

# Reflecting on the Role of Academia–Private Sector Partnerships in Moving Forward with the SDGs

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## 1. Introduction

Partnerships are central to realizing the United Nations Agenda 2030, and thus have received their own focus within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, in SDG 17, “Partnerships to Achieve the Goals”, partnerships are enshrined as an integral mechanism for the achievement of the other 16 goals. Central to the SDG agenda is the notion of strengthening global solidarity. Solidarity comes with connotations of collective action and the recognition that we can do more together than on our own. This is set against the backdrop that the challenges we face, and hence the issues that the SDGs seek to address, are wicked in nature. This implies that individual solutions are not easy to find and, where problems are codependent on one another, there is interdependency in the problem. This means we must take a broader holistic view when attempting to address the SDGs. However, despite the apparent prominence and importance of partnerships in the SDGs, it is interesting to note that in SDG 17 only two of the 19 sub-targets, targets 17.16 and 17.17, correspond to the interaction between partners. Cross sector partnerships are regarded as an important vehicle to achieve broad-scale change for sustainability (Clarke and Crane 2018), enabling parties from different sectors to come together, share skills and resources, and ultimately achieve more together than they could on their own (Gray and Wood 1991; Glasbergen 2007; Googins and Rochlin 2000). From over 40 years of research in business relationships, public–private partnerships, cross-sector partnerships, and, more recently, multi-stakeholder partnerships, it has been shown that the quality of interaction between parties is crucial in order to achieve major positive societal and/or environmental outcomes. To this end, extant literature has adopted a process perspective that considers how actors interact with one another and the impact that the mode of interaction has on the achieved outcome of the partnership (Seitanidi and Ryan 2007; Barroso-Méndez et al. 2016).

In this essay, we advocate a process perspective and describe how higher education institutions (HEIs) can engage in partnerships for sustainable development in which knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources are mobilized

and shared. Central to a process perspective is the question: What does each of the involved parties have to give to the relationship, or indeed sacrifice, to make the partnership succeed? For example, Håkansson and Snehota (1998) described the inherent costs of partnerships, including a loss of control, a recognition of the indeterminate nature of long-term relationships, the degree of investments required, and the 'stickiness' of relationships, which refers to the situation in developing close relationships with key counterparts where one also becomes connected to a wider network of organizations, in both a direct and indirect way. Therefore, the focal organization becomes subject to third-party relations, which they do not control directly.

A special focus of this essay is on partnerships of HEIs of the UN-backed initiative Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and on how the activities of schools from the PRME Champions network can inspire SDG-related partnerships of other universities and business schools. PRME is a principles-based global platform for HEIs to advance responsible management and the SDGs (Hauser 2019). Launched in 2007, the initiative aims to foster sustainability and corporate social responsibility through educating future professionals at HEIs. As of 2020, PRME had 820 signatory HEIs globally who have committed to integrating the six PRME principles throughout their organizational functions. Of the 820 PRME signatories, the PRME Champion network consists of 37 business schools globally who are actively committed and highly engaged in fostering the PRME and the SDG agenda. In the context of this essay, two key principles of the PRME are vital. Principle 5 focuses on partnerships and calls on HEIs to collaborate with key stakeholders, and share knowledge and skills in meeting stakeholders' social and environmental responsibilities. The emphasis here is to work collaboratively rather than through dogma or preaching. This brings us to Principle 6, which focuses on dialogue and, again, brings with it the notion of listening to other stakeholders to understand and empathize with their position, and bring different stakeholders together to foster collaboration and collective action.

Even where HEIs have established an SDG-related agenda, they will face challenges and issues trying to collaborate with their stakeholders on SDG-related topics. These challenges are associated with bringing together multiple stakeholders on common issues, mobilizing financial resources and securing affective commitment within the organization. After all, it is usually the organizations' agenda and their specific needs that determine the definition of the issues at stake, and with whom to collaborate, that will lead to the desired results. However, this is different with SDG-related partnerships because the issues do not have to be defined by the agendas and needs of the individual organizations, but by the SDGs (Hauser and

