RESEARCH ARTICLE

Accelerating sustainable development goals in the wake of COVID-19: The role of higher education institutions in South Africa [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

Michael Takudzwa Pasara[1], David Mhlanga[2]

[1]TRADE Entity, FEMS,, North-West University,, Vanderbjilpark,, Gauteng, 1900, South Africa
[2]Accountancy, University of Johannesburg, Johanneburg, Gauteng, 2006, South Africa

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Abstract

Background: Educational institutions are strategic tools in disseminating knowledge on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since education is an effective developmental tool. All the 17 SDGs are tied in one way or the other to education, that is, the ability of people to learn and apply. This study applies unorthodox theories which include convergence models, neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism, neorealism and the Hofstede model to explain how educational institutions are an essential enabling environment which accelerates the attainment of SDGs.
Methods: These factors are analysed in the context of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Empirically, some university case studies were highlighted in addition to unclear modus operandi, small, fragmented and heterogeneous markets and economies, political stability, deficient political will, and lack of standardisation of products and procedures among other factors. These dynamics affect both the quality of educational institutions and the quality of education thereby directly or indirectly affecting the attainment of the 17 SDGs and are compounded with the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic.
Results: The study reveals that acceleration of the 17 SDGs will require a holistic approach as opposed to silos (scientific, economic, political, academic) which usually emerge when pursuing overarching goals of this magnitude.
Conclusions: It concludes that accelerating progress towards the attainment of SDGs will not only require dynamic and visionary leadership but also well-functioning institutions which are based on economic feasibility as opposed to political alliances. Priorities should be placed on addressing poverty, inequality and quality education. Moreover, partnerships will be key in achieving sustainability

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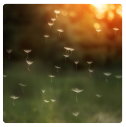
1. **Syden Mishi**, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa

2. **Majed Alharthi**, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

especially given that the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded existing challenges.

Keywords
South Africa, higher education; institutions; COVID-19; SDGs



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Corresponding author: David Mhlanga (dmhlanga@uj.ac.za)

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Introduction

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address the universal challenges of poverty, protect the planet and ensure that global citizens enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs also known as the Global Goals are aimed at improving all forms of welfare by 2030. Member countries improved the previously labelled Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and summarised the Global Goals into 17 SGDs. These goals are highly intertwined as there was a recognition of causality effects across various fields and the need to work together to attain the common goal of improved welfare and sustainable development The member states identified quality education (Goal 4) as one of the strategic goals which were to be promoted to attain inclusive and equitable quality education with lifelong opportunities for everyone.

Education is a fundamental growth and empowerment tool for every economy. The education objective is fundamental because it is tied to the other 17 SDGs. For instance, quality education reduces poverty, and inequalities and stimulates good health and well-being[1] (Aka & Dummont, 2008; Grossman, 1972; Lucas, 1988; Mehrara & Musai, 2011; Pasara *et al.,* 2020). When citizens are educated, they are more productive thereby having decent work which contributes to economic growth (Goal 8) and there is a better appreciation for affordable clean water and energy solutions (Goals 6 and 7) leading to sustainable cities and communities[2]. On the other hand, one could posit that quality educational institutions are a function of peace and justice[3] which fosters the establishment of strategic vertical and horizontal partnerships. This will in turn compound results in disseminating knowledge and information on SDGs. the benefits of partnerships emanating from convergence arguments were first postulated by Robert Mundell (Mundell, 1963) and will be revisited in the subsequent section. Too & Bajracharya (2015) posited that the expectation of universities to provide both leadership and sustainable innovative solutions are anchored on these institutions being generators of cutting-edge research.

Forlornly, Africa is marred with weak economic and political institutions whose spillover effects are generally felt by educational institutions. The general sentiment is inclined toward African institutions being invariably disappointing and without strong (educational) institutions (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020), two outcomes are likely to happen. Either attainment and acceleration towards SDGs will be futile, or reversal can be experienced where progress was once made (Juma & Mangeni, 2015). Compounding these issues with the emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) due to forced lockdowns is likely to negate any form of momentum gained in tackling the SDG agenda. On the other hand, South African universities are among the top in Africa and have led in producing cutting-edge research across the continent and globally. Despite the ravaging effects of COVID-19, most of these universities have fared fairly well in terms of providing virtual educational facilities which resulted in minimal disruption of academic learning and research compared to other African countries (Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Mhlanga, 2021). This provides hope that, if these benchmarks could be replicated across the continent, then notable progress can still be attained in terms of accelerating the attainment of SDGs.

A closer analysis of the literature reveals that the renewed vigour on SDGs (formerly MDGs) will be watered down if institutional matters are not addressed. Thus, this paper analyses factors which are likely to affect African educational institutions in accelerating progress towards the attainment of SDGs. This paper intends to add to the literature from two strands: firstly, by bringing to light the significant and catalytic role played by educational institutions in accelerating the attainment of SDGs. Secondly, by highlighting some of the nuances which affect educational institutions which are not usually captured in mathematically engaging models yet influence the overall output levels. Whilst this paper acknowledges that there are a variety of educational institutions, this study will focus on tertiary institutions because of their capacity to conduct both teaching and cutting-edge research. However, where necessary relevant institutions involved in horizontal or vertical partnerships will also be analysed. The novel contribution of this paper is in its multidimensional analysis and unorthodox examination of some nuances which are ordinarily disregarded in either scientific research in the natural and biological, or statistical and econometric analysis in the social and business sciences.

