

## REVIEW



# When Higher Education Engages Glocal Challenges of Sustainable and Equitable Development: A Promising Way Forward

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**Abstract:** Sustainable and equitable development requires comprehensive and collaborative initiatives that avoid and remedy environmental harms and remove and alleviate poverty-contributing factors. This review article presents a promising way forward for universities to engage in sustainable development challenges that build on South-North collaboration and the interests, dedication, energy, and contributions of today's youth. First, we introduce critical dimensions of the contemporary global challenge of sustainable development along with their interconnected features. We next review the crucial sustainable development Higher-Education roles and gaps of tertiary education institutions along with encouraging educational approaches. Then, we set forth three innovative initiatives that, implemented collectively, promise to address prevailing shortcomings in the ways that universities currently approach these challenges. The linked initiatives are (1) transnational competence curricula and preparation, (2) South-North Higher Education Consortia, and (3) a Global Challenges Corps staffed by a transnational cadre of higher education graduates and professionals. These proposals are accompanied by a detailed evaluation framework. The world's institutions of higher learning are strategically positioned to distinguish and address current and upcoming challenges of sustainable development. In combination, our three proposed initiatives offer tertiary-level institutions a breakthrough approach for preparing current and future students interested in gaining valuable sustainability problem-solving skills. By embracing the institutional change pathways elaborated here, forward-looking universities will move to a far stronger position from which to provide tomorrow's students with valuable skills and experiences for tackling forthcoming glocal socio-ecological challenges.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, environmental degradation, poverty alleviation, transnational competence, youth, higher education

## 1. Introduction

Universities in the Global South and the Global North are in an especially influential position to equip current and future students, researchers, professionals, and policy leaders who are committed to discovering and implementing solutions to critical arising glocal (global↔local) challenges of equitable and sustainable development. In the enduring words of Boyer [1], “the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems.” What is needed is a viable collective vision that will yield results. In this article, we present a promising way forward that builds on South-North collaboration side by side with the interests, dedication, energy, and contributions of today's youth.

Our discussion proceeds as follows: first, we introduce the critical dimensions of the contemporary global challenge of sustainable development along with their interconnected features. We next review the vital sustainable development roles of higher education institutions around the world along with encouraging educational approaches and gaps. Then, we set forth three innovative

initiatives that, implemented collectively, promise to address prevailing shortcomings in the ways that universities currently approach these challenges. The linked initiatives are (1) transnational competence (TC) curricula and preparation, (2) South-North Higher Education Consortia, and (3) a Global Challenges Corps (GCC) staffed by a transnational cadre of higher education graduates and professionals.

## 2. The Sustainable Development Challenges

Sustainable and equitable development requires comprehensive and collaborative initiatives that avoid and remedy environmental harms and remove and alleviate poverty-contributing factors. The objective is to ensure the well-being of all human and non-human creatures without compromising the finite resources available to future generations [2–4]. In short, sustainable development offers a vital pathway for mitigating and resolving the most daunting current and forthcoming challenges facing humanity and the planet.

The challenges associated with sustainable development are compounded by multiple entanglements [5]. The Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare's “Meeting the Grand Challenge to Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment” position paper

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explicitly recognizes the “intersection of social and environmental issues,” particularly the need to reduce emissions and create a protective net that supports multifaceted climate-resilient development inclusive of leadership and voices from within affected communities – especially among marginalized and migrant communities [6].

The UN *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* lists 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets aimed at stimulating critical actions in the interest of humanity and planet Earth [7]. Nearly a decade after the adoption of Agenda 2030, we continue to face daunting global challenges associated with livelihood construction and the reduction of poverty, North-South and intra-nation inequalities, ecosystem harms, and non-sustainable practices that merit attention among university educators [8]. The UN Environment Programme’s 2024 Global Resources Outlook report warns of accelerated global trends in non-sustainable resource extraction and utilization of limited natural resources.<sup>1</sup> While urgent actions are needed, “doomsday messages” that ignore long-term and continued progress “do more harm than good” [9].

