



Global, Nordic, or institutional visions? An investigation into how Nordic universities are adapting to the SDGs

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Abstract

After their launch by the UN in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been seen as landmarks for global survival. Higher education has been given a key role in the implementation of the SDGs, and the current article investigates how a sample of Nordic higher education institutions have been adapting to the SDGs. Based on the assumption that some SDGs are closely linked to traditional Nordic values such as inclusion and equality, one could expect that higher education institutions in this region would find it easy to adopt (specific parts of) the SDGs. However, although such adaptation is detectable at some institutions, many institutions seem to adapt to the SDGs in more symbolic ways. The findings are discussed in relation to the impact of globalization on Nordic higher education, along with how and to what extent globalized ideas are translated into local contexts.

Keywords Institutional strategy · Nordic higher education · SDGs · Organizational change · Globalization

Introduction

During the past few decades, higher education in different parts of the world has been exposed to globalized ideas and norms, resulting in quite similar strategies and visions about how to best organize for a more competitive and uncertain future (Drori et al., 2015). These ideas have also materialized into the spread of specific practices and distinct organizational structures (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). However, globalization also seems to spread in different ways and forms, and there are many indications of the variations in how globalized ideas are translated around the world (Morphew et al., 2018; Stensaker et al., 2018).

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More recently, it has been possible to identify a reaction to globalization that emphasizes the specific characteristics of individual countries and the potential negative impact of globalization on national culture and identity. These various neonational policy initiatives can currently be found in a range of countries around the world (Douglass, 2021). The Nordic region has also traditionally been associated with some distinct features, including a strong emphasis on equality, inclusion, and similar welfare state ideas (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Fägerlind & Strömquist, 2004; Strang, 2016), resulting in a higher education sector also heavily influenced by these ideas, and characterized by a high level of public investment, no tuition for domestic students attending higher education, and considerably involvement by state authorities in the organization and governance of the sector (Välilmaa, 2018). During the past few decades, Nordic higher education has nevertheless been exposed to a range of reform efforts emphasizing efficiency and quality (Foss Hansen et al., 2019; Geschwind & Pinheiro, 2017; Välilmaa, 2018), even though the vision of the Nordic countries as a “special region” still seems to be very much alive—both politically (Nordic Council, 2019) and in practice (Elken et al., 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2018; Välilmaa, 2018).

However, current global policy ideas and visions are not only about more market and de-regulation—or the neonational rejection of such ideas—but include contrasting political discourses addressing themes such as global inequality, climate change, and social justice. This trend is particularly visible in relation to the spread of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its related Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI; United Nations, 2015; 2021), which aims to integrate sustainability into the policies and practices of universities.

Exactly how universities are to integrate sustainability into their policies and practices is more unknown territory (Moon et al., 2018), although calls have been made for universities to do more especially emphasizing the importance of equity and inclusion in the approaches taken (UNESCO, 2022). The latter underlining could be said to be especially fitted to a Nordic region where such values are perceived to prevail. Thus, the current article is guided by the following questions:

- How are Nordic universities balancing institutional policy ambitions with the ambitions found in the SDGs?
- Do the SDGs represent a “return to the past” for Nordic universities as values related to equity and inclusion are articulated through the SDGs?
- Is it possible to identify the new “hybrid” values emerging as a result of mixed expectations regarding the future roles of Nordic universities?

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The SDGs were launched in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was set up by the United Nations’ General Assembly with the goal of achieving “a better and more sustainable future for all” (UN, n.d.). The 2030 Agenda is made up of 17 goals, covering issues such as hunger, access to education, affordable and clean energy, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, poverty, and not least partnership to reach the goals (SDG 17). Such global policy agendas are not new, and the SDGs were preceded by a series of similar goals (e.g., the Millennium Development Goals 2000–2015, the MDGs) initiated by the UN to combat endemic challenges such as poverty, hunger, and lack of access to health care and education.