Review of important literature

Sustainable development goals

On September 25, 2015, global leaders gathered at the "United Nations in New York to enact the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals and 169 targets established an action plan for sustainable development for all countries that encompasses growth in the economy, social integration, and protection of the environment". These goals and targets were adopted at a meeting that took place on September 25, 2015. (Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017). The next item on the agenda is to get an agreement on the goals, and then move on to putting those goals into action and finally realizing them. Goal 17 is the final objective, and it is solely concerned with implementation strategies; nonetheless, there is little discussion of interrelatedness and connections between objectives in the programme of action. All of the goals have 42 targets that concentrate on the achievement of sustainable development, and the final goal, Goal 17, is completely dedicated to means of implementation (Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017). According to Stafford-Smith *et al.* (2017), "there needs to be a greater focus on interlinkages in three domains: across sectors (such as finance, agriculture, energy, and transport education, among others), across societal actors (such as local councils, governmental organizations, private industry, and civil society), and between and among low-income, middle-income, and high-income countries".

[1] Goal 1,2,4 & 10.

[2] Goal 6, 7, 8 & 11.

[3] Goal 16 & 17.

According to Sachs *et al.* (2019), the 17 "SDGs, and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change call" for significant changes to be made in each nation. These changes will require complementary actions to be taken by governments, civil society organizations, scientific communities, and commercial enterprises. The SDGs are a framework that expands on the "Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)" in many ways, but one of the most important ways is that they aim to firmly link the social, economic, and environmental components of goals (Mhlanga, 2022; Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017). This is "turn implies linking across time and makes sure that the short-term accomplishment of improvement of human well-being does not take place at the expense of diminishing well-being in the long run by impacting the underlying environmental and social capital on which our worldwide life support system depends to achieve long-term goals" (Mhlanga, 2022; Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic and South African higher education

There are "26 public universities, 50 public technical vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, and a variety of private schools" that make up the higher education system in South Africa. According to Tjønneland (2017), the number of students enrolled in public universities in 2017 was close to one million, 700,000 students enrolled in the "fifty TVET colleges", and 90,000 students enrolled in various private institutions. Since 1994, the nation as a whole has seen not only a general but also a specific rise in the number of students enrolled in schools across all of its races. The "National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)" bursary is one of the primary forms of financial assistance provided by the government to the African students who make up the bulk of the student body at these institutions of higher learning. This bursary project is funded by "the Department of Higher Education and Training for those students who are unable to fund themselves and do not have access to any other bursaries, study loans, or bank funding".

Tjønneland (2017) asserted that notwithstanding the dramatic increase in enrolment rates in institutions of higher learning, it is believed that the enrolment rates was is still far too low in comparison to the country's population of 55 million in 2017. He stated that this belief is based on the fact that in 2017 the country had a population of 55 million. Nevertheless, Tjønneland (2017) brought attention to the fact that the government intended to increase the number of children enrolled in schools to 1.5 million by the year 2030. The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in South Africa at a time when several public universities were experiencing difficulties as a result of student demonstrations that were taking place over various issues, including rising tuition fees, dissatisfaction with accommodation and registration, and other problems (Landa *et al.*, 2021; Mokhoali, 2020). In addition to this, a number of these demonstrations had become violent, which resulted in the temporary shutdown of several educational institutions (Grobler, 2020). The beginning of the pandemic made the situation, even more, direr, and on March 18, 2020, it was announced that all campuses of higher education would be shut down and placed under lockdown. This resulted in a complete transition away from the conventional in-person education that is provided by the majority of educational institutions of higher learning and toward online teaching and learning (Mpungose, 2020).

Traditional methods of teaching and learning in the classroom made use of books, chalk, and chalkboards. On the other hand, the online mode makes the content of modules available online by utilizing digital technologies such as computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones in addition to learning management systems (LMS), software applications, and social media sites (Mpungose, 2020). The swift transition to learning through online platforms is not without its share of obstacles. The adoption of new teaching pedagogies by the teaching staff in universities against their will without a clear design for meeting the educational needs of the students is one of these problems (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Because university professors had not received adequate training in the most efficient methods of online teaching and learning before the abrupt shift, this necessitated a great deal of experimentation on their part. This scenario strongly "suggests that there is a need for professors to receive training, which might pave the way for collaboration between educational technology companies, online education corporations, and institutions in the post-pandemic period" (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). The shortcomings of the current system of higher education have been brought to light as a result of COVID-19; hence, the government of South Africa ought to expand its commitment to and investment in professional development programs that are intended to capacitate university instructors. It wasn't until the start of the new school year in 2022 that all of the students at the nation's public colleges finally made their way back to campus. On the other hand, the vast majority of educational institutions have adopted blended teaching and learning. This suggests that students would have access to both online and face-to-face education even though all students would be permitted on campus to alleviate overcrowding in the lecture halls. As a result of the reopening of campuses to all students in 2022, a select number of universities have been designated as vaccination mandatory sites. This means that "all students and employees will be required to be vaccinated for them to access university campuses unless they have been granted an approved exemption".

