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People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

Integrating sustainability in higher education curricula: A transformative approach towards marketing education and brand social responsibility

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The theme of Education for Sustainable Development necessitates Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to integrate the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their operations and program/course offerings. Drawing upon transformative learning theory and brand social responsibility theory, the research analyzes the teaching materials of 156 courses from seven programs within the School of Communication & Design at RMIT Vietnam, a prestigious Australian university. The findings reveal that the School currently aligns with 14 out of the 17 SDGs, encompassing a total of 60 indicators. On average, each program within the School addresses more than 10 goals and 24 indicators via collaborative partnership projects, case studies, and assessments. However, the study highlights that the incorporation of SDGs has yet to be deeply and comprehensively embedded within the curriculum. The research contributes to the theoretical framework of sustainability by offering recommendations on how to evaluate the integration of SDGs in teaching materials.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, education for sustainable development

Introduction & Research Aim

Nowadays there is a growing public concern regarding the adoption of sustainable practices and the shared responsibilities and profitability of organizations (Saleh et al., 2021). As such, more and more businesses integrate 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their brand strategy and operations. It can generate strong impacts on the relationships with society, community, and partnerships with stakeholders. Investors, consumers, workers, business partners, governments, and the general public are just a few examples of internal and external stakeholders whose expectations and demands have been substantially impacted by the sustainability narrative (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020). Ever since then, efforts have been highly invested in business models to assess how for-profit corporates integrate SDGs into their operations through mapping SDGs with different methods. For instance, Khaled et al. (2021) mapped the SDGs using Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) scores as the benchmark for 1,202 high-profile companies in the business sectors. Another study by Horne et al. (2020) reported the emergence of entrepreneurship and its sustainability engagement through mapping 17 SDGs with 193 award-winning new ventures.

Surprisingly, recent studies about sustainability focus too much on well-established and high-profile businesses in manufacturing, retail (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020), or tourism (Chen, 2016) which in turn, lack the generalization of the findings for HE brands. While there are significant achievements of HE creating positive impacts on society and communities (Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015; Viegas et al., 2016), scholars argue that the HE sector should be more active in addressing sustainability issues to strengthen the relationships with relevant stakeholders (Sá & Serpa, 2020). There are few attempts to examine the practices of sustainability of HE (Ramísio et al., 2019; Viegas et al., 2016). In the HE sector, sustainability can be available in various aspects, such as the environment, economics, culture, gender equality, and social responsibility towards stakeholder communities, aiming for the long-term balanced growth of HEIs (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Sustainable HEIs address, involve, and promote, regionally or globally, the minimization of negative environmental, economic, societal, and health effects generated in the use of their resources in order to fulfil its functions of teaching, research, outreach and partnership, and stewardship (Aleixo et al., 2018). Building a favourable reputation for the organization is the result of efforts to establish a "sustainable university" as a brand, which eventually causes an impact on a variety of stakeholders (Saleh et al., 2021). They consider the issues of sustainable development through all structural and organizational dimensions, one of which is through stakeholders (partnerships and community) (Aleixo et al., 2018).

More important, the emergence of the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) theme reflects the expectation for education to drive development and contribute to achieving the SDGs (Vaughter et al., 2016). As a result, using the SDGs as guidance, HEIs must enhance their efforts and push forward collaborations and interactions with local and international stakeholders (Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020). The academic dimension of HEIs' organizational environment emphasizes updates and changes in curricula toward interdisciplinarity,

intercultural understanding, and inclusion (Casarejos et al., 2017). In STEM programs, the integration of sustainability into learning, teaching, and assessments is seen as a means of achieving social transformation for poverty reduction, economic growth, and resilient democracies (Gamage et al., 2022). In the context of business and management education, a curriculum strongly integrated with sustainability can meet the increasing expectations and partnership collaborations of both industry and academia (Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015). Few research studies conducted SDG mappings against the management curriculum of universities and the level of integration varied inconsistently across disciplines (Lu et al., 2023). Another study mapping social sciences curriculum to 17 SDGs reported significant differences in the level of achieved goals between departments, and the difference in the addressed goals itself (Chaleta et al., 2021). However, the extent to which sustainability is present in creative programs within HEIs' curricula remains underexplored. Considering the prominent role of SDG integration in leveraging partnership and stakeholder engagement (Aleixo et al., 2018), this study aims to investigate the integration of the sustainability concept in the academic curriculum and its linkages to partnerships with society, communities, and the brand social responsibility collaborations of HEIs.