### 3. Higher Education and the Challenges of Equitable and Sustainable Development

The world needs tertiary-level education institutions, whose enrollments are expanding in both the South and the North [10], to be at the forefront in addressing encroaching threats to people and the planet. In future-focused higher educational undertakings, critical awareness will be nurtured regarding ecosystem harms, depletion of vital natural resources, biodiversity loss, water stress and ocean pollution, green energy, improved waste management practices, and public health hazards along with source threats associated with population expansion, overconsumption [11], economic inequities, armed conflicts, human displacement, and exploitation of fossil fuels and other raw materials. The role of university leaders also extends to identifying and discovering potential offsetting technologies and rewarding lifestyle changes.

The *2030 Agenda* calls for the adoption of “bold and transformative steps, which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path.”<sup>2</sup> Enhanced and transformed tertiary education institutions [8], along with a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, are needed for marshaling the required measures and attaining the demanding *2030 Agenda*. In line with partnering, SDG 4 is widely referred to as “the education SDG” [12]. Moreover, “SDG 4 has a high level of correlation with all the other SDGs” [8, 13].

In alignment with their encompassing and influential positioning, multiple conferences and international declarations have urged tertiary institutions worldwide to transition from a peripheral to a lead role in advancing sustainable development [14–16].<sup>3</sup> It is crucial in this connection that universities around the world provide today’s youth with educational opportunities that prepare them for professional careers and transformative public and private sector leadership roles that promote fulfillment of the *2030 Agendas* sustainable development objectives [10, 17]. We rely on university researchers and educators to convey honest and promising insights that will inspire and galvanize young people to engage

in transformative action. The requisite optimism in the face of sustainable development challenges involves finding opportunities for making progress and remaining confident that one’s actions can be difference makers [9].

The foundational higher education response engages students in cross-disciplinary learning about the interconnected socio-economic and policy change processes occurring in low-income countries and in disadvantaged regions of wealthy countries. Above all, educators must keep in mind that enhancing opportunities for the many and “Leaving No One Behind” constitutes the essential transformative promise of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the SDGs, as a collective way forward [8]. Thus, universities need to equip youth educated in the South and North with competencies suited for glocal initiatives that uplift disadvantaged persons through dedicated service in bilateral, international, and independent community development agencies.

At the same time, as universities advance SDG objectives by preparing committed professionals, the SDGs provide opportunities for higher education institutions to display relevance and socio-economic impact, establish collaborative networks, and appeal to additional funding sources [18]. In addition, sustainability-informed education can drive widespread transformation of individual behavior; that is, everyone learning to act as “a change maker on behalf of sustainable development” [19, 20].

Although not sufficient, some higher education institutions have initiated sustainability or sustainable development platforms [21, 22]. Indeed, the United Nations has designated 17 tertiary institutions around the world as “SDG Hubs” devoted to preparing graduates to address the SDGs [23]. Nevertheless, the higher education sector as a whole is “on a sustainability journey” without certainty regarding the final destination [13, 24].<sup>4</sup> Going forward, we need to distinguish and assess the broad array of activities relevant to sustainable and equitable development available to and engaged in by universities and to conduct evaluative research aimed at identifying the impact in practice of these activities on society [17, 23].<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1. Educating for sustainable development

How might Southern and Northern universities best prepare their graduates to fulfill an upbeat vision of sustainable and equitable development by engaging in activities that promote the realization of requisite impact objectives? Educating for sustainable development requires that universities provide opportunities for “transformative thinking and learning” [26] that are future-focused. First and foremost, educators need to prepare learners for tackling sustainable development challenges [8, 27] by prioritizing skill development that facilitates transformative community-engaged and transnationally connected civic roles and responsible personal behavior [11, 28, 29]. Institutional commitment to this goal requires defusing preoccupation with factors that divert attention from advancing civic engagement, such as global rankings and pursuit of national and international reputation and status [28].

