

Incorporating Global Sustainable Development Goals in University's Strategic Development: The Case of the Northern Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk

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Paying particular attention to global development problems during the last stages of its programs, the North-Eastern Federal University named after M. K. Ammosov, within the priorities until 2025, identified the northern territories and the territories of the Arctic zone as a key geostrategic priority. To take a more active stance and gradually bring its initiatives to support the socio-economic development of the northern territories to the level of international cooperation, the North-Eastern Federal University named after M. K. Ammosov needs broader support from the regional community, as well as knowledge of how SDGs are understood at the university level. Also, there is a need for help from external stakeholders. The study "The university is an intellectual, innovative, and spiritual platform for the sustainable development of the northern territories," conducted on a sample of more than 2,000 people, allowed us to form an evidence base for integrating the UN SDGs global agenda into the strategic development of the university.

Keywords: university, sustainable development of territories, UN sustainable development goals, university's impact on regional development, university's impact on sustainable regional development, data management, education for sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Relevance

In September 2015, the UN High-level Meeting on Sustainable Development adopted a new global program "Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." During the program discussion, representatives from different states recognized the relevance of several socio-economic problems, which require practical actions. Issues in education are one of the key aspects of this program since education subsequently determines the social mobility of individuals. Besides, education can influence inequality; it affects the labor market and employment spheres. In addition, education can have

an impact on sustainable development, including by organizing qualitative research aimed at promoting SDGs (Mori, Fine & Horne, 2019).

Universities play a particular role in this process, determined by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, n.d.). Universities are called upon to play a central role in creating conditions for achieving the SDGs in the next 10 years, including the reduction of extreme poverty, the promotion of gender equality, the preservation of cultural diversity, and the provision of universal well-being. To this end, universities provide subject and interdisciplinary research, implement developments and thematic training, generate independently, and contribute to new innovative approaches to solving development issues at the global, regional, and local levels.

Universities can generate the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for future sustainable development. They contribute to achieving the SDGs at the institutional level, following the decisions taken by governments and leaders of countries participating in the global agreement (Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development, n. d.).

The transformation in higher education involves solving many tasks, including at the institutional level (Elder, 2008). In many respects, sustainable development remains an idea which is challenging to implement. Education can play a decisive role in the implementation of the principles of sustainable development. By setting the necessary guidelines, one can use education to raise a generation that is fully aware of the current and future challenges (Schrüfer, Wrenger & Lindemann, 2020). In this regard, we systematized the Russian experience of SDGs support regarding the place and role of universities in this process.

SDGs Agenda for Universities

In recent years, the priority direction of the state policy in education in Russia is the course for its sustainable development. The promotion of SDGs is supported by the sectoral national ministry within the national development agenda for the period up to 2024. In particular, the work on achieving SDGs 4 is being carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation within the national project “Education” through ensuring the global competitiveness of Russian higher education. ‘In the project, events are planned to train more than 400 thousand international students at Russian universities. This step will make high-quality higher education available to a large number of young people from different countries and regions’ (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

Thus, the state regards universities as the main participants in the national priority for achieving SDGs. The Russian universities themselves, keeping up with the set priorities of the global and national agenda, approach the tasks of promoting the achievement of the SDG as active participants in the socio-economic development of the territories where their influence extends and their contribution is most significant. Annual reports on the achievement of the UN SDGs, systematic research and development aimed at solving specific problems of improving the well-being of territories are implemented by federal universities, national research universities, and individual regional universities whose activities are inextricably linked with the regions of localization. This activity is not regulated by national agencies. Nevertheless, universities support the values of the SDGs, guided by the recommendations of the International Association of Universities. Some Russian universities are part of the international cluster of universities cooperating in SDG solutions (International Association of Universities, n.d.), initiated by the International Association of Universities.

There are several main activities of the International Association of Universities to achieve the SDGs:

- Promoting universities to learn from each other;
- Tracking trends;
- Encouraging universities to develop a unified, comprehensive approach to solving sustainable development issues;
- Creating a network of universities engaged in achieving SDGs, sharing knowledge and common practices with each other;

- Assisting universities in organizing work to achieve the SDGs.

