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Policy paper

Development Diplomacy – a transformational teaching and learning approach in Higher Education to building competences and skills for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

Development Diplomacy represents an evolving diplomatic practice that targets inclusive sustainable development and sustaining peace. Development Diplomacy applied in Higher Education (HE) promotes a transformational learning and teaching approach aiming to build students' key competencies and skills demanded by future professional practice and society in implementing sustainable development endeavours. This will require the transformation of learning and teaching methods and pedagogical approach. In this respect, this policy paper shows the value added by introducing 'Development Diplomacy' as a novel and effective approach for shaping teaching and learning and to implement the SDGs in Higher Education and how the Development Diplomacy's based learning objectives, outcomes, and applied pedagogy contribute to building learners competences and skills to this aim.

The Development Diplomacy approach in HE is learning-centred and focuses on the key sustainability competencies and skills – systems thinking and strategic competencies, critical thinking competencies, normative competencies, collaborative competencies, and interpersonal skills– that are needed to implement the SDGs.

Development-Diplomacy-based transformative learning and teaching informs pedagogy and learning methods and addresses the need for organisational and strategic changes at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) level for the purpose to enhance the overall learning process leading to develop learners' sustainable development competencies.

Universities introducing the novel approach of Development Diplomacy in learning and teaching will need to develop learning platforms and educational activities that facilitate acquiring and exercising the competencies and skills necessary for promoting sustainable development, as well as assessments based on verifiable results.

To accomplish this, a university might reframe its educational system and develop an institution-wide learning program that promotes transformational cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral research for sustainable development, fosters outreach based on results, and connects with business and society through partnerships, with the aim of contributing to the implementation of the SDGs.

Introduction

This policy paper demonstrates the value added by introducing 'Development Diplomacy' as a novel and effective approach for shaping teaching and learning in higher education (HE) for the SDGs. Development Diplomacy builds students' key competencies and skills for sustainable development. They will be capable of carrying out the collaborative, interdisciplinary work involved in strategic planning and targeted decision-making to find inclusive and equitable sustainable solutions for present and future global sustainability challenges and to promote and facilitate cooperation and transformative multi-stakeholder partnerships endeavours to achieve the SDGs in different contexts at local and global levels. On the personal level, learners will become agents for Sustainable development, aware of opportunities to act and prepared to assume responsibility for and promote values for inclusive sustainable development in their future professional lives thereby becoming active members of society committed to enhancing the common welfare, peaceful, just and inclusive societies and a living planet.

It is undeniable, that strengthening our capacities to work towards a common understanding, collective action and practice in the area of sustainable development is vital to any kind of successful future for human society. Referring to the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), education is crucial in many respects for the achievement of the Global Goals and expressed by its Goal 4: to *"Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning"* and referenced in its target 4.7 *"... ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development..."* (UN 2015), and examining progress therefore by *"mainstreaming at all levels, in national education policies, teacher education and student assessment"* (Global indicator 4.7.1; IAEG-SDGs 2017).

Worldwide, at the international, regional and many countries level, as well as by educational institutions themselves, there is a manifested growing interest for Sustainable Development Education (UNESCO 2015; UNESCO 2016 a) and the 21st Century skills (Partnership for 21st Century skills, 2009; OECD 2009), framed to meet the needs of society and workforce and enabling to respond to the challenges of the future, going with the preoccupation on how to integrate these overall learning goals and agendas in educational policies and institutions' teaching and learning practices, including in higher education.