However, two characteristics make SDGs distinct from their predecessors. The first is that the 2030 Agenda has been significantly informed by the global transformation in climate politics, in which climate change has been placed on the international agenda as the key threat to human existence. This does not imply that the SDGs only address climate change in a narrow sense but that the broader agenda of the SDGs is partly associated with the tensions and underlying social struggles that accompany climate politics.

The second development is that the 2030 Agenda is framed as a global agenda involving all nations, irrespective of their standing on the indexes for social, economic, and political development. Whereas the MDGs were to a large extent understood as goals that should be realized in low- and middle-income countries with the support of the so-called developed nations, the 2030 Agenda gives all countries equal roles in realizing the SDGs both at home and abroad. Consequently, the SDGs have been afforded political significance in the Nordic countries that is very different from the MDGs, and reference to the SDGs is now common both in the political and academic discourses.

Whereas the MDGs did not explicitly address higher education, SDG4 includes a target of “equal access to affordable technical, vocational, and higher education,” as well as another target aimed at expanding higher education scholarships for developing countries. In contrast to the MDGs, which only specified quantitative targets, the SDGs specify qualitative dimensions of education. One example is the target “education for sustainable development and social citizenship”:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development. (UN, 2015a, p. 19)

This target illustrates a significant shift in the extent to which UN development goals specify the purpose and content of higher education. From this perspective, the SDGs attempt to directly define the aspects of higher education that have historically been considered the domain of institutional autonomy.

The higher education community has also been targeted for their responsibility for the SDGs through the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, HESI (United Nations, 2015), which launched in 2012 as a partnership between UN agencies and the higher education community. HESI’s overall objective is to integrate sustainability in the policies and practices of HEIs and, according to its website, aims to “provide higher education with an interface between higher education, science, and policy making by raising the profile of higher education’s sector in supporting sustainable development” (UN, n.d., b).

These developments do not imply that HEIs have not engaged with the notion of sustainability prior to the launch of the SDGs. For example, the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* has existed since 2000. However, the SDGs have shifted the global discourses on sustainability in the higher education sector and have arguably also provided HEIs with a new frame for legitimizing and presenting their priorities and practices.

Theoretical perspectives on SDG adaptation

An analysis of the SDGs in a European context needs to take into account that European higher education over the past few decades has been exposed to a continuous stream of reforms aiming at producing more effective, efficient, and relevant universities and colleges (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Frølich et al., 2013; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Although there are national variations in reform policies, there is an underlying common template to this reform agenda—the idea that higher education institutions (HEIs) will perform better with more autonomy and that governmental steering at a distance is the best recipe for accomplishing this objective (Capano et al., 2020, p. 376).

However, the idea of steering at a distance does not imply that governments have become less important regulators of higher education (Capano, 2011). Rather, the reforms have resulted in more complex governance arrangements (Frølich et al., 2013) and in the introduction of market-inspired governing instruments (result-oriented funding, introduction of contract arrangements, more competitive funding schemes, etc., Bleiklie et al., 2017). Studies have demonstrated that the reform initiatives have contributed to changing universities as organizations, hence making them into more “normal” organizations with more power allocated at the central level, more accountability measures, and a stronger emphasis on the strategic role of institutional leadership (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Seeber et al., 2015).

One of the consequences of greater institutional autonomy in a more market-oriented setting is that universities have been increasingly oriented toward their environments and interested in enhancing their reputation as responsible and responsive institutions towards funders, stakeholders, and public authorities (Christensen et al., 2019). Thus, the politics of representation has become an item on institutional agendas as a means to strengthen external legitimacy and demonstrating accountability (Stensaker, 2019).

Whether all universities have the ability and are capable of being responsible and responsive actors in an increasingly dynamic environment is nevertheless a more open question. Below, we identify two ideal-type university responses—one symbolic and one strategic—to this situation, which we will use as a heuristic for our empirical investigation of how Nordic universities are adapting to the SDG initiative.

SDG adaptation from an image perspective

A critical perspective when it comes to adapting higher education institutions to the SDGs—particularly regarding climate change and environmental issues—is that most universities have not developed their organizational capacity or have prioritized these issues as part of their core activities (Moon et al., 2018). Ignoring the SDGs may still involve considerable reputational risk, especially considering that external legitimacy has become more important for universities (Christensen et al., 2019; Drori et al., 2015).

