



9th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education
Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs

Joint Meeting of the EHEA's Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue and Participants Invited by the Asia-Europe Foundation

“Higher Education Policies Working Towards the SDGs in
Asia and the EHEA (European Higher Education Area)”

27-29 September 2023
Rome, Italy

Thursday, 28 September 2023

Opening the 2nd day with welcoming remarks

After institutional greetings by Ms. Valentina Muiesan, Head of Division South-East Asia, Pacific, Antarctica, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Mr. Arturo Lavalle, Head of International Relations Area, Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, Reka Tozsa (Director Education Department, Asia-Europe Foundation - ASEF) opened the second day of work.

Policy Dialogue on Sustainable Development in the Higher Education

Ms. Reka Tozsa set the stage on Policy Dialogue on Sustainable Development in the Higher Education by introducing the [ARC9 Report on “Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs”](#). She briefly explained that it works on two different levels, namely policymakers to investigate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) policies at national level and Higher Education Institutions to investigate policy and practices implemented in each institution. To date, 29 out of 31 ASEF countries represented responded to the research's survey. More specifically, they answered the research questions: 1) To what extent are ASEM HE policies oriented towards the SDGs? 2) How do ASEM HE policies translate global into local goals? 3) Which missions of the universities are most often targeted? 4) What kind of policy tools are most often used to promote sustainable development in HE?

She shared the 7 points that summarize the data collected and analyse the key findings:

1. Governments play a key role in SDG implementation;
2. Governments' top role: provide a common vision;
3. SDGs 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 were highlighted as top priorities;
4. Most respondents have an existing government document for SDGs implementation;
5. HEIs are involved in SDGs implementation at the national level;
6. Education and training and research are focus areas;
7. Incentives in the form of financial support is the most commonly employed policy tool.

Moreover, she emphasized that, among policy tools employed by survey respondents (Incentive, Authority, Capacity Building, Symbolic and Learning), incentives in the form of financial support are the most employed policy tool among ASEM respondents. Afterwards, Ms. Reka Tozsa briefly explained the Higher Education Institutional Perspective on the SDGs, reporting the four research questions: 1) How do HEIs engage with the SD since the launch of the SDGs in 2015? 2) What are the different

institutional good practices in Asia and Europe? 3) Are there SD implementation challenges that are unique to Asia and Europe? 4) What interventions are required to accelerate progress on the SDGs?

Consequently, she shared the 7 points that summarize the data collected and analyse the key findings:

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

Parallel Workshops

From 10:00 a.m. to 15:30, participants were engaged in three different workshops, each structured into three distinct sessions. Within each session, commencing with materials provided by the Chair and drawing upon their own individual experiences, attendees were tasked with contemplating specific facets of policies associated with the SDGs and their advancement. To ensure the efficiency of collaborative efforts within the group, a set of shared guidelines was disseminated among participants. These groups were delineated as follows: Group 1 focused on Strategy, Implementation, and Indicators; Group 2 centered on Policy Tools; and Group 3 addressed the Localization of the SDGs and Partnerships. The results of each workshop were shared in the plenary session at the end of the day and the elaborated recommendations will feed into the upcoming 9th ASEM Education Minister's Meeting (ASEMME9) taking place on 25-26 January 2024 in Malta.

WORKSHOP 1

Strategy, implementation, indicators

Moderator: Ms. Reka Tozsa, Director, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

Rapporteurs: Caroline Hollela, Belgium French Community & Raul Muyong, Philippines

Participants: Belgium French Community, Holy See, Ireland, Lao, Malta, Montenegro, Philippines.

Key issues to be discussed: What are the major challenges for higher education policymakers to create a **strategy** on SDGs in higher education? How can we extend strategic plans to include concrete **implementation** steps, indicators of progress and clear responsibilities?

Session 1

Developing Recommendations: What is the present situation?

This first session began with the handouts of country sheets and a round of introduction of each representative at the table.

The first round of discussions aimed at stating which countries had an on-going national strategy implementing SDGs: The Holy See has some strategies that are relatable to SDGs, for instance in the field of climate change or education, but it is not framed within the Agenda 2030. Malta has developed

a strategy in a report centred on gender equality. Montenegro and the Belgium French Community do not have a strategy in place but are willing to develop one. Lao is making progress as well as the Philippines, including policies that address SDGs at governmental level. Ireland has an on-going strategy towards SDGs, which involves a governmental [website](#) accessible to the public with data about SDGs shown in reports and graphics, allowing the SDGs to be prioritised and aligned to the government actions in a transparent and authentic way.