Globally, numerous higher education institutions (HEIs), associations, networks and international organizations highlight and express in their platforms, at international conferences and debates the importance of higher education's contribution to implement all SDGs through curricula, research and community connectivity and engagement. Furthermore, associations, networks, experts and leaders from the international HEI community from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America play an important role in advocacy to further the engagement of higher education institutions for sustainability education and applying the SDGs as framing reference, therefore. To this end, many argue for a needed reconceptualization of higher education, namely by rethinking teaching and learning away from the merely discipline model to a cross-disciplinary approach and multidisciplinary research to foster learners' competencies to address the complexity of today's and future global challenges and for inclusive, sustainable solutions. Thus, requests the transformation of the teaching and learning environment, institutional reforms, and adapt HEIs to engage with society (communities, civil society organisations, business) to meet local and country's needs and aspirations. Consequently, arguing to include the SDGs in curricula, research, community engagement, campus activities, institutional governance and adopt policies and practices to this end what represents the essence as of the 'Whole Institution Approach' (UNESCO 2014; UNESCO 2016b and 2019).

Broadly, the HE community stresses the importance to integrate Sustainable development in the whole HEI's systems in a holistic manner. However, as the current practice in teaching and research apparently show, that most universities are engaging only with a few SDGs each, evidenced by findings of different sources (IAU 2020; GUNi 2019). Also, as IAUs global survey on HE and the SDGs (Mallow, Toman and van't Land 2020) summarizes that all the SDGs are addressed also to a different extent by the group of respondents as a whole.

The main challenge here is to figure out how HEIs might effectively transform their approaches to teaching and learning, in such a way as to develop students' competences and skills in sustainable development. to build learners' key competencies and skills demanded by future professional practice and society in implementing sustainable development endeavours.

In this respect, this policy paper shows the value added by introducing 'Development Diplomacy' as a novel and effective approach for shaping teaching and learning to implement the SDGs in HE and how the Development Diplomacy's based learning objectives, outcomes, and applied pedagogy contribute to building learners competences and skills to this end.

1. Development Diplomacy's shaping of teaching and learning in higher education to develop the competences and skills in sustainable development

Development Diplomacy (DD) represents an evolving diplomatic practice that targets inclusive sustainable development and sustaining peace. DD is part of the new diplomacy needed to foster global and local cooperation based on inclusiveness, equality and respect of human rights for transformative collective actions for sustainable development solutions and governance, aiming inclusive and equitable Sustainable development for peaceful, just and inclusive societies and a living planet (Adam 2018, 2019, 2021).

Development Diplomacy arose in the context of the UN Conference on Environment and Development 1992 in Rio (UN Earth Summit). It gained momentum in response to rapid changing realities in international relations to address global and transnational challenges and collective action by the broadening of the circle of participants in the international arena, – including nations, non-state actors and civil society organisations –, engaged in policy-dialogue and policy-negotiation leading to Global Governance Agendas and Agreements aimed at sustainable development.

Development Diplomacy emerged as a practice for facilitating multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation for sustainable development through negotiations towards the agenda setting, framing the goals and sustainability norms, shared commitments, and partnerships for the implementation, as of the UN Agenda 2030 and other agreements for sustainable development at all levels of governance. The contemporary approach of Development Diplomacy applied in actors' relations and cooperation is based on a comprehensive, inclusive, human rights based and environmentally sustainable approach for Sustainable development, and strategy driven by the transformative vision, embodied in the Universal Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Development Diplomacy at work is a cooperative diplomacy, promoting dialogue and cooperation between different stakeholders,- governmental, non-state actors from civil society, business, academia, international organizations-, to further common understanding of Sustainable development challenges and solutions and for multistakeholder negotiations, based on equality and inclusiveness of actors, targeting Sustainable development endeavours, as transformative policies and institutional reforms, sustainable investments and sustainable development governance agreements at all levels (Adam 2018, 2019, 2021).

In this respect, the Development Diplomacy approach applied in HE informs pedagogy and learning methods and addresses the need for organisational and strategic changes at HEIs level for the purpose to enhance the overall learning process leading to develop learners' sustainable development competencies.

Development Diplomacy based learning empowers students to employ a bottom-up approach, aiming a whole of government and whole of society approach engaging in collective actions that further sustainable development.