One option that universities could take is to decouple their core activities in teaching, research, and innovation from the external image they would like to have—an option with historic familiarities to those studying universities as organizations (Huisman & Stensaker, 2022). Hence, it is not what the focal university actually does, but rather, it is how it is perceived in the environment that matters.

By adhering to SDGs and other green and ethical policy initiatives in more symbolic ways, universities engage in “greenwashing activities” in which the actions taken have little

effect on institutional life and that adaptation is grounded in the wish to portray the institution in favorable ways, that is, as ethical, adhering to certain moral standards, or responding to the great challenges of our time (Moon et al., 2018).

Although having an image that is rooted in the identity of a university is theoretically preferable (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), the image a given university wants to establish might not always be aligned with reality. Hence, the links between what the university is (identity) and how the university wants to be perceived (image) may differ considerably (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Although a complete match between identity and image may be very difficult to achieve in any organization, too large of a gap between the two constructs may open up for symbolic actions (Strati, 1998), which might be a solution when the university is facing expectations of more rapid adaptation to its environment (Drori et al., 2015; Morphey & Hartley, 2006). Of course, images may also be the signifiers of intended future action (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Huisman & Stensaker, 2022), but such intended images are usually accompanied by detailed plans, actions, resource allocations, and specific outcomes. Lofty ambitions without an accompanying plan for implementation and a commitment to specified outcomes can be associated with symbolic actions (Strati, 1998).

SDG adaptation from a competitive advantage perspective

A constructive perspective on SDG adaptation might focus on the specific resources and capabilities universities have at their disposal. Because the SDGs cover a lot of different areas and sectors, most universities would probably have educational offerings, research profiles, or academic strengths that fit well with specific SDGs. In more competitive environments, it makes sense to concentrate the actions and resources in areas where certain strengths and considerable organizational capacity already exist (Porter, 1979). This is the basic logic behind the competitive advantage perspective, where institutional competitiveness is seen as a dimension integrated into all strategic deliberations. As such, the competitive advantage perspective takes into account that market-like settings are unequal by default and that history, resource foundations, and other path-dependent factors create different starting points for institutional competition.

Competitive advantages can be both material and immaterial, ranging from factors such as wealth, academic quality, and efficiency to more immaterial advantages such as reputation, networks, status, or the ability to add value for stakeholders. All these factors are, from a competitive advantage perspective, potential resources the organizations may exploit (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Originally, the competitive advantage perspective tended to focus exclusively on the economic dimensions. More recently, the framework has also been seen as relevant for organizations wanting to demonstrate (corporate) social responsibility. For example, Porter and Kramer (2011) have suggested that the competitive advantage perspective is highly relevant for organizations wanting to construct social value for their stakeholders. If the perspective is applied to the individual university, SDG adaptation is about evaluating a university's strengths and how they match specific SDGs (e.g., in relation to industry sectors, innovation and infrastructure, and clean energy), develop plans according to resources available, and specify outcomes accordingly (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Table 1 sums up the two perspectives and the key expectations related to them.

It is also possible to argue for a possible combination of the two perspectives. Because some of SDGs focus on dimensions that traditionally have been associated with Nordic values, that is, inclusion and equity (Strang, 2016; Välimaa, 2018), higher education

Table 1 Theoretical perspectives of universities' adaptations to SDGs

| | SDGs as images | SDG as a comparative advantage |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Adaptation characterized by | (Imitation of) The global SDG vocabulary | Emphasis on institutional and academic identity and profile |
| Strategic plans characterized by | No priority of particular SDGs; All SDGs seen as important; unclear implementation and outcomes not specified for the achievements | Emphasis on SDGs that match the institutional academic profile; clear objectives and measures regarding implementation |

institutions might find it easier to emphasize these dimensions in their own adaptation. In this respect, adapting to specific parts of the SDGs could be perceived as a “return to the past” and as part of strengthening the Nordic image—i.e., enhancing a possible Nordic comparative advantage (Porter, 1990). Within the Nordic region, though, this strategy would not imply a comparative advantage although this kind of adaptation could be seen as something that could make the Nordic institutions stand out from a more global perspective. We will return to this issue in our discussion.

