https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2025.7

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Viewpoint
Co-opting and devaluing the sustainable development goals

To paraphrase the oft-quoted scene from Monty Python, 'What have the SDGs ever done for us?'. This is a question you might imagine being asked by local communities around the world, or of politicians when pitching a national development strategy. It is also a question that many university administrators – particularly in the UK – seem to have asked themselves in recent years – what have the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) done for their institution? Or, perhaps more accurately, what *could* the SDGs do for their institution?

What has driven this questioning? In part, this has been driven by growing pressures on higher education institutions (HEIs) to be key drivers of national economic growth and development, social development, and to develop young people as particular types of citizens (Amani, 2024). The marketisation and metricisation of the sector has further driven strategic plans and decisions by university administrators to 'brand' their institutions in particular ways and to prioritise efforts to maintain or improve ranking metrics and be seen as a 'top institution' (Gardiana et al., 2023). These pressures have been experienced against a backdrop of a growing awareness of and concern with the future of the planet and of humanity, of questions of environmental sustainability, social justice and global development. It is unsurprising then that in the facing of growing imperatives to develop a particular brand or reputation in the marketplace, many universities have turned to the SDGs to do so. Witness then the infusion of policies, rhetoric and marketing within the higher education sector (certainly in the UK but also beyond) of narratives about and claims to excellence in relation to sustainability, sustainable development and world-leading expertise that 'contributes to meeting today's global challenges' and specific SDGs (MacFarlane, 2021, 596). Evidence of this infusion abounds, including the QS and *Times Higher Education* (*THE*) 'sustainability rankings' for universities (we return to these later); the badging of researcher expertise on university webpages and open day slides as 'contributing to realising SDG-X'; the launch of institutional-level policies, commitments, or institutes on 'sustainability', 'sustainable futures' or 'global development';

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and demands to embed 'education for sustainable development' into all programmes or modules (Ramos et al., 2015).

Surely this is a positive move? Gaining buy-in from HEIs to addressing current challenges through research and 'impact' while shaping young minds to be sustainable 'good' citizens of the future has to be a positive endeavour in realising the SDGs, surely? Or is there a more problematic subtext to these efforts, a less altruistic set of dynamics at work that do little to genuinely promote a globally sustainable future and are more about the prestige and (economic) sustainability of individual universities? More than this, what if the adoption and promotion of the SDGs actually threatens academic freedom and undermines the critical interrogation of dominant developmental mantras? What if academics themselves are co-opted by this agenda – what implications are there for the potential exclusion of critical thinking amidst an unquestioning acceptance of and adherence to the orthodoxy of the SDGs? Drawing on the UK higher education context, this Viewpoint critically reflects on these questions to interrogate the ways in which the language of the SDGs has been co-opted as part of university branding initiatives that perpetuate existing inequalities within the sector. Before proceeding to these broader debates and macro-issues, we situate our own positionality and experiences that brought us to a version of the question of 'What have the SDGs ever done for us?'. Asking ourselves this question prompted the following personal reflections:

Anna: I joined the University of Leeds in 2016 after a spell as a research fellow at the Overseas Development Institute and many years at the Bradford Centre for International Development, engaged in research on development interventions in East and Southern Africa. The excitement of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) money gave 'development' and the SDGs a new centrality, and I was excited that my expertise and experience would be welcome. In various ways, it was: as part of stimulating complex interdisciplinary collaborations in water@leeds and civil engineering with fantastic academic colleagues. However, I soon learnt that on the topic of 'development' itself and on the SDGs, my expertise and experience was not really welcome in some spaces, particularly by the administrators charged with branding in the universities. They seemed to want to tell a simple NGO-like narrative e.g. brochures about inequality and how the efforts of Uni of Leeds researchers are heroically changing peoples' lives and 'empowering communities'.

In the excitement for things such as 'empowering communities', it is unsettling for these audiences to hear that there is a huge literature that says this is more complex than you think. It is more than 20 years since the publication of *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), a book which shaped my research trajectory more than any other. The lessons of that book and my own research experience are inconvenient because the *development* we are selling from UK universities (in

marketing narratives – not necessarily the research and practice of researchers) is simple and unencumbered by complex realities. African researchers, in particular, are to be capacity built, and governments to be influenced, and all of this is also somehow in the service of 'decolonisation'. My cognitive dissonance has never been greater and I am disappointed.