Theoretical Foundations

This study draws on the transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003) and brand social responsibility (Dincer & Dincer, 2012; Grohmann & Bodur, 2014) to interpret the role of education, particularly teaching, and learning, in driving transformative momentum and facilitating personal and social transformation to address sustainable issues. Transformative learning involves altering problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, introspective, and emotionally flexible, ultimately leading to disruptive change (Mezirow, 2003). Transformative learning aligns well with ESD, as it aims to contribute to profound societal transformation through education (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). Integrating ESD into the HE environment enables students to engage with the most significant changes of the time, evaluate their consequences from a sustainability perspective, reconsider the interactions between people and nature, and take responsibility to actively contribute to societal transformation towards sustainability (Nölting et al., 2020). In many respects, the pursuit and maintenance of fruitful partnerships between universities and communities or organizations resembles the attempts to preserve relationships, since transformative and reciprocal interactions become vital to pedagogies of engagement (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). Brand social responsibility refers to consumers' holistic impressions of a brand's social responsibility, encompassing their beliefs about the brand and ongoing volunteer efforts promoting societal welfare (Grohmann & Bodur, 2014). In terms of HEIs as brands, their social responsibility enhances their ability to influence student considerations through a sustainable brand image (Plungpongpan et al., 2016). In advertising and marketing education, the integration of social responsibility into the curriculum presents a prominent challenge yet remains necessary for ethical and sustainable industry impact on society without compromising the effectiveness of branding strategies (Champlin & Sterbenk, 2018). The social responsibility of a brand frequently goes hand in hand with the partnership with a wide range of stakeholders to further leverage the scale of impact a brand can create on social issues (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine the integration of sustainability in the curriculum of HEIs adapted from previous studies (Chaleta et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2023). Conducting SDG mapping by content analysis is so far a significantly feasible method for universities for less subjectivity and uncertainty (Lu et al., 2023) that helps to assess HEI sustainability performance based on the most recognised and comprehensive benchmark like the SDGs. Considering the expanding HE market beyond Western countries to emerging markets such as China, India, and Vietnam (Perera et al., 2022), the sample consists of seven programs within the School of Communication & Design of RMIT University Vietnam. RMIT University is ranked 7th in the Impact Ranking 2023 of Times Higher Education (2023) based on the 17 SDGs. The sampled programs within the School of Communication & Design are Professional Communication, Design Studies, Digital Media, Fashion Enterprise, Languages, Digital Film & Video, and Games Design. The data collection procedure involves gathering the content of 156 courses, including course overviews, learning outcomes, teaching schedules, and assessment details. The coders identified the course content to address the SDG indicators using a dichotomous code (0=absence; 1=presence). After coding course content into indicators, the codes of each indicator were coded into the corresponding goals. For instance, courses meeting indicator 1.1 were coded into Goal 1. The data is analyzed using the 17 themes of SDGs and their indicators as coding themes, allowing for an assessment of the number of goals and indicators addressed by the programs and their courses and weighting the course contents in relation to the 17 SDGs.

Results and Discussions

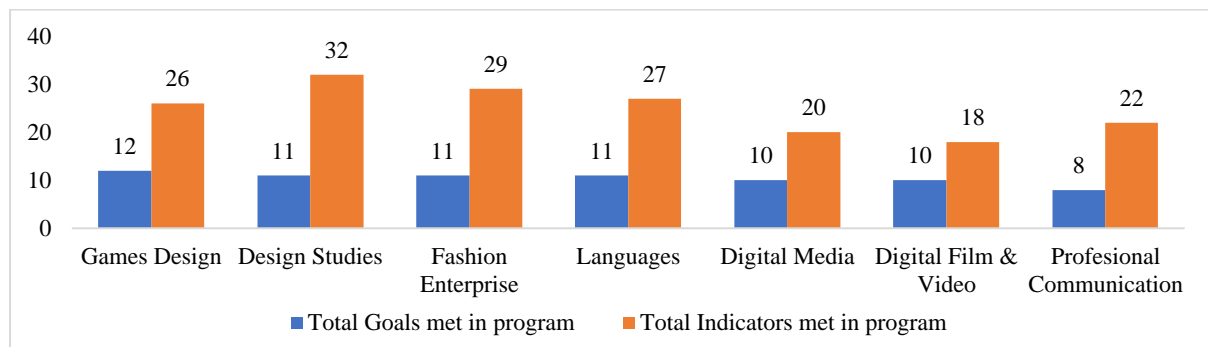


Figure 1: Total Goals and Indicators in Programs of the School of Communication Design (RMIT Vietnam).

The findings indicate that the School's curriculum aligns with 14 out of 17 SDGs, incorporating a total of 60 indicators. As illustrated in Figure 1, each program addresses from 8 to 12 goals, as well as from 18 to 32 indicators. On average, each program addresses 10.42 goals and 24.86 indicators. Overall, SCD courses across seven programs address an average of 10.43 out of 17 SDGs, in which Games ranks first with a total of 12 SDGs achieved while Professional Communication comes last with only 8 SDGs attained throughout its program. Particularly in Figure 2, the number of goals and indicators in the courses of each program is reported. In each course of the School, an average of 4.18 goals and 7.40 indicators are addressed in its teaching and learning materials.

