



DO SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES CAPACITATE STUDENTS TO MEANINGFULLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE REALISATION OF AGENDA 2063?

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation, digitalization, and modernization of economies have affected the world in ways that continuously destroy the planet's climate, landscapes, economies, humans, and animals that occupy the world. The article explores strategies that could be used to ensure that learners and students are empowered to be change agents towards sustainable development. The study adopted a qualitative research method where secondary sources were reviewed. These sources included journal articles, books, newspaper articles, speeches, and electronic media. The researchers also did a review of university websites. The researchers also followed a phenomenological method by interviewing students from two universities in the country to capture their lived experiences. The researchers found that most South African universities offer Education for Sustainable Development in their curriculum and have adapted their organisational structures to meet Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goals. The study also found that what is lacking, is reaching out to students outside lecture halls through co-curricular programmes to facilitate learning in Education for Sustainable Development. The researcher recommends that the Department of Higher Education should insist on a co-curricular training programme on Education for Sustainable Development for universities and colleges in general. The researcher concludes that unless universities introduce structured co-curricular programmes geared towards the attainment of sustainable development goals, Vision 2063 will not be realised.

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1. Introduction

Globally there have been developments to ensure that sustainable development is mainstreamed within the higher education sector. Such attempts have been based on the two major appeals that are embedded in education for sustainable development. These are “the power to ensure that governments keep their commitment to implement the [Millennium Development] Goals”. Secondly, “the value of providing a systems approach lens that will help students develop a well-rounded understanding of how global challenges need to be addressed.” (Grund, 2020). More than ever before, there is now greater realisation that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot happen if governments work in silo, the task requires partnership of governments, private sector, civil society, and citizens alike (Thunberg,2020). The need for sustainable development is underpinned by the increasing levels of greenhouse gases and pollution. These have placed the world on the precipice of catastrophic climate

change. Given their unique standing as beacons of hope and “factories for future greatness, universities have a leading role to play in sustainable development. Initiatives like the UI Green Metric World Universities Rankings play a pivotal role in ensuring that globally, universities take Education for Sustainable Development seriously. The categories used to rank the most environmentally friendly universities are setting and infrastructure, energy and climate change, waste, water, transportation, education, and research (Lawlor, 2022).

Agenda 2063 is a living document and a flexible instrument that stands to be adjusted according to the exigencies that prevail at a particular point in time. One of the steps in making Agenda 2063 ‘a living document and a flexible instrument’ is embedded in the blueprint of the agenda. The policy organs of the African Union tasked the African Union Commission and African Union Development Agency-NEPAD to coordinate and prepare biennial performance reports. This allows for adopting the implementation plan according to the results of ongoing evaluations (AU,2020). The second step was the fact that the implementation of Agenda 2063 is done through national and regional development strategies. This, therefore, allows space for flexibility and makes sure that Agenda 2063 is a living document (AU, 2063). The African Union leaders are continuously working towards harmonising the Agenda with the Global Sustainable Development Goals to ensure a meaningful impact. The continent faces serious challenges in its attempts to realise the agenda. Several if not most economies on the continent are fragile, whilst the infrastructure continues to be underdeveloped. On the other hand, most African economies still rely on raw materials. The number of people who live below the poverty line remains high. Inequality continues to be high with the United Nations declaring that six of the ten most unequal countries in the world are African (Cle, 2017). African universities face these realities in their purpose of research, teaching and community engagement, as they must be positioned to develop active global citizens capacitated to contribute towards the realisation of Vision 2063. The paper pursues to answer the question of How can universities contribute towards capacitating young leaders for a meaningful contribution towards the realisation of Vision 2063.

2. Methodology

The researchers adopted a qualitative research design whereby interviews were conducted According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 2), qualitative research is a “method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found with the data set.” The authors adopted a phenomenological approach by conducting interviews to understand the lived experiences of students (at selected universities) on sustainable development. The use of phenomenology in the study was to ensure that the researchers could describe the essence of the phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of the people involved (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Thematic analysis was used to analyse data

by organising the collected data into codes. To ensure that the analysed data met the trustworthy test, the researchers acted in accordance with what (Nowell et al, 2017: 1) suggest in positing that “qualitative researchers must demonstrate data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing and disclosing methods of analysis”.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Education for Sustainable Development

O’Flaherty and Liddy (2018: 1031) suggest that deliberate educational interventions that focus on teaching development education and education for sustainable development play a significant role in engaging students and departments in efforts towards sustainable development. The authors also argue that the ripple effect of such educational interventions will be global citizenship and the building of “skills of analysis and understanding, empathy and efficacy, as well as promoting sustainability and justice.” (O’Flaherty & Liddy, 2018: 1032). This is a view that is also embedded in international policy developments that include the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2012).

