

## **Student Affairs and Services: The Global South Leading the Global North in the Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a worldwide commitment to a set of ambitious goals that advance sustainable social justice across the globe. Higher education (HE), while featuring in SDG 4: Quality Education, needs to occupy a bolder and more explicit position in the formulation of the SDGs and in their attainment, not only as an instrument toward the achievement of the SDGs but also in the sociocultural consciousness of countries towards a more sustainable and socially just world. Engaging with students in HE around these issues plays a vital role. Given Student Affairs and Services' (SAS) role and position in terms of support and development of students worldwide, it is a key player in supporting HE to become a more effective instrument in advancing the SDGs and in advancing students' attitudes and commitment to SDGs. To explore how SAS can play a more impactful role in advancing the SDGs and SAS' role in and contribution to SDGs around the world, we researched SAS practitioners' awareness of and engagement with SDGs. To collect data, we used a survey with open and closed questions via snowball sampling with self-selected participants from fifty-three countries (N=318). The results of our study suggest that SAS practitioners engage with and utilize the SDGs in a variety of ways across the globe, thus contributing to the role HE plays in advancing SDGs. In exploring the patterns, it emerges that SAS in the Global South

(GS) and Global North (GN) engage differently with the SDGs. According to the results of our study, SAS in the GS appears to have more awareness of, engage more deliberately with, and use the SDGs more broadly in their work with students. While there are different trends on the role SDGs play across the global HE sector, the consensus seems to be around the need to discuss and engage with the SDGs more deeply, at curricular and co-curricular levels in higher education. Our research suggests that HE and SAS can do much more to generate awareness of SDGs, particularly in the GN.

**Keywords:** Global South, Global North, Student Affairs, Sustainable Development Goals

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## INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) plays a significant role in the support and advancement of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The development of global citizens, supporting achievement and lifelong learning, and generating new knowledge, provides an obvious platform for featuring and incorporating the UN's SDGs and ideals (Blessinger et al., 2018; Chankseliani & McCowan, 2020; HESI, 2021; O'Malley, 2019; Mallow et al., 2020). Global Student Affairs and Services (SAS) is often at the center of this educational endeavor, working directly with students throughout their academic careers in cocurricular spaces (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Osfield et al., 2016; Schreiber et al., 2022; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2019).

The 3rd Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (Toman et al., 2023) shows a trend of increased "institutional commitment, more actors involved, and increasingly holistic approaches of the whole institution to SD" (p. 8) as observed in the data from 2016 to 2021. So too in contexts where SD forms a deliberate set of guidelines, is SAS increasingly involved in advancing the SDGs via citizen education, education for sustainable education, community engagement, and aligning student services and development goals with SDGs (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Osfield et al., 2016; Schreiber et al., 2022).

The SDGs are "ambitious and versatile, and they are unique in their unprecedented use by diverse actors in the global community" (Toman et al., 2023, p. 11). SAS is one of these "diverse actors" (Toman et al., 2023, p. 11) and is advancing and embracing the SDGs (Schreiber & Torabian, 2023; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020).

Toman et al. (2023) explore HE's understanding and approach to SDGs and provide a detailed report on global trends. Whereas the focus on SDGs requires a multi-stakeholder approach, Toman et al.'s (2023) research found that their sample (N=464, from 120 countries) indicated that students are "perceived as the most involved in the process" (p. 21) of sustainable development. Toman et al. (2023) highlight the need to have "systemic structures in place to support their activities" (p. 44) and SAS is this very "systemic structure" that is the focus of our study.

The Toman et al. (2023) comprehensive and incisive study highlights the importance of Global South and Global North (GS-GN) collaborations by pointing to the important role of leadership and partnership among institutions, stating that “increased North-South, South-North and South-South cooperation and training opportunities” play an essential role in achieving the SDGs (p. 49). Our study contributes towards this knowledge of GS-GN relationships and how best to understand the trends and strengths of the Global South and Global North so that all people benefit from good practices, which seem to be especially in place in the GS, leading the efforts to work with students around SDGs in HE.