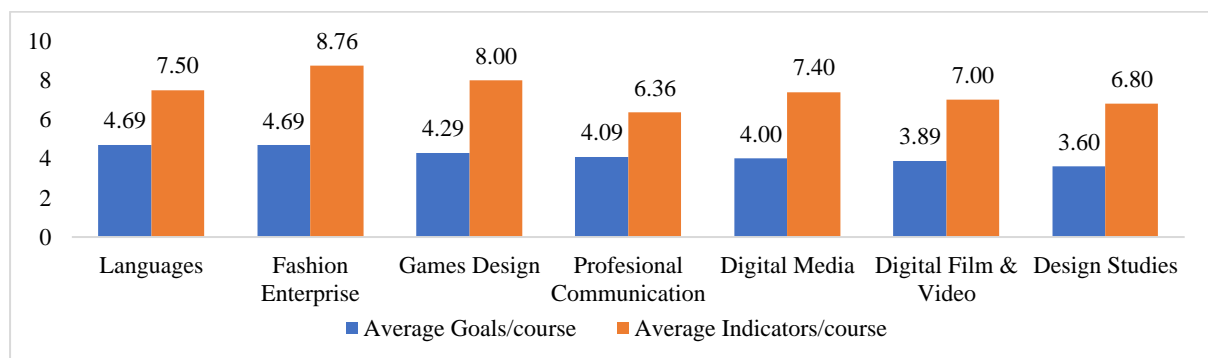


Figure 2: Average Goals and Indicators per Course of Programs of the School of Communication Design (RMIT Vietnam).

As illustrated in Figure 3, most courses across the School of Communication & Design (SCD) manage to address all or the majority of sustainable development indicators within Goal 4 – Quality Education and Goal 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth. Regarding Goal 17 – Partnership for the Goals – as the key factor fostering stakeholder engagement and collaboration, there is a recorded effort to integrate the Goals into the curriculum, despite a less extensive level of 22%. However, the SDGs have yet to be deeply and comprehensively embedded in many programs and relevant courses. While certain mentioned goals receive significant attention, others, such as Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and Goal 14 (Life Below Water), are not sufficiently integrated into course contents and assessments. In particular, each program also varies with its own distinct priorities: Professional Communication and Language courses emphasize Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (77% and 100%), whereas courses in Fashion or Design Studies concentrate more on Goal 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (72% and 68%). On the other hand, Goal 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production is the focus of both Digital Media and Games, with 80% and 71% of their courses fulfilling this goal respectively. Notably, Indicator 4.4 (substantially increasing the number of youth and adults with relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship) and Indicator 8.5 (achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value) are the most addressed and integrated across the seven programs.

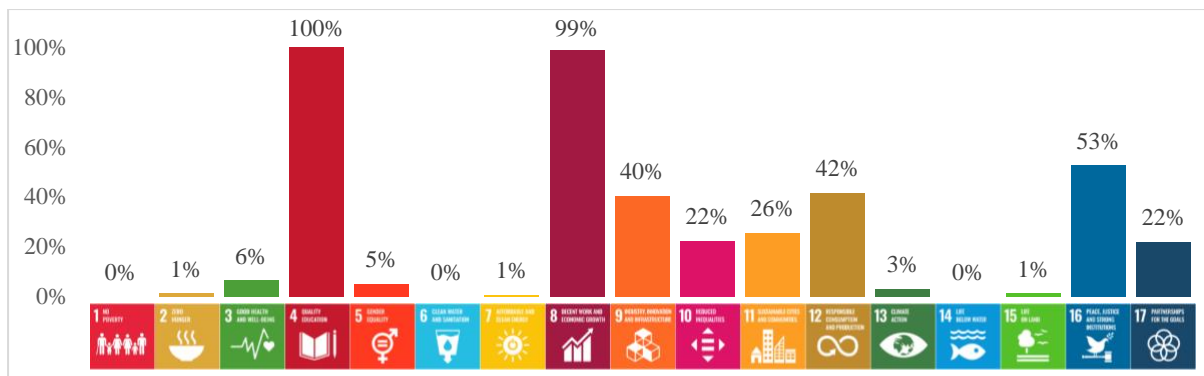


Figure 3: Number of courses in the School of Communication Design (RMIT Vietnam) mapped by SDGs.

Overall, this study contributes to the theoretical knowledge of sustainability in HE through the lens of transformative learning and brand responsibility theory by advocating for the integration of SDGs into curricula, particularly in creative-related majors, to foster transformative education and facilitate positive change within society and communities. Future research can explore SDG integration into the curriculum from a wider and more diverse context such as cross-disciplinary, cross-national, or cross-institutional comparison and in-depth analysis longitudinally. From a practical perspective, addressing stakeholders' issues is vital to maintain meaningful relationships and impactful win-win partnerships for all organizations. By conducting SDGs mapping against the creative course content of the School, the findings offer some foundational assessments and thus guide the strategic adjustment towards sustainable curriculum in the next phases, especially for enhancing brand performance through meaningful engagement and partnership with stakeholders on a corresponding level. Moreover, the findings offer strategic recommendations for other higher educational institutes on specific SDGs to focus on within social responsibility strategies and highlight the issues and stakeholders that should be emphasized in the curriculum and courses, thereby enhancing the brand performance of HEIs. The findings suggest HEIs' key performance indicator of serving communities in both internal and external communication to promote HEIs' efforts toward social responsibility and sustainability.

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