Issues of Implementing the SDGs UN Agenda by Universities

In the recent decade, education for sustainable development has become one of the most relevant research areas, both in pedagogy and in management in education at various levels. In the context of the research presented, scientific publications reflecting the scientific results of research on the development of higher education in the context of the SDGs and the global agenda of international cooperation for development are of interest. Many Russian scholars explored this issue. In particular, Yu. K. Zaitsev (2020), J. C. Quadrado and K. K. Zaitseva (2019), A. G. Sakharov and O. I. Kolmar (2019), I. V. Ilyin, A. D. Ursul, and T. A. Ursul (Ilyin, A. Ursul & T. Ursul, 2017) addressed the global agenda of achieving the UN SDGs, considering education as a resource and a tool for implementing relevant goals. Many works are devoted to the peculiarities and problems of implementing the SDG in the national context, including from the point of view of university involvement (Bazavlutskaya, Evplova & Konyaeva, 2018; Vlasyuk & Mayer, 2016; Dagbaeva, 2018). The institutional level of SDG integration into the activities of universities was revealed by Krakovetskaya et al. (Krakovetskaya, Vorobyova & Dalibozhko, 2020a; Krakovetskaya, Vorobyova & Dalibozhko, 2020b; D'cruz & Osipova, 2011). Finally, the works of Gabriele Schrüfer et al. (2020), Gafurova et al. (Gafurova, Osipova & Shubkina, 2020), A. N. Zakhlebny & E. N. Dzyatkovskaya (2015), E. N. Dzyatkovskaya (2014) deal with the peculiarities of the development and implementation of SDG issues in educational programs, as well as the development of particular competencies among university graduates.

Since SDGs are an international program aimed at solving global problems, “an example of sustainable development of a university is the implementation of international educational and research projects” (Timiryasova, 2020).

Despite positive experiences, the path to implementation of the SDG program by the efforts of the university community has not been fully defined to date, leaving room for new ideas and solutions (Richardson & Munday, 2013).

Still, it is not clear enough how it is possible to implement the main ideas of the SDGs in practice and what actions should be taken to achieve defined objectives with maximum efficiency.

Due to the lack of understanding of the processes and their consequences, as well as the absence of developed mechanisms for changes and failed dialogue with experts studying and modernizing education, universities are forced to act intuitively.

To promote the achievement of the SDGs, one should regard this idea as a part of the primary mission of higher education. According to some researchers (Cortese & Hattan, 2010), academic leaders should take a fresh look at the context of education, the content of training, and the organization of the learning process.

Below, we presented the main hypotheses and approaches to the study of the impact of the global agenda for promoting sustainable development on the strategic development of North-Eastern Federal University named after M. K. Ammosov [NEFU] in Yakutsk, as well as the main results of the study and their influence on the development of a new communicative strategy of the university for the recent reporting period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Since 2017, NEFU has been publishing analytical reports on the university's assistance in the sustainable development of the northern territories (Northeastern Federal University named after M.K. Ammosov, n.d.). Besides, this university conducts initiative projects on the sustainable development of the Russian Arctic and the Far North (NEFU Initiative Projects with Partners, n. d.). The accumulated experience of NEFU in promoting the goals of sustainable development of the territories of the Russian Arctic and the Far North has been recognized by the international community. Since 2019, the university has been included in the global ranking of world universities for sustainable development. In general, the university is involved in the problems of promoting sustainable development. Therefore, in 2021, the new

NEFU development program defined sustainable development of the Northern Territories as a key priority until 2025.

In 2021, a new university development program for the period up to 2025 will enter into force. The new university development program represents new opportunities and achievements, demonstrating the progress of the university in completing its mission as a university involved in regional development.

In the next 10 years, the university will increase its superiority as an authentic but globally-oriented university that contributes to the sustainable development of the Far North and the Far East territories while strengthening its social mission.

The experience of implementing the past stages of the NEFU development program shows that the university is systematically moving towards the leading role of a scientific and innovative center in the Far East. Based on the results of scientific research and development in its strategic vision, NEFU successfully passed three stages of positioning in the Far East, from the near circle model, in which all the activities and efforts of the university are aimed at the development of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and the city of Yakutsk, to the far circle model, in which NEFU is regarded as an innovative development center of the Far East. The plans of the university to promote the development of Russian North-Eastern territories and adjacent regions in the Far East and the Far North (Chukotka Autonomous District, Kamchatka Krai, and Magadan Region) were fully implemented within the “middle circle” positioning model.