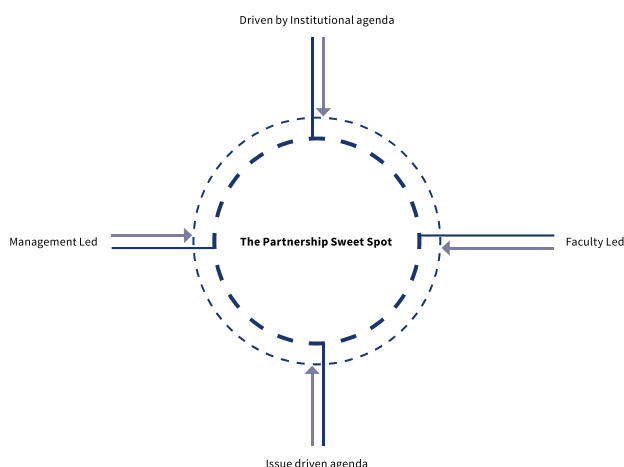
Ryan forthcoming). Furthermore, in the context of HEIs, not only the role of the institution but also the role of the individual faculty members needs to be considered, considering the unique aspect of academic freedom in higher education. In many countries, academic freedom is a fundamental right and part of the self-conception of universities, whether private or publicly owned. Scholars are free to decide how to use the resources available to them and which topics they wish to focus on. Furthermore, in many countries, the confines of faculty member engagement and cooperation with stakeholders other than students are unclear and controversial. In addition, partnerships with stakeholders often run up against the reward system in the academic setting, because the rewards of promotion and tenure are based essentially on peer-reviewed publications, while teaching and other activities, such as facilitating society-oriented partnerships, rarely enter the equation for rewards (cf. Schmandt and Wilson 2018).

## **2. Working towards the Partnership Sweet Spot**

In an effort to scrutinize contemporary SDG-related partnerships between HEIs and other sectors, the authors of this chapter recently proposed a three-dimensional model (Hauser and Ryan forthcoming). The first dimension aims to address the intended outcome of the partnership, whether the partnership is driven to serve the basic organizational functions of the educational institution, or whether the intended end benefit is for the practitioners and wider society. The second dimension describes the degree of material commitment by the HEI towards the partnership. This ranges on a continuum from low to high. At the lower end of the scale, little, if any, support at the university level for the partnership would be provided. In this case, human resources may be reallocated to allow for the partnership to occur, or facilities may be made available for use for the partnership. The higher end of the scale is characterized by great material commitment at the university level. Here, funds may be provided explicitly for the partnership, or a new position specifically created. The third dimension seeks to explain the level of affective commitment by the university and is presented on a continuum from low to high, whereby both top-level management and individual faculty members at HEIs who actively seek SDG-related partnerships can be considered as having a high degree of affective commitment, and those who are more passive and dormant in obtaining SDG-related partnership are considered to have a low level.

For the purpose of this essay, we simplified dimensions two and three to consider whether HEI partnerships are primarily faculty- or management-led. We offer the following model as a method for HEIs to situate their current partnership

activities and consider how they might achieve the partnership sweet spot (PSS). The PSS, developed by the authors and introduced in this essay, integrates key insights from the cross sector and inter-organizational research literature and is offered as a parsimonious framework for HEIs to situate and strategically develop their partnership portfolio. In the framework (see Figure 1), we suggest that HEI partnerships will be primarily management- or faculty-led (horizontal axis) and driven by their institutional agenda or in response to broader societal goals (vertical axis). As we will see from the exemplars below, many institutions will have examples of activities of partnership-related programs that fall into more than one category. We suggest that the sweet spot is where, rather than viewing partnerships as isolated activities driven by multiple logics, institutions attempt to work towards a more central position, exemplified in the PSS. This PSS is where faculties are engaged and are driving partnerships that align with their teaching and research interests, but are supported, enabled and equipped by management. Furthermore, we identify that, while the individual school agenda must be served, this should be done in a manner that meaningfully addresses the SDG 17 challenges of the wider society, and the school should provide a framework to measure or reflect on the impact of their partnership activities. We understand that this is an ongoing process and, therefore, the model presented should be regarded as dynamic in nature (see return arrows and broken line circles), where the sweet spot is regarded as an overarching ‘direction of travel’ in building sustainable, SDG-responsive academia–private sector partnerships.



**Figure 1.** The academia–private sector partnership sweet spot (PPS). Source: Own illustration.

### 3. Examples of SDG-Related Academia–Private Sector Partnerships

To learn more about existing partnerships between academia and other sectors, the 37 business schools of the PRME Champion network were contacted in September 2019 and asked to provide some examples of their partnership activities. A total of 13 business schools responded to the request and provided written examples. The following section draws on these examples to illustrate the PSS framework.