Dan: When I moved to Sheffield after a period of time working in South Africa I joined a department (as well as a cross-departmental research group) that was committed to growing a critical mass of scholars working – in broad terms – on and around development geographies. Over subsequent years, the profile of international/global development research and teaching within the institution has grown – at times driven by institutional strategic priorities, and at times despite them. While the space for critical engagements with global (sustainable) development within teaching have been largely free from interference, non-specialists from within the institution have too often interfered with and undermined the ethos and practical focus of programmes designed to blend academic study with practical application. More broadly, as Anna has also noted, the vision of and for 'development' scholars is increasingly dominated by imperatives to secure research income, to deliver major 'impact' by changing government policy, and to write 4* REF papers in world-leading journals. The ironies abound and are integral to my increasing ambivalence in identifying as a 'development geographer': I have increasingly self-identified as a 'political geographer working on the global South'. While this may seem a relatively trivial or self-obsessed observation, it is – I would argue – indicative of the unease many critical scholars feel in relation to the simultaneous strategic co-option of development orthodoxies and siloing of critical development studies within the sector.

We open with these personal vignettes to contextualise the argument that follows, acknowledging that this is rooted in our individual experiences within the British higher education system and framed by personal professional trajectories and journeys.

(Un)sustainability and the SDGs

At the start of 2016, the UN SDGs and associated targets replaced the previous international development framework, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs have continued the pursuit of a shared framework and goals for development, with plaudits arguing that the SDGs provide a global plan of action for collective benefit to deliver prosperity while protecting the planet, eradicate poverty and realise economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development (Willis, 2016). The SDGs have proven successful in capturing and dominating global development discourse, through brightly coloured branding and cartoonish infographics, and have been lauded for being more inclusive in design than the MDGs, for setting goals and

targets for the globe – not just the global South – and providing a universal language for development.

Couched in the dominant language of neoliberal new public management (the restructuring and reconfiguring of (public sector) organisations to be more 'business-like' and operate using a neoliberal governance logic), the SDGs set key performance indicators (KPIs) for the world through their 17 goals, 169 targets and 247 indicators. The headline goals of 'end poverty', 'reduce inequality', 'end hunger', etc are the stuff of apple pie and fairy tales – wonderful sound bites and catchy slogans to political rhetoric and attention-grabbing headlines. They are the utopias of peace and prosperity in which many of us wish to live. Most popular and political engagement with the SDGs begins and ends with the headline slogans, but the real battles for the soul and character of development lie both in critically interrogating the underlying structural causes and violence that frame (and perpetuate) current development inequalities, and in the mundane politics of the targets, indicators and their allied funding flows (Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Butcher, 2022; Greig et al., 2007; Hammett, 2023; Horner, 2020).

Critics have cautioned that the adoption of the SDGs has ushered in a new era of development orthodoxy, one that is founded on unsustainable and directly contradictory assumptions about economic growth and technological solutions (Kumar et al., 2024; Spash, 2021), perpetuates a dominant neoliberal economic order (McCloskey, 2015), and which always lacked the necessary political and economic commitments required to deliver on the targets set (Overton and Murray, 2021). Within the (British) university sector, this is replicated in the adoption or co-option of the language of the SDGs as part of the reconfiguring of HEIs to deliver on key metrics and develop profile, revenue (from research income and student numbers) and kudos for contributing to the realisation of global development.