Development Diplomacy's learning outcomes as specified below (2.1) synthesize the knowledge, competences, skills and values, students will have acquired by the end of assignment and will be able to apply in real world contexts and practices to implement the SDGs.

2.: Development Diplomacy's integrative and transformative teaching and learning approach for sustainable development in Higher Education

The proposed conceptual approach and novel and transformational approach of 'Development Diplomacy' to shape teaching and learning in HE and its value added, require for a deep understanding of the complexity and interlinkages of global problems and local impact and of the need for shared, inclusive sustainable solutions, at all levels.

Development Diplomacy promotes an integrative and transformative teaching and learning approach to sustainable development, based on a systemic understanding of the SDGs. It does not focus on a specific selection of SDGs or on imparting specific SDG- related knowledge, nor on streaming the SDGs into the curricula of specific disciplines, but rather on enhancing pedagogies and methods targeting a 'whole-institution approach' (UNESCO 2014 and 2019) to build the competences and skills required for sustainable development to the educational benefit of students across all disciplines.

Development Diplomacy's learning approach in higher education is transformative, learner-centred, competency- and practice-oriented, and focuses on the key sustainability competencies and skills – systems-thinking and strategic competencies, critical thinking competencies, normative competencies, collaborative competencies, and interpersonal skills– needed to implement the SDGs. Learning methods and educational activities are informed by the practice of Development Diplomacy and are based on real-world experiences.

Highlighting, that the 'key sustainability competences and skills' referred to are also part of those promoted by the Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2017) furthered by UNESCO and the 21st Century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009; OECD 2009). Development Diplomacy does not claim to offer a newly defined category of competences. However, the set of competences focused on are at the core of Development Diplomacy's transformative teaching and learning approach and related outcomes directed at inclusive sustainable development and its implementation in practice.

Also underlining, that Development Diplomacy teaching and learning approach has to be developed in synergy with the core mandate and disciplines of a given higher education institution and to be compatible with the characteristics of the students and their needs. Therefore, it is crucial that students, faculty members, administrators and the leadership engage in the process of the strategy and learning program design.

2.1: Learning objectives and outcomes

The overall learning approach aims at developing students' key sustainability competencies and skills needed for engaging with the SDGs, – **systems-thinking and strategic competencies, critical-thinking competencies, normative competencies, collaborative competencies, and interpersonal skills.**

The conceptually framed learning objectives aim to increase students' understanding of the societal and individual dimensions of sustainable development, and of their respective implications.

The learning objectives aim to building composed competences, and to develop a number of relevant transferable skills as well, including, negotiation, communication, analyses, problem- solving, leadership and teamwork skills, that will be applicable in different functions and jobs in the future, and as active members of society to implement inclusive and equitable sustainable development.

Highlighting, that the learning objectives will need to be adapted to local workforce and societal needs, and changing priorities related to discourse and practice of Sustainable development

The overall learning outcomes are specified at HEI's corporate level, based on a 'whole-institution approach' to transforming teaching and learning. They synthesize the knowledge, competences, skills and values, students will have acquired by the end of assignment and will be able to apply in real world contexts and practices:

- Learners will be empowered to employ a bottom- up approach, engaging in collective actions that further sustainable development in all contexts and at all levels with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.
- They will have acquired the ability to conceptualise, frame, negotiate and put into practice sustainability projects and norms-, systems-sustainability-based inclusive and transformative policies, and institutional reforms and accountability mechanisms, in each case applying governance and human rights principles aligned with the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.
- They will be capable of carrying out the collaborative, interdisciplinary work involved in strategic planning and targeted decision-making to find inclusive and equitable sustainable solutions for present and future global sustainability challenges and to promote and facilitate cooperation and transformative multi-stakeholder partnerships endeavours to achieve the SDGs in different contexts at local and global levels.
- On the personal level, learners will become agents for Sustainable development, aware of opportunities to act and prepared to assume responsibility for and promote values for inclusive sustainable development in their future professional lives thereby becoming active members of society committed to enhancing the common welfare, peaceful, just and inclusive societies and a living planet.