The following discussion aimed to understand how to implement the goals, especially of SDG 4. Education is described as an enabler for all SDGs, since it has the greatest impact on society; and while all 17 goals are interconnected, a specific field and its methodology needs to be addressed by a specific goal, identifying its targets and objectives. Moreover, there was a common understanding on Quality Assurance to be present in any kind of strategy. SDGs should be also aligned with the ESG. It would be ideal to have an adaptable ESG system when an institution wants to move towards the SDGs, including them in institutional agendas. Lifelong learning is also a way to alleviate disparities in education and to support economic development.

The next question to reflect on was whether institutions or governments should promote a strategy and who is responsible for it. All the participants replied that it is up to the government, as directives and funding to implement strategies should align to it, and institutions. Cooperation between the two is needed as well as an exchange of research from the Higher Education Institutions and Quality Assurance.

The Holy See and Malta agreed on the fact that people are those who make institutions, confirming Ireland's push for "hearts and minds" strategy: persuasion and empowerment and a bit of risk to allow people to make connections. Holy See is developing fundamental principles of education where "learners are responsible for their own learning and teachers to give the best in terms of quality in education" thus putting the person at the centre. Other countries claim that there should be a mechanism on how to sustain the implementation of SDGs, through a commitment for instance.

An example is lifelong learning, which needs to derive from a desire to keep learning: everyone seems to be challenged by it, so the longing for it by people needs to prevail.

The key principles for ideal strategy features were summarized as follows:

- the strategy should overarch lifelong learning;
- the strategy should be empowering, make every individual feel that they are part of the process, thus creating a balance between autonomy and responsibility;
- there should be implementation, monitoring, evaluation of SDGs to create responsibility, for example by providing reports;
- the commitment of Higher Education stakeholders (government, policy makers, HEIs, Ministry, students, academics, teachers) should be sustained;
- an action plan should be part of the strategy, including a timetable;
- monitoring and evaluation, focusing on integrity and openness, needs to be in place to ensure implementation;
- a shift should be made to commitment culture.

Session 2

What are the options/solutions that can make a difference?

The objective of this session was to find ways to improve some of the policies already undergone in some countries. Before debating the main question for this session, the findings from the previous session were translated in a few bullet points to start the discussion from:

- government coordination mechanism;
- crossed multi-stakeholder initiatives;
- review of national strategies;
- mapping targets;
- prioritisation and adaption of targets;
- mainstreaming into existing strategies;
- assessments of synergies and trade-off;
- monitoring and reporting;
- fundings (added during this session).

As for multi-stakeholder consultations, there was an agreement that consultations often end up in a “one and done” process instead of involving people in the process of finding solutions, which usually brings a more dynamic implementation of a strategy and can also be a fruitful way to exchange best practices.

Philippines added impact assessment to the monitoring and reporting process, which can also be linked to “mapping targets”. Participants stressed the importance that the SDGs strategy do not surpass the national one. Regarding monitoring systems to be used, existing ones were listed, such as Eurydice, where countries give data to the platform that then shows reports, as well as Eurostat, which provides also qualitative data. ASEAN could do the same as the aforementioned websites, in addition to the policies. It was underlined that in order to have a good strategy, an efficient monitoring system needs to be in place first in order to avoid the gap between implementation and monitoring. Another existing good monitoring system is the Irish website (www.irelandsdg.geohive.ie), where it is possible to see each goal divided into activities, such as education, targets, indicators, in different cities or regions. Data is collected via central analytics through specific surveys led by the government. The biggest impact with having these data published is that they are authentic and transparent. The Philippines have a website on SDGs but it does not provide any data. The prioritization and adaptation of targets was suggested. It could be time-consuming but necessary when developing a strategy. The importance of having a budget in addition to public funds was mentioned. It would be useful to find partnerships, public or private foundations or organisation, as well as the industry through private investors interested in cooperating with the public sector. Montenegro and Philippines suggested that competences and knowledge that regard SDGs should be mandatory for academic and school staff to also transmit knowledge to students. For this reason, Philippines argued for a harmonisation of policies regarding higher education institution and SDGs. The role of professors would also serve the need to obtain data, by teaching or disseminating for a specific SDG.

