

# **Report from session 3 - Providing Leadership for Sustainable Development, the Role of Higher Education**

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## **We have had 2 keynote speeches:**

1. Leading Change – the Key Role of the Higher Education Community to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

Speaker: Hilligje van't Land, Secretary General at the International Association of Universities (IAU), PhD

2. Education for Sustainable Development as a Catalyst and the Role of Students in the Future Management of HEIs

Speakers:

- Valentina Tafuni, Unione degli Universitari (UDU), Student
- Janek Heß, freier Zusammenschluss von studentinnenschaften (fzs), Student

In the process of shaping the world of tomorrow, there is a growing need for involvement of universities in creation of an international society. Changes can be achieved only by implementation of changes proactively in academia, by investment in the education of people, enhanced social cohesion, critical thinking and creativity, fluid mobility process, open mind and innovativity etc.

International Association of Universities (IAU) has supported this type of an open approach to development since their founding in 1950 under UNESCO. They gather and analyze data on their key values (Ethics & integrity; Equity, solidarity & cooperation, Academic freedom & institutional autonomy, Quality in learning, research & outreach, Global responsibility towards all communities; and Appreciation of diversity) and communicate changes in a forward – moving perspective towards stakeholders. Their mission is to act as a forum for innovation, shared and mutual learning, and joint action, pursue creation of novelty approaches and communication of these approaches etc.

IAU strongly focuses on the contribution of the Universities to the evergrowing society by providing citizen- oriented platforms for learning and the education for the future leaders. Student has a central role in the development of the future society, tracking the quality of this process. All research must be available, reliable and responsible at the academia level and this can greatly contribute to the growth in community engagement both locally and globally. Strategic partnerships with the public stakeholders in this case can function as a link between academia and society, having strong impact on the rise of the societal engagement.

The growth in the population is followed by a growth in student numbers, which can be problematic in regards to the quality assurance and enhancement processes, with globalisation, competition, consumerism (value for money in higher education) and populism (HE is seen as self-serving) being some of the many arising problems within higher education on a global level. This is why there has never been a bigger need for large- scale

implementation of higher education into the society on a regular basis, creating a global community of knowledge.

The 2030 Development Agenda and the SDGs provide a framework for universities' collaboration in the pursuit of a sustainable development.

**We have had 4 speakers on the round table:**

1. George Sharvashidze, Tbilisi State University Ivane Javakhishvili, Rector
2. Michelle O'Dowd Lohan, National University of Ireland, Research Fellow
3. Per Hillbur, Malmö University, Pro-Rector/Associate Professor
4. Pier Sandro Cocconcelli, Holy See, Higher Education Expert (BFUG)

**Rector George** Šarvašidze stated that the transformation into a regional leaders for education and innovation has an important role in developing human capital as the principle block of sustainable development and progress. The Tbilisi State University concentrated on the current research focus of the institution including the work done on renewable energy, water and green economy, geothermal and volcano research, as well as gender and equality related topics and some others in order to scientifically address the challenges that we face, in alignment to the development goals of 2023 Sustainable Development Agenda. He stressed the need for change, but considers ranking to be the demotivational factor in trying to achieve the change in HE area. Progress should be made for the sake of the society, not for a place in ranking, and this message is the focus of their sustainability work. Rector stated that there is an immense need for the basic research to be the core in higher education system, upon which the interdisciplinarity should enrich the programme and shape the scientists of today.