Depending on whether the partnership is initiated by individual faculty members (right side of the horizontal axis) or by the university's management (left side of the horizontal axis), and on the level of material resources made available for the activities by the university, the following examples illustrate how PRME Champion schools acted in such circumstances to establish fruitful SDG-related partnerships. The first exemplary scenarios refer to SDG-related partnerships that are primarily oriented towards the domains of the university's main business, i.e., teaching and research (top of the vertical axis), whereas the examples that follow are oriented more toward the SDG-related needs of the wider society (bottom of the vertical axis).

#### 3.1. Examples of Faculty-Led Partnership Activities

As an individual faculty member, there are many opportunities to develop partnerships with key stakeholders for teaching or research purposes. For example, the faculty at *Zeta University*, located in northern Europe, actively searches for partnerships for guest lecturers, for example, in their project course in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Furthermore, faculty members of *Zeta University* collaborated with colleagues of three other HEIs to create open-access online learning material on all 17 SDGs, thus addressing the teaching aspects of the core business of the university. All of the videos highlight local examples of contributions to the SDGs. They have been created under the creative commons license and, thus, can be shared freely by providing appropriate credit and can be built upon, as well, for non-commercial purposes. Furthermore, this project forms the groundwork for a massive open online course (MOOC) on the SDGs to be launched in 2020 on an e-learning platform with over 8 million active users. Another example is partnerships, which are developed to enable students to connect with the local community and offer and build their expertise. In this regard, Australian *Alpha University* collaborates with the city council and local businesses to offer internships to students alongside their studies to enhance their learning.

When considering a cooperation that has a research orientation, the faculty at *Zeta University* engage in partnerships for research projects and collaborations for individual publications, which could then be further disseminated into additional

research projects, or into educating the public at stakeholder events. At *Lambda* Business School, another university located in northern Europe, many collaborative research projects are positioned around the SDGs, particularly relating to CSR in different companies, circular economy, sustainable industry networks, migration and sustainable finance. In such applied research-oriented collaborative projects, researchers mainly provide systematic approaches to develop CSR activities, reporting and indicators (e.g., environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors) or benchmarks to evaluate the effectiveness of policies or programs. Accordingly, their partners provide data for researchers to analyze within such frameworks—often in the interview format but sometimes also detailed data from operations. For example, in a PhD project on the circular economy, several big manufacturers unveil their logistics and supply chains for the student to include them in a model to evaluate the environmental versus economic impacts of different business model alternatives.

Faculty members of the *Kappa* Business School in Western Europe collaborated with colleagues of other HEIs in an effort to show how popular music can be used as a way to discuss climate change and climate action, as well as to show that young people have a voice on the subject. In this collaborative effort, a workshop was conducted with international students and staff of the university, who were each asked to write a paragraph about what climate change means to them, what the environment means to them, and what the future looks like to them. From these responses, a senior lecturer shaped them into lyrics, wrote the music, and then brought it to the university's recording studios where it was sung by a university graduate, and played by members of staff. The song was then used in higher education as both a template of how to engage students from different countries, subject areas, and universities in a proactive discussion about climate change or as a conversation starter to help elicit new ideas or projects. It is especially suited to discuss actions related to SDG 7 and SDG 13 but, as it tries to 'shake up' students into keeping our world as beautiful as it is, it can be used to prompt behavioral changes with regards to any of the SDGs.

In a further initiative, *Kappa* Business School also engaged in partnerships to develop a training program on carbon literacy. Here, they invited academics with relevant expertise or those with tools to contribute to the development and rolling out of training to contribute. The training consists of three hours of the science of climate change and business impacts. The training program is one way to move the discussions of climate change to the forefront as business school academics teach their students, conduct their research, and engage with business leaders. Parallel to this package, a train-the-trainer version is also in the process of being developed, the idea

being that interested business schools could invite one of the certified trainers to do a full day of training and pass the knowledge on to the academics they want to train in their business school.