2.2: Pedagogical approach, learning methodology and assessments

Development Diplomacy addresses learning in the field of sustainable development and the SDGs in a direct, practice-oriented way. It represents a competency-based and transformative learning approach. Therefore, the following pedagogy and learning methods are suggested to this end.

The pedagogical approach is action oriented, inter-active and transformative, and based on the Development Diplomacy approach and practice for sustainable development, informed by real world cases that have been adapted to classroom and/ or to the specific institutional program within which it is employed by the university or faculty.

In this regard, the pedagogical approach and learning methodology should be also broadly informed by the research program, outreach, societal cooperation engaged by the specific higher education institution in the field of Sustainable development. Students' participation and involvement in these activities should provide numerous opportunities for acquiring the desired competences and skills and achieving the learning outcomes.

It is advantageous for HEIs to associate to the learning program practitioners in diplomacy, business, public services, and NGOs among others, to contribute with real-world cases and their practical experiences related to sustainability challenges and solutions. Furthermore, this approach might also apply to cooperate with society or business representatives for the purpose to design learning and research programs.

The introduction and translation of real-world cases into a learning context is achieved through different competency-based learning methods, as simulation/negotiation exercises, problem-based learning, research- and project-based learning and situated learning and used to design the learning activities and programs in line with the overall learning objectives.

The Development Diplomacy learning strategy (methods and activities) involves exercises and research- and project activities that come close as possible to real world settings. This enhances learners' ability to interact in a variety of different contexts and to take into account the interests of distinct actors, it also allows them to experience interdisciplinary work in applied science and technology aimed at promoting sustainable development.

Students' progress towards mastery of the overall learning objectives, and performance in key competences should be assessed according to an established procedure over the course of the whole learning cycle. The assessments should be based on verifiable results, that indicate what learners are able to put into practice in real life for sustainable development and must be based on targeted learning outcomes.

3. Reframing the higher education institutions' educational system and develop an institution-wide program and learning approach to implement SD in higher education

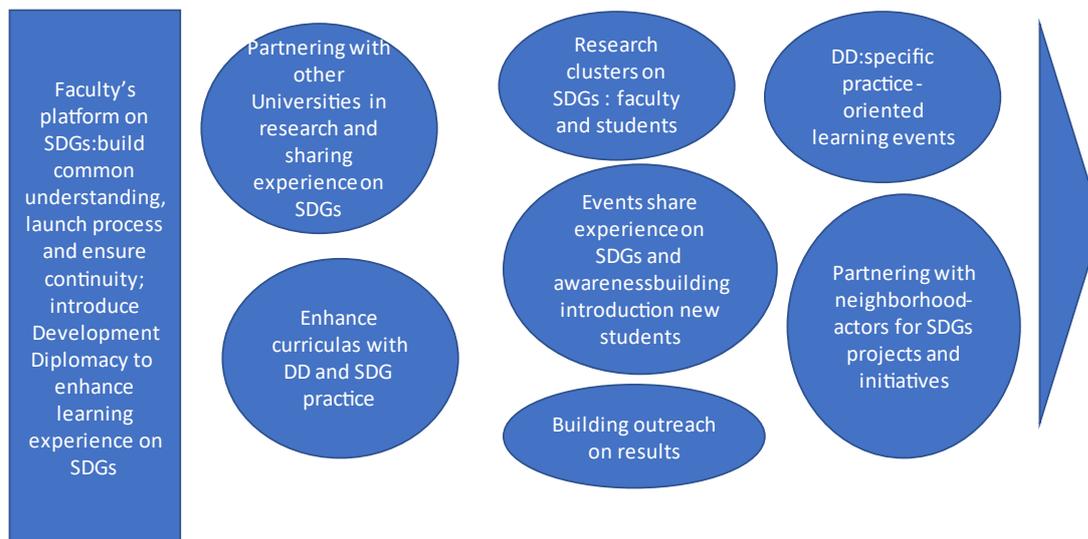
Universities introducing the novel approach of Development Diplomacy in learning will need to develop learning platforms based on educational activities that facilitate the acquisition and exercise the competencies and skills necessary for promoting sustainable development.