In general, most Ministries gather the data focusing on impacts and outcomes, not on the ongoing processes. It was proposed to steer the data already collected on SDGs related topics, which, however, would tend to regard SDGs and not national goals. The Philippines has agencies collecting data, such as NEDA -National Economic and Development Agency- but again not towards SDGs and using these

same agencies would increase the risk of preferring SDGs over national objectives. Lao universities management system (LUMES) gathers university data related to SDGs and quality in higher education.

Session 3

What can Asia and Europe learn from each other?

Participants were asked to reflect on the points gathered during the previous sessions and highlight the common points raised during the discussions. The group was divided in smaller groups in order to discuss ideas and formulate two or three sentences for the final development of recommendations.

The final proposals were the following:

1. Develop strategies and implementation plans for the achievements of the SDGs that empower stakeholders and especially the students to actively shape and participate in them.
2. Develop more comprehensive LLL strategies that encompass a wider range of different kind of learners and are informed by the SDGs targets.
3. Assign responsibility to one body (new or existing) that coordinates, leads and reports on the implementation of the strategy across all public and private stakeholders.
4. Platform be constructed to collect data for analysis and comparison among countries in Europe and Asia, such as the Irish government website.
5. Revisit the Strategic Development Plans and integrate the SDGs.
6. Conduct capacity building to ensure that all stakeholders understand the importance of SDGs.
7. Establish adequate funds for the successful implementation of SDGs (internal or external sources).

WORKSHOP 2

Policy Tools

Moderator: Ms. Liesbeth Hens, Policy Advisor Higher Education, Co-chair of the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue, Ministry of Education and Training Flemish Community.

Rapporteur: Ms. Adriana Gonfroid, Policy Officer – Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2024 Team, Ministère Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

Participants: Albania, Belgium-French Community), Brunei Darussalam, European Commission, Finland, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, SEAMEO RIHED and Slovenia.

Key issues to be discussed: What kind of policy tools are the most effective in promoting SDGs in higher education? What kind of research, data or information is needed to support policymakers in designing effective policy tools to support the implementation of SDGs in higher education?



Session 1

Developing Recommendations: What is the present situation?

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and to share the present situation in their country/region on what were the most common policy tools used to promote SDGs in higher education, why some tools were used more often than others and how data to design these policy tools were collected. At the conclusion of the first plenary debate, several significant findings emerged regarding the implementation of the SDGs in higher education policies across different countries. Firstly, diversity in approaches was outlined. One prominent observation was the diversity of approaches taken by various countries in integrating SDGs into their higher education policies. While some nations have already established comprehensive and nationally coordinated policies, others are still in the process of formulating and implementing their SDGs-related actions. This diversity reflects the complex and evolving nature of SDGs integration on a global scale. As one participant aptly summarized, there is recognition that "local wisdom actions" may not always align seamlessly with national-level strategies. A second finding relied on the fact that some countries, such as Germany and Belgium, exhibit unique administrative structures and cultural diversities that lead to significant variations in SDGs adoption. In Germany, for instance, individual states have a substantial degree of autonomy in deciding how they incorporate SDGs into higher education policies. Likewise, Belgium's distinct regions have the flexibility to tailor their approaches based on their cultural and economic characteristics. This regional autonomy adds an additional layer of complexity to the SDGs implementation process. Finally, it was emphasised that any data collected and presented in the report should be interpreted with careful consideration of the specific context in which it is situated. Researchers should provide in-depth explanations and contextual information to facilitate understanding of the findings.

Session 2

Developing Recommendations: what are the options/solutions that can make a difference?

The aim of this second session was to analyse the effectiveness of the policy tools gathered in the previous round of discussion and discuss how the availability of data or type of data available impacted on the effectiveness of the policy tools. This session, therefore focused on understanding the kind of research, data or information needed to support policymakers in designing effective policy tools for the implementation of SDGs in HE. A key takeaway from the debate was the recognition that not all of the policies outlined in the ARC9 Report are necessarily feasible in real-world contexts. There was a consensus that assumptions and descriptions of these policies should be rephrased and clarified to enhance understanding of the various policy types and their underlying elements. Furthermore, the experiences shared by group members and the reports presented at the beginning of the session highlighted several effective policy tools that can be employed. These tools include guidelines or declarations that higher education institutions can sign (symbolic tools), awards to incentivize compliance (incentive tools), and the establishment of specific compulsory curricula (authority tools). These practical examples serve as valuable models for implementing policy measures successfully. A central point raised during the debate emphasized the importance of investigating the implications and outcomes of policies that have already been adopted to better understand which policies apply in different situations and with what expectations. The debate also advocated for the adoption of a diverse set of policy tools rather than relying exclusively on one type of policy.

