga and Universiti Malaya also have their own SDG Centre and Sustainability and Development Centre, respectively. Prince of Songkla University has an institutional committee for SDG policies and Okayama University has an SDGs Promotion Headquarter.

Universities' sustainability initiatives vary given the encompassing nature of the SDGs. For Prince of Songkla University, their university mission serves as their compass in deciding where their resources go. For Ateneo de Manila University, while education, health, and ecology are the main priorities determined through a whole-of-university strategic planning, other SDGs are also touched on. Okayama University focuses primarily on SDG 4 due to its nature as an educational institution, but they undertake research for all the other SDGs. Specific localisation initiatives and good practices that floated during the discussion include running financial assistance programmes for students, policies and facilities for persons with disabilities (PWDs), academic and non-academic initiatives (with or without credit), holistic sustainability framework and blueprints, internal research grants, and national and international research collaborations. Local and national government supported efforts through universities are also worthy to note, such as in the case of Xiamen University where they take a proactive approach to targeted poverty alleviation work. This is pursued under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, and in cooperation with local government.

Students also prove central to university-wide efforts to promote the SDGs. Chiba University has a student-organised committee on environment management systems, similar to Royal University of Phnom Penh's student-led university-level strategy on a clean and green group. Institutions like Prince of Songkla University and Universitas Airlangga empower and support student organisations to pursue SDGs they wish to address and assume a supportive role. It was agreed that student-led initiatives are cost-effective and allow students to take ownership of the learning process on sustainability. Providing awareness-building and educational opportunities will help motivate them to contribute to a sustainable future.

In their discussion, student leaders highlighted the importance of grassroots consultations that involve target communities such as in the case of Mae Fah Luang University, University of Santo Tomas, and Mindanao State University. University of Santo Tomas' student leadership believes that civic organisations such as student bodies bridge the government and communities. They undertake feasibility studies and ocular visits to learn community needs such as in one of their projects implemented in Tondo, Manila focused on reproductive health. Mindanao State University, on the other hand, launched programmes focused on green design, and participated in efforts spearheaded by the local government where young people network and present sustainability-themed projects.

Other good practices shared were the implementation of enrichment programmes at Polytechnic University of Brunei and rolling out credit-giving courses focused on the SDGs and their application and localisation from an individual level to the national level at Thammasat University.

Several participants mentioned the key role of the university administration in enabling student initiatives to thrive in partnerships both inside and outside the institution and help push priorities forward and deepen engagement with target beneficiaries. Institutional leadership is instrumental in providing general direction, guidance, and resources for student-based efforts. Student leaders from Universiti Utara Malaysia also emphasised the advantages of collaborating with field experts and sharing good practices, while the student leader from Mae Fah Luang reminded the table of the importance of cultivating local knowledge through interfaces with grassroots representatives. This was confirmed by a De La Salle University representative who shared the value of consulting an array of stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, students, even parents) when they pursue sustainability-related initiatives.

In localisation efforts, students agree on the importance of various forms of university and government support, especially for community-based approaches to sustainability. Students also put a premium on ensuring their stakeholders and target communities have a say on sustainability initiatives implemented. With the help of multi-level partnerships and the availability of learning opportunities, they contribute significantly to a sustainable future for their campus and partner communities.

## **Session B: Challenges Encountered and Support Needed in Addressing the SDGs**

From the perspective of university leaders, there was a consensus on the impact of funding limitations and human resource issues on implementing sustainability initiatives.

De La Salle University mentioned the challenge of deciding which priorities to pursue given limited resources, which is important as consultations usually generate a myriad of inputs. Structure-wise, a coordinating body also helps address the challenge of prioritizing as well as coordinating the inputs and outputs of sustainability efforts. Language barriers also hamper efforts of university personnel to collaborate especially with international partners, as in the case of the National University of Laos. Other human resources constraints include lack of staff and lack of training opportunities, as mentioned by University of Mandalay.

Lack of collaboration with local government, private sector, and civil society also limits the breadth and depth of programmes. Given this, Okayama University makes active efforts to form partnerships that extend to the international community. It was also pointed out that a positive symbiotic relationship between government and universities is possible to support implementation gaps: governments can support universities' capacity to address sustainable development targets, while universities can lend its experts to assist government in policymaking.