The SDGs have led to a significant data-fication and metricisation of the international development realm, resulting in significant resources being directed into data collection and monitoring (although all countries report continued challenges in reporting national progress towards meeting the SDG targets (Vu and Long, 2023)), and concerns being raised not only that the targets were flawed but also that abstract and often unattainable targets, rather than local needs, are driving decisions and actions (Hammett, 2023). Arising from these concerns is a question as to whether 'the SDGs (and their specific goals and indicators) are now more of a problem than a solution?' (Mdee et al., 2024, 392). Such challenging questions stem from recognition that many targets and their allied indicators are 'fantasy artefact[s]' (Mdee et al., 2024, 395) that skew attention to useless performative metrics rather than supporting critical engagements with and responses to the unequal political, economic and other power dynamics that underpin fundamental questions of resource governance. Such concerns, alongside persistent failures in progress towards sustainable development outcomes, have resulted in critics tracing these shortcomings back to 'weaknesses

inherent in the design of the SDGs and the wider development agenda and process' (Kumar et al., 2024, 228; also Mustafa et al., 2024).

Compounding these critiques, critical examination of new public management approaches suggests that perhaps counter-intuitively 'the more we measure, the less we understand' (Lowe, 2013, 213). Within the global development arena, the data-fication and metricisation of targets and indicators has resulted in an 'obsessive measurement disorder' that has overridden more pragmatic and localised approaches that consider local needs and contexts (Natsios, 2010; also Alexius and Vähämäki, 2024; Mdee et al., 2024). Illustrating this concern, Umar (2019, 206) identifies the impossibility of meeting the 'unrealistic' health care-related SDGs goals in Kano State, Nigeria and argues that these targets are simply 'political ideals, but lack pragmatic or practical evidence'. Elsewhere, Brissett (2018, 18) argues the SDGs are doomed to fail in the Caribbean due to their 'commitment to the unequal power structure of the neoliberal capitalist development model' and Heun and Brockway (2019, 1) argue that it is 'mission impossible' to simultaneously realise SDGs relating to economic growth and primary energy consumption. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the SDGs are a globally unified 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson, 1994, 1), a depoliticised space of 'action' that assuages consciences using a narrative of metrics without addressing underlying, structural challenges and structural violence that entrenches inequalities (Hope, 2020). These trends are exacerbated by an apparent 'performative' turn where institutions mobilise strategic narratives of and claims to impact linked to the SDGs, without genuine support and action to realise the more progressive possibilities offered by the SDGs (Kumar et al., 2024).

This is by no means a new critique on development and will be very familiar to many of those engaged in research and teaching in and around the sector. What has changed, however, is the broader awareness of and (strategic, performative and seemingly opportunistic) buy-in to the global development agendas, and marketing and funding opportunities in recent years. The precursors of the SDGs – the MDGs – were largely ignored by the higher education sector outside of departments of international development. The SDGs, on the other hand, in their most simplistic form are seemingly everywhere in the (UK) higher education sector, reflecting both the opportunistic efforts of institutions, departments and scholars to capitalise on the (short-lived) GCRF and the marketing zeitgeist of sustainability and development.

The SDGs and higher education

Connections between the SDGs and universities are evident via online and on-campus marketing materials, in various university rankings and in discussions and framing of teaching and research agendas and priorities. In part, these connections are driven by the inclusion of tertiary education with specific targets and indicators (4.3 and 4.5) and

the function of HEIs 'as a driver for the achievement of the full set of goals, through their role in human formation, knowledge production and innovation' (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021, 1). Which other institutions are so prominently located at the intersection of research, innovation and education, able not only to shape and inform the thinking of younger generations but to develop new 'solutions' and pathways for sustainable development?

It is unsurprising that some have argued that 'Universities are now considered natural partners in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' (Zapp et al., 2021, 544; also Wijaya et al., 2024). This dynamic has increasingly come to the fore as many universities across the globe have been encouraged to engage in research relating to the SDGs and global development (for instance, the UK's GCRF – a cross-disciplinary research fund coordinated by UK Research and Innovation (the national funding agency for science and research in the UK) established to channel £1.5 billion of funding between 2016 and 2025 to research addressing the SDGs) and to articulate how their work aligns with and contributes to realising the SDGs. These links have been further entrenched through the UN's designation of 17 universities across the world as 'SDG hubs' (one per goal) 'for their commitment to addressing SDGs and educating future generations about the biggest global challenges' (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021, 2).

