Challenges of Incorporating Sustainable Development Goals Into South African Higher Education Curricula

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ABSTRACT
This paper highlights several challenges that the adoption and implementation of the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pose for South African Higher Education institutions’ (HEIs) curricula design. It also reflects on the experiences of some institutions who have embraced SDGs in their teaching and learning, research, management (governance and operations), and public engagement strategies (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2017). SD4 seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This paper is intended to contribute to policy debates on issues that are seemingly being given little attention in curriculum design, in the advance towards the target 2030 date for achieving SDGs. The research is motivated by the absence of guidelines and frameworks from South African education governing bodies regarding SDGs, leading to knowledge and capacity gaps that frustrate academics who are increasingly being required to include SDGs in their courses. The author uses a qualitative methodology (document review) and focuses on literature published between 2019 and 2023 on the implementation of SDGs into South African curricula. This study recommends that private HEIs be included in the development of SDG governing frameworks and policies. It also recommends that HEIs develop a South African ranking system to track progress towards SDG attainment.

Keywords: SDG 4; curriculum development; South Africa; United Nations; higher education

INTRODUCTION
The importance of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) is highlighted by the commitment of 193 UN member countries to achieving the goals by 2030 (Our World in Data, 2023). These goals promote “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs……while building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet” (United Nations, 2016). Various stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate in the pursuit of these goals and higher education institutions (HEIs) can play an important role in this (Wright, Ritter, & Wisse Gonzales, 2022). Education features prominently in the SDGs as Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2023a). The United Nations target for achieving SDGs is 2030 and at the current pace, though many African countries will fail to meet several goals (United Nations, 2023a).

The SDGs are interrelated, and they should be considered as part of a sustainability system that does not function in isolation (Alcamo et al., 2020; Laumann, et al., 2022). Efforts aimed at achieving one goal will affect the ability to reach targets of other goals (Nilsson, et al., 2018), highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary work (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Globally, HEIs are developing new programmes and courses that are focused on equipping students to work effectively towards the 2030
SDG agenda and HEIs are partnering with private and public entities in SDG centered research and development (Avelar, da Silva & Farina, 2023).

Sustainability inclusion in education curricula leads to cultural changes and innovative ways of thinking about the issues that affect the planet, and the solutions needed to address them (Žalènienè and Pereira, 2021). This can be achieved through a combination of current specialized qualifications and the development of interdisciplinary programmes (Žalènienè and Pereira, 2021). Universities should prioritise and support any SDG research, govern their institutions using SDG based principles and lead the national discourse on SGDs through partnerships within the public and private sectors (Žalènienè and Pereira, 2021). HEIs are uniquely placed to educate, influence, train and implement SGDs through programmes/qualifications that are geared toward competencies that can be achieved through smart learning outcome (LO) designs. Effective implementation of SDGs requires a thorough understanding of what the goals are and how they function – some have overemphasized the economic themed goals at the expense of social and environmental themed goals (Leal Filho, et al., 2022) and vice versa. Therein lies a fundamental challenge of effectively implementing SGDs in South African tertiary education curricula – that is, a lack of a coherent strategy that is caused by a lack of expertise/competence in sustainability content and weak institutional leadership (Amos & Lydgate, 2020; Weiss, Barth, Wiek & von Wehrden, 2021). Generally, despite encouraging progress, there is still a lack of integrative approaches to truly implementing SDGs in higher education (Chaleta, et al., 2021).

Increasingly, higher education institutions are requiring SDGs to be included in curriculum design. However, there are no guidelines at a national governmental level (Department of Higher Education) or Council of Higher Education (CHE) level to do so. In addition, few institutions have frameworks and policy guidelines to assist curriculum development in including SGDs. Educators are generally left to ‘figure out’ how to include SDGs in the absence of knowledge, skills and understanding of the ‘what, how and for whom’ of SDG inclusion in their curriculum. The absence of such guidelines leaves the whole exercise at risk of failing and causes mass confusion in the. messaging around SDGs in curriculum design. This has led to haphazard approaches where SDGs are being included for the sake of following instructions and meeting requirements coming from superiors where often, academic leaders themselves do not clearly articulate what and how SDGs are to be included.