One lagging area that requires special attention is the integration of sustainable development learning in secondary- and

<sup>1</sup>Global Resources Outlook 2024 | UNEP – UN Environment Programme

<sup>2</sup><https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld.0>

<sup>3</sup>By September 2024, 524 chief higher education executives from more than 50 nation states had signed the Talloires Declaration’s 10-point action plan commitment to advancing an “equitable and sustainable future for all humankind in harmony with nature.” <https://ulsf.org/talloires-declaration/>

<sup>4</sup>Based on their “rigorous” literature review, Unterhalter and Howell [8] conclude that tertiary education institutions in low- and middle-income countries generally are “not managing to fully realise their potential with regard to their role in development.”

<sup>5</sup>According to Chapungu and Nhamo [25], engaged academics at Great Zimbabwe University have achieved limited local SDG impact, primarily due to a lack of funding and resources for community-based projects.

primary-school teacher education [8, 30, 31]. By “empowering future generations to act and ignite sustainable change,” teacher educators can catalyze systemic transformations [32, 33].

### 3.1.1. Experiential learning

Experiential learning offers an educational approach with special potential for cultivating empathetic graduates who are prepared for and dedicated to creating “a sustainable future” [34]. Participation in community-supported projects that directly address environmental degradation and sustainable development issues enhances network building and lifelong learning by generating (1) more profound insights concerning sustainable development’s contextual complexity, (2) critical insights regarding connections between social justice and environmental sustainability, (3) a deeper and more empathetic consciousness of one’s global responsibility, (4) confidence in one’s ability to exert a positive impact, and (5) dedication to promoting sustainable practices [20, 34, 35].

Another particularly rewarding approach involves introducing practical student activities that link humanities, science, and social-science education with the SDGs [27].<sup>6</sup> For instance, instructors can assign students the collective task of devising a cross-national collaboration that would tackle a specific sustainable development challenge within a fixed time frame,<sup>7</sup> for example: (1) responsible industrial and agricultural production; (2) sustainable consumption; (3) enhanced waste management; (4) low-emission transportation innovations; or (5) applications of Indigenous knowledge [38].<sup>8</sup>

In Jamaica, informed students develop a commitment to future sustainability by applying community-based analyses to the eco-social pillars of sustainable development and through interaction with local stakeholders [39]. At Germany’s Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, students lead sustainable development group-project initiatives that respond to the goals of non-university collaborators [40].<sup>9</sup> Nepal’s Kathmandu University works to enable grassroots advances through its policy outreach center, and its School of Management’s Policy Lab supports the involvement of rural youth in policymaking and offers workshops for government organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations that are intended to enhance local and national policy decision-making [41].

Through the University of The Gambia’s Sustainable Development Goal Challenge program in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), student teams develop innovative local projects oriented around one or more of the SDGs that respond to the “pressing development needs of The Gambia” (Localizing the SDGs | United Nations in The Gambia). Regrettably, however, potential student contributions to sustainable development remain constrained by funding challenges in Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa [25], Nigeria [42], and other places.

<sup>6</sup>Lendínez-Turón et al. [36] further assert that introducing students at Southern and Northern tertiary institutions to the SDG challenges and opportunities that practitioners encounter is critical in light of the vital implementing role that graduating public administrators play worldwide.

<sup>7</sup>Moratis and Beyne [37] report on useful project guidelines for multicultural teams of 5–6 members: (1) adopt a specific SDG focus, (2) set a six-month time frame for completion, (3) include opportunities for organizing and persuading collaborating stakeholders to work toward realization of a common goal or goals, and (4) provide chances for each team member to demonstrate leadership competencies and growth in personal skill development.

<sup>8</sup>For a list of available sustainability-related projects that interested students could opt to engage with, see The University of Manchester’s Living Lab (Students – University Living Lab).

<sup>9</sup>On the importance of collaboration with private sector and government employers in the design of courses linked to preparing graduates for workplace requirements, see Unterhalter and Howell [8].

### 3.1.2. Incorporating Indigenous wisdom

“Justice-based environmental sustainability” [43] incorporates a complementary educational initiative that emphasizes “a shared planetary identity” with non-human entities [44]. Engaging Indigenous perspectives and integrating place-based insights into university courses enhances this learning objective [43, 45].

