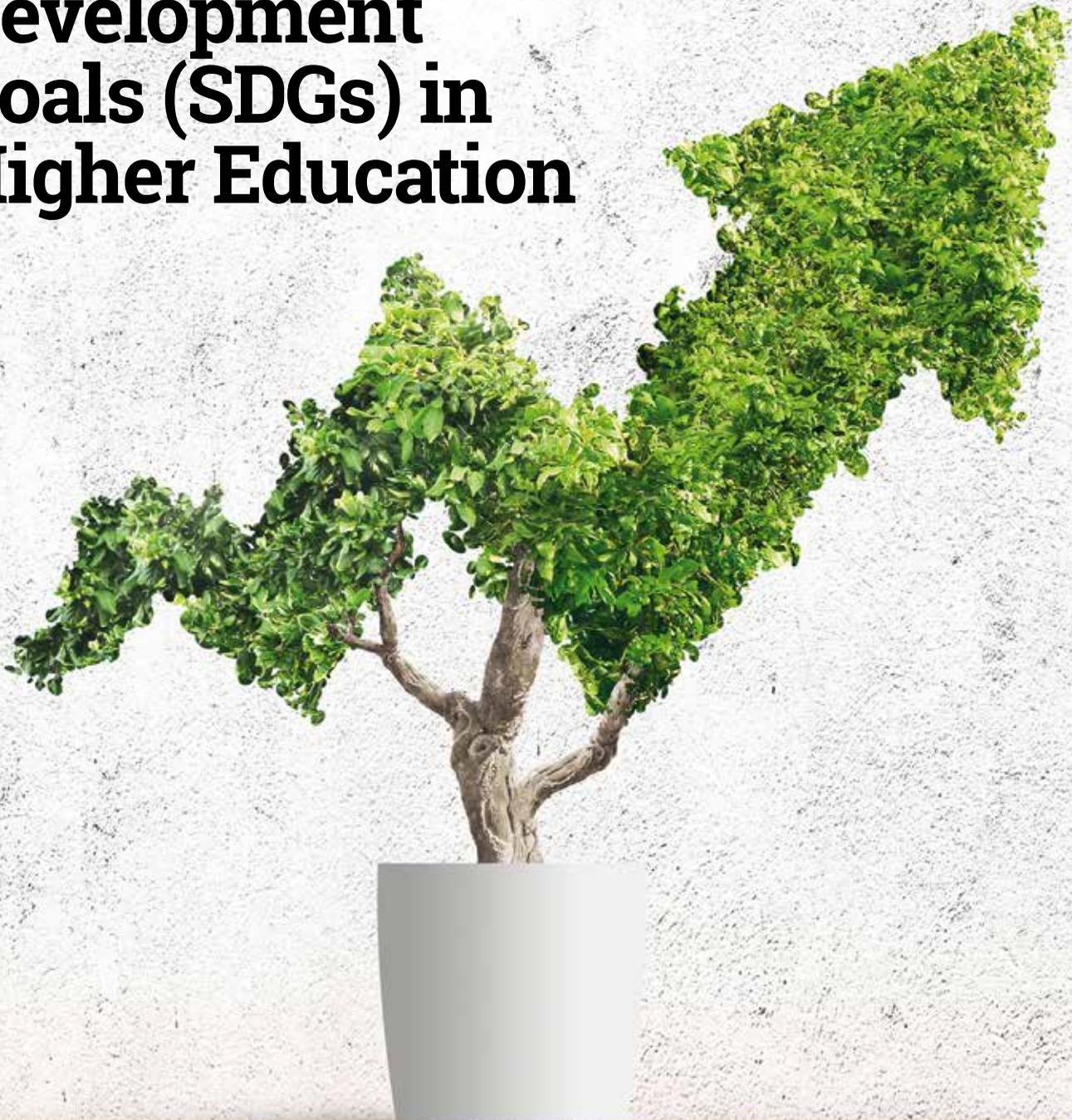Agenda 2030 is the new global roadmap for public policies.
Alain Tord explains

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Higher Education

The 2030 Agenda was adopted by heads of member states in September 2015 at the special summit for sustainable development. It features 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted by 193 states, the universal programme for sustainable development addresses environmental, social and economic issues, fighting against inequality, exclusion and injustice, tackling climate change and the erosion of biodiversity and putting an end to extreme poverty.

Higher education institutes (HEIs) have a major role to play in the transition towards sustainability with nearly 200 million students around the world, a teaching staff of 6.5 million including 4.7 million professors and 1.8 million researchers.

The SDGs are international goals currently being translated and taken on board at national and local levels. Localising the SDGs gives HEIs an opportunity to boost sustainable development action on campus.

Three guides recently released highlight how to: *Getting started with the SDGs in universities* (issued on 2018 by SDSN Asia/Pacific); *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives* (published in 2017 by UNESCO); and *Sustainable Development Goals: How can French higher education and research institutions contribute?* (published in 2018 by *Conférence des présidents d'université* (CPU), *Conférence des grandes écoles* (CGE) and *B&L évolution*).

How can French higher education and research institutions contribute? is a manual about [HEIs] professions and how they are associated with the SDGs. [It] has been developed to provide practical answers, categorised by [14] major professional groups in higher education and research institutions.

Every professional can contribute to SDGs… in its own way

In the professional sphere, action for sustainable development and social responsibility are often reduced to eco-friendly gestures and awareness-raising operations and seem only to concern certain specialised professionals.

Yet deep-seated change is needed to contend with the environmental and social issues facing us: change that will result in the way we report and communicate; in the way we guide and support students; in teaching and research methods; in risk management and end-user protection; and in our international relations.

