

Book review: McCowan, T. (2019). Higher Education for and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals. Springer Nature. Pages: 359.

Reimagining development in higher education

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In September 2015, a new era for higher education began, when, for the first time, universities were included into the global policy framework by the United Nations. Unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals¹, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)² brought hope and at the same time disruption into the academic world—it was the first-time universities were mentioned in such a document. It is not that academic institutions had never worked in the area of sustainable development. Rather, it is the point of acknowledgement that empowered higher education sector and gave previous efforts a clear shape. This shift from the focus on primary education to the inclusion of the whole educational spectrum opened the doors to universities. However, at the same time, the SDGs caused a great deal of confusion. One potential reason for the confusion is that these 17 managerial-like goals with their indicators and targets ask for immediate change. Usually, such immediate changes are hardly attainable by higher education institutions, which are slower in their policymaking than the SDGs expect. Moreover, the SDGs are not based on coercive mechanisms of implementation, which leaves higher education institutions decide voluntarily and without any proper guidance.

¹ The MDGs were in action in 2000–2015. They were the goals that preceded the SDGs. In total, there were 8 goals and their focus was mostly on the developing countries. The MDGs did not include higher education. <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

² The SDGs include 17 global goals that were approved by the United Nations. Their reach is limited to 15 years, 2015–30, and they apply to all the UN member states. The goals ask for changes in numerous areas of sustainable development, such as economy, environmental protection, gender equality, and quality education: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. In the area of higher education, the SDGs are frequently mentioned in the context of a socially responsible university.

Yet, despite all the challenges mentioned, thousands of universities worldwide have decided to work with the SDGs. In his book, Tristan McCowan, Professor of International Education at the Institute of Education, University College London, introduces the readers to the world of the SDGs, and development in more general terms, in global higher education. *Higher Education for and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals* is one of the first monographs which explores higher education institutions (HEIs) as crucial actors in achieving the SDGs. Considering that the SDGs have no specific instructions when it comes to their implementation by universities, this rich blend of theory and practical references is a valuable read for university administrators, top management, and those researching policy implementation processes and change.

Furthermore, McCowan explores multiple streams of prior scholarship, referencing higher education, globalisation, and development literature (Boni & Walker, 2016; Gough & Scott, 2003; Leal Filho, 2010). First, the author acknowledges the lack of studies that originate from lower income countries and then goes on to fill this gap by including multiple references to universities in Latin America and Africa. Thus, this book is also highly recommended for researchers who are working on broader trends in higher education, such as policies related to emerging forms of higher education provision, and are searching for references in the field. Also, scholars working on sustainable development in general and those examining globalization tendencies in tertiary education across the world could gain valuable insights from the references from reports of international organizations.

Although published already before the pandemic, this contribution is a timely volume in higher education research since the SDGs are in place until 2030. McCowan describes the means through which universities can contribute to the deep transformation that is called for by the SDGs. The author focuses on the universities from lower income countries, thus referring to the very nature of the SDGs, which ask for the global collaboration beyond borders. With no special focus on one region or any particular state, McCowan provides a sketch of global involvement that the SDGs have initiated. This multifaceted perspective, without heavy paragraphs with long reference lists, makes the book an engaging read.

The book consists of three parts. In the first part, McCowan introduces the role of education in development, then moves on describing the anatomy of a university, and finally discusses the basics of a developmental university. The author connects eloquently these first three points with the current global trends in higher education. In the second part, the reader is guided through the impacts of the SDGs together with quality and access. In the third and final part, McCowan discusses the limits of development in higher education and proposes new ways of rethinking and reimagining this complex process.

McCowan demonstrates the complex relationship between education and development by viewing education as a ‘driver of development’ (p. 33), and, at the same time, highlighting that ‘development driv[es] education’ (p. 33). By asking a question ‘[w]hich higher education for which development?’ (p. 53), McCowan goes beyond the simplification that higher education equals more development, or vice versa. Thus, he questions human capital theories in higher education that frequently dominate developmental narratives. Furthermore, McCowan criticizes the ‘elitization’ of higher education and argues that to achieve the SDGs, universities should emphasize community outreach and equal access. He notes that historically, higher education has been trapped in societal paradigms of restricted accessibility and the SDGs might provide a way out of it.

One of the most compelling contributions of the monograph is McCowan’s identification of five modalities in higher education, which he exemplifies on the implementation of Goal 1, ‘no poverty’. These modalities are *education* (‘equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to ensure decent livelihoods’), *knowledge production* (‘developing technologies for ensuring food security for farmers’), *public debate* (‘raising awareness of the negative impact of punitive debt repayments of the poorest countries’), *service provision* (‘providing free-of-charge internet facility for local communities’) and *embodiment* (‘paying its own cleaning staff a [good] living wage’) (p. 220). In this discussion, McCowan links conventional functions of a HEI with the paradigms of the SDGs.

Another strong contribution of the monograph is discussing the concept of *developmental university* that goes beyond teaching and research. Instead, a developmental university has the potential of acting as an outreach actor with the broader mission in the region. The concept of a developmental university is not new, as it dates back to the de-colonization period/s as well as to the US ‘land grant’ institutions in the 19th century. However, McCowan emphasizes that with the arrival of the SDGs, this type of a higher education institution is not only related to African or Latin American contexts. He notes that high-income countries also need to place universities as developmental actors that can be ‘the motors for local economies, fostering innovation and solutions to societal problems, at the hub of a thriving network of companies and governmental agencies’ (p. 92).

Like much of the literature, also McCowan’s book relies on case studies. Unfortunately, there is little comparison between the individual cases of the selected universities. Adding a comparative perspective would have shown a better outlook for the global picture of the SDGs in higher education. Furthermore, the SDGs/sustainability narratives are portrayed mostly in a positive light, and little is said about the contested nature and politicization of the framework. Apart from some studies, such as the one by Spangenberg (2017), not much has been written critically about the SDGs. There is also a need to acknowledge the lack of explanation on

how the SDGs can be critically incorporated into the pre-existing agendas of universities, including various disciplines, without being repetitive and misleading. Indeed, more critical discussions are needed, but it should also be noted that these were not among the main promises of the book.

To end this review on the positive note, I would like to praise the incorporation of global higher education in the book, also in a geographical sense. For me as an early career higher education researcher, the inclusion of universities from Brazil, Mexico and Kenya makes the book stand out from the range of Western-oriented contributions in higher education scholarship. I believe it is important to make this book known in the institutions that are considering or already working with the SDGs, since it is a valuable asset in terms of theory and practice, when it comes to the SDGs and also beyond in higher education.

Author biography

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