In April 2023, the Higher Education Sustainability Community of Practice (HESCoP) held their first meeting in Cape Town, South Africa to discuss the sustainability agenda of HEIs. HESCoP is a body of senior leaders, responsible for sustainability departments at University South Africa (USAf) member institutions (Universities South Africa, 2023). HESCoP is seeking to have South African universities implement SGDs a part of all their activities, both internally and externally and for HEIs to create an “Environmental Sustainability Framework” that will guide these processes, and for annual reports to be produced, showing how institutions are progressing with this endeavour (Universities South Africa, 2023). This coalition provides hope for a cohesive strategy for HEIs to target the 2030 SDGs, but there is a shortcoming that warrants attention. USAf does not include private university colleges as member institutions (USAf is comprised of 26 public universities). That is unfortunate because the proposed framework would exclude from discussions private HEIs, that provide education to over 20 percent of the one million students registered in the higher education sector (Independent Online, 2022). This omission is significant because the framework would be developed by institutions that receive hundreds of millions of South African rands from government funding, while private HEIs do not receive any government financial support. Funding is essential for implementation of SDGs in various education activities, but this critique does not absolve private HEIs from engaging in sustainability issues. In fact, it offers an
opportunity for private HEIs to forge closer ties with industry on the sustainability agenda and tweak the forthcoming framework accordingly to suit their contexts.

To be fair, it is essential to acknowledge that several South African HEIs have been open about their SGD initiatives. For example, the University of Cape Town produce reports on their annual university wide sustainability efforts, reporting in detail on their progress toward several SDGs (University of Cape Town, 2022). In addition, the University of Pretoria’s South African SDG Hub is a comprehensive platform that consolidates the highest quality and most pertinent research on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from both South African and carefully chosen non-South African universities (University of Pretoria, 2022). These examples are provided to highlight practical efforts and projects in sustainability and research, and are not meant to be a definitive guide to sustainability in HEIs.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight potential challenges in the integration of SDGs into South African university curriculum, and to provide recommendations on how some of these can be addressed. This paper also clusters some of the main lessons learnt from the experiences of some South African HEIs in their transformation of HE curriculum to incorporate SGDs. This is done through a qualitative methodology in reviewing the recent relevant South African literature (2019-2023). In my experience of working for several public and private HEIs institutions, many educators are not comfortable with the requirements to include SDGs in their curriculum for various reasons. Some of these reasons are discussed in this paper, but others are not due to the nature of this submission being limited in length to suit conference proceedings requirements.

Finally, I believe that there exist multiple opportunities in SDGs adoption and implementation in higher education curriculum and this paper takes a developmental approach to these issues. Even if in an imaginary world, all countries achieved the SDGs by 2030, there remains a question that I do not see being asked in the various discourses around SDGs and HEIs. That is, what happens beyond 2030? Is the sustainability agenda completed/finished when we reach 2030? How do we continue with the SDG agenda beyond 2030? What follows below is a discussion of challenges that I foresee and have experienced in implementing HEI curricula.

CHALLENGES OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN HEI CURRICULA

**Should educators Include SDGs As Part of Program or Module Outcomes?**

There is little clarity as to whether SDGs should be included as programme or module level outcomes. This distinction is important because it avoids a situation where every module includes SDG content, leading to duplication and including them when they were never stated to be part of the program outcomes. HEIs can avoid such issues by agreeing on specific SDGs to be included at a program level. Next HEIs can identify specific modules within a program to include SDGs, because some SDGs have little or no relevance to certain modules. Due to the wide-ranging possibilities of interpretation of SDGs, it becomes difficult to know where to begin and end as the following discussion on gender illustrates.

