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A holistic blueprint for sustainability publication outlet

Lily KONG

Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

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Citation

KONG, Lily, "A holistic blueprint for sustainability publication outlet" (2023). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3770.

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A holistic blueprint for sustainability publication outlet

Lily Kong

2 May 2023

Instead of compartmentalising decisions about infrastructure or resource allocation, universities need a whole-system approach to sustainability that shifts attitudes and behaviour, writes Lily Kong

While planning a recent reception, my colleagues in the organising committee scrutinised food catering options to ascertain whether packaging materials were biodegradable. Although seemingly minute in global impact, such procurement practices reflect our ethos as a university. These kinds of daily actions and decisions testify to how, in our efforts to cultivate a greener university, we seek to encourage and embed sustainability as a mindset.

Sustainability is the buzzword of our times. More than a trending search term, it is lingua franca. Regardless of where we sit in the global order, protecting the world's resources needs little justification.

Transformative not transmissive education for sustainability

For the common good: why we need ecological universities

To offset or not to offset – that is the question

So, how can universities connect their sustainability plans to the wider world?

Integrating sustainability at an institutional level

Universities can integrate sustainability targets into institutional plans. About 700 universities in the US and Canada, for example, participate in the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (Stars). Aligned to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this system encourages universities to self-report their sustainability performance.

Sustainability efforts can also focus on environmental protection and preservation, where targets are set to reduce carbon emissions from campus buildings, reduce water usage or waste and

expand sustainable purchasing and investment. The University of Oxford's Environmental Sustainability Strategy, for instance, aims for net zero carbon emissions by 2035, addressing biodiversity impact from its operations and supply chain. Princeton University's framework highlights energy conservation with operational snapshots of reduced consumption and increased take-up of alternative energy sources.

Beyond metrics: taking a holistic approach

These objectives demonstrate resolve to improve environmental outcomes. However, if sustainability plans are positioned using only metrics, they are at best reductive and limited.

To move the needle, we must deep-dive into what sustainability really entails. Instead of compartmentalising decisions about infrastructure or resource allocation, we need a holistic approach that shifts attitude and behaviour. This requires sustainability plans to be aligned with the university's broader strategic agendas, rather than left in silos.

At Singapore Management University (SMU), our sustainability blueprint amalgamates behavioural and mindset change. Aligned to SMU Vision 2025, the blueprint outlines four strategies for sustainability: cultivate a greener university; develop change agents; drive impactful research; and foster resilient communities. Targets are mapped onto relevant SDGs, giving focus and tangibility to planned action.

Integrative curriculum and change agents

To generate creative solutions and build talent, universities can increase research and curricula – from undergraduate level up – in sustainability. We should ensure this is not merely token representation of the sustainability agenda.

To develop change agents at SMU, we aim to embed sustainability across the curricula – from foundational digital resources that all freshmen are required to access to a sustainability management major in the School of Business, which offers courses such as Corporate Sustainability and Product Value Proposition Design, and Sustainable Operations.

Universities can also encourage students to participate in community projects that are socially conscious and sustainable, and address specific SDGs.

Such intentional programming will build the talent pipeline for green industries and engender solutions for complex environmental challenges. We believe they will also have transformational impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

Resilience and social sustainability

Educating students means preparing them for leadership in organisations that will inevitably encounter economic and technological disruption. Acknowledging this reality of more frequent economic, social or political upheavals, the World Economic Forum launched the Resilience Consortium in May 2022 to build global resilience and secure a sustainable future for all.

In the same vein, universities should set targets for building resilience and social sustainability. To foster resilient communities, we must adopt a multi-pronged framework that considers the inter-related dimensions of wellness – physical, intellectual, social, emotional, career and financial. For students, we have developed a framework to guide programme development. This is premised on three dimensions: education, encouragement (via professional and peer support platforms) and experience (exposure of students to authentic learning environments).

Alignment to country-level objectives

Finally, universities' plans can gain traction when aligned to their city's or country's sustainability agendas. In many ways, SMU's blueprint is underscored by the Singapore Green Plan 2030, which rests on five pillars: city in nature, energy reset, sustainable living, green economy and resilient future.

By prioritising research in areas such as urban infrastructure and sustainable finance, universities can contribute to economic and social priorities. One example is the Singapore Green Finance Centre, a collaboration between Imperial College Business School and SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business. It conducts multidisciplinary research and talent development opportunities in the areas of sustainability, climate and green finance to support and transform businesses in Asia.

It is imperative that universities join the sustainability cause because we impact economies and societies of the future. With an expanded perspective that establishes equilibrium between economic growth, environmental stewardship and social well-being, we can anchor belief systems and build competencies to maintain this delicate balance over time.

Lily Kong is the president of Singapore Management University.

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