According to the general contribution, intensity, and diversity of projects to promote the socio-economic development of the Far North territories, one can compare the experience of NEFU with the practices of world universities located in the northern latitudes. At the same time, NEFU is the only major educational and research center that implements its projects beyond the Arctic Circle. This fact determines the university’s relevance of the university’s appeal to the development agenda of the northern territories and the territories of the Far North on a more systematic basis.

The appeal to the Sustainable Development Agenda of the Northern Territories and the expanded scope of promoting the UN SDGs is harmonious for the university’s development (Vande, 2007); it ensures the implementation of the projects initiated under the global development priorities.

According to the 2019 and 2020 Sustainable Development Rating, the university entered the Top 400 universities in the world for contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. Therefore, choosing a paradigm for promoting the sustainable development of the northern territories for its further development is extremely relevant and timely.

The research “University is an intellectual, innovative, and spiritual platform for the sustainable development of the Northern Territories” was conducted to determine (1) to what extent the global agenda for promoting sustainable development is shared within the university from management to students; (2) whether there is a unanimous opinion and support; and, most importantly, (3) whether there is a common understanding of the global scale of the work of the university for the next 10 years.

When planning the study, it was assumed that the level of awareness of the republic SDGs at the level of the republic is not high (h0), which, accordingly, will affect the awareness of the work of NEFU to promote the SDGs (h1) and the university’s low assessment of the potential of the university in the development of the favorable socio-economic situation in the Northern Territories by stakeholders, mainly external to the university (h2).

Regardless of the results of the research hypothesis testing, the conducted research made it possible to highlight the new priorities of the NEFU development program, simultaneously informing people at the university level and its partners in the region and beyond.

The study comprised two stages: the first one was aimed at assessing the awareness of the work and contribution of NEFU within the university, and the second one focused on studying how and to what extent representatives of the republic, including the main stakeholders of the university, know and support this direction.

The survey covered two large sets of respondents: students, teachers, researchers, administrative and managerial personnel, and top management of the university (representing the university); and representatives of regional and municipal authorities, industrial partners, and non-profit organizations of the city of Yakutsk and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), key stakeholders.

The survey is based on an online questionnaire method that involves a specially designed questionnaire to get a more accurate picture of the attitude of each of the university stakeholders towards the problems of promoting sustainable development. The questionnaire was applied to different groups of respondents separately. Study participants were determined by a simple random sample.

The results obtained were processed and aggregated for further analysis. The results of the analysis are reflected in the NEFU materials. A series of scientific publications based on the results of the study is also planned.

Building a research design based on the study of the experience of NEFU in integrating the global agenda for promoting the UN SDGs into the main activities of the university is a unique example of data-based university management. We cannot guarantee that the obtained research data will be extrapolated to the work of other Russian universities. However, we can state that a university development of the communication strategy of a university focused on promoting the SDGs can and should be based on the research presented in this paper.

RESULTS

The conducted research showed that the university's efforts have not been in vain over the past few years. Most university representatives and key stakeholders became aware of the work of NEFU in promoting the SDGs and started to share these priorities, supporting the university. Nevertheless, the study revealed that there is still much to be done to mobilize university students and industrial partners due to their incredibly low awareness of what SDGs are and what the university is doing on this issue.

The study revealed even more significant problems that the university is facing now regarding the assessment of the contribution of NEFU to the achievement of the UN SDGs, which can have a negative impact on the formation of a positive image of the university in society. The point is that the most critical target groups for NEFU are students, potential applicants, and representatives of industrial partners. For the most part, these groups have never heard of the success of NEFU in achieving SDGs or find it difficult to answer the question posed.

The study revealed that the university must improve its work with these target groups, which are also the most poorly informed group in terms of university activities in the field of SDGs.

The low level of awareness of the university's work concerning SDGs among students and industrial partners correlates with a low assessment of the university's efforts to achieve SDGs by the same target groups.

