

# Building sustainable, global institutions

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**Higher education institutions have a central role to play in achieving a new sense of individual consciousness and intellectual orientation towards creating a sustainable future, writes *Prof C Raj Kumar***

The demand for recognising issues related to sustainability in higher education is slated to grow exponentially the world over. Educational leaders have a unique opportunity to lead the creation of a new institutional consciousness on sustainability. It is educational leadership that will lead in enabling a new consciousness and intellectual orientation for a sustainable world.

The leading universities of the world have demonstrated a deep, persistent and sustained commitment to interdisciplinarity. The importance of crossing disciplinary boundaries in teaching, learning and research is yet to be fully realised within the Indian higher education system. Institutional mechanisms need to be established within universities to enable students to learn across schools, departments and programmes across the entire university. The big debates of our time will not be addressed by knowledge and understanding of single discipline, but our ability to draw upon the expertise from many disciplines with a view to producing solutions.

At the Caspian Week – World Economic Forum 2020 sessions at Davos, the two key panels: “Education & Leadership for Sustainable World” focussed on educational leadership, sustainability, inclusive development, institutional cultural change, and pedagogies of sustainability. The second panel was on “The Role of Global Universities in Promoting Sustainable Futures”, where the discussion focussed on challenges that universities are confronted with today and that global universities can play a specific role in advancing the cause of sustainable development.

Higher education institutions in particular have a central role to play in achieving a new sense of individual consciousness and intellectual orientation towards creating a sustainable future. Institutional leaders have the opportunity to intervene and address sustainability issues in multiple forms. They can foster new institutional consciousness towards a sustainable world; there are some key steps that need to be initiated. Universities can be crucial partners in the initiation of dialogue between regional scholars, academics, policymakers, researchers and relevant state-level agencies. International collaborations between academics, researchers, international institutions and non-profit foundations engaged in the study and practice on related areas can increase potential to study previously unexplored approaches and potential funding sources for research and initiatives related to sustainability.

Universities can affect deep and meaningful change in local communities and can shape as to how they respond to sustainability issues over the long-term. Adopting approaches to address sustainability and sustainable futures in curriculum, research agendas, infrastructure (energy/water conservation and waste management), campus engagement, public institutional engagement, diversity and accessibility indicators, and institutional environmental footprint are some example of this initiative.

There is more. Specific initiatives are needed at the institutional level. Investing in research that is valuable to local communities will lead the way to an intellectual consciousness. This includes developing research networks with(in) local communities. Relevant disciplinary areas that could lead and contribute to such networks include public policy, law, architecture, journalism, management, environmental studies, and liberal arts. Working in collaboration with local governments is another area for greater exploration by universities and institutional leaders.

We need to develop interdisciplinary global networks focused on sustainable development. These could include research partnerships on exchanging institutional and pedagogical best practices, and transnational dialogues and forums to deliberate and explore new approaches to institutional governance that better address sustainability concerns.

For universities to play an effective role in advancing sustainable local, national, regional and global development, students must be made active stakeholders in existing and future approaches to sustainability. A primary mode of cultivating sustainability consciousness is by grounding relevant themes, issues, challenges and concerns within the curricula while focussing on experiential learning, clinical programmes, capstone projects and community level engagement.

Of particular focus must be those that relate to the most critical local, national and regional issues. A greater range of relevant pedagogical interventions is then made possible through curricula that are aligned towards addressing the challenges of sustainable development. A secondary focus area is to orient faculty members to design and teach courses that are more closely aligned with institutional, national and global sustainability agendas.

While research funding for related areas is important, institutional incentive structures for researchers can go a long way in encouraging greater research on sustainable development themes. One way to address this is for institutional leaders to prioritise

research sub-themes that may contribute directly to sustainable local and national developmental concerns. This prioritisation could imply not only actively setting institutional research agendas on a periodic basis, but also incentivising researchers who choose to work on these areas through greater research support, more accessible dispensing of available institutional funding, adjusting institutional teaching and research responsibilities, and making available necessary infrastructure for such research. All of this has to happen in recognition of the extended time horizons, longer study periods and lack of immediate and demonstrable outcomes that such research may require.

Locally, Fostering community networks will encourage exchange of ideas. These could include networks for institutional, research, teaching and student related initiatives that encourage greater transnational exchange of current practices, ideas, and problem-solving approaches. Of crucial importance will be the role that universities play in not only encouraging and nurturing greater participation of young students in such networks, but also creating opportunities for greater cross-border interactions with peers and enabling students to undertake leadership roles in exploring new approaches to sustainable futures.

Then, institutions adopting interdisciplinary approaches in research, teaching, learning, policy and practice will be key to acting progressively on sustainability issues. For universities, this means that investing in creating opportunities and pathways for interdisciplinary interactions will be essential. One approach to this is to institutionalise interdisciplinarity across core functions. For instance, in course offerings, the availability of interdisciplinary, cross-listed electives is a useful way to encourage students to think and learn outside their own subject areas. Universities could also enable greater interdisciplinary interactions within their campuses, for instance through conscious and deliberate design of their physical infrastructure and facilities, and offering greater support for teachers and researchers who undertake interdisciplinary initiatives and projects.

Higher education institutions necessarily need to be as representative as possible of their host communities and regions in order to survive and thrive. Universities have a greater obligation to accomplish such representation given the public character of their mission and purpose, and the broad societal goals they commit to achieve. These aims take on greater significance in developing economies, and given the value that a robust higher education system can add to achieving national developmental goals. These include providing adequately representative access, particularly to marginalised groups of citizens; balancing such access with the provision of university environments that are of global standards; helping our students bridge gaps in communication and thinking skills that can meet the requirements of globalised careers and roles; and perhaps most importantly, institutionalising efforts to identify and correct disparities in diversity and inclusion indicators.

Universities are confronted with the challenge of embracing globalised modes of functioning and expansion while simultaneously remaining rooted, mindful and responsive to local, national and regional developmental and sustainability concerns.

Eventually, the role that academic leadership plays in creating a beneficial environment will be key to creating a systematic process for sustainability. Approaches to creating institutional environments that are conducive to the study and practice of sustainability necessarily need to be whole-system oriented.

Such approaches could take the form of making sustainability a lived experience within campus environments and spaces. Hence sustainability as a concept is then not far removed from the everyday experience of teaching, learning, working and residing within campus environments.

There is a need to build an attitude of conservation of natural and other resources. Institutions need to move towards adoption of alternate technologies, increasing green cover, water and energy conservation, reducing waste, and increasing intra-campus awareness of its carbon footprint within host regions.

Leaders must bring greater awareness of adverse impacts of developmental trajectories on local/host communities while, interweaving sustainable objectives into all aspects of university activities including administration, pedagogy, and residential life.

While 21st century universities must serve as bastions for academic and scholarly work, they must also serve as models of organisational innovation, agility in a complex world, creative negotiation with change, and representative in demographic, identity and design with local and national communities. These are key elements that will determine the preparedness of universities to contribute to building more sustainable futures while preparing students more adequately to intervene in sustainable development efforts.

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