Data and methods

The data material consists of strategic plans, action plans, web pages, and other relevant documents collected from the websites of 22 public Nordic higher education institutions in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark.

In each country, we selected three institutions with a broad academic profile and two institutions with a narrower academic profile, except for Iceland, where we could only find two public universities that fit our criteria and had English language policy papers available online. Examples of institutions with a *broad academic profile* include the University of Bergen, the University of Helsinki, and the University of Copenhagen. Examples of institutions with *narrower and more targeted academic profiles* include the Technical University of Denmark, the Oslo National Academy of Arts, and Karolinska Institutet, a medical university in Sweden. This variation has allowed us to examine whether institutions with a narrower academic profile are more likely to adapt to the SDGs in ways that are tailored to their institutional context when compared with universities with a broad and comprehensive academic portfolio.

Relevant documentation was selected by visiting the “strategy” pages of the universities’ websites. The “strategy” section provides information about universities’ policies, visions, and priorities and contains texts that seek to communicate the institutions’ normative ideals, which supported our analytical purposes. However, there is considerable variation in how visions, strategies, and values are presented across the included institutions. For example, Roskilde University has summarized their strategy in a one-page document containing 404 words, which does not mention sustainability. They do, however, have an SDG report of 34 pages, which mentions the word sustainability 82 times. By contrast, the University of Turku has a strategy document of 17 pages, containing 2428 words and 14 mentions of sustainability, but does not present any separate documents on sustainability or the SDGs in the strategy section of its web site. Some institutions also present action plans in the strategy sections of their web sites, such as the Arctic University of Norway which has an *Action Plan for Sustainability and Environmental Leadership*. Such action plans tend to be more concrete and specific in nature than more generic strategy documents.

To account for this variation, we downloaded all documents that were available via *the strategy pages* that had a specific focus on sustainability and/or the SDGs, in addition to all documents with titles including terms such as “vision,” “strategy,” and “values.” A limitation of this approach is that we did not include documents about sustainability that may have been available in other parts of the web sites, or documents that are not publicly available but may be part of the universities’ work with sustainability. Given our empirical focus on institutional policies, however, we consider this limitation to be justified.

The content downloaded for analysis included strategic plans (typically named *Strategy for University X in the period 20XX–20XX*), subject-specific strategy documents or policies

related to sustainability (e.g., *University X as a sustainable university*), action plans related to sustainability (e.g., *Action plan for sustainability and environmental leadership*), institutional reports on sustainability (e.g., *Sustainability report for University X*), web pages outlining the universities' missions, visions, and/or values (e.g., *Our Values*), and other web pages presenting the institutions' approaches to sustainability that were available via the section of the web site entitled "About University X" (e.g., *This is how University X works with the SDGs*). In this article, we refer to all the included documents with the term "strategic plans."

Documents written in Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish were analyzed in their original language. Quotes used in this article are either taken from their English language counterpart (where available) or translated by the authors. The authors do not read Finnish or Icelandic, and in these countries, the English language versions of documents were used. This may have affected the range of documents included for these two countries, as the universities may have presented a smaller selection of their strategy documents in English.

The empirical analysis was conducted in several rounds. First, the *extent and type of information* about sustainability were mapped for each institution. Within this range, some universities only mentioned sustainability briefly in their strategic plans, whereas others addressed sustainability comprehensively through a combination of strategy plans, action plans, strategic areas, and institutional sustainability assessments. This step of the analysis helped us position the HEIs as adapting to SDGs, either as an image or as part of their institutional identity (cf. Table 1) because it gave us insights into whether their visions and values as related to the SDGs were accompanied by more specific objectives and measures of implementation.