At the same time, many universities – in the UK and internationally – have identified the potential to leverage popular awareness of and (particularly amongst younger generations) concerns with sustainable development to promote their own 'brand'. Amidst growing financial constraints and increasing competition for student numbers and income, many university administrators and leaders have started to 'explore innovative avenues to gain a competitive edge' (Amani, 2024, 2). Many of these avenues have led to the same public interest branding space coalesced around the SDGs – a move that reflects a shift in the role and space of activism within the university sector that 'has been subtly corporatised through the migration of corporate social responsibility from the private sector into the university' (MacFarlane, 2021, 594). This process reflects a continuation of well-established understandings and practices of corporate social responsibility branding as a means through which 'institutions can enhance their corporate reputation by investing in ethical practices aligned with socially constructed norms, values, and beliefs' (Amani, 2024, 2; Saifudin et al., 2021; Zapp et al., 2021). Within the higher education sector, SDG-related branding endeavours have both established expectations of compliance and performance of academics framed through the narrative of 'grand challenges' (MacFarlane, 2021) while simultaneously attempting to position institutions in a favourable light to different but often overlapping audiences: applicants and their parents, funders and governments, existing students, alumni and major university ranking organisations (Saifudin et al., 2021; Zapp et al., 2021). Critics of these efforts argue that this fundamentally undermines the role of the university in society to be independent in

thought, given that components of the international institutional architecture embody ideological assumptions about 'solutions' and 'actions' (MacFarlane, 2021).

Universities are neoliberal bureaucracies where performative metrification has been embedded at every level through bureaucratic mechanisms, including the near-ubiquitous intrusion of rankings, metrics and audits to measure 'performance' against multiple indicators (Nash, 2019). These rankings and audits have increasingly extended into efforts to measure (and rank) universities' performances in contributing to the SDGs and in improving their own social and environmental 'sustainability'. Thus, recent years have seen the integration of measures – and metrics – relating to 'sustainability' and the SDGs into various of the major university rankings, including the *Times Higher Education* university impact rankings and the QS world university rankings: sustainability. The QS rankings claim to identify which of the world's universities are leading the way in social and environmental sustainability (QS, 2024) based on 'indicators designed to measure an institution's ability to tackle the world's greatest environmental, social and governance (ESG) challenges'. Calculated using metrics falling under three categories (social impact – 45 per cent, environmental impact – 45 per cent and governance – 10 per cent) and 'evidence of a research culture aligned with the UN's SDGs', QS ranked the University of Toronto (Canada) as the world's leading HEI on sustainability in 2024 (Table 1). The *THE* impact rankings, meanwhile, claim to be 'the only global performance tables that assess universities against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (THE, 2024) to achieving SDG17 (partnerships) plus three other goals. While there is only limited direct overlap in the top rankings between the two approaches (Table 1), the clear dominance of these measures by major (often research-intensive) institutions in the global North is prominent (a concern returned to later).

Table 1 Top ten ranked universities for sustainability 2023/24

QS sustainability rankings 2024	***THE* impact rankings 2023**
University of Toronto (Canada)	University of Western Sydney (Australia)
University of California, Berkeley (USA)	University of Manchester (UK)
University of Manchester (UK)	Queen's University (Canada)
University of British Columbia (Canada)	Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysia)
University of Auckland (New Zealand)	University of Tasmania (Australia)
Imperial College London (UK)	Arizona State University, Tempe (USA)
University of Sydney (Australia)	University of Alberta (Canada)
Lund University (Sweden)	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – RMIT (Australia)
University of Melbourne (Australia)	Aalborg University (Denmark)
Western University (Canada)	University of Victoria (Canada)
	Western University (Canada)

Note: *THE* impact rankings include 11 institutions due to a tied ranking.