Indigenous cultures and “ways of knowing” give current student generations with “exemplars” of relationships with specific ecological contexts and places that have demonstrated viability and sustainability [46]. One valuable strategy for incorporating Indigenous wisdom into classroom instruction involves insight sharing by invited Indigenous knowledge possessors regarding how their culture adapted to environmental conditions encountered over generations.

### 3.1.3. Gamification

Lisa Boragine advocates game-based learning given its potential to expand students’ insights into complex problems and their ability collaboratively to envisage and articulate potential solutions of sustainability challenges. Immersion in gamification also provides empathy and action-inspiring benefits [47].

For instance, the game *New Shores* invites students to “develop a remote island community” in ways that promote learning about challenges involved with sustainably managing ecological resources and ways of balancing “short-term individual gains” with shared responsibility for community resources [47]. Hayes [48] also finds that the active agency and co-curricular design involved in gamification that contextualizes social justice, global poverty, climate, and ecological crisis promote creativity and innovation and interest in lifelong and life-wide learning.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.1.4. Distance-learning opportunities

Fischer and Isenmann [50] extol the virtues of distance and online learning primarily given their capacity to reach and educate vast numbers of sustainable development practitioners. University teachers can also enhance prospects for attaining sustainable development objectives by using social media and podcasting to disseminate SDG-related research findings and calls to action with wide audiences [51].

### 3.1.5. Transnational competence (TC) preparation

To address the challenges of sustainable and equitable development effectively and in an optimistic manner, higher education institutions must move from exclusive reliance on information-focused teaching to transformative competency-centered preparation [52]. Universities in the South and North are exceptionally well-positioned for empowering students to “develop the core competencies which [will] allow them to actively engage with the world, and help to make it a more just and sustainable place” [27].

The arising question is “what are the precise 21st-century competencies . . . graduates must possess to navigate the uncertainties of the future” [53]? The educational preparation of versatile professionals who are agents of “sustainability transformation” [48] necessitates an approach to interpersonal competence that goes further than knowledge-building and intercultural instruction [54, 55] and includes the capability to engage in actions that will help attain SDG objectives [56]. Fully equipping graduates for the future

<sup>10</sup>Providing opportunities for students to experiment with innovative technologies and creative approaches is also associated with “enhanced student engagement with the sustainability dimensions” of the architectural higher education curriculum [49].



challenges of sustainable development calls for incorporating TC preparation in Northern and Southern universities.

The TC method of higher learning incorporates five reinforcing capabilities: analytic, creative, emotional, communicative, and functional [54, 57, 58]. TC prepares learners for tackling challenges of sustainable development through context-focused skill preparation and personal eco-social commitment [20].

Basilico et al. [59] suggest two helpful preparatory skills that can be incorporated into communicative and functional TC training: (1) careful listening, “especially [to] those who disagree with you,” and (2) devoting special attention to advocacy and collaborative network building with mobilized supporters. Imbued in TC preparation for challenges of equitable and sustainable development are the value of trans-professional teamwork [60] and the emotional importance of “caring.” Caring for place, ourselves, and others constitutes a potent driver for generating collaborative initiatives on behalf of sustainable and equitable development.

A set of TC-specific pedagogical tools aimed at advancing transnational competencies among learners can be found in Koehn and Rosenau’s work [61]. The “living lab” at Brazil’s Newton University strives to enrich engineering students with 15 skills of value for creatively addressing “real-world problems” that encompass all five transnational competencies [62].

### 3.1.6. Eco-justice pedagogy and green education

Lin et al. [63] propose that tertiary-level institutions utilize “anti-anthropocentric” and “eco-justice” pedagogies in order to nurture deep love and respect for nature among learners. The eco-justice method emphasizes finding creative ways to engage students’ bodies, hearts, and spirits that stimulate meaningful and lasting ecological connections [63]. In terms of instruction, the authors suggest nurturing “an eco-identity”<sup>11</sup> or we-togetherness with nature through storytelling, along with mindfulness and meditation exercises, transnational competence experiences, simulations, and artistic encounters [63]. Such teaching methods are likely to stimulate active engagements because learners will come away with indignation, anger, and frustration when seeing the destruction of their intimate friends [nature] [63]. Martens [65] similarly argues for preparing graduates for regenerative education who will be devoted to maintaining and rebuilding planetary health.