3.1: HEIs and faculties learning platforms and activities that facilitate the learning process

The term 'learning platform' as used here is based on derives from the Development Diplomacy's learner-centred and inclusive approach to learning for sustainable development. The platforms serve different objectives throughout the whole learning process, and might be seen from the learners' perspective, the faculty members and HEI's leadership, and position the institution in implementing Sustainable development in higher education (**Fig 1**).

Figure 1

Development Diplomacy (DD) – building the capacities, skills and competences of learners for the SDGs: Higher Education faculty's actions to feed in learning process



The various learner-centred fields of activities illustrated in **Fig. 1**, represent a dynamic set, that will change over time, as experience, best practices for developing the targeted competences and reaching the learning objectives, innovations, and new ideas, feed into the institutions' on-going learning process. This will allow the institution to respond to changing needs of students brought about by professional, societal, and contextual developments.

To accomplish this, a higher education institution might reframe its educational system and develop an institution-wide learning program. Also, the programme aims to promote transformational cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral research for sustainable development in defined areas of impact and leverage, fosters outreach communication of research results to society at large and inform policymakers, and the connection with business and society to meet local needs through partnerships and in research design.

The organisational setting of the platforms might differ among institutions in terms of participants, objectives, and implementation phases over time. However, it is crucial that learners are actively involved in all phases of the platforms' activity: in planning, in the evaluation of results, and in the identification of best practices to feed back into the learning process. The overall objectives of learning platforms are resumed as follows in **Fig. 2**.

Figure 2: Overall objectives of learning platforms at HEIs:

(i) To launch a platform that forges a common understanding of how to establish bottom-up practices for building and implementing sustainable development and global governance agendas, and of how to become an 'agent' for sustainable development at the personal level, as a practitioner, and in project policy formulation and negotiation.

(ii) To define the relationship between Development-Diplomacy-based learning and other relevant ongoing processes (teaching and learning, research, institutional development, administration, and resources), to set priorities, and to establish a road map for the process of integrating the Development Diplomacy approach into the university.

(iii) To assure the continuity of the process, so that it remains inclusive at all stages, for example for new students and faculty members/staff.

(iv) To ensure that, as practice and understanding evolve over time, learning goals and curricula respond to the continuously changing requirements of future employers and the continuously changing needs of society with respect to sustainable development.

3.2: Conclusions and way forward

This policy paper highlights the value added by introducing 'Development Diplomacy' as a novel and effective approach for shaping teaching and learning and to implement the SDGs in Higher Education and how the Development Diplomacy's based learning objectives, outcomes, and applied pedagogy boost learners' competences and skills to this aim.

The biggest challenge for higher education institutions to implement the Development Diplomacy's approach in teaching and learning for sustainable development is that its introduction cannot be incremental, as it will need a first-step commitment by the HEIs leadership, faculty members and students to identifying the foundation for and common understanding of the platform at the levels of the institution and the faculty.

An advantage of Development Diplomacy is that it favours a flexible teaching and learning approach for the SDGs at HEIs, and its pedagogy and learning methods might be adapted and adopted by any institution, in line with their vocation, local contexts and needs.

In conclusion, the ongoing institutional learning will thus be based on interactive bottom-up and top-down processes, drawing from the experiences and lessons learned from the activities of the 'learning platform' and on the higher education institutions strategy and decisions. As major gain it will improve learning outcomes for students and thereby increase the higher education institutions' societal relevance and impact as it contributes to sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs.

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