The attraction of these metrics is that they provide easily digestible lists and rankings, often with an attached numerical score, which suggests rigour and gravitas (Mdee et al., 2024). Much of the power of such lists is that most consumers of their content rarely look behind the curtain to examine their construction. A quick examination of the methodology reveals this to be a composite index compiled through a combination of 'quick and dirty' citation numbers (how many times is water or sanitation mentioned in an abstract for a paper (co)authored by an academic affiliated to the university for instance, rather than consideration of the substantive argument and focus of a paper) produced by Elsevier, with self-reported data submitted by universities on how they are achieving components of that SDG in their institution and wider geographical location. Quick and dirty citation counting tells little about the value of research, and measures such as 'the percentage of papers with an author from a middle- or low-income country' are a poor and highly gameable indicator of inclusion. In fact, such a metric can easily lead to the symbolic but ultimately meaningless inclusion of authors. The numbers created by such lists tell us more about the hunger of particular institutions to play 'the game', rather than indicating any genuine commitment to progressive change and sustainability agendas.

A more detailed examination of the metrics that inform impact and sustainability rankings allows us to draw likely connections between recent initiatives across different institutions and specific metrics. For instance, the drive at various institutions to embed and clearly badge 'education for sustainable development' across all curricula can be seen as a strategic ploy to increase scores in *THE* rankings as self-reported data on 'Commitment to meaningful education around the SDGs across the university, relevant and applicable to all students' accounts for 9.06 per cent of the score awarded, while 'Dedicated courses (full degrees, or electives) that address sustainability and the SDGs' account for a further 9.06 per cent. The embedding of key terms in module or programme titles, descriptions, or learning outcomes, or the inclusion of 'skills badges' on sustainability or development on relevant modules provides both marketing material and 'evidence' of a 'commitment to' and 'dedicated' content tackling sustainability and the SDGS.

Meanwhile, the open publication of data on an institution's performance against all 17 of the SDGs accounts for 27.2 per cent of the overall potential score. Initially this may seem like an inconsequential and undoubtedly positive step – increased transparency should result in heightened accountability. But which institutions have the capacity to collect, analyse and present these data? Which institutions have the infrastructural capacity and resources to host and maintain this data in a public, online repository? Which institutions across the globe will have the resources and capacity – from functioning websites to well-staffed central administrative teams to resources to support academic staff to be research active – to report on and meet the metrics used? Thinking critically about these questions quickly highlights how the hidden labour

and costs involved mean that rankings systems reflect and perpetuate inequalities within the global higher education sector. The corollary of this is the entrenching of inequalities in landscapes of knowledge production (Hammett et al., 2024) through the consolidation of prestige and resources at 'top' universities who already benefit from historical and contemporary advantages.

The metrics themselves and language used reflect a powerful global North bias (for instance for SDG17, the 'proportion of academic publications with co-author from lower- or lower-middle-income country') and assumptions about particular forms of data collection. Moreover, the metrics seem unable to account for the differential resource footprints of institutions, encompassing not only campus energy usage but also (international) travel footprints, the differential potential for and access to renewable energy provision on existing national power grids, access to public water and sanitation systems, etc, let alone the underlying difference in resource consumption between a large, research-intensive institution in the global North and a regional, teaching intensive institution in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, the metrics are inherently skewed to reward institutions in high-income contexts – a situation compounded not only by the language used (which is also skewed towards and privileges Northern contexts and conditions) but the administrative capacity required to provide these data for inclusion in the rankings which will be beyond the resources of many global South HEIs (for broader critical engagement with composite measures and university rankings, see Paruolo et al., 2013). Crucially, these metrics matter and have power within the current orthodoxy: higher rankings provide marketing and branding opportunities, and can lead to increased prestige and student recruitment.

Within the competitive, neoliberal higher education sector, individual institutions are inherently incentivised to work in their (financial) self-interest, to identify mechanisms to secure status, reputation and income. This *de facto* results in pressures to act in ways that are unsustainable on multiple levels – often in the name of 'sustainability'. These efforts are vital to institutional attempts to gain legitimacy from their performance – or at least perceived or represented performance – in relation to the norms, values and expectations that universities are committed to global sustainability (Miotto et al., 2020). The pursuit of rankings and reputation are thus inherently entangled with efforts to secure resources (research income, student numbers and tuition fees, etc.) with privileged institutions enjoying pre-existing advantages to these endeavours. The result is the recurring perpetuation of unequal landscapes of knowledge production at both national and international levels, leading to massive discrepancies and inequalities in resources, workloads, research time and ability to report on 'sustainability' metrics (Hammett et al., 2024; Mdee et al, 2024). In an increasingly competitive higher education landscape, are we to believe that university administrators are genuinely committed to the SDGs or that introduction of performative and routinised reporting or teaching expectations are about gaming the rankings systems? These

practices risk undermining the realisation of sustainable development in numerous ways, from the risks of uncritical adoption of flawed development orthodoxies to alienating students through the routinised imposition of education for sustainable development content shoe-horned into degree programmes.