Green education similarly nurtures the development of direct personal interactions with the natural world and “promotes values like environmental stewardship, sustainability, empathy for nature,” and a sense of responsibility for the “well-being of future generations” [66]. It encourages students to adopt sustainable behavior, participate in community initiatives, advocate for policy changes, and make environmentally conscious choices [66]. Green education also empowers students to think critically about sources of information, question assumptions, and evaluate the credibility of claims related to environmental issues at the same time as it inspires and equips them to become active participants in building a more sustainable and resilient world [66]. It also helps learners develop a systems perspective and comprehend how local collaborations with government agencies, NGOs, and private firms can have regional, national, and transnational impacts [66].

## 4. Promising Transnational Initiatives

Although intra-institutional efforts are valuable and should be encouraged, eco-social justice and sustainable development present complex glocal challenges that need to be addressed more comprehensively [63]. Transnational and collaborative, multi-stakeholder attention [4] is necessary. Therefore, we now turn to recommendations for two transnational initiatives that promise to facilitate the fulfillment of the objectives of education for sustainable development.

### 4.1. South-North higher education consortia

SDG Target 17.16 calls for the global establishment of “multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” [38]. For maximum impact in addressing Target 17.16, we advocate the establishment of transnational consortia of tertiary education institutions specifically focused on advancing sustainable development that will foster multidisciplinary and cross-national collaboration among researchers and practicing professionals. Teams of consortia members will pursue evidence-based, large-scale, interconnected and multiple-level, durable, and measurable action-focused initiatives and policies aimed at addressing challenges of sustainable and equitable development that stretch beyond any one university’s problem-solving capacity. Such transnational partnerships will serve as resource-maximizing vehicles for bringing multiple stakeholders together in ways that enhance higher education’s capacity to generate and anchor culturally and place-relevant knowledge when tackling shared sustainable development challenges [10, 42, 64, 67–70].<sup>12</sup> One partial example is the Global Consortium of Sustainability Outcomes, a transnational assemblage of research organizations and higher education institutions that “collaborate to develop, test, teach and transfer potential solutions to worldwide sustainability problems” [72].<sup>13</sup>

The ideal members of a jointly established consortium would be universities that possess a “high interest” in equitable and sustainable development objectives and contribute various resources needed for “strategy formulation and implementation” [4]. Commitment by senior-level champions within participating tertiary-level institutions works to ensure that each university can overcome internal obstacles, embrace necessary structural transformations, and be counted on fully to support emerging transnational initiatives [4, 74]. The overarching goals of each South-North Higher Education Consortium would be maximum wins for all the partners and the maximum impact of the partnership as a whole [4].

Toward this end, consortia creation and operation would draw fruitfully on the partnering principles set forth in the UN’s *SDG Partnership Guidebook*. Within a wide and ambitious set of potential common interests, the *Guidebook*’s collaborative advantage framework includes insightful value-assessment and value-maximization suggestions for opening negotiations [4]. Consortium members will

<sup>11</sup> Whitsed et al. [64] refer to this as an “ecological worldview” that perceives “all living and non-living things” as constituting one interdependent Earth community.

<sup>12</sup> The Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) emphasizes “public impact research” that improves lives and societal conditions at local, national, and transnational levels [16, 71].

<sup>13</sup> Relevant national and regional university-partnership platforms include Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA), the Mexican Consortium University for Sustainable Development (COMPLEXUS), ARIUSA (Portugal, Spain, Central and South America), the Japanese Higher Education for Sustainable Development Network, the US Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the Australian Campuses Towards Sustainability Network [16, 73], and the Aurora European Universities Alliance [64].

be well-served by co-articulating a compelling “shared narrative” regarding sustainable development objectives and by bringing a “partnering mindset” – including the ability to recognize that other members might possess more relevant knowledge and/or resources when addressing specific challenges, openness to shared decision-making, willingness to contribute on behalf of the consortium as a whole, and placing priority on ongoing learning and the capacity to make necessary corrections [4].<sup>14</sup> Frequent consultations with the *Guidebook’s* comprehensive table of partnership health indicators [4] would enable consortia leaders to keep the collective sustainable development initiative on track.