### **SOME CRITIQUES OF SDGS**

HE does not have a clearly articulated role or function in the attainment of SDGs and appears largely left out across the 17 SDGs and is only marginally included in SDG 4: Quality Education (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2020). SDG 4 expands the scope of education in relation to the SDGs by seeking to “ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015). Not only is HE underrepresented in the SDGs overall, moreover, even SDG 4 lacks specificity and milestones that could support achievement in this area, particularly from an equity perspective in relation to lower income countries and people (Heleta & Bagus, 2020; Schreiber & Torabian, 2023). In addition, SDG 4 contains some problematic suggestions, see for instance target 4.3, which suggests scholarship funds to flow from GN to GS, deepening the dependencies of GS on GN, and de-contextualizing higher education student success (Heleta & Bagus, 2020).

We assert that SAS can support HE in the pursuit of the holistic achievement of all the SDGs through work both broadly contextualized with students and more specifically embedded within programs and services that underscore student learning and development of students (Schreiber et al., 2021; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020). By working across key student services and student support domains during their tertiary education—personal, socio-cultural, and public (Perozzi et al., 2022)—SAS is able to infuse the SDGs in meaningful ways into the SAS practice and use them to guide practice that supports student success in higher education and beyond. In sum, we assert that SAS is ideally placed to advance SDGs education with students and also, the programming and services SAS offer lend themselves suitably to embed SDGs within them.

Our study contributes to what Chankseliani and McCowan, (2020, p. 4) call the need for “evidence and conceptualisation of higher education’s potential of contributing to the SDGs.” Our empirical investigation into these concepts has led us to an understanding of significant differences between SAS practitioners in the GS and the GN. Overall, it appears that respondents in the GS were more aware of the SDGs, their institutions were more overt in their support of the goals, and SAS practitioners more regularly incorporate the SDGs into their work with students (Perozzi, et al., 2023).

## **WHAT CONSTITUTES THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE GLOBAL NORTH?**

Generally, critical sociology literature does not focus on the geography of the GS-GN separation but rather the political economy and sociology thereof, despite the geographical marker in the moniker (Cooper, 2021). Historically, literature on the political economy and sociology of global development used other ways to classify countries on a global scale. Until the end of the Cold War, the classification of countries into three “worlds” was popular. Then, the “First World” referred to the Western world, that is, the industrialized, capitalist, liberal democracies of the North (including some of their independent settler colonies in the geographical South, such as Australia and New Zealand). The “Second World” referred to the industrialized, communist countries centered in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, and the “Third World” was made up of the countries of the so-called non-aligned movement.

Another historical classification based on the experience of colonization is also relevant, whereby Third World nations and developing countries typically are countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that were historically colonized by European nations. However, countries with similar experiences that have become independent settler colonies (such as Australia, Canada, and the United States) are typically not counted among the developing nations.

Currently, notions such as developing countries, “industrial (or post-industrial) countries,” and classifications of countries based on national income “upper middle income” and human development-based classifications, are widely used by multinational organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They all refer in one way or another to indicators of political, economic, and social development.

As much as sociologists (such as Cooper, 2021) seek to de-emphasize the geography of the GS and GN to describe economic, political, and cultural divisions, it is also indisputable that it is the former colonies and current developing countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa that are understood to make up “the Global South” and identify with the notion of the GS. Notwithstanding this, we agree that there is significant internal variation whereby there are places that have all the characteristics of the GN, and there are persons whose lived experiences in countries of the GN are akin to those in the GS and vice versa. It is certainly not our aim to gloss over these variations or wanting to perpetuate a sense of division and inequality between countries.

In this study, we categorize respondents from different geographical localities as either representing views from the GS or the GN. Provided that our study deals with the SDGs, our first interest was to see if there was any significance to such a classification. We operationalized the GS-GN divide firstly by continents whereby we coded responses from North America, Europe, and Oceania as GN, and as GS those from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. We then took a closer look within these broad groups and with reference to relevant literature, we kept Turkey in the GN, moved Fiji, Tonga, etc., (Oceania) to the Global South (but kept

Australia and NZ in the GN), and also moved Japan, Hong Kong and Macao (Asia) to the GN. In the process, we had much debate about borderline cases such as certain countries in Asia and Asia Minor (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, the wealthy Gulf States), and certain countries in South East Europe, but for various reasons (be it historical, cultural, political, or economic) we kept them within their broad category (while in many cases our debate was also short-cut due to an absence of responses from some of these borderline cases).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Survey Instrument**

Our study used a survey that was built in and administered through Qualtrics and was deployed to potential respondents in an online response format. During the design phase, draft questions were sent to test reviewers to complete and provide feedback. We took that feedback and modified the process and questions accordingly, which resulted in a questionnaire that included 25 closed and open-ended questions and eight demographic questions. SAS practitioners were asked to provide their perspectives on the institutions they are affiliated with, and their thoughts on their awareness and engagement with the SDGs. Approval from the institutional review board was secured through the American University of Sharjah, the home institution of one of the researchers.