Second, we assessed the *organizational extent of focus* of sustainability by examining whether and how the institutions explicitly related sustainability to research, education, and public service. Additionally, we identified whether the focus on sustainability was also directed at the operational management of the university (e.g., practices related to recycling, sustainable property management, or efforts to reduce the university's CO₂ emissions). This step allowed us to further expand the analysis of whether an emphasis on the SDGs was accompanied by specific objectives and measures for implementation.

Third, we assessed the *thematic breadth of focus* of the SDGs, reviewing this in light of the institutions' academic profiles. Within this range, some institutions highlight selected SDGs or specific thematic areas related to sustainability, such as education, health, or the environment. Others took a more comprehensive approach and positioned their institution in relation to a broad range of SDGs or to more general notions of sustainability and a "sustainable future." Where available, we also paid attention to how such priorities were justified. This step of the analysis allowed us to examine to what extent and how the institutions' emphasis on SDGs matched their academic profiles and helped us in reviewing whether their adaptations to the SDGs could be said to reflect an orientation toward "Nordic" values.

Results

In this section, we present the empirical analysis in three parts. We start by assessing the prevalence of the SDGs and Agenda 2030 in the included documents, along with the position of the SDGs and Agenda 2030 in relation to the classic mandates of universities (research, education, and community outreach). We then consider the extent to which the

SDGs and Agenda 2030 have been applied to the operational management of the included HEIs before finally analyzing the data material according to the two categories of SDGs as image and SDGs as competitive advantage. Examples from relevant documents are provided for illustrative purposes.

Prevalence of sustainability and SDGs in HEI policy papers

To map the extent to which SDGs were integrated into the HEI policy papers, we first conducted a word count of the included documents. The search terms included “sustainability” (in either English, Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish), “SDG,” and “Agenda 2030” to distinguish between references to sustainability more generally and to the UN Agenda 2030 more specifically.

The word counts revealed considerable differences regarding the extent to which policy papers referred to sustainability and SDGs. At one end of the scale, the University of Helsinki *Sustainability and Responsibility Strategy* refers to “sustainability” 237 times and the SDGs nine times. At the other end of the spectrum, one institution (Copenhagen Business School) does not mention either sustainability or the SDGs. If we account for relative frequencies, the *OsloMet Action Plan for Sustainability* has the highest number of references to “sustainability” (58). No national patterns can be identified based on the word frequencies. Appendix 1 outlines the relative frequency of “sustainability” in the documents, and Appendix 2 outlines relative frequencies for “SDGs.”

We find differences regarding the number of references to sustainability versus the SDGs. Whereas only four documents have no references to sustainability, fifteen documents do not refer to the SDGs. These fifteen documents include all Nordic countries and belong to institutions with both broad and narrow academic profiles. At the other end of the scale, we find LUT University with 17 mentions of the SDGs in a document containing 1174 words. If we look across all the 39 documents, there are a total of 1186 references to sustainability and 105 to the SDGs.

This part of the analysis demonstrates that (i) there is a significant variety across the documents when it comes to the extent to which “sustainability” is referred to in the texts; (ii) the texts can be broadly distinguished between those that emphasize sustainability in a broader sense and those who explicitly refer to the UN Agenda 2030 and the SDGs; and (iii) that the notion of “sustainability” are included—at least at some level—in all the included documents, with the exception of one HEI.

Sustainability versus UN Agenda 2030

Having established that the extent to which the notions of “sustainability” were mobilized in policy documents differed significantly, we proceeded to examine the qualitative dimensions of these differences in more depth. One significant difference within the policy documents concerns the status afforded to the UN 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Whereas some HEIs refer to the notion of sustainability without emphasizing its connection with the UN agenda (e.g., the University of Turku, University of Akureyri), others position the SDGs as central to their overall mandate and objectives (e.g., the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, the University of Iceland, the UiT Arctic University of Norway, and the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences).

Some HEIs go as far as to position the 2030 Agenda as the foundation for their entire strategy. For example, in their strategy document, the UiT Arctic University of Norway

states that “UiT bases its priorities on the UN Sustainable Development Goals” (Arctic University of Norway, n.d., p. 3). UiT also features an SDG dashboard on its website that organizes the activities of the university based on the 17 SDGs (<https://uit.no/om/baerekraftsmaal>). The dashboard features an interactive button for each of the SDG, which directs the reader to related educational programs, researchers, and projects as well as relevant web pages of the United Nations. Through this interface, the work of the University is categorized through the SDGs and explicitly related to the agenda of the UN.