Methods

A qualitative method was employed for this paper, and a critical assessment of the relevant literature was carried out. A critical review is viewed as a method of a "complete review that enables researchers to study, comment on, critically evaluate, and synthesise published literature to identify research gaps, consistencies, and inconsistencies in earlier studies" (Carliner, 2011; Wakefield, 2015). The researchers followed the advice given by Webster & Watson (2002) to make the review comprehensive. Webster and Watson argue "that a comprehensive review needs to address four essential aspects: contribution ("what's new?"), impact ("so what?"), logic ("why so?"), and thoroughness ("well done?")". The researchers followed this advice to make the review comprehensive. The "Publish or

Perish" search tool was used to search through the Google Scholar database as well as the Scopus database to collect the relevant material. In light of the findings presented in Snyder's (2019) publications, it is important to emphasize that the selection of articles included the participation of two reviewers. Snyder (2019) claimed that it is preferable to have two reviewers to preserve the quality and reliability of the search technique. The criteria for inclusion were the amount of time that had passed since the study was conducted as well as the suitability of the study's design in relation to the research topic. Publications that had been released from the year 2000 and up until the present were the ones that were primarily focused on, however, work from earlier years was also taken into account. In terms of the design of the studies, we were more interested in articles that utilized critical review articles, and content analysis because these types of articles were more inclined with our study, and we were able to obtain more of the information that we were looking for from these review articles. Some of the keywords used were sustainable development goals, COVID-19, higher education institutions, South Africa, accelerating among others. There were a total of 66 articles considered for this critique. According to Wee & Banister (2016), the ideal number of papers for a comprehensive review article is between 50 and 100. The following theoretical frameworks served as the basis for the thematic discussion of the aforementioned literature. The convergence of viewpoints, the neo-functionalist view, the perspective of intergovernmental, and the conclusions drawn from a variety of documents and academics. After reaching the saturation point, which is the point at which there is no longer any new material on the topic being examined as a result of the additional examination of more papers, a thorough examination of the relevant literature was carried out (Carliner, 2011; Mpofu, 2022). A literature review of books, scholarly articles, and any other authoritative sources was carried out, although journal articles published from Google Scholar and Scopus were given greater attention than any of the other sources. The keywords were selected following the claims made by Hsieh & Shannon (2005), who stated that when carrying out a critical review entails comparing keywords or other information, typically, before interpreting the underlying context using the Publish or Perish is a software program Figure 1 below is showing a flowchart depicting the process of conducting a literature review.

Discussion of the findings

The convergence views

At a macro level, several inconsistencies characterise African education and investment models. Although there are some isolated countries which devote a significant portion of their national fiscus towards education and health, the general proclivity of the lion's share is channelled towards security and defence irrespective of no evidence for potential national and regional threats. The circumstances are worsened by low income per capita across many African countries. Significant variances reflected by inequalities and widespread poverty are so high to an extent that African countries like Nigeria recently became the poverty capital of the world, ahead of India (Pasara, 2021). South Africa is one of the most unequal countries globally, living standards in Zimbabwe continue to worsen whilst poverty in Malawi remains sustained. These gloomy and complex macroeconomic indicators trickle down to affect educational institutions thereby affecting the momentum need to accelerate the progress towards the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is true given that one could rationally positively correlate the quality of education with the quality of educational institutions.

Consistent macroeconomic conditions provide an enabling environment for educational institutions to not only flourish in their respective countries but also partner with other institutions across the continent. The economic rationale behind this argument was raised by Mundell (1965) who highlighted

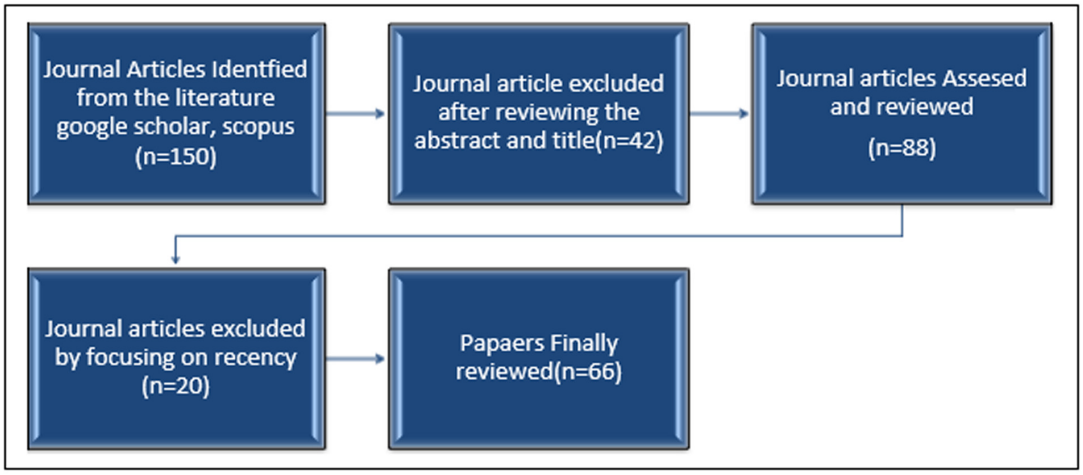

Figure 1. A flowchart depicting the process of conducting a literature review.