Session 3

Developing Recommendations: what should governments do? How can Asia and Europe work together?

The group was invited to formulate recommendations for the ASEM Education Process, based on the facts and ideas shared in the previous session.

For Ministers and Senior Officials:

1. It is recommended that each nation consider the establishment of specialized mobility programmes for policy makers. These programmes would help reach out to many organisations from those prevalent within their own country or even within countries sharing similar cultural backgrounds. This could help policy makers to confront different realities and issues, but also different solutions to similar problems.
2. Organising regular and structured meetings designed for the comprehensive examination of specific issues might be useful to involve more stakeholders and discuss concrete issues considering multiple perspectives and across various levels.
3. To streamline the compilation of documents aimed at enriching information databases, such as the ASEM Compendium, it is imperative to engage in negotiations encompassing meanings and languages in collaboration with diverse nations. This would limit misunderstandings and allow more usable data to be collected.

In summary, the initial plenary debate underscores the importance of promoting international mobility programs for policymakers, advocating periodic meetings for in-depth issue analysis, and emphasizing cross-cultural negotiations to enhance data compilation and its utility in advancing policy initiatives.

WORKSHOP 3

Localising the SDGs and Partnerships

Moderator: Ms. Cleo Cachapero, Senior Project Executive, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

Rapporteur: Mr. Elizabeth Colucci, Adviser and Project Expert, European University Association (EUA)

Participants: Brunei, Cambodia, EUA, France, Holy See, Montenegro, Netherlands, Philippines

Key issues to be discussed: How can policymakers tailor the global goals to their country's needs? How do policymakers select the priority SDGs? How can we enhance the participation of local stakeholder groups, including local government bodies, NGOs and industry players in SDG relevant policy making in higher education?



Session 1

Developing Recommendations: What is the present situation?

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and to share the present situation in their country/region on what the Top 5 SDGs priorities in HE policies were, in what policy process these priorities were decided and by whom. Apart from one country that does not prioritize the SDGs because of the lack of national statements, the other countries/organizations that participated in this workshop shared the main SDGs that the government focuses on. Overall, there was a group consensus on quality education (SDG4) as the top priority. Despite the different order of the goals due to the national and contextual differences, all participants mentioned the same targets, namely gender equality (SDG5), decent work and economic growth (SDG8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG9) and reduced inequalities (SDG10). The group members agreed that the SDGs are integrated into almost all initiatives or projects at the national level. Participants also highlighted the central role of the recognition of qualifications to guarantee the balanced mobility and expressed their support for further steps towards ratification and implementation of the Global Convention, as a tool to provide a common direction for recognition. In addition, the group pointed out that global education has partially shifted from in-person to online training due to Covid-19 pandemic, causing increased demand for infrastructure funds to enable e-learning. Many infrastructure funds have been allocated to industry and innovation in recent years, making this goal a national priority. Moreover, because of the ongoing digital transition, some attendees stressed the need to rethink national strategies with a broader focus on digitalization of education.

Continuing the discussion, participants were asked to indicate in which policy process the SDGs priorities were decided among the following: governance and coordination mechanisms; multi-stakeholder consultations; review of national plans and strategies; mapping targets; prioritization and adaptation of targets; mainstreaming into existing or new strategies; assessment of interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs; monitoring arrangements for reporting and follow-up. In general, the most frequently mentioned were multi-stakeholder consultations, mapping targets and monitoring arrangements for reporting and follow-up. Additionally, the group mentioned the different stakeholders involved in the prioritisation process. Although the collaboration with higher education institutions and think tanks tops the list of partners, in some cases collaboration with national government and local authorities also plays a central role.

Session 2

Developing Recommendations: what are the options/solutions that can make a difference?