3.2 Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals are a collection of 17 Goals agreed upon in 2015 by the 193 countries that make up the United Nations Organisation. The target date agreed upon for completion is 2030. The SDGs are a call to action for people across the globe to attend to five critical areas of importance: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. Taken together, the goals are not stand-alone aspirations but rather influence each other and are connected to each other (United Nations, 2015; Kleespies & Dierkes, 2022 &). The United Nations (1987: 204) defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

3.3 Vision 2063: The Africa We Want.

In their jubilee celebrations of the establishment of the OAU (AU), the African Heads of State signed the 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration as an affirmation of their commitment to the attainment of Africa’s inclusive and sustainable growth and development (African Union, 2020). Agenda 2063 was a strategic path towards the realisation of the African Union’s Pan-African vision of “An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena”. For this article, the authors selected only five AU Goals & Priority Areas of Agenda 2063 that are mostly relevant to the universities. These are:

Table 1: Five AU Goals & Priority Areas of Agenda 2063 that are mostly relevant to the Universities.

Goal Number	Goal	Priority Area
Goal 2	Well Educated Citizens and Skills revolution underpinned by Science, Technology and Innovation	Education and STI skills driven revolution
Goal 11	Democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and rule of law entrenched	Democracy and good governance Human rights
Goal 12	Capable institutions and transformative leadership in place	Institutions and Leadership Participatory Development and Local Governance
Goal 17	Full Gender Equality in Spheres of Life	Women and Girls Empowerment Violence & Discrimination against Women and Girls
Goal 18	Engaged and Empowered Youth and Children	Youth Empowerment and Children

The implementation of Agenda 2063 is done through five phases of Ten-Year Implementation Plans. These Implementation Plans are aimed at identifying priority areas and setting specific targets for the priorities, coupled with defining strategies and policy measures for implementation. The First Ten-Year Implementation Plan is underpinned by 15 flagship projects and runs from 2013 to 2023. The most relevant flagships to the article are flagship 4 & 15:

Table 2: Flagship Plans

Flagship No.	Flagship
Flagship 4	The Pan-African Virtual and e-University (PAVU). This Flagship project is intended to accelerate development of human capital, science, technology, and innovation in Africa.
Flagship 15	The Encyclopedia Africana was added to the list of Flagship projects by the 2019 AU Summit to systematically document the

3.4 Universities and Sustainable Development

“The 17 SDGs are part of the United Nation’s sustainable agenda aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity by 2030” (UP,2022). The SDGs are an international framework for concrete action having been adopted by 193 countries in 2015. In line with Goals 4 & 9, universities do provide cutting-edge research, quality education, and ground-breaking innovation. In addition, in line with Goal 16, universities are a pivotal part of civil society and therefore better placed to facilitate local and global partnerships as envisaged in Goal 17. The interventions and contributions by universities in these four Goals place them in a good position to contribute towards the achievement of all other goals (El-Jardali, Ataya, & Fadlallah, 2018). Amongst the many roles played by universities, is also supporting students to develop a rigorous scientific acumen, a sense of curiosity, and entrepreneurship highly needed in producing solutions required for sustainable development. At a global level, some universities are already involved in the SDGs through UN-supported initiatives like the Higher Education Sustainable Initiative, the Principles of Response Management Education initiative, and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The challenge becomes how to ensure that universities in Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) also play an intentional, proactive, and leading role in Achieving SDGs (El-Jardali et al, 2018).

In South Africa, there are attempts by universities to facilitate the achievement of the SDGs and Agenda 2063. This could be seen from the fact that five South African universities are signatories to the Tallories Signatories Declaration List. There were 520 signatory institutions as of September 2021. In addition, some universities have divisions dedicated to research, technology, innovation, and partnerships. One such university is the Cape Peninsula University of Technology with a Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Technology, Innovation and Partnerships. Some universities are also offering senior degrees focusing on sustainable development. Examples are the University of Johannesburg offering a Master of Sustainable Urban Planning and Development, the University of Stellenbosch with a Master of Sustainable Development and the University of Cape Town with an M. Phil. Environment, Society and Sustainability. The Central University of Technology has a Centre for Applied Food Security and other units positioned to accelerate sustainable development. This signals the intention and commitment of the following universities (CPUT, website; Peninsula University of Technology, CUT, website, RU, website, UCT, website, UJ, website & Wits, Website) in realising Agenda 2063.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Well-configured and responsive university structures

Is your university positioned to drive the implementation and realisation of Vision 2063?

Most South African universities have embedded sustainable development in their governance hierarchy. This helps to ensure that the implementation of Vision 2063 and Sustainable Development Goals does not fall through the cracks. The literature reviewed reflects that most universities have placed issues of sustainable development as a senior management responsibility. This can be seen at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and at the University of Johannesburg as examples of the point made above. At the senior management level, CPU has a position for a Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Technology, Innovation and Partnerships. When the questionnaires were administered, one of the participants responded that.