### **Sampling**

The survey was sent via snowballing technique to all members of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) using email and social media. The participants were self-identifying as SAS practitioners, staff, or management in any way they viewed themselves as part of the global SAS community. The survey portal remained open between 1 November and 20 December, 2021. This sampling technique is a convenience method, often termed snowball sampling (Goodman, 2011), and allowed us to reach a broad number of SAS practitioners from across the globe, especially because the world was still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of sampling. A total of 360 responses were received, with 318 of those being valid and usable, in terms of completion and submission.

### **Analysis**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the quantitative data and thematic development (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used to analyze the qualitative data (Likert scale) from the open-ended questions.

## Participants

We were able to reasonably group responses into the following regional categories based on existing rubrics from IASAS and the United Nations that delineate countries into regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, Oceania, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Any smaller disaggregation on a country-specific level was not possible given the small sample size from some of the 53 countries the participants were located in. A total of 360 responses were received, with 318 of those being valid and usable. The scope of data collection was limited to those SAS practitioners who self-selected to partake in the study by agreeing to the conditions approved the American University of Sharjah Institutional Review Board (IRB).

See Table 1 for the number of responses per region. For this study, the process described in the previous section was used for our delineation of the GS-GN regions.

**Table 1: Number of Respondents and GS-GN Sample Delineation**

<u>Region</u>	<u># of Participants</u>
Africa (GS)	36
Asia (GS)	60
Middle East (GS)	10
Latin America and Caribbean (GS)	19
<i>GS Subtotal</i>	<i>125</i>
Europe (GN)	96
Oceania (GN)	5
North America (GN)	92
<i>GN Subtotal</i>	<i>193</i>
Grand Total	318

The sample consisted of a range of demographic representations with 60% of the sample being 35-54 years of age and 53% female. Public higher education institutions (HEIs) were most represented at 64% of the total, with private HEIs representing the second most at 27%. While titles and responsibilities within global SAS vary tremendously (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020), 36% reported being senior SAS leaders, 25% mid-level, 18% advisors, and 21% various; this last category demonstrates the diversity of roles across regions and institutions. The sample demographics were similar for the GN and GS groupings.

## FINDINGS

In these findings, we report on the quantitative results and not on the thematic analysis of the qualitative responses of the participants due to the limited length of this paper. The Likert Scale responses are described here in terms of the participant's perception of the SDGs, the importance of select SDGs, and the utility value of the SDGs.

### **Perceptions of Familiarity, Knowledgeability, and Utility**

The first questions we asked SAS practitioners were concerned with their familiarity with the global SDGs. It was encouraging to find that of the 318 respondents to this question, over 80% considered themselves at least somewhat familiar with the SDGs. There is some discrepancy between the respondents from the GS and GN, though.

**Table 2: Are you familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?**

	<u>Global North</u>	<u>Global South</u>	<u>Total</u>
Yes	45.4%	59.8%	50.9%
Somewhat	31.6%	27.0%	29.9%
No	23.0%	13.1%	19.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The analysis in Table 2 shows that a significantly larger proportion of SAS practitioners in the GS (60%) considered themselves familiar or somewhat familiar (27%) with the SDGs, as compared to SAS in the GN where the proportion is significantly smaller (45% were "familiar" and 32% "somewhat familiar").

The findings in Table 2 correspond to the responses SAS practitioners provided regarding the extent to which they thought their peers were knowledgeable about SDGs. SAS from the GS considers their peers "quite a bit" (30%) or even "very knowledgeable" (15%) about SDGs. In contrast, less than 25% of SAS from the GN considered their peers more than just "somewhat" knowledgeable (see Table 3).