**Should we include some or all 17 goals in HEI curricula?**

This question requires strategic reflection by all stakeholders as indecision in selection of targeted goals or an approach that attempts to include all SDGs without justification for doing so can frustrate the achievement of the 2030 agenda. Different countries struggle with different goals and are doing better in others. Also, some goals may not be applicable to South Africa. Thus, direction and clarity from national government is useful here to inform the country about the status or progress in meeting each goal as the central statistical bodies would be collecting this data. This would help HEIs in identifying which goals they should focus on as 2030 edges closer.
Gender Equality

Gender equality interpretation challenges are immediately obvious as its definition has become a sensitive subject in the 21st century. What does the term ‘gender equality’ mean? Traditionally, gender equality has been taken to mean equality of opportunity and access amongst other metrics, between males and females. For example, the United Nations (2023b) define it as “…achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women” while the European Union’s Institute of Gender Equality (2023) goes further to say “interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration”. These definitions clearly define gender equality as envisioned to occur between males and females.

However, such a definition commonly found in textbooks has led to outcries from certain parts of society who do not identify as male or female (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2023). Attempts to be more ‘inclusive’ and widen the above definition may potentially lead to resistance from some who may hold conservative positions on these issues. An example is the boycotts and retail uncertainty that caused Target (an American retailer) to lose up to USD$14billion after the company had supported ‘Pride Month’ (Business of Fashion, 2023). Furthermore, several Asian and African countries have laws that can punish lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTIQA+) people with the death penalty; some South African HEIs recruit students from these countries. Asking curriculum designers to be more ‘inclusive’ on these issues can also cause internal conflict in those designers and instructors who have religious or moral objections to doing so. Is it safer to avoid addressing this topic entirely for the sake of peace? Ignoring the issue as difficult as it is not advisable as it simply postpones conversations that will not go away anytime soon.

These concerns surrounding gender could be addressed by teaching gender as per traditional lines and roles as the majority of society still holds to those beliefs. Annual institution wide programmes on gender, equity and inclusion could be provided by HEIs where these issues can be raised without prescribing or forcing all employees to adopt minority views, thus providing a balanced approached to handling very sensitive issues.

Groupthink

There is a risk of groupthink associated with SDGs implementation in curriculum development. It appears that consensus on the ‘need’ to achieve SDGs has left little room for dissenting or opposing viewpoints. For example, pursuing SDG7, “affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” (UN, 2015) may cause some countries to suffer a loss in welfare. South Africa is one such country, and the foundation of its energy sector has been natural resources in the form of coal. But western prescriptions that South Africa moves away from coal are farcical when western countries such as Germany are increasing their reliance on coal (Bloomberg, 2022) to ensure their energy security needs are met. South Africa is at risk of losing energy jobs that may never come back, and its economic trajectory may be derailed by switching to sustainable energy sources (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2021; Bohlmann, et al., 2023). To what extent should textbooks engage these discourses and at what level? Or are curriculum designers required to simply include sustainable energy issues without discussing potential downsides as mentioned in this section?

What about those who may be climate change sceptics? The climate change denial movement reminds one of COVID-19 ‘vaccine hesitant’ or ‘vaccine refusers’ or ‘conspiracy theorists’ as they have been branded (Dobson, 2022; Freeman et al., 2022). My point is climate change deniers who constitute a small percentage of the population have grounds to hold their position and yet they have been ostracized. Are curriculum designers permitted to express climate change denial views if they have such?
Cultural literacy

HEIs can advance the SDGs agenda as facilitators and disseminators of knowledge and external collaboration possibilities through stakeholder engagements. The application of SGDs at HEIs must consider both the local and cultural context for students to identify with the objectives being pursued (Aririguzoh, 2022). This highlights the importance of understanding cultural sensitivities for HEIs when promoting SDG activities in communities as they cannot be accomplished; culture functions as a facilitator of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017).

When trying to communicate with someone from a different culture, it might be challenging if you are emphasizing a value that someone from your culture does not share (Aririguzoh, 2022). SDGs by their nature, promote general, universal cultural values. Universalists hold that there are shared principles, values, and ideas that may be applied across all societies and cultures (Kohfeldt & Grabe, 2014). The SDG pursuit resembles the globalism wave of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in that both create tensions that manifest from a perceived loss of local cultural identity (Islam, et al., 2019) and individual values. Unfortunately, many university curricula do not include any diversity or cultural training content as this is usually the reserve of programmes in the humanities. This shortcoming in advancing cultural literacy can hinder the effective implementation of SDGs during the “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous” times that we live in today (Shliakhovchuk, 2021).