Ateneo de Manila University and Universiti Malaya also touched on the difficulties encountered in having faculty members align their priorities with the sustainability strategy and goals of the institution. Doing so is not only a long process, it can also be challenging when faculty also have their own key performance indicators to meet.

Given the consensus that students contribute greatly to the pursuit of the SDGs, challenges that hamper their potential contributions were also identified by university managers. Continuity might be a challenge if there is low level of awareness, interest, or motivation as discussed by representatives from the National University of Singapore and Okayama University. Implementing partners from within and outside the university can address any implementation gaps resulting from these challenges. Incentivising student participation in SDG-related activities and programmes is also a way of encouraging greater participation and more consistent engagement from the studentry.

Students, on the other hand, echo the unfortunate effects of limited funding to their sustainability initiatives. For student leaders from Universiti Utara Malaysia, this forces them to cut corners and scale down projects, and at times makes it difficult to secure partnerships that require financial support.

Lack of sustainability-focused education opportunities and the concomitant barriers to creating and increasing awareness are also present. Despite wanting to help, students may not be well-equipped to spearhead, participate in, or show support for SDG-related programmes. Compounding this problem is the inaccessibility of knowledge materials, as observed by the student representative of Mae Fah Luang University. Thammasat University's delegate shared a similar experience and added that tangible proof of the benefits of pursuing the SDGs and the availability and accessibility of relevant data can encourage students to continue giving their support in the implementation of sustainability programmes.

On the topic of structure, there can be a confusion on which central body handles SDG-related matters. It is also interesting how a system of structured partnerships anchored on religious denominations provide a stable source of support for private sectarian universities in the Philippines, based on the sharing of the student leader from University of Santo Tomas. Private non-sectarian schools may find it difficult to address huge challenges as they primarily operate independently, while public universities experience delays in funding which affect implementation cycles.

Internally, student clubs and organisations might end up working in silos that hamper cooperation. Juggling academics and extra-curricular activities also affect the consistency of student engagement and motivation. Other noted challenges were differences in beliefs and values that affect decision-making and the resistance of some faculty to incorporating sustainability into their teaching, research, or administrative responsibilities.

## Key Recommendations

Based on the foregoing discussions, the following recommendations emerged from a) university leaders addressed to policymakers and b) student leaders intended for their universities:

### **For Policymakers:**

1. Co-develop with universities a guideline manual for universities to set up a coordinating body in universities focused on pursuing the SDGs.
2. Co-create with universities annual programmes and plans in fostering sustainability practices.
3. Provide a venue for government, private companies, and civil society organisations to work with universities on building partnerships and increasing awareness for implementing SDGs at the institutional, national, and international levels.
4. Support capacity-building for university officials and staff to assist in accessing and building partnerships through language trainings, participation in international associations, and building collaboration with strong coordination mechanisms.
5. Encourage university experts to take a proactive role in national and international consultations on sustainable development.
6. Enable key performance indicators or measurements for SDGs 12 and 13 to address data gaps and fulfill select priority SDGs while leveraging on universities' work on these specific SDGs.

### **For Universities:**

1. Encourage faculty members to be involved in mentorship initiatives for students willing to engage in sustainability efforts.
2. Offer faculty development programs and workshops to enhance faculty members' understanding of the SDGs and their integration into the curriculum.
3. Raise awareness through public crowdfunding, where the university stakeholders are informed of sustainability-related problems and the need for more SDG initiatives to address these problems.
4. Take advantage of social media and influencers to boost SDG-related messages and inspire action through catchy, easily digestible content.
5. Assign a focal office/organisation in the university to provide information, materials, and other resources on the SDGs and serve as a central hub for students to grow their engagement with and knowledge of the SDGs.
6. Inform and empower people in the grassroots and members of the community being served to enable them to take part in the implementation of SDG initiatives focused on issues they experience.
7. Establish a review and monitoring panel focused on evaluating programmes and stakeholder engagement, and providing guidance on improving SDG-related efforts.
8. Conduct curriculum mapping and revision to identify opportunities for integrating the SDGs in students' education.
9. Implement a funding system that students can access for their projects.
10. Provide up-to-date reporting of SDG-related data and information to university stakeholders.
11. Foster cross-departmental collaboration and partnerships with other universities, government, private sector, and other civil society organisations.
12. Create experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, fieldwork, or community-based projects, that allow students to apply their knowledge in real world contexts related to the SDGs.