The various consortia devoted to sustainable development initiatives would include universities from multiple nation states operating on the basis of equitable and symmetrical collaboration [4, 8, 35, 39, 68]. Each voluntary-participation consortium would also involve faculty, researchers, and professionals from diverse backgrounds (disciplines, nationalities, and socioeconomic status) in promising learning, research, and service undertakings.

South-North Higher Education Consortia can benefit from the experiences of two existing educational consortia: (1) the World Universities Network, a collaborative arrangement of 22 comprehensive research universities spanning six continents that supports research projects that address global sustainable development challenges<sup>15</sup> and (2) the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD), an interdisciplinary partnership of students, scholars, and practicing professionals devoted to “Building Knowledge for Social Development Worldwide For Social Change.”<sup>16</sup> ICSD expedites collaborative initiatives with the World Bank, UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, human service organizations, and university undertakings and collaborates and delivers consultative services that involve curriculum development, transnational research networking, and demonstration ventures. ICSD’s Technical Assistance Roster “links members’ special expertise in international social development to agencies, governments, and organizations upon request.”<sup>17</sup>

An arising challenge when seeking solutions is to inspire collaborative initiatives that tackle linkages that bind the socioeconomic and environmental dimensions of equitable and sustainable development. The vision of the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2020–2030, Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind* contributes to the design that South-North consortia can build on in empowering future-centered, competency-focused education. The “eco-social world” idea necessitates that change leaders re-envision and dedicate themselves to advancing a shared sustainable future. This co-constructing endeavor includes a central place for South-North Higher Education Consortia that promote collective learning and inspire contextually applicable policy actions.

Enhancing capacity among Southern higher education institutions is crucial for the realization of planetary sustainability and equitable development [75]. The African Union’s Second Decade for Education Action Plan advocates that the continent’s tertiary education institutions establish transnational collaborations for the purpose of promoting sustainable development initiatives [76]. Kenya’s Moi University has an exemplary record in terms of the number of social development and economic empowerment

partnerships aimed at capacity building and impact attainment; it has entered into higher education institutions in Europe and North America [69, 76]. Moi University’s successful record of partnership sustainability can be attributed to the adoption of a symmetrical, equitable, and complementary South-North steering framework along with reciprocal academic and governance embeddedness [4, 68, 69, 77].<sup>18</sup>

Another exemplary long-term South-North arrangement is the Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development (CESD). Through CESD, Makerere University in Uganda and the Karolinska Institute in Sweden integrate the SDGs into higher education and provide relevant resources for students and researchers [39]. Spearheaded by committed top-level managers, the University of Arequipa in Peru succeeded in enhancing local research capabilities needed for addressing contextually arising development challenges through international linkages with other universities [74].

Forward-looking universities will also drive consortia to collaborate in mutually rewarding sustainable development projects with external organizations and players [69]. In this connection, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network constitutes a model South-North Higher Education Consortium “at the epicenter of global research on SDGs” that brings together “experts from public and private research institutes, universities, private sector and government research organizations” and delivers educational programs that cover a variety of topics related to sustainable development [77]. Sustainable Development Network Youth, a UN initiative, is a partially virtual worldwide collection of higher education institutions that integrates sustainable development into higher education and serves as a point of unity and collaboration for local action, as well as [for] building capacity to address concrete issues [78].

Multifaceted and innovative consortia can fruitfully co-engage on contextual “conditions of possibility” with civil society organizations,<sup>19</sup> businesses, health providers, foundations and donors, host communities, governments, alumni, intermediary organizations such as academic networks and think tanks, and other stakeholders. Such initiatives can be particularly rewarding for local development and for connecting “local needs and complexities . . . with wider concerns” in ways that accelerate SDG implementation [8] by catalyzing changes that trigger a ripple effect among participants [1, 4, 10, 14, 71, 79]. For instance, the US Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development has brought together schools, science and research, faith organizations, NGOs, government agencies, and youth advocacy groups to support the implementation of sustainability initiatives [16]. The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), a Barcelona-based think tank focused on promoting sustainable development, connects 268 universities in 85 countries [79].