that successful integration and partnerships require the business cycles of the respective economies to be synchronised. In other words, economies must be moving systematically to have consistent results when macroeconomic principles are applied. In Africa, regional economic communities established macroeconomic 'convergence criteria to achieve this synchronisation and improve economic welfare (Pasara & Dunga, 2019). Convergence was described as a situation in which countries (or institutions) attain a similar level of wealth and development (Mundell, 1961). When two or more economies achieve macroeconomic convergence, it then becomes easier for micro institutions such as universities within those respective countries to collaborate on teaching and research projects which enhance SDGs.

Consequently, there has been notable progress in terms of university collaborations in developed countries and communities outside Africa. In North America, Yale University signalled strong institutional commitment by pivoting its university-wide strategic plan around sustainability, the Sustainability Strategic Plan (2013–2016) (Filho *et al.*, 2018). The Swedish University of Uppsala Centre for Sustainable Development coordinated interdisciplinary collaborative initiatives between the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and itself. The aim was to catalyse education research on sustainable development. Some developing countries have also taken some leadership initiatives in the area of sustainability. For instance, 89% of offered programs across forty (40) Brazilian universities piloted exploratory research mapping the emphasis given the SDGs. They concluded that SDGs involvement in business administration programmes was irregular and slow with only 13(33%) of offered courses having some links to the subject (Palma *et al.*, 2011). These asymmetrical outcomes could be attributable to improper convergence criteria which is characteristic of many developing economies.

However, other schools of thought (Winkler *et al.*, 2004) who argue for the *ex-ante* convergence purport that convergence is not a necessary condition for a successful integration or partnerships such as universities. On the contrary, they hold the view that it is the alliance varying developmental levels which lead to convergence. The argument is based on the privilege of the less developed country being able to imitate methods and technology cheaply and easily without incurring the sunk costs associated with research and development (Lin, 2003; Nelson & Philips, 1966; Romer, 1990). Using this argument, it would be ideal if educational institutions in Africa engage more in collaborations outside the continent, especially from the developed world. Employing this rationale, one could argue that South Africa has fared reasonably well since most universities' teaching and research collaborations with those universities in the Global North. In addition, a fair share of South African academics also holds strategic positions in those institutions in the developed world. This, perhaps, explains why most South African universities are among the best in the continent, with eight of the top ten universities being South African.

The Solow model posits that the institutions from the developing economies will grow at a faster rate and 'catch up since the initial sunk costs of research and development will be minimised (Romer, 1986; Solow, 2007; Solow, 1956). Apart from a few South African and Kenyan universities, Makerere University in Uganda and more recently the Rwandan universities; African universities do not generally engage in collaborations with educational institutions from the developed world. There are very few African universities apart from those mentioned above which are engaged in quality research outputs (THE, 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxford University has been collaborating with the University of Witswatersrand of South Africa in conducting trials on the efficacy of the Astrazeca vaccine, a commendable effort (Pasara, 2021). However, in general, the majority of universities in Africa are struggling to ensure that their students can get access to subsidised mobile data so that virtual classes can continue. This translates into slowed pace toward attaining SDGs in Africa. Such major disparities can be minimised through integration. According to [Lozano, 2011; Trencher *et al.* (2014); Zilahy & Huisingh (2009)], there has been an increased willingness to joint reach societal stakeholders, referred to as sustainability co-creation. This would enrich education and research through the production of transdisciplinary knowledge and pragmatic challenges (Trencher *et al.*, 2016).

Countries in general and educational institutions, in particular, must realise that SDGs are common continental goals as opposed to national and institutional goals. The emergence of a global pandemic like the coronavirus has solidified this argument even further. There is a tendency, at times, for African countries to operate in silos as if these objectives are anchored on the 'zero-sum' principle. In fact, in 1817 David Ricardo queried the zero-sum notion and articulated that institutions are likely to be better off when they partner with each other due to comparative advantages which emanate from variances in elasticities in production (and consumption). Research institutions have different specialities (thus elasticities) and can maximise their multiplier effects when they collaborate thereby improving economic welfare.

Before Ricardo's model, dominant schools of thought were mercantilism and absolute advantage theory by Adam Smith (Smith, 1776). These models believed in 'absolute advantages' where stronger institutions were supposed to prey on weaker institutions to continue to survive. These models did not understand the idea of spillover effects (positive or negative) where activities in one institution (or nation) could affect the other institution. For instance, South Africa witnessed the *"fees must fall"* movement which started as a spark in one university until it became a national veld fire. These spillovers were easily transmissible because the origins of such a movement, poverty and inequality (targets of the SDGs), were something easily relatable across institutions. Thus, not only can political leaders no longer afford the luxury of operating in silos but also academic institutions. Unfortunately,

there are still some leaders even in higher education institutions who still believe in mercantilism and absolute advantage models and are not willing to collaborate with educational institutions from relatively lowly ranked stratas. The contribution of universities towards the attainment of SDGs will require them to collaborate and optimise as postulated in the convergence argument.