Another example is the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, which frames the SDGs as key to its overall mandate:

By 2030 we will be a university that draws inspiration from and takes responsibility for the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and that has a symbiotic collaborative relationship with the healthcare sector. (Karolinska Institutet, 2019., p. 8)

The introductory messages from the president of the university explicitly relates its medical profile to the UN 2030 Agenda, emphasizing the global context of health issues and the need for the university to reflect this context in its educational programs.

A third example is the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences, which states that:

The continued development of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences will be based on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. We will define what sustainability means to us in our everyday lives and highlight this in our educational programmes, research and daily operations. ... All our programmes of study will include sustainability perspectives that are relevant to each specific programme. (NIH, n.d. p. 2)

Other HEIs refer to generic notions of sustainability without linking this concept to the UN Agenda 2030. For example, the University of Turku mentions sustainability 14 times in its strategy, here through terms such as “sustainable development,” “sustainable future,” and “sustainable world” (University of Turku, n.d.). However, the UN Agenda 2030 is not explicitly mentioned, and the main goals of the strategy are framed in a language typically associated with the traditional mandate of HEIs, emphasizing education, research, and community outreach. Similarly, the University of Akureyri does not mention the UN Agenda 2030 in its strategic plan or its environmental and climate policy, but in the presentation of its educational programs, it is stated that the university “places an increased emphasis on environmental and natural sciences with sustainability and mutual knowledge exchange between the University and society as guiding principles” (University of Akureyri, n.d., p. 8). The university also emphasizes that its own operations should be sustainable, particularly regarding environmental concerns, with its strategy stating that by 2023,

UNAK is a leading institution internationally in environmental affairs of higher-education institutions by being a carbon neutral educational establishment and sustainable in terms of environmental considerations. (University of Akureyri, n.d., p. 15)

In summary, we have identified two broader patterns through our qualitative analysis. The first pattern is one in which the SDGs are given primacy for the identification and formulation of universities’ priorities. The second pattern is one in which the SDGs or more generic notions of sustainability are subsumed to a classic division of universities’ missions into education, research, and community outreach. The distinction between these two patterns is not empirically clear-cut but is analytically helpful for exploring the overall status and framing afforded to the SDGs in these strategy papers. More specifically, it sheds

light on the extent to which UN Agenda 2030 has become a significant factor in formulating strategic priorities among Nordic HEIs.

Education, research, and community outreach versus operational management

Another distinction concerns the extent to which efforts toward sustainability and the SDGs are primarily directed at the classical mandates of HEIs (research, education, and community outreach) or whether they also include the operational management of HEIs. Out of the 22 HEIs, 15 institutions featured strategy or policy documents that emphasized the notion of sustainability for operational management in the strategy sections of their web sites. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that such strategy papers exist at the remaining 17 institutions. However, they have chosen not to include such documents in the sections of their web sites that foreground their strategic directions.

Typical examples of objectives that emphasize sustainability in operational management include intentions to become carbon neutral, encouraging the use of bikes rather than cars among employees in their travel to work, minimizing air travel through increased use of digital meetings, increased reuse of office furniture and electronic equipment, and calculating and monitoring the overall climate impact of the organization. Some institutions, such as the Technical University of Denmark, relate such plans to all the SDGs. However, the general emphasis is on those objectives related to mitigating climate change (SDG 13), ensuring good work environments (SDG 8), and promoting equal opportunities and anti-discrimination (SDG 10).

The documents varied considerably in the degree to which these objectives were operationalized and specified. Some HEIs refer to the importance of sustainability for their operational management but do not specify clear goals associated with this ambition. For example, the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences (NIH) states in its strategy that.

