

Quality Assurance as a Catalyst for Achieving SDGs in Higher Education

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Introduction

Commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA) has conducted the 2024–2028 academic year evaluation of technical universities. This evaluation integrates four key components, with a particular emphasis on “Strategies for Enhancing Institutional Effectiveness.” Central to this approach is the alignment with University Social Responsibility (USR) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are thus required to develop and operate governance mechanisms that address social and environmental issues through rigorous research and analysis.

TWAEA, established to advance assessment standards and internal quality assurance (QA) in Taiwan, conducted a nationwide survey in May 2023. This initiative aimed to gauge the implementation status of SDGs across HEIs, strengthen quality assurance methodologies related to sustainability, and explore the potential for developing a standardized sustainability report evaluation mechanism.

Survey on the Implementation of SDGs in HEIs

Responses were collected from 119 HEIs, comprising 54 general universities and 65 technical colleges. Most respondents were senior administrators or heads of SDG-related departments. The findings underscore the pivotal role of institutional leadership, particularly university presidents, in promoting sustainability. The establishment of dedicated SDG units and the operation of sustainability offices were also found to be critical enablers.

The progress of SDG mapping in curricula and industry-academic research projects varies across HEIs. While some institutions have completed a comprehensive assessment, more than 30% have yet to begin. Moving forward, HEIs should enhance SDG integration into curricula and research projects and establish a systematic evaluation mechanism to improve the effectiveness of SDG implementation.

Moreover, 57.1% of HEIs have not yet published sustainability reports, but most of those that have started doing so in recent years, with 84.3% publishing them annually, indicating that the sustainability reporting system is gradually maturing. However, the allocation of dedicated personnel for SDG-related tasks remains generally insufficient across HEIs.

Motivations for Promoting SDGs in Higher Education

Table 1 outlines institutional motivations for engaging with SDGs. The top four drivers—with mean scores above 4.5—include demonstrating university social responsibility, guiding students’ understanding of SDGs, responding to global and societal trends, and showcasing institutional performance.

Table 1. Objectives Behind HEIs’ Promotion of SDGs

| Item | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----|------|--------------------|
| Q1 Display university social responsibility | 119 | 4.87 | 0.358 |
| Q2 Enhance university reputation | 119 | 4.32 | 0.758 |
| Q3 Demonstrate institutional performance | 119 | 4.50 | 0.609 |
| Q4 Benefit student recruitment and publicity | 119 | 4.03 | 0.906 |
| Q5 Strengthen SDG-related research | 119 | 4.28 | 0.791 |
| Q6 Attract faculty and students with social responsibility and SDG awareness | 119 | 4.22 | 0.875 |
| Q7 Guide students to understand SDGs and expand their impact | 119 | 4.69 | 0.593 |
| Q8 Align with international standards and enhance university competitiveness | 119 | 4.48 | 0.675 |
| Q9 Participate in QS or THE world university rankings | 119 | 3.94 | 1.099 |
| Q10 Comply with government regulations and project requirements | 119 | 4.16 | 0.930 |
| Q11 Evaluate administrative processes | 119 | 3.94 | 0.886 |
| Q12 Risk management and control | 118 | 3.94 | 0.860 |
| Q13 Respond to social trends and global developments | 118 | 4.56 | 0.621 |

Key SDG Areas of Responsibility

Table 2 presents the SDGs that HEIs identify as key areas of responsibility. SDG 4 ranks highest, with 96.6% of institutions acknowledging it as a core focus, followed by SDG 8, SDG 17, and SDGs 5 and 10. This data highlights a concentrated effort in educational quality, workforce preparedness, and societal equity.

Table 2. SDGs Most Frequently Targeted by HEIs

| Category | Institutions (N) | Percentage |
|--|------------------|------------|
| SDG 1 No Poverty | 14 | 11.8% |
| SDG 2 Zero Hunger | 5 | 4.2% |
| SDG 3 Good Health and Well-Being | 48 | 40.3% |
| SDG 4 Quality Education | 115 | 96.6% |
| SDG 5 Gender Equality | 49 | 41.2% |
| SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation | 9 | 7.6% |
| SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy | 19 | 16.0% |
| SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth | 61 | 51.3% |
| SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure | 38 | 31.9% |
| SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities | 49 | 41.2% |
| SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities | 44 | 37.0% |
| SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production | 19 | 16.0% |
| SDG 13 Climate Action | 28 | 23.5% |
| SDG 14 Life Below Water | 4 | 3.4% |
| SDG 15 Life on Land | 6 | 5.0% |
| SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions | 11 | 9.2% |
| SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals | 54 | 45.4% |

Institutional Alignment with SDGs

Table 3 details the SDGs HEIs believe they can most readily align with. SDG 4 again tops the list, followed by SDGs 3, 8, 5, and 11. This reveals a strong institutional readiness to support quality education, health initiatives, and community sustainability.

Table 3. SDGs Most Easily Integrated by HEIs

| Category | Institutions (N) | Percentage |
|--|------------------|------------|
| SDG 1 No Poverty | 10 | 8.4% |
| SDG 2 Zero Hunger | 10 | 8.4% |
| SDG 3 Good Health and Well-Being | 55 | 46.2% |
| SDG 4 Quality Education | 107 | 89.9% |
| SDG 5 Gender Equality | 44 | 37.0% |
| SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation | 14 | 11.8% |
| SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy | 19 | 16.0% |
| SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth | 55 | 46.2% |
| SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure | 40 | 33.6% |
| SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities | 40 | 33.6% |
| SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities | 44 | 37.0% |
| SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production | 21 | 17.6% |
| SDG 13 Climate Action | 14 | 11.8% |
| SDG 14 Life Below Water | 8 | 6.7% |
| SDG 15 Life on Land | 9 | 7.6% |
| SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions | 12 | 10.1% |
| SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals | 39 | 32.8% |

Challenges and Future Prospects

While progress is evident, significant challenges persist. Key barriers include:

- Limited institutional awareness of SDGs (65.0%)
- Insufficient resources for implementation (50.4%)
- Inadequate policy support from government bodies (24.8%)

Addressing these gaps is essential for enhancing the depth and impact of SDG integration in higher education. HEIs are encouraged to foster a campus-wide culture of sustainability, improve policy alignment, and secure dedicated resources for long-term success.

Conclusion

The integration of SDGs into Taiwan’s higher education landscape is gradually taking shape, with increasing institutional awareness and participation. The survey findings highlight that HEIs are strongly aligned with goals such as quality education, economic development, and gender equality, reinforcing the sector’s commitment to social responsibility and sustainable progress. However, systemic challenges—including insufficient internal capacity, funding limitations, and lack of cohesive government policy—pose significant barriers to deeper and more comprehensive SDG adoption. Addressing these barriers will require coordinated efforts among stakeholders, including educational institutions, government agencies, and external partners.

As quality assurance frameworks continue to evolve, they hold significant potential to embed sustainability into the fabric of higher education. TWAEA’s ongoing initiatives aim to not only assess but also empower institutions to turn SDG commitments into measurable outcomes. Through strategic planning, robust evaluation, and collaborative learning, HEIs in Taiwan can lead transformative change in pursuit of a sustainable future.