Neofunctionalist view

The neo-functionalism view, founded by Edmond Haas, emphasises the role of the high authority. Haas postulated that institutions consist of groups with varying interests which would be better satisfied through partnerships. Neofunctionalism conveyed the notion that a *high authority* must exist to provide overall direction to institutions (Rosamond, 2000a; Rosamond, 2000b). At the national level, the high authority would be presumed to be the education ministry and/or the Department of Higher and Tertiary Education (DHET), South Africa. Haas argued that the high authority determines the overall direction of the education sector, either to success or failure.

In South Africa, the high authority has been quite aggressive in ensuring that universities have a strong component of SDGs in their strategic documents. Moreover, some analysts also argued that these developmental goals were not simply religiously mentioned since there were proper tools for monitoring and evaluation of university outputs which resulted in their yearly rankings. These kinds of mechanisms are key in benchmarking results, providing stimuli for continuous development and also for tracking progress. The DHET has been key in ensuring that there is reasonable pressure to improve outcomes whilst at the same time ensuring that there is sufficient academic independence for the universities to operate. It is these kinds of models which usually provide enough room for creative and developmental research as opposed to a largely authoritarian environment. Consequently, there has been notable progress in university outputs, especially with the University of Johannesburg (UJ), North-West University (NWU) and University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN). Other new universities such as Sol Plaatjie University are also making remarkable progress in ensuring that there is equitable distribution of quality education. All this has been made possible due to a conducive environment and sustainable models designed by the higher authorities in South Africa. Moreover, South African universities have also been key in ensuring that there is a smooth transition from conduct to virtual learning in South Africa when the coronavirus pandemic broke out. This has not been the case in other countries such as Zimbabwe where, in some cases, universities took close to a year to adopt new learning models. This lack of urgency dampens the amount of momentum which is required to accelerate the implementation of SDGs.

Although tertiary institutions have the capacity for cutting-edge research and promoting SDGs through social stakeholder engagement (Too & Bajracharya, 2015), it should be noted that the majority of these institutions operate in silos. Achieving SDGs at the national and continental level will require well-coordinated efforts and it is the role of the high authority, which will then act as an apex institution (ministries) responsible for coordinating efforts by these universities (Pasara, 2020). On one hand, a lack of coordination mobilised by a high authority may result in subtle or acrimonious tensions as universities (or other educational institutions) may tend to undermine the efforts of one another[4] (Trencher *et al.*, 2014; Trencher *et al.*, 2016). Even within the same institution of higher and tertiary learning, intra-departmental tensions are a common phenomenon (Rasiah, 2011). Collaboration becomes difficult in such cases (Alesina *et al.*, 2000). Thus, the university administration then becomes the high authority responsible for managing these crises and stimulating SDG projects which require departmental collaborations. Without decisive leadership from the higher authority, the likely outcome will be a lack of collaboration, and duplication of programmes and efforts which will result in wastage of resources, oversubscription of some goals and under subscription of other goals. Again, the results will be irregular. Therefore, fusing and coordinating efforts under the supervision of a higher authority will likely lead to multiplier effects in accelerating progress towards SDGs. As much as these micro institutional (university) efforts are commendable, they hardly translate into significant macro impact which is recognisable at national and continental levels. Consequently, most universities end up feeling unappreciated in their research investments and outputs which in turn dissuade them from conducting further research. Thus, there is always a role of high authorities (whether at the continental, national or local level) in driving SDGs.

Other analysts raised the argument that the authority and influence of high authorities usually require affiliates to 'give up some of their sovereignty to the higher authority if the institutions are to work effectively to achieve a common cause such as SDGs. The transfer of power equips the high authority to have some monitoring and enforcing authority to ensure the successful implementation of SDGs. Controversy usually arises on the magnitude of sovereignty which should be transferred to make the parent institution truly functional (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Caporaso, 2018; Krapohl *et al.*, 2014). The power should neither be too much nor too little to create a balance between the high authority having enforcement power and affiliate universities and institutions of higher learning not being crippled so that they can independently make internal strategic decisions (Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019; Chechi *et al.*, 2016). Research institutions and universities generally thrive on their conditions of independence both in decision-making and implementation. Thus, transferring a significant part of sovereignty to higher authorities for purposes of accelerating SGDs is unlikely to occur in higher education and research institutions without compromising some elements of independence and ethics. This outcome is also attributable to

[4] This could be due to 'ego' reasons, for instance, university rankings or any other related pre-conceived notions which create artificial barriers.

a lack of trust between the academia which largely constitutes universities and politicians who usually occupy ministerial positions and drive SDG agendas at the national strategic level. However, without trust and some form of accountability on measurable goals, accelerating progress towards attaining SDGs would be difficult if attainable at all.