## 4.2. Global Challenges Corps (GCC)

In terms of prospects for advancing sustainable development, “there is an extraordinary reservoir of idealism, goodwill and determination [to make a difference] as well as considerable skill and experience on offer” [80, 81]. One of the most decisive ways in which committed youth in the South and North can facilitate sustainable development rests on how they spend their time. Hannah

<sup>14</sup>For an outline of the considerations that could fit into a consortium-agreement template, see Stibbe and Prescott [4].

<sup>15</sup><https://wun.ac.uk/about/>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.socialdevelopment.net/>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.socialdevelopment.net/about-us/>

<sup>18</sup>Valuable Southern-partner contributions to a consortium include “non-material resources such as knowledge of host country context and access to local stakeholders” [14] along with innovative research approaches and service initiatives with application in low-income areas of the global North [69].

<sup>19</sup>On the resources, insights, and actions that civil society organizations can contribute, see Stibbe and Prescott [4].

Ritchie [9] exhorts young people to “pick a great career where you can really make a difference” with the approximately 80,000 hours one will spend working over the course of a lifetime. Fortunately, the number of humanitarian responders, providers of health care, youth mappers, teachers, and other professionals and pre-professional volunteers to work in Southern places continues to grow [82–84].

Building on this momentum, we envision the creation of a GCC that will mobilize and deploy competitively selected skilled persons who desire to serve in ways that will remedy existing shortages in trained sustainable development and social justice personnel that currently plague many Southern countries and underserved Northern residents.<sup>20</sup> Along with experienced specialists, the proposed GCC will mobilize youthful recruits from Southern and Northern countries, “working side by side, very often in a country which is unfamiliar to them” [86]. GCC will recruit and employ persons who are accepting of and prepared for transnationally rotating and modestly salaried placements and are also committed to setting in motion an exit strategy through local-counterpart training.

For maximum global SDG impact, South-North Higher Education Consortia will devote attention to preparing a stream of motivated individuals for post-graduation GCC participation. The TC learning framework applied to the envisioned consortia provides a supportive underlying academic foundation for equipping GCC recruits from multiple disciplinary and transdisciplinary backgrounds for arising contextual challenges of sustainable development.

The GCC’s sustainable development projects will primarily be selected from situations where host communities [87] identify crucial competency voids [88]. Personnel posted to GCC project-execution teams will be contextually equipped and positioned to tackle “primary sources” of eco-social challenges and identify and appreciate reverse innovations [69, 82, 87]. Projects will be carried out within a framework that comprehends and attends to underlying drivers that undermine sustainability.

The GCC’s multinational personnel will contribute informed, need-driven action plans and mobilize and collaborate with key stakeholders [60, 89]. To maximize sustainability prospects, projects will incorporate “explicit plans for scale up, strategies for influencing policies” [90], a detailed exit plan that is consistently implemented, and rigorous evaluations that include the extent to which local community members and their organizations contributed in terms of planning, applying local expertise, and gathering support for the undertaking [14]. For instance, when a small-scale sustainable development project is successful “and *government* embraces it, the partnership can be massively scaled in short amount of time – and therefore generate huge impact” [4].

To realize this vision, philanthropic and other donor organizations devoted to enhancing transnational collaboration and improving the quality of life for people around the world, such as the Gates Foundation, need to step up by mobilizing support and funding for the GCC and by working with higher education leaders in shaping its creation. Universities and consortia around the world can also serve as the primary pipelines for GCC staffing by producing transnationally competent and sustainable development-skilled graduates who are motivated to contribute by joining the auspicious NGO.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>This discussion elevates and expands on Kerry et al.’s [85] proposed International Health Service Corps.

<sup>21</sup>For instance, the GCC could draw upon graduates of the Aurora European Universities Alliance consortium’s integrated work packages who are graduates prepared and committed for tackling global challenges of sustainable development [64].