**Table 3: To what extent are Student Affairs professionals knowledgeable about SDGs?**

	<u>Global North</u>	<u>Global South</u>	<u>Total</u>
Very Knowledgeable	6.1%	14.8%	9.9%
Quite a Bit	18.4%	29.5%	23.3%
Somewhat	36.0%	37.5%	36.6%
Not at All	30.7%	9.1%	21.3%
Do Not Know	8.8%	9.1%	8.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Familiarity with SDGs and being knowledgeable appears higher in the GS compared to the GN. Here the disparity in responses is even starker whereby 72% of GS practitioners emphatically agree that SDGs can serve as a framework for their work as compared to only 41% of SAS in the GN (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Could the SDGs serve as a framework for your work?**

	<u>Global North</u>	<u>Global South</u>	<u>Total</u>
Yes	41.3%	71.8%	54.2%
Somewhat	49.3%	22.7%	38.1%
No	9.3%	5.5%	7.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Which SDGs were in the Top 5 in the Global South and Global North?**

Of the 318 SAS practitioners that responded to the question of what they considered the top five SDGs in their institution/organization, the following rank highest: SDG 4: Quality education, SDG 3: Good health and wellbeing, SDG 5: Gender equality, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, and SDG 17: Partnerships.

When comparing the responses of GS and GN practitioners, it emerges that SDG 4: Quality education, SDG 3: Good health and wellbeing, and SDG 5: Gender equality are the top 3 SDGs in both contexts. However, a different emphasis emerges after the top 3. In the GS, SDG 17: Partnership and SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure follow in succession on places four and five, while in the GN it is SDG 10: Reduced inequalities followed by SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure. In both cases, sustainability issues as well as climate action are other important SDGs.



**Using SDGs in Higher Education and Beyond**

Participants were asked if and to what extent their institution supports the SDGs. Table 5 shows that close to a third (32%) of SAS practitioners in the GS indicated that their institutions/organizations support SDGs as a high priority, as against less than a quarter in the GN (22%).

**Table 5: To what extent does your higher education institution / higher education organization support the SDGs?**

	<u>Global</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Global North</u>	<u>South</u>	
Essential	5%	11%	7%
High Priority	17%	21%	18%
Medium Priority	29%	36%	32%
Low Priority	27%	24%	26%
Not a Priority	22%	9%	17%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The responses as recorded in Table 6 reveal a similar pattern to that of using the SDGs. When asked whether they are using SDGs to inform their work (directly or indirectly) with students, 84,1% of participants in the GS answered “yes” or “somewhat” whereas in the GN only 57,1% responded with “yes” or “somewhat.”

**Table 6: Are you using the SDGs to inform your work directly or indirectly with your students?**

	<u>Global</u>	<u>Global South</u>	<u>Total</u>
	<u>North</u>		
Yes	19.6%	31.8%	25.0%
Somewhat	37.5%	52.3%	44.0%
No	42.9%	15.9%	31.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Our research found that a great majority of the respondents (73%) from the GS found that SDGs shaped public policy in their local context at the level of being “extremely,” “very,” and “somewhat” influential (see Table 7). In the GN, however, only 42.5% of respondents thought of SDGs as influential in the public policy context.

**Table 7: To what extent do you think the SDGs shape public policy in your local context?**

	<u>Global</u> <u>North</u>	<u>Global</u> <u>South</u>	<u>Total</u>
Extremely Influential	1.6%	6.3%	3.6%
Very Influential	6.3%	24.0%	13.9%
Somewhat Influential	34.6%	42.7%	38.1%
Slightly Influential	33.1%	20.8%	27.8%
Not at All Influential	24.4%	6.3%	16.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

## **DISCUSSION**

The importance of mapping the SDGs across Higher Education Student Affairs and Services practice and practitioners across the globe is evident, given that Student Affairs and Services plays a critical role in student support and development, and in overall institutional success (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Osfield et al., 2016). Given that the role of higher education is nebulous throughout the SDGs, it is important to highlight that our research demonstrates a greater affinity of SAS with SDGs and how SAS can advance the SDGs within and beyond HE. So, while the role and function of higher education is only obliquely referred to in the overall attainment of the SDGs, and goals around higher education within SDG4 are modest, the SAS's affinity to the SDGs plays a significant role towards the attainment of the SDGs.