Other analysts criticised the neo-functionalism school of thought for diminishing the authority and role of affiliate institutions, and universities in this case. Moreover, the idea that spillover effects would mature into integration was contested (Ujupan, 2005). In other words, once institutions are established on an economic basis such as achieving SDGs, they will not culminate into anything more even after successfully achieving their goals. For instance, using the arguments of Stanley Hoffmann, academia and politics are independent of each other. The former would be categorised as low politics while the latter would be categorised as high politics. According to Hoffmann, the law requires technocrats and does not require much sovereignty transfer; in this case, a common institution or collaboration would be feasible. To a larger extent, achieving SDGs will require more technocrats than high-level politics and in this sense, partnerships or collaborating institutions are feasible. On the other hand, high politics encompasses strategic policy matters and Hoffmann (1966, 82) reasoned that partner institutions will be unwilling to transfer their sovereignty to the high authority even for cross-cutting issues such as the global pandemic and SDGs.

Intergovernmentalism perspective

Another governance issue applicable to the discussion was raised by Putnam (1998) who postulated the intergovernmentalism school of thought. This hypothesis is anchored on binary currents of neorealism and neoliberalism. The former posits that participants (education institutions) do not carry similar weight because they have varying competencies. It is these differences which induce power variances (Ujupan, 2005). Those institutions with greater weight and power bases (academic, economic or political) are likely to pursue the majority of their objectives. The implication is that horizontal collaborations on SDG projects may become challenging since certain institutions may feel that they are better ranked and therefore, should exert greater weight when running communal projects such as those which entail the achievement of SDGs. In South Africa, highly ranked institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of Pretoria (UP) hardly collaborate with lowly ranked universities like Walter Sisulu University (WSU), University of Limpopo and/or Venda. The former is more likely to collaborate with universities from the Global North such as the University of Oxford and Cambridge.

However, when unavoidable circumstances such as the coronavirus pandemic arise where local academic institutions have to collaborate toward a common national developmental goal, these highly ranked institutions usually influence the preferences and priorities of other partners to avoid loss of position, similar to the principal-agent theory. This does not usually result in a balanced and sustainable dynamic when it comes to nationwide projects. Thus, there is a need to address the need for collaboration using mutually beneficial models to achieve sustainable development.

The second component of neoliberalism emphasises how the interests of members interact. According to Putnam, (educational) institutions comprise participants on two levels (Putnam, 1998). The first level consists of coalitions established by bearers of offices whilst the second level consist of unions whose members consolidate their positions by bargaining to satisfy the demands of interest groups. Consequently, challenges emerge when trying to create a balance on the outcomes of both games, that is, institutional objectives of attaining SDGs while at the same time satisfying interest groups to enhance domestic positions. In other words, there are internal politics which must be played whilst simultaneously working on SDG projects. Sometimes leaders will then be forced to sacrifice overarching objectives such as SDGs to consolidate domestic positions. It is generally uncharacteristic of African leaders to put institutional or national objectives such as SDGs ahead of personal interests, and if a choice has to be made, the former will be sacrificed. Thus, apart from focusing on direct projects which address SDGs, there is a need for visionary leadership and proper governance structures to attain long-term objectives such as SDGs.

Other generic challenges affecting institutions in delivering SDGs

Several generic issues constrain Africa's institutions including the higher and tertiary education sectors. The significance of political stability on the quality of education cannot be overemphasised. Institutional frameworks in Africa generally predicate the attitudes of politicians such that the SDG project will live or die with them. Political leaders have a significant say in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and university executives. The downside of such frameworks is that the continent is characterised by endemic political instability. This emanates from politicians who either overstay until they are forcefully removed or are in office for a very short period to follow through on their policies. The incoming leadership will have no interest in following up on those projects (such as certain SDG-related projects and models) even if they were aimed at improving the welfare of citizens. The consequences have been paralysed institutions (Alesina *et al.*, 2000; Büthe & Milner, 2008; Hanieh, 2010; Mothae, 2005). The paralysed institutions will have far-reaching implications such as slow or zero response capacity and models in dealing with significant shocks like the pandemic.

South African politicians should be commended on, at least, ensuring that universities continue to have a strong degree of institutional independence and that university projects are not always influenced by the political environment. In cases where interventions were made, it was to a larger extent justifiably so. For instance, the South African government has been playing an active role in correcting the institutional ills of the apartheid regime by ensuring that the intake of the

black majority from previously disadvantaged backgrounds is corrected. This is well in line with the Global Goals of 2030. However, when it comes to operational models and institutional independence, South Africa has generally fared well above the average African university. If these models could be replicated across the continent, the resultant effect may be a significant acceleration in attaining SDGs. If the rule of law and governance principles are upheld, then it would be feasible to incorporate policies such as SDGs into national laws as opposed to just being a democratic agendum so that issues such as reducing inequalities and alleviating poverty which are at the core of SDGs are placed above the fleeting political spans.