“The most telling factor on how our university is positioned to drive Vision 2063 is the fact that issues of sustainable development are driven at the senior management level. This is done through the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor responsible for research, technology, innovation, and partnerships.”

Another participant, at a different university responded that.

“Our university offers an academic programme on sustainable development at the master’s level. These are trained to be thought leaders, opinion makers, and influencers in the space. This is a huge step towards developing foot soldiers and champions for the implementation of Vision 2063.”

There is an ever-increasing number of South African universities that offer academic programmes on sustainable development goals. This is a sure way of ensuring that there is a corps of young future leaders who are grounded on the vision for peaceful, inclusive, sustainable development and growth on the continent.

4.2 Evidence of national and global collaborations

Is the university involved in any partnerships to advance Vision 2063?

There is evidence to suggest that South African universities are serious about the realisation of Vision 2063 and the global Sustainable Development Goals. The fact that Rhodes University and other universities are part of a global network is proof of that. There are five universities (Rhodes University, University of Cape Town, University of Natal, University of the Western Cape, University of Witwatersrand) that are part of the Tallories Declaration Signatories List and that points to the commitment to form partnerships. Furthermore, in 2022, the University of Pretoria launched the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). The purpose of the network is to mobilise and support South African universities and other leading institutions to work towards the realisation of the

SDGs, and to support the country's contribution to the goals globally (UP, 2022). This is in line with the prescripts of the National Development Plan which suggests that:

“Research and development should be significantly expanded. Collaboration across the South African education system and with internationally accredited institutions should lead to higher levels of innovation.” (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Another participant who is a senior university student interviewed commented that:

“Yes, there are many areas where the university is involved in partnerships. The first level of these is at an inter-university level where our university where is playing a prominent role in sector organisations like the Association of College and University Housing Officials-International South African Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC) and NASEV where best practices on issues of sustainable development are shared and replicated. The university is also involved in community engagement programmes where it fosters mutually beneficial collaborations with communities on sustainable development.”

Whilst on the other hand, an SRC member participant commented:

“Our university is involved in many partnerships on sustainable development. These include co-hosting conferences and seminars with prominent individuals, other institutions, and research institutions with similar interests.”

4.3 Lack of co-curricular programmes on sustainable development

Does the university offer a co-curricular programme to reach most or all the students at the university?

From the data collected, it became abundantly clear that most universities in the country do not have a clear, structured, and assessed co-curricular programme on sustainable development. Involvement in sustainable development programmes by students is optional leaving activism in the space open to those who already have knowledge. This leaves many students outside the scope of influence on issues of sustainable development. Most concerning is that students who are mostly left out are those from remote areas, from low-income backgrounds, and generally from low educational backgrounds. One participant from the targeted universities responded that.

“The university does not have a structured co-curricular programme that targets all students of the university. The only thing close to that is programmes that happen through the Green Team for its own members.”

On the other hand, another participant from another university commented that.

“There are campaigns and projects aimed at raising awareness on sustainable development, but I doubt that these qualify to be called a co-curricular programme. These programmes are sometimes unaligned with each other and seem to be duplication with very little impact.”

Different universities have adopted different programmes to support the realisation of the global SDGs and Vision 2063. UWC, for example, has the UWC Green Campus Initiative with its main objective

being to promote environmental sustainability initiatives. The initiative has the following focus areas: Awareness and behaviour change programmes, energy conservation and efficiency, food and dining, green building and purchasing, habitat management and restoration, recycling and waste reduction, water conservation, student residences, student organisations, transportation, knowledge enhancement, community development, & recreation and climate justice. UCT on the other hand also has a green campus initiative which is an action-based organisation of students and staff. Its main objective is to ensure that UCT becomes a sustainable and environmentally friendly institution. This is done through awareness creation, recycling, events, and partnerships.

5. Conclusion

South African universities have covered a lot of ground in putting measures in place to make sure that they become enablers for the realisation of Vision 2063 and for mainstreaming sustainable development. There is however no compelling evidence to indicate that most students are taken on board in raising awareness and in making student leaders particularly motive forces for the implementation of Vision 2063 and the realisation of the global Sustainable Development Goals.

6. Recommendations

The recommendation is that universities should commission their Student Affairs departments to develop structured sustainable development co-curricular programmes with clear assessment tools. The co-curricular programme should be a non-credit-bearing module mandatory for all university programmes. This should be an online module that all first-years need to complete before the end of an academic term. It is also recommended that issues of sustainable development be a permanent agenda feature in all meetings of student societies starting from the Student Representative Council (SRC). These actions would make sure that all university students grapple with aspects of Vision 2063 during their student days.

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