In another direction, the examples provided by PRME Champion schools also illustrated a more direct alignment of faculty-led partnerships with the SDG-related needs and requirements of their partners. For instance, faculty members of *Iota* Business School located in Western Europe created a module, which actively engages students with local non-profits and community organizations to help them deliver on the SDGs relevant to their particular missions using social media. Additionally, the faculty engage with local disadvantaged schools in the vicinity to encourage the children to consider university as an option. In a similar way, the faculty of *Mu* University engage in several societal-oriented initiatives. For instance, the university created and participates in a program that aims to reduce the proportion of youth unemployment as well as reduce the amount of young people who do not study nor receive training. Here, the faculty contribute to the development of competencies in neighboring communities to access employment and invite neighboring communities to participate. Additionally, they also engage in a faculty-run program that aims to contribute to the full and effective participation of women at decisive levels in economic life. Moreover, in order to support and facilitate the access of small businesses and other companies to financial services, the faculty at *Mu* University in Latin America collaborate with financial institutions in designing educational materials and carrying out academic programs that contribute to the financial inclusion of small businesses and farmers.

In addition to seeking and conducting SDG-related partnerships, it is also important to consider the impact of these faculty driven engagements. For example, to evaluate the success and synergistic benefits of guest lecturer partnerships, *Zeta* University conducts a feedback survey with the organizations involved as well as the students.

Faculty-led partnerships are a vital component of any HEI partnership agenda in the sense that individual or groups of faculty can mobilize engagement with stakeholders, community organizations and local businesses, and are well placed to design and develop initiatives related to sustainable development. However, without broader institutional support, these initiatives might remain isolated and singular, and lose impact over time. Thus, even if different institutions have varying levels of resources available to support partnerships, it is, nevertheless, vital that senior management supports such initiatives and initiates SDG-related partnerships.

### 3.2. Examples of Management-Led Partnership Activities

Business schools have a key role to play in enabling partnership formation amongst stakeholders and providing leadership in their local communities on specific issues. The examples provided by the PRME Champion schools highlight that driving forces of partnerships differ case by case. In this regard, management-led partnerships can be driven primarily in line with the priorities and agenda of the HEI. For example, management can play a key role in enabling partnerships by explicitly investing and offering resources to facilitate the initiation of research-oriented partnerships with institutions of the private and public sectors. For example, the faculty at *Beta* University in Western Europe can apply to the university's research council for an initial financing grant. These funds are intended to help attract and build up partnerships and research consortia. Whilst the grant does not have an exclusive SDG focus, sustainable development is one of the three strategic areas of the university. Therefore, many of the applications and subsequent partnerships relate to topics from this area. After the faculty have been sponsored with the initial capital, the subsequent partnerships and research projects must be self-sustained and externally funded.

*Alpha* University partnered with another HEI to form an SME Research Centre. This center conducts multidisciplinary research on small and medium-size private businesses and not-for-profit enterprises, bringing together practitioner insights with world-class analysis, to enable policy development. The work of the research center provides a model of applied research leading the world in delivering critical reform to the SME sector backed up with tangible policy announcements.

A further example of the leadership that management can show is to listen to their faculty and stakeholders in devising their sustainability or partnership strategies. For example, through partnerships, *Theta* Business School in Latin America used their stakeholders' perception of the SDGs as a guideline for their sustainability strategy, which in turn helped them define future partnerships and collaborations. To do so, the business school invited internal, as well as external, stakeholders, such as suppliers, to a focus group to discuss the university's positive and negative impacts, the ways in which they could improve their institution and concrete goals for the future. Additionally, *Theta* Business School used an online questionnaire to reach out to thousands of students and alumni as well as professors and employees of their different campuses. The questions focused on the stakeholders' perception of the SDG and the SDG's individual importance to the business school, while providing leeway for feedback and suggestions. The results were analyzed and put into the materiality matrix the business school uses as a guideline for its sustainability strategy.



Systemic-level change becomes possible when the HEI moves beyond its institutional boundaries to enable the formation of SDG-related networks. For example, *Zeta University* organizes an annual stakeholder conference where they try to initiate matchmaking with different partners for potential collaborations in research and education on themes related to sustainability, CSR and the SDGs. *Kappa Business School* collaborates with a voluntary initiative that works closely with organizations across the region to run networking events and interactive workshops focusing on issues surrounding employee engagement. The group consists of members interested in employee engagement from a variety of organizations. Improving employee engagement and productivity is challenging for all organizations, especially SMEs who often lack the time and resources to implement engagement initiatives. By connecting organizations through the regional group, members can share problems and support each other in developing solutions. The business school noted that feedback from the events has been extremely positive, with members stating that they appreciated the opportunity to share thoughts and take ideas back to their organizations to implement.