What happened to the decolonization agenda in higher education?

Between 2013 and 2018, South African HEIs experienced unprecedented instability, triggered by student frustrations regarding equitable access and inclusion - frustrations that have deep rooted historical undertones (Kenyon & Madlingozi, 2022). Due to South Africa’s unfortunate history of segregation and separate development, many students of colour still struggle to afford opportunities for tertiary study (Vally, 2022). The protests under the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements that prevailed over the period have relatively subsided, but many of the issues that were raised at the time remain unresolved. A major challenge that the protesting students raised at the time was about the decolonisation of the various HE curricula, leading to an increase in scholarship offering suggestions on how this could be achieved (e.g. Yende, 2020; Motala, Sayed, & de Kock, 2021; Thaba-Nkadimene, 2022).

Mass movements in the absence of continual coverage and support from various stakeholders struggle to maintain momentum. I therefore argue here that as HEIs increase their focus on SDGs, the equally important and difficult conversations around the decolonization of curriculum are at risk of being sidelined. The two agendas can co-exist if conscious efforts are maintained in doing so. The risk of forgetting about decolonization in higher education is that unresolved concerns could flare up in future protests and violence.

We need more studies that document how SDGs are used in curricula

There is a shortage of South African literature on how the SDGs are being integrated into university curricula and on assessing the effectiveness of SDG content in achieving sustainability goals. Some recent work provides insights into the experiences of a few public South African HEIs with SDG adoption, but similar studies are not available to the best of my knowledge, for private HEIs. For example, Mawongo and Togo (2019) report on an extensive number of SDG related initiatives that the University of South Africa (UNISA) is engaged in regarding teaching and learning, lamenting financial restraints on the agenda’s reach. Mawongo and Togo, (2021) also raise challenges related to student participation in these initiatives as UNISA is a distance learning institution and many students are not willing or able to travel large distances to reach the main campus where sustainability activities may be taking place. Other students stated that they were simply not aware of SDG initiatives while others were not interested in the
agenda at all. Similar findings were presented by Owojori, Mulaudzi & Edokpayi, (2022), that South African university student awareness on some SDGs is very low; their research focused on sustainability perceptions and awareness at a rural university.

CONCLUSION

The task of achieving the SDGs by 2030 is not easy and requires renewed vigour and commitment from all stakeholders. While SDGs are not legally binding, all countries have agreed to meeting them. Higher education is at the forefront of knowledge creation and sharing and South African institutions are only now, starting to collaborate to developing sustainability guidelines. Further delays in providing strategic guidelines on how to integrate SDGs into HEI criteria will delay the sustainability agenda that is essential to save the earth from imminent dangers. The need for practical sustainable solutions for the 17 SDGs can be met through research and teaching and learning at HEIs, but several challenges must be addressed before this is possible. The implications of HEIs not leading the sustainability agenda would be felt in future generations, through different environmental and socio-economic hardships. This study recommends the following:

1. Private HEIs should have a voice in crafting policies and frameworks to implement the SDGs into curricula. Practically, this can be achieved by Universities South Africa granting private HEIs member status. Currently, private HEIs only have college status and are not permitted by government legislation, to call themselves universities; this may be the reason why Universities South Africa is only constituted of public HEIs. Private HEIs could be assimilated in the aforementioned body as affiliate partners to encourage greater engagement and coordination of the SDG curriculum development framework and agenda.

2. To monitor advancement towards SDG completion, I suggest that South African HEIs create and publish an annual rating system that will be used to report on various projects in the academic space that are being implemented to achieve SDGs, with a specific category on curriculum development. An easy to understand and consistent rating system achieves two main objectives in my view. Firstly, it increases accountability for HEIs’ SDG agendas if reporting on this is also made mandatory on all education providers and secondly, it serves a motivation to those HEIs who may not be actively engaged with the agenda to the extent that others are. Public reporting of SDG related academic activities can be a useful marketing tool for HEIs to attract similarly minded students and funding. I make this point based on trends in corporate finance, where companies that want shareholder funding are increasingly adopting sustainability initiatives as investors are caring more about firms’ roles in production that is environmentally friendly.

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