In our findings and in the literature it appears that the SDGs provide a meaningful framework for HE and SAS work (Jensen, 2022; van't Land & Herzog, 2017). They act as a backdrop against which issues can be cast and illuminated in the broadest sense. Using this global equity lens (Bardill Moscaritolo & Roberts, 2016) in our work allows us to frame issues in a global context while helping students and the institutional community focus on local action toward an ultimate, greater end. This kind of interplay between the global and local is also described as a useful lens by Chankseliani and McCowan (2021, p. 4) who examine the role of the SDGs with a view to "the global from the perspective of the local and view the local from the perspective of the global."

There are myriad ways in which HE SAS can support the SDGs, which is indeed critical to advancing achievement across the 17 SDGs. And while our focus is on SAS, we realized the importance of an all-institutional approach, which is also emphasized by Toman et al. (2021) and HESI (2021). SAS is embedded into and across the HE sector and the work with students is recognized as critically relevant in advancing the SDGs (Toman et al., 2021) and thus the SAS work is contributing to the HE's collective efforts to attain the SDGs.

Part of the collective efforts is both curricular and cocurricular support of the SDGs, which assist students in acquiring the broad knowledge to be effective citizens, while concomitantly developing skills and abilities that support the individual in

achieving both personal and collective success, aligned with sustainable and social justice goals. The SDGs provide a platform for global thought and local action, which fits perfectly with the overall mission of HE and SAS.

Our results are organized into three clusters: 1) familiarity with SDGs across SAS and the HE sector, 2) the ranking of SDGs' various goals as a focus for the work with students, and 3) the utility value of SDGs as a guiding framework for SAS. We compared the results through the lens of GN and GS and how the data differ across these two regions.

The data suggest that SAS in the GS tend to be more familiar, have more explicit awareness and knowledge, apply the framework and work more specifically towards some of the SDGs and use the SDGs more explicitly in programming with students. There is a myriad of reasons for this and some of these might include that SAS in the GS is more sensitized to the needs of achieving the SDGs due to the contextual factors. In other words, in contexts where male and female students have equal access to HE, as is the case in most GN regions, the SDG 4 – equitable access to HE – is not a pressing requirement and urgent need. Perhaps other reasons contribute to the uneven awareness of SDGs in the SAS across GN and GS, such that if SDGs are already embedded into the context of HE, such as reduced inequality (SDG 10) or peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) then there is less readiness for the work on these SDGs. It is indeed a problematic discourse to imply that privilege is blind to the urgency of the SDGs, which inadvertently also deepens the stereotypes about the neediness and vulnerability of the GS. Hence, we are only tentatively exploring and suggesting these considerations, rather than offering confident conclusions in this regard.

There might be other reasons why there appears an uneven focus of SAS on SDGs across GN and GS, and perhaps, given concepts like the African Ubuntu and other social justice maxims in the GS, for instance, South Africa, it might be that SAS in the GS has a greater awareness of these, which then inform the awareness around the importance of SDGs.

Another reason that might have influenced the data in favor of GS SAS awareness of SDGs is that the SAS staff might have different characteristics from the GN SAS participants. Fewer countries in the GS have post-graduate preparation programs leading to roles in SAS and come to SAS work from a wide range of educational and vocational backgrounds (Seifert, Perozzi, & Li, 2016). SAS staff in the GS might have an overrepresentation of staff coming from other fields and disciplines, such as the social sciences, and thus bring a certain kind of social awareness and political consciousness with them, which may influence their lens and perspectives.

What appears evident is that more focus, increased energy, and further attention are required to advance the work with students to advance the attainment of the SDGs. Students are particularly motivated and receptive to work toward SDG attainment (Toman et al., 2023) and SAS is directly focused on supporting and developing students (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020) and is thus in a powerful position to advance the SDGs.

## CONCLUSION

While we believe that HE should be more specifically integrated and charged by the UN with assisting in the achievement of the SDGs, we have discovered that those working in SAS roles have the vision to support these broad efforts. Given that SAS professionals and practitioners tend to have a strong equity lens, while variously interpreted and construed, this orientation and perspective supports the lofty commendable cultural and humanitarian ideals of the SDGs.

There is a significantly different level of familiarity and use of SDGs in HE between the GS and the GN, according to our sample of global SAS practitioners. SDGs appear to be much more central in the frame of mind and work of SAS practitioners in the Global South than in the Global North. More awareness is needed to advance the work around the SDGs in HE and SAS is well-positioned to take up this call.

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