**Michelle**, as a second speaker pointed out a strategy at the University of Galway, named: Learn-Live-Lead, which tries to implement the knowledge on environment and new techniques for a better society today and more engaged and proactive society tomorrow. This model resonates strongly with students, who are becoming more aware of the importance of their timely and broad engagement in the field of sustainable development. NUI Galway has proven that including sustainability in the learning process is a must in all HE areas, but it also needs to be accompanied by the change in the University operations. Building the strategy from the core, is how they spread the perspective on sustainable development onto the community and slowly achieving the change. I would like to share a quote from Michelle, saying: „ At NUI Galway we view sustainability as a process rather than an endpoint.“ I think this is extremely important, and a key message that we somehow overlook in tries to achieve the goals set. This need for changes never ceases, nor should our proactivity and effort in further development of a sustainable future. The challenge to be relevant to society lays within the sustainable development in an holistic approach in teaching and learning. There are 6 groups within the sustainability development created inside the Learn- Live- Lead strategy, including teaching and learning, lowering CO2 emission ets. The key for a sustainable campus is involvement of students in strategy development, feedback and giving their opinions on the discussed matter. Their students have implemented positions of student leaders in engagement in sustainable development in 4 different fields, and this is the way in

which students prove that sustainability is one of their key objectives, and they recognise the need for their action within this topic.

Bringing into perspective the need for creating the sustainable society, **Per Hillbur**, deputy vice- chancellor of the University of Malmo pointed out that there are three core values integrated into their educational system: *natural resource management ("sustainability")*, *gender equality and international migration and ethnic relations*. Upon these values, their curriculum was built and has changed over the past 21 years, but these formed foundations stayed the focus of their higher education system. With the creation of the university-wide advisory board for a sustainability, their efforts in practical approach were given a kick for the focused advancement. Diversity amongst the students enrolled at the University is a key for moving forward, as well as involvement of students within internationalization process. However, their challenge is to engage students within the sustainable development curriculum building. Students need to be engaged on the Action for Climate Change for their role is invaluable and central to the Action creation and implementation. There has to be a focus on global actions in sustainability, and diversification of incoming students could greatly contribute to this mission. Internationalization becoming more environmentally friendly is essential to achieving sustainable development goals, especially in the field of student transportation that gains momentum with the increase in the rate of student mobility. Digitalisation could be the potential tool to resolve this problem.

**Prof. Cocconcelli** spoke of the project: „*The role of Catholic Higher Education in reducing hunger and malnutrition*“ which addresses the problems of malnutrition and world hunger. The project focuses on the development of new solutions within the higher education system as an answer to these problems, and the transfer of innovative technologies to the communities. Promotion, encouragement and sensitization of young scientists at the universities in the area of food and nutrition issues, creating universities` collaboration networks and sharing good practice within the community are the key aspects of this project. Professor recognises that there is a need for new competences amongst the population of students to produce international research but act locally to inspire change. The agricultural sciences can find a range of possibilities to use CO<sub>2</sub> in food production, as one of the strategies to be sustainable, but also help in resolving hunger and malnutrition. Although internationalisation is important, it should not be the primary focus of HEI, in these times in which technology has given us the opportunity to go green more than it was possible before. Politics shaping our societies should be science-based and influence the change, and the students need to network amongst each other to grow together and to create a more responsible and active society. Research and science need to be empowered by themselves, without limitations, and although they are not always neutral, they should always be ethical. We should be ready for the global warming, using the existing technology and regulations, alongside shaping the minds of the future.

The conclusion on the topic 3 of the round tables: „Providing Leadership for Sustainable Development, the Role of Higher Education“ is that we should lead by example, assuring that the impact on the environment is as low as we can make it. Sustainable development requires

human ingenuity, action and involvement. People are the most important resource on this path, and the Universities play the essential role in the shaping of the global mindset. The need for financial support is evident, and the increase of funds would contribute additionally to the sustainable development implementation into higher education system. On that note, I would say that we are, all of us, the engineers of the sustainable future, and we need to live the change to inspire it and to create a new, forward- oriented global society. In the celebration of 20th anniversary of the Bologna process, I am confident that in the name of all of the students of tomorrow, we can send a message that the race to the finish never stops, because we will not stop striving toward better, more stable and green future for us and all our successors.

In general, there is a growing need for the engagement of the universities into the societies in the creation of a globally sustainable communities, highlighting the central role of students as trackers of the success as a part of the quality assurance committees. Stakeholders can act as an invaluable partners in the process of societal engagement and should be involved in the process of the community engagement, building partnerships with HEI and advocating for the common goals.