And behind each of these elements are HEI professionals whose activities are directly concerned with SD&SR. As a consequence, the challenges concern all HEI activities including teaching, learning content development, social actions, career guidance, workforce integration, facilities and property management, finance, human resources, IT and food services.

CPU, CGE and B&L evolution, with the support of institution management associations, student associations, and funding and insurance bodies picked up 14 major professional groups and analyses for each: social issues for the profession, the main SDGs pertinent to the profession and their deployment, the major challenges facing the profession and good practices to go further to address SDGs.

This guide provided us with a wealth of information, covering 14 professional categories, whose four examples are presented below:
  • Faculty
  • Student affairs
  • Human resources
  • Finance and accounting

17

The 2030 Agenda was adopted by heads of member states in September 2015 at a special summit for sustainable development. It features 17 SDGs

200m

HEIs have a major role to play in the transition towards sustainability with nearly 2 00 million students all around the world, a teaching staff of 6.5 million including 4.7 million professors and 1.8 million researchers

Silo, or stand-alone, practices are still common and are often criticized. But each profession now works with others and links among professions are starting to develop. HEIs' capacity to meet environmental and social goals depends on the quality of the connections between professionals

Four examples of HEIs professions
Faculty (teacher-researcher)

HEI teaching staff have an important responsibility in social change. They need to deliver education adapted to the requirements of tomorrow's world, which must be more sustainable. By communicating their research findings, they can orient political and strategic decisions.

Teacher-researchers have several roles: they create knowledge; they transmit knowledge; and they help students to learn and acquire the skills necessary to reach a high and stable level of knowledge and expertise.

Main SDGs:
4, 8 and 9

Main social issues covered
• To orient political and strategic decisions (by communicating their research findings)
• To influence political agendas and building process of social issues

Some issues to tackle to commit further
• To go beyond disciplinary framework since lots of social and environmental problems need interdisciplinary approaches to be accurately investigated
• To scale-up individual initiatives of pioneers regarding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to trigger an in-depth change of curricula

Examples of good practices
• To encourage autonomous learning such as internet research during class, personal analysis of work, e-learning, MOOCs
• To work towards becoming a model institution by creating collaborative courses for teachers, students and other personnel about research findings into sustainable development

Human resources

Human Resources (HR) comprises a wide variety of activities that cover all the administrative and social aspects of personnel management. One of the main issues is employment stability. HR professionals guide and manage employees, both payroll and administration, and other issues such as training and quality of working life.

Main SDGs: 3, 5, 8 10

Main social issues covered
• Support to quality working conditions (including occupational risks and psychosocial risks)
• Social dialogue facilitation (in relationship with workers representatives)

Some issues to tackle to commit further
• To find a balance between administrative tasks and HR management
• To maintain employability of HEI professionals

Examples of good practices
• To work with other departments to implement a jobs and skills forecast management tool
• To identify obstacles to recruiting people with a disability

650

Contribution to the SDGs is also proven to strengthen relationships and connections in-between HEI professions. *How can French higher education and research institutions contribute?* highlights a network of over 650 relations between the professions supported by the SDGs

Finance and accounting

Responsible for an institution's financial management, finance and accounting professionals play a key role in operations. Their main role is to assist the policy team in the deployment of the institution's projects with budget control and financial management. Working with teams in the field, they also calculate budgets and forecasts.

Main SDGs:
8, 12, 16 and 17
Main social issues covered
• Compliancy of accounts and operations
• Social and environmental impacts related to projects and activities funded
Some issues to tackle to commit further
• To maintain HEI financial viability in a price scissors context (reduction in public funding while expenditures are increasing)
• To improve existing tools (to boost productivity of finance and accounting professionals) and create new ones (to include environmental and social issues in the decision-making process)
Examples of good practices
• To plan department funding programmes over several years to reduce excessive consumption at the end of the accounting period
• To create an internal ethical alert system for unorthodox practices, embezzlement, conflict of interest and corruption
• To include sustainable development criteria in procurement contract ratings

Student affairs

Professionals involved in student affairs are an important bridge between students and institutions. Their job is to ensure the self-fulfilment and success of students. First and foremost, they ensure students have the means they require to successfully complete their higher education. They help students who have health problems or who have physical, psychological or financial difficulties. They ensure access to health care and participate in funding attribution.

Main SDGs:
3, 4 and 10
Main social issues covered:
• Ensure the self-fulfilment and success of students
• Create links between students
Some issues to tackle to commit further
• To enhance visibility of student life services (especially social aide services, due to their lack of visibility it is difficult to identify students in difficulty)
• To better design schedules (by avoiding short lunch breaks, short and intense exam periods, etc)
Examples of good practices
• To train association administrators in preventing at-risk behavior
• To organise dietary prevention campaigns such as classes about cooking in student rooms

All professions in higher education and research institutions can contribute to the SDGs in their own way as shown by these few examples. Contribution to the SDGs is also proven to strengthen relationships and connections between HEI professions.

Silo, or stand-alone, practices are still common and are often criticised. But each profession now works with others and links among professions are starting to develop. HEIs' capacity to meet environmental and social goals depends on the quality of the connections between professionals. No profession can address the issues alone, as stressed by the UN with the SDG 17 promoting "partnerships for the goals".

Deep-seated change is needed to tackle the environmental and social issues that face us: change in the way we report and communicate; in the way we guide and support students; in teaching and research methods; in risk management and end-user protection; and in our international relations. HEI professions are at the core of these elements and their activities are directly concerned with sustainable development and social responsibility.

SDG 17

No profession can address the issues alone, as stressed by the UN with the SDG 17 promoting "partnerships for the goals"

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About the Author
Alain Tord is Cooperator in charge of Higher education and Green IT, B&L évolution, in Paris, France, and lecturer at Université Paris-Dauphine