The aim of this second session was to elaborate on the previous points by discussing the role of policymakers in tailoring the SDGs to their country's needs and in coordinating and enhancing the regional cooperation on these issues. Therefore, participants were asked to share their opinions and insights on SDGs localization strategies. For European countries, supranational influence is very evident, so much so that funding helps influence actions. Whereas for Asian countries localization begins at the national level with a policy-making body assisted by the relevant ministries. Most participants stated that in their countries the top-down localization approach is predominant, although there are some exceptions. Moreover, due to the existing mistrust between communities and governments, attendees suggested that universities should play a stronger role to achieve a greater involvement of local communities. In general, the whole group agreed on the fact that more synergies

between governments, universities and industry are needed. SDGs localization strategies should also be based on promoting SDGs concepts and initiatives to the public to help them contribute actively to the SDGs. In doing so, Ministries should focus on collecting data to contribute to evidence-based SDGs initiatives. Participants remarked the fact that, although discussions focus on two levels, the government and the universities, university associations are also key in setting goals and best practices. Further SDGs localization strategies may imply creating a system of incentives to involve more civil society, which is currently very low. In conclusion, on the topic of localization, it is essential to take into account the different local contexts. As for the regional coordination mechanism, the Asian participants quoted the ASEAN and SEAMEO RIHED, whereas the European participants nominated the EHEA.

Session 3

Developing Recommendations: what should governments do? How can Asia and Europe work together?

The group was invited to formulate recommendations for the ASEM Education Process, based on the facts and ideas shared in the previous session.

For Ministers and Senior Officials:

1. Governments should appropriate the SDGs for their national contexts. This requires more explicit and precise strategies and indicators that are contextualised.
2. EU policy and funding incentives often influence the understanding and promotion of SDGs in higher education in Europe. ASEAN is governed differently, but an ASEAN-level funding pool for higher education projects on SDGs would be of great added value. It would also help to align funding priorities and pool capacity and resources.
3. Incentives are needed to engage the broader university and civil society to own the SDGs. This can be helped with financing (ex. Collaboration university projects like under Erasmus+), but non-financial incentives are also needed.
 - a. Ex) Introducing the demonstration of community impact into QA can help to generate awareness at HEI level and also generate data.
4. There is not one formula for this: Different contexts must be considered, where HEI may be financed differently, with different consequent levels of autonomy, industry linkage, etc.
5. More work must be done regarding the way we collect data on gender equality and how we assess it (STEM enrolment, VET enrolment, participation in graduate studies, participation in mobility and internationalisation)

For the ASEM space:

1. All SDGs are important, but there is specific emphasis put on gender equality in education right now, where ASEM could facilitate more exchange and practice sharing.
2. The dialogue space between education and the economic sector should be strengthened: Higher education dialogue should not always be segmented from industry and sectoral cooperation dialogue: An annual ASEM higher education-industry forum could be organised, driven by associations.
3. Data collection on the SDGs should be comparable between Asia and Europe. A comparative framework could be established for ASEM. This could also help to focus dialogue around impact.



9th ASEM Regional Conference on Higher Education
Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs

4. Most countries agree that stakeholder consultation and engagement for national policy making/monitoring and implementation related to the SDGs is critical. This is also needed for ownership of the SDG. But how this is done and the cultural expectations around it vary. The ASEM space can promote practices, examples and success stories on consultation and engagement.
 - a. The role of associations (HE, but also civil society and economic sectors) must be emphasised and strengthened in this process.

During session 3, participants were asked to share their takeaways of this Workshops. The need for higher education institutions to focus more on gender equality and have the green transition topic as part of their programmes was noted. Participants also remarked the governments' commitments to promote SDGs knowledge to help citizens be more productive. Some good practises of participants' countries were recalled, such as the way in which Cambodia localizes the SDGs based on their context and its strategy 17+1 SDGs as well as the Netherlands bottom-up approach. The decisive influence of a supranational agenda in pursuing the SDGs was emphasized, as well as the good understanding of different contexts that facilitates the discussion about practices and priorities of the SDGs. Finally, a stronger participation from the community to promote the awareness for the SDGs was underlined.

Sharing Recommendations for the ASEM Education Ministerial Meeting (ASEMME 9 in January 2024) in Plenary

During this plenary session, each group briefly presented their recommendations, the main challenges, how they could be addressed and how Asia and Europe could work together.

Summary of the Day and Closing Remarks

Ms. Reka Tozsa, Director Education Department, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), Liesbeth Hens (Belgium Flemish Community) and Ann Katherine Isaacs (Italy), Co-chairs of the EHEA's Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue thanked participants and closed the meeting.