However, it should be noted that, in general, within the university, the work to inform administrative and management staff, teachers, and researchers of the university was successful. The proportion of ignorant and those who have a low estimate of the potential of the university is lower than those who have heard about it and support it. This factor is positive; it can potentially ensure further communication of NEFU with the internal and external environment. Furthermore, representatives of regional authorities have already been informed about the success of NEFU in promoting the UN SDGs.

The research also showed the insufficiency of the efforts made to inform the general public about specific projects promoting SDGs that NEFU has implemented recently: out of about 15 implemented projects in the field of SDGs, only 2 projects were successful in terms of promotion in the information field:

- Organization of the Northern Forum on Sustainable Development;
- Organization of UNESCO International Conferences on the Preservation of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Cyberspace.

Within the university, projects related to the higher education programs focused on training personnel taking into account the values and goals of sustainable development are well recognized. In the field of external information, the educational programs of the NEFU are poorly recognizable.

The participation of NEFU research teams in integrated research programs in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), affecting the priority areas of SDGs, is recognizable both inside and outside the university, indicating the presence of a priority in the university's information strategy associated with the wide

dissemination of information about the scientific research results and about the university's scientific communication strategy, which does not specify SDG priority areas.

The publication of the annual NEFU reports on the achievement of the SDGs within the university is a common source of information on the university's activities in promoting sustainable development. At the same time, the key source of information about the activities of NEFU in the field of SDGs for external stakeholders in the republic has nothing to do with annual public reports. The awareness of the resource outside the university is low, although people outside the university are the target audience for such reports.

The study also shows that for the majority of the audience (both within the university and external stakeholders), the primary sources of information about the achievements of NEFU in promoting SDGs are three communication channels: Instagram, corporate website, and public reports. Sources such as YouTube, Facebook, and corporate mail appeared to be the least involved.

When promoting NEFU into the global higher education space, it is crucial to strengthen the role of social networks and their mission in informing the target audience (future international students) about the university's work (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis, 2012). At the same time, the discussion of the work of NEFU in promoting SDGs while building the potential of social networks can become a good symbiosis that can bring positive results. In addition, it is essential to understand the specific attitude of the international audience to issues such as charity and development assistance: the international audience has long accepted that universities can and should contribute to promoting international development, overcoming global development problems through their key functions, such as education, research, integration into social development, and work with local communities.

The world should know the heroes of the global campaign to promote the achievement of the UN SDGs in person. So far, only a part of the representatives of the administrative and management staff, teachers, and researchers of the university, as well as the most progressive part of the representatives of regional and local authorities, have argued that NEFU can and will succeed in promoting the development of the Northern Territories with the new development program. Most of the audience does not support and even doubts the expediency of concentrating the university's resources on SDGs issues.

It is vital to continue working in this direction so that the achieved results do not lose their significance as a basis for large-scale work to promote NEFU into the global higher education space. At a higher level, it is necessary to follow the recommendations of UNESCO and the International Association of Universities, adhering to the values of joint contribution to solving global problems of humanity.

Such work does not mean that the university deviates from the tasks of socio-economic development of the republic. On the contrary, this fact indicates that the university is ready for cooperation in development assistance; it is taking on broader obligations by joining the global movement of universities. For such universities, SDGs are not just an opportunity to enter the next global ranking: this is an all-encompassing and comprehensive mission.

DISCUSSION

In the spring of 2020, before the publication of the second issue of the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking, the founding director of Social Responsibility at the University of Manchester, Julian Skyrme, in an interview, noted that SDGs for universities around the world are a framework that organizes the activities of universities, sets the direction, and gives them meaning. According to the expert, the SDGs are a real gift for universities. Using SDGs, universities can tell the world about what they do for society, what contribution they make to social development (Times Higher Education, n.d.).

However, not all universities fully agree with these facts. For instance, the vice-president of King's College in London argued that there is no such practice at his university. Although the university can collect special information for the new University Impact Ranking (which they partially did by providing information on the progress of the university's contribution to the SDGs), the priorities of the UN SDGs are not included or integrated into strategic documents. The professor also asserted that it would be a mistake to say that universities cover SDGs as part of their activities. The Vice President mentioned that he

mainly worries that the work of universities to promote the achievement of SDGs may turn into a pursuit of a position in the next ranking and become an exercise in meeting certain indicators.