*Nu University* in Asia had the opportunity to focus on the SDGs when redesigning its campus. Collaborating with the government and other industry players was a key strategic goal for the university, which used these partnerships to help lead the way towards a sustainable future. As a result of the university's top-down commitment to having a strong partnership with the local chamber of commerce, a sustainable campus was built with a gold certification of a green building certification system. It became a benchmark as a green campus since the entire campus operates at higher standards of energy conservation at all levels, while generating solar energy aiming to be self-sufficient. With the green building of *Nu University*, various benefits were targeted, including significant financial savings, better occupant satisfaction, reduced levels of pollution and global publicity.

The management of the North American *Epsilon Business School* states that it values authentic and meaningful partnerships and recognizes the importance of collaboration and community outreach. In its endeavors, the business school provided financial support to create a center for business and student enterprise that offers experiential learning opportunities, community engagement initiatives and incubation for student and alumni start-ups. The center specializes in problem solving for industry and innovative processes designed to bring new ideas to life. The center's incubator program provides space, mentorship, and funding for entrepreneurs to bring their new venture ideas to life. The start-ups are evaluated by whether they

provide a social benefit along with a sound business model to highlight that a successful business focuses on both profitability and social impact.

An example of a partnership in this scenario, at the Western European *Delta* University, is the multi-stakeholder *Delta* Club. The club is a widening participation and community engagement initiative, working across the university's local communities. In order to tackle below average progression rates into higher education, the *Delta* Club challenges perceived barriers to progression, providing positive and rewarding experiences within a higher education setting. This partnership has won multiple awards for its innovative approach to working with local communities.

Senior management support for SDG-related partnerships is vital in bringing about higher-level change and impact on the local, regional, or national level. However, without the contribution of passionate and expert faculties, there is reason to fear that senior-management-driven partnership agendas may prove to be futile and unsustainable. The key lesson from the above examples is the value of having institutions listen to their faculty when developing their partnership strategies, and of using faculties' expertise, their social capital and their network of relations as an important input in the HEI's future partnerships.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Partnerships are central to realizing the SDGs. Thus, HEIs globally are trying to find ways to build partnerships that address the SDGs. In an effort to inspire other HEIs to collaborate with their stakeholders, we asked members of the PRME Champion group about their SDG-related partnerships. The examples from PRME Champion HEIs show that, on the one hand, some SDG-related partnerships are led by faculty initiatives, whereas, on the other hand, other partnerships are led by the management of the HEI. This can also have a level of impact on the resource commitment provided by the HEI for initiating, establishing and sustaining partnerships. Moreover, looking at the examples, it can be observed that the HEIs also tend to want to achieve different aims with their SDG-related partnerships. In this regard, some partnerships are primarily oriented towards the different domains of the university's main business, i.e., teaching and research. Conversely, other partnerships focus more directly on the SDG-related needs of the wider society.

While we agree that partnerships should serve both society and the organization, we would like to acknowledge that this is not always the case. This has been addressed in the literature on cross-sector partnering in discussions on partnerships and their societal impact, where Van Tulder et al. (2016, p. 18) argue that "research on the impact of partnerships i.e., looking whether partnerships make a difference to

society ('so what' questions) is mainly grounded on anecdotal evidence employing prescriptive and 'best-practice' reasoning". In this essay, we do not present individual school exemplars as falling into one of the quadrants of the partnership sweet spot model presented. Rather than prescribing individual examples as 'best practice', we suggest that HEIs use the model as a guideline to locate the positioning of their current or desired partnership activities. By gaining a greater understanding of the status quo of the partnerships, we suggest that HEIs can use this information to work towards the partnership sweet spot located at the center of the framework. In this situation, ideally, the faculty would be engaged and driving partnerships that align with their teaching and research interests and serve the SDG-related needs of the wider community, but are supported, enabled and equipped by management to do so. The model can further offer inspiration on the future direction of travel for HEIs in developing and pushing their partnership agenda. Thus, depending on the point of departure, the individual examples can serve the reader as inspiration for their future partnerships.

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