The second issue relates to political will. Some analysts purport that African leaders only devote much of their resources to treaties, conferences and speeches but generally fail to address cross-cutting challenges identified in the SDGs. This lack of political will is demonstrated even in national budgets where the majority of governments allocate a lion's share to the security and defence ministries and very small proportions to the education sector. Even in cases where the allocation towards the educational sector was fair, empirical evidence indicates that large disparities exist between budget allocation and actual disbursements (Daniel & Sama, 2020). Consequently, the majority of educational institutions are crippled to conduct cutting-edge research which will accelerate the achievement of SDGs (Too & Bajracharya, 2015). African governments have a syndrome of donor dependency which has crippled their national institutions including the education sector. With the risk of donor fatigue increasing (Palinkas *et al*., 2021), most African governments were left with the option of borrowing from international financial institutions (IFIs). However, this comes at the backdrop of increased debt unsustainability levels which has made most economies not creditworthy. Although there are feasible alternatives such as mineral revenue, most politicians are unwilling to channel those resources towards development even in cases such as the pandemic. They will still be waiting on bailouts from IFIs.

The South African context is mixed at best concerning South African political will. On one hand, the government should be commended on student facilities such as National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which has provided financial cushioning for financially disadvantaged families with cumulative figures running into millions. On the other hand, some argue that these models have increased the level of debt unsustainability, a key macro fundamental which has contributed to the burden on the taxpayer. In some cases, a lack of political will manifests itself through stalled ratification procedures due to insufficient support from relevant institutions (Ujupan, 2005). Sometimes, ratified documents are not properly disseminated to avoid accountability and progress becomes stalled due to information asymmetry. In other instances, it simply sabotages (Beyene, 2014a; Beyene, 2014b), especially where opposition parties want to prove the ineffectiveness of the other. Unfortunately, this happens at the expense of neutral institutions such as universities and the general populace. In most of these instances, the hands of educational institutions will be tied as they do not have the authority to hold leaders accountable. This can be addressed by empowering universities and other research institutes with some level of autonomy so that SDG projects are run irrespective of the political outlook.

It should be noted, however, that political leaders can genuinely renege on their SDG obligations due to national emergencies. National emergencies common to Africa include suppressed popular or political dissent, ethnic conflicts, civil strife, natural disasters, disease outbreaks such as Ebola, cholera and more recently, the coronavirus (Candau & Dienesch, 2015; le Roux, 2005; Pasara, 2021). Sometimes pursuing long-term strategies such as the SDGs may appear like an unjustified luxury in the face of national emergencies. When COVID-19 broke out, countries and (educational) institutions were forced into lockdown and isolation. Consequently, leaders are faced with a dual challenge of a health crisis and an economic crisis which both significantly affect the SDG agenda. Universities and other learning institutions closed forcing their leaders to switch to virtual methods. The majority of ongoing research projects and conferences were affected. Although the actual magnitude of the coronavirus pandemic is still to be assessed, it is an undeniable fact that the quality of education among other SDG goals was negatively affected.

The African continent is also characterised by cleavages. The continent is so disaggregated and the nature of disunity is multifaceted. One significant aspect which has affected nations at large and educational institutions, in particular, is cultural differences. Most universities in South Africa are identified with a certain local culture, language or tribe and this has significant implications when identifying models which can be effectively applied to cross-cutting matters such as SDGs. As Geert Hofstede's insights conclude, organisational or institutional culture is very important and it influences productivity, creativity, profitability, growth and also how problems are solved (Hofstede, 1980). This matter is true even at the continental level where educational institutions are largely divided into Anglophone, Francophone and Arabic. Unlike in the European and North American universities where universities from different cultures collaborate on certain welfare-enhancing projects, such occurrences rarely happen in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Instead of focusing on establishing stronger relations, Africans always find fresh sources of divisions and hatred among themselves resulting in decelerated progress toward SDGs. The continent is also characterised by terrorist attacks, civil unrest, xenophobia elements, pre- and post-election violence where tribal attacks are common, and wars that on occasion spill over to neighbouring nations (Johnston & Trebilcock, 2013; Pasara, 2020; Walters *et al.*, 2016). The results are increased poverty, inequalities and

vulnerability to diseases; poor quality education among other issues. Overall, it is feasible to accelerate progress towards SDGs despite uncertain setbacks such as the novel coronavirus. Human beings can achieve more if they want to.

Conclusion

The paper analysed the factors affecting accelerating progress towards SDGs in Africa in general and South Africa in particular and how the emergence of the coronavirus has compounded some of these challenges. The crux of the message is that issues relating to achieving SDGs are intricately intertwined and complex. They do not only depend on scientific research methods and outcomes but also on governance and economic models including expectations as well as the prevailing political environment. The paper analysed using both unorthodox theories and empirical literature, how educational institutions have a significant role in the attainment of SDGs. The paper posits that acceleration towards SDGs requires harmony and coordination of efforts from universities as leaders of cutting-edge research. Moreover, there is a need for vertical and horizontal institutions like government ministries to complement educational institutions either through enabling policies, or funding among others (Lozano, 2011; Palma *et al.*, 2011; Zilahy & Huisingh, 2009). Consequently, well-functioning institutions (both academic and complementary) will be key in harmonising efforts toward the common goals of attaining SDGs. Accelerating progress towards achieving SDGs will require dynamism and visionary leadership. More importantly, institutions should be based on economic feasibility as opposed to political alliances. Whilst the general arguments raised focused on educational institutions, similar arguments can be raised for other institutions as well. In a similar vein; although the focus was placed on poverty, inequality, quality education and partnerships as SDGs goals, similar arguments can also be extended for the rest of the 17 SDGs.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ✓