While some argue that the increased branding by universities and individual academics of their work as contributing to the realisation of the SDGs reflects 'strategic efforts to support sustainable consumption' (Wijaya et al., 2024, 756), our reading of current trends is more cynical. The co-option of the SDGs and global development branding can be read as a strategic branding ploy by HEIs to gain market profile directly and indirectly in order, ultimately, to secure their own bottom-line – the financial security and sustainability of *their* institution. The instrumental approach to 'sustainable development' that this engenders, from diktats on the inclusion of education for sustainable development in curricula to the deployment of SDG branding on research outputs and webpages, does not demonstrate a genuine, substantive and critical engagement with global sustainable development. Whereas the 'challenge' or 'development turn' – the shift in focus and resources to meet the 'grand' or 'global' challenges linked to sustainable development – should have opened the space for critical global development scholars to bring their expertise to bear on major debates and initiatives, this space has instead been increasingly co-opted for marketing and branding purposes with concomitant risks of reductionist mantras and unproblematic reinforcement of (neoliberal) development orthodoxies that are far from sustainable. For example, the messaging from universities on core global development remits more often resembles those used by NGOs in their fundraising campaigns to the public. Cloaked in words and phrases like 'co-production' and 'empowering communities', unequal power relations and exploitation become sanitised and hidden (Serunkuma, 2024). Academic practice-based research, which reveals unequal power, exploitation and complexity is hard to brand, hard to solidify in metrics and disrupts the chosen narrative of messaging. Therefore, it is threatening to the incentives of the institution that has become compelled to present itself not as a space for debate, contestation and dissent, but rather as a compliant producer of 'solutions' to technical problems.

A golden age for international/global development in universities?

On the surface, the prominence of the SDGs in the university sector should have ushered in a golden age for research and teaching relating to international/global development. Growing numbers of under- and post-graduate courses clearly identified as international or global development can be seen as a reflection not only of consumer demand but also of institutional decision-making which can often be an uneasy mix of academic passion and commitment, and university financial impera-

tives and strategic decision-making. As previous sections have indicated, the realities of the 'development turn' have often been an uneasy mix of idealism and opportunism, of hoped-for spaces of critical engagement and entrenching of orthodoxies. These paradoxes and tensions infuse our everyday experiences as the personal reflections in the opening section of the Viewpoint highlight.

In many ways the processes outlined in our opening vignettes and then discussed through the rest of the Viewpoint feel eerily similar to previous experiences of the mainstreaming of progressive agendas around corporate social responsibility and 'greenwashing' or 'green sheen'. As with greenwashing – where advertising and branding is used to mislead customers and consumers into believing an organisation is more environmentally sustainable than it really is – we see the co-option of SDGs into university marketing as a form of 'development washing', in other words, the badging of research excellence, teaching content, and 'sustainability' rankings through the terminology and goals of the SDGs to produce a specific view of an institution (in this case a university) as being more substantively committed to and contributing to sustainable global development (including support for critical interrogations of dominant development narratives) than it really is.

The co-option of the SDGs and rise of 'development washing' within the university sector thus risks perpetuating dominant orthodoxies and unsustainable approaches and practices within and beyond the sector, and the undermining of *critical* development studies. As the clock inevitably ticks down on the SDGs – and awareness grows that few of the goals and targets will be realised – the need for critical interrogation of development orthodoxies grows. But amidst the rush towards SDG-related branding, what space will remain for those critical voices? Moving forwards, it is incumbent upon critical scholars working in this field to ask difficult questions of their institutions regarding any disjuncture between marketing and practice, and to continue to engage critically with (global) development orthodoxies.

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