NIH's campus, educational and research activities will be run in a sound, resource-efficient manner. We will utilise resources in an efficient manner and use products and services that impact our surrounding environment in the least possible way. We will reduce our environmental impact during the period and have ambitions that the institution will become climate neutral by 2030. (Norwegian School of Sports Sciences, n.d., p. 3)

Other HEIs specify quite specific objectives but do not quantify them or present detailed strategies for their realization. For example, the Technical University of Denmark (DTU) has explicitly anchored its operational management in the 17 SDGs, which are organized under five themes that address issues such as resource utilization, sustainable property management, and healthy work and study environments. Examples of these objectives include "DTU will work to secure responsible water management" and "[t]hrough its campus development, DTU will promote green mobility" (Technical University of Denmark, n.d., p. 3, authors' translation).

Finally, some HEIs feature documents that detail specific goals for increasing the sustainability of the organization. For example, the Hanken School of Economics specifies that it will increase waste sorting by 10% to a total of 68% by 2024, keep consumption of electricity to 2019 levels, increase the percentage of recyclable paper in the total paper consumption by 5%, and increase the amount of megawatt hours emerging from solar energy from 10 to 42 MWh (Hanken School of Economics, n.d.)

In summary, most of the included HEIs integrate notions of sustainability into the plans for their operational management, but the detailed operationalization of these plans varies considerably. The objectives associated with such plans are, to a great extent, framed by concerns related to climate change, but they also include an emphasis on good work environments for all students and employees. In the next section, we proceed to examine the operationalization of sustainability in the context of education, research, and community outreach.

SDGs as images or as comparative advantages

Within our sample, there is no clear tendency for HEIs to adapt to the SDGs either as a way to improve their image or gain a competitive advantage. Rather, as Table 2 illustrates, there is an almost equal distribution across the two categories. One higher education institution—the Copenhagen Business School—is not included because it does not explicitly refer to sustainability or the UN Agenda 2030 in its strategy documents. Names in bold indicate that the institutions are classified as having a narrow academic profile.

HEIs in the first category, which have adapted to the SDGs from an image perspective, refer to sustainability or the SDGs in their strategies but in rather broad and unspecific ways. For example, Aarhus University mentions the term sustainability several times in its strategy document, referring to terms such as “sustainable future,” “sustainable society,” or “sustainable development.” However, the notion of “sustainability” is not further operationalized, except for a cursory reference to the SDGs. In contrast, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences exemplifies a higher education institution that very explicitly links its academic profile to the SDGs. Its strategic plans state the following:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015 as a starting point for concerted efforts to safeguard the future of our planet. NMBU represents a unique academic synthesis of environmental and life sciences, bio-production, veterinary medicine, technology, land use planning and economics that provides us with the perfect position to help solve these challenges and enable a sustainable future in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Such solutions will mainly be found at the interface and in the interaction between our subject areas. (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, n.d., p. 1)

Table 2 SDGs as image versus comparative advantage

| SDGs as image | SDGs as comparative advantage |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Aarhus University | Arctic University of Norway |
| Lund University | Chalmers University of Technology |
| University of Copenhagen | Hanken School of Economics |
| University of Turku | Karolinska Institutet (KI) |
| University of Akureyri | Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology |
| University of Southeast Norway | Norwegian University of Life Sciences |
| University of Gothenburg | Norwegian School of Sports Sciences |
| Stockholm University | Oslo Metropolitan University |
| Technical University of Denmark | Roskilde University |
| Åbo Akademi University | University of Helsinki |
| | University of Iceland |

Other examples include Karolinska Institutet, a medical institution, which emphasizes objectives related to global health; the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences, which emphasizes physical activity, health and well-being as important for sustainability; and Chalmers University of Technology, which emphasizes the role of technological transformation in pursuing ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

Although there is an almost equal distribution of HEIs between the two categories, Table 2 illustrates that most of the institutions with a narrow and specialized academic profile have been categorized under the heading of SDGs as a competitive advantage. This confirms our expectation that the SDGs as a competitive advantage might be easier for universities with a more specialized academic profile.

Discussion

Are all universities currently addressing “global challenges” and working to solve