## 5. Evaluation Framework

Currently, we confront a void in “knowledge and evidence about higher institutions’ contributions to (un)sustainability and the associated challenges” [43]. We await methodologically sound and independent evaluations focused on teaching, scholarly, policy, and action outcomes and impacts that devote serious attention to stakeholders and participant assessments. A particularly important indicator is the degree to which equity for all and the future well-being of planet Earth are “mainstreamed” across disciplines and academic programs [32].

Curricular evaluations will also explore the extent to which student-designed community development projects were contextually relevant, impactful, and sustainable [91]. Comparative (pre- and post-) peer and self-evaluations of changes in skills and attitudes are likely to be especially revealing in TC learning [37, 91].

Assessing the outcomes and impacts of diverse academic initiatives and collaborative undertakings provides valuable evidence and insights concerning the interventions and conditions that generate the most beneficial results and for whom. Are participating higher education institutions and consortia connecting multiple stakeholders engaged in local, national, and transnational sustainable development projects and policy undertakings? Have they enhanced the capacity of community organizations and other stakeholders to address contextual and transnationally connected development equity challenges? Mule and Kamaara [69] provide a helpful list of evaluative inquiries focused on the degree and nature of involvement by community partners and on the costs and benefits of stakeholder engagement.

Have South-North Higher Education Consortia expanded the boundaries and enriched the networking, research, higher education, and policy-advocacy capacity of participating universities? Did consortia initiatives address the drivers of equitable and sustainable development? Did the consortia under evaluation take unintended consequences into consideration [92]? Did consortium members demonstrate fearlessness and transparency by not shirking from controversial issues and through openness to and learning from internal and external criticism [64] and to experimentation [93]?

Did creative consortia initiatives integrate human and natural systems? Have collaborative undertakings enhanced well-being “for all people and living things, and natural ecosystems and environments?” [64] Were the project and policy impacts transformational and durable?

Has an effective and sustainable GCC, reinforced by TC-prepared functionaries, been established? How do stakeholders evaluate the analytic, creative, emotional, communicative, and functional TC of GCC staffers? What evidence exists regarding GCC’s sustainable and civic engagement impacts? Have Corps members contributed to “development-at-home, including mutual learning and problem-solving” [28]? Have the GCC’s engagements expanded globally?

Along with concluding summative assessments, ongoing formative evaluations that incorporate findings from diverse sources allow for adapting institutional and educational interventions as evidence of their effectiveness grows. In addition, outcome failures “can be generative if treated as an opportunity to learn from mistakes so as not to repeat them” [18].

## 6. Conclusion

Sustainable and equitable development requires comprehensive and integrated socioeconomic and political policies and actions that will arrest environmental degradation. In pursuit of this urgent



objective, universities around the world gain by joining transdisciplinary consortia that facilitate the ability of teaching faculty, researchers, and students to tackle complex intertwined trials in a collaborative and inclusive manner that engages nonacademic stakeholders in mutually beneficial activity.

One available pathway to success combines TC education and expanded experiential learning at the community level with participation in South-North Higher Education Consortia side by side with the formation of a robust GCC. In combination, TC curricula, transnational consortia, and the GCC offer tertiary-level institutions a breakthrough approach for preparing current and future students interested in gaining valuable sustainability problem-solving skills.

Progress along these lines requires recognition and addressing of potential obstacles, including higher education inertia, elite-ranking distractions [28], resource constraints [74], and the need for institutional transformation. At minimum, the recommended academic initiatives will necessitate “additionality” in resource commitments and funding organization support for higher education structural transformations and mutually beneficial partnerships [14]. In a promising development along these lines, Schendel et al. [94] find, through analysis of documents published by the “top 15 funders of higher education in the Global South,” a universal discursive shift from providing aid to facilitating capacity development, partnership, and mutuality.

The world’s institutions of higher learning are strategically situated to distinguish and follow the requisite institutional change pathways for addressing current and forthcoming challenges of social and planetary justice. By embracing the initiatives elaborated here, forward-looking universities will move to a far stronger position from which to provide tomorrow’s students with valuable skills and experiences for tackling forthcoming glocal challenges of sustainable and equitable development.

## Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

## Author Contribution Statement

**Peter H. Koehn:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Phyllis Bo-yuen Ngai:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

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