Version 1

Reviewer Report 07 September 2023

https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.15904.r29257

✓ **Majed Alharthi**
King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Title: Accelerating sustainable development goals in the wake of COVID-19: The role of higher education institutions in South Africa

The article is reasonably clear in its presentation. It does cite some current literature to support its arguments. The article's study design is explicitly stated; it is a qualitative review of existing literature on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the impact of COVID-19 on South African higher education. The topic is relevant and has academic merits. However, I would suggest that the authors:

1. State their research questions clearly, and

2. give a rationale on why they chose the Google Scholar database as well as the Scopus database to collect the relevant material.

The article has a clear presentation of results and conclusions. It discusses various aspects of the relationship between SDGs, COVID-19, and South African higher education, and it explicitly states conclusions and provides evidence to support them. With this being said, the reader is left with a clear understanding of the article's main takeaways.

The article is primarily written in an academic style, using technical language and referencing academic literature. It does not make an effort to simplify or clarify concepts for a non-academic audience. Therefore, it may be challenging for individuals without a strong academic background to comprehend.

The article touches on real-world challenges, such as the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in South Africa and the importance of collaboration between educational institutions, and it provides concrete solutions or actionable recommendations.

The article discusses various aspects related to SDGs, COVID-19, and South African higher education and draws explicit conclusions, providing empirical evidence to back them up.

Some solutions are offered and can be effectively implemented in practice. For instance, the authors stated, “Other analysts raised the argument that the authority and influence of high authorities usually require affiliates to ‘give up some of their sovereignty to the higher authority if the institutions are to work effectively to achieve a common cause such as SDGs.”

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?
Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Communications media

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 27 March 2023

https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.15904.r28526

?

Syden Mishi
Department of Economics, Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa

The authors need to be commended on taking on this topic, and for the overall objective; not withstanding the following are concerns that need attention before the paper is acceptable:

1. Coherence: the arguments fail to be coherently and consistently carried out throughout the sections – from title one would assume the argument is around how higher education institutions enable attaining of SDGs—either as knowledge hubs (measuring of SGDs, knowledge of how to reach the goals; and as actors to attainment of goals themselves)—in some sections focus has been on enrollment with no clear connection with accelerating SGDs in general other that access to education

    - Second paragraph under introduction indicates education objective is fundamental and tied to other '17' – 17 includes the education one, so the number should be other 16

    - Last paragraph under introduction talks to SDGs as formerly MGDs--- to say 'formerly' is inaccurate as it is not just a change of name of the goals

    - Literature review section- 'Sustainable development goals'- that section has no 'literature' but provides background to SGDs, so it should move to the introduction section

    - The covid-19 pandemic and South African higher education - this section fails to provide 'literature' in a global view to help orient reader from any part of the world - rather it provides stylized facts on how South Africa higher education system dealt with Covid-19
        - Arguing that enrollment are far too low by comparing to population of 55 million is misleading—in that population those under 17/18 years, those with already higher education qualification, are not expected to be part of enrollment—else the assumption is that every citizen must be in higher education at any point in time - not logical

        - The section fails to convince reader of its inclusion

2. Methodological issues:The flow of sections is either leaving gaps, incoherent or lacking substantiation
    - Why were articles search from the particular search engine

    - Why cut of year of 2000 (not for example 2015 from the onset of SDGs or any other year)]

- Figure 1 is not clear - check how reviews like systematic are done, and how screening of articles is done — it is not clear how authors got to 88; from 150 they removed 42 (no reasons for removal given), balance should be 108; but next box shows 88; from 88, 20 were removed 'focusing on recency', did the search strategy give prior 2000 articles?, then balance should be 68; but the box shows 66. Caption of the figure indicates 'process of conducting' but what is depicted is not 'process'—it is not showing process of conducting literature review, but of screening
- Concept of saturation – is it tested before getting to the number of articles, in this case 66; or it was tested with the 66 articles
- Key words explanation was given later, after indicating number of articles finally used—yet this should be part of the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria at the start of methodology

- Justification of 66 articles is loosely done—there is reference to 50-100 being good; but it is not tied to the 66 articles in expression, it is like a statement on its own

3. Results—the articles that form data of the article are not listed anywhere—expectation is that these articles will be summarised to give the reader an understanding of the nature of articles found - a table summarizing key issues like – date of publication, study area, methods, key questions/hypothesis; key findings/ key conclusions is needed. It is only after knowing the which 66 articles have been found can one understand the results

    - One can come up with the results in current form without having done the steps outlined—so steps outlined are not clearly leading to results – the list of articles is missing; the summary of the articles is missing—that is the data to give results

    - If literature review section had alluded to theories, it was going to be easy to understand the discussion of results around certain theories
    - Fees must fall is formerly written as #FeesMustFall

The manuscript will benefit from revisions ensuring a coherent discussion in line with the objective of the paper – guided by comments above.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
No

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?
Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Welfare economics; development economics; economics interventionism; human and firm behaviour

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.