The case of NEFU shows that the promotion of the UN SDGs was an unspoken but important priority of the university's work long before the university entered the TOP 400 of the world's prestigious Times Higher Education Impact Ranking. The university has been working on projects related to the SDGs problems since the very moment of their announcement. Promoting sustainable development globally through local projects was the social mission of the university. As a result, the university did not immediately come to formalize the SDGs priorities in strategic documents. The university has gone a long way in positioning itself as a university actively involved in the regional development of its republic and the entire territory of the Far East. Thus, the inclusion of NEFU in the global rating is a well-deserved and long-awaited reward for many years of work in this direction.

Therefore, when working on projects to overcome global development problems, universities must maintain balance, demonstrating that this activity is not a tool for promotion in special academic rankings or international marketing. It is critical how universities treat SDGs activities, regardless of whether SDGs targets are included in their development documents or not. The key factor of success is the motivation to promote development and do everything in the power of universities.

CONCLUSION

The university must see the real picture of awareness of the promotion of UN SDGs; it allows one to distribute the efforts to implement the development program more rationally, focus on urgent issues of perception of the university's role in solving global development problems.

Based on the research results, we confirmed the correctness of the choice of the university mission as an intellectual, innovative, and spiritual platform for the sustainable development of the Northern territories.

Nevertheless, it is still premature to claim that NEFU has fully used all the opportunities for a special status of the university included in global development problems.

The university is not included in the cluster of universities of the International Association of Universities cooperating in achieving SDGs.

Besides, NEFU has not yet fully realized what prospects the integration of the global agenda for promoting the UN SDGs opens up in the main activities of the university.

The issues of SDGs are only partially included in the university's educational programs, especially at the master's or postgraduate level for international students.

The current state of higher education requires the search for new ways to attract international students. Universities worldwide are switching to online master's and postgraduate programs, forming a new marketing policy. Taking into account the recommendations of the international university community to strengthen the SDGs issues in educational programs, one can see that the future of NEFU master's and postgraduate studies have been clarified.

Due to the specifics of the university and its location, the research agenda is more harmonious concerning the issues of overcoming the main problems of human development. The goals of promoting sustainable development cover many areas of NEFU research, but the new development program will require an interdisciplinary approach.

Currently, the results of scientific projects have a significant potential for growth. It is necessary to adjust the communication strategy in terms of increasing the information openness of scientific activities. This step will allow one to establish further closer cooperation with other scientific and educational organizations and international partners and start new joint projects. At the same time, the wide coverage of research results will help attract industrial partners to implement collaborative research and development activities.

Working with the local community and the non-profit sector has been the basic mission of NEFU for more than a year; the university implements the concept of a university included in regional development as part of its mission. Taking into account the task of integrating the SDGs global agenda into the main

activities of the university, it is crucial to review the grounds for the university's work with the local community, considering new or additional areas of work for the near future.

It is necessary to take a new look at the information and communication component of university activities with both an internal and an external audience. The results achieved in terms of the awareness of the work of NEFU in promoting SDGs are noteworthy; nevertheless, without additional efforts, they may lose their potential.

Therefore, a new NEFU communication strategy should help prioritize SDG issues in the structure of the university's development program until 2025, establish a dialogue, develop new partnerships in the region, and get broader support from students, including future applicants not only within the republic but also abroad.

To create an external positive communication field, one should focus on social networks in the context of SDG achievement and NEFU contribution. In the future, this step will ensure the growth of the attractiveness of the university, its educational programs, and research areas for international students and international partners. At the same time, the status of public reports can be more official, ensuring the dissemination of information about the success of NEFU from the regional to the international level.

An essential tool for integrating the global agenda into the work of NEFU should be a system for monitoring and evaluating its activities in the field of SDGs, including benchmarking of partner or competing universities of the world level, as well as assessing the effectiveness of NEFU's efforts regarding itself and competitors.

Moreover, all work to promote SDGs should be coordinated at the university level through a special department that would monitor and evaluate the results of the university's work in the field of SDGs for a certain period, conduct special case studies, generate public reports to disseminate the results, and support the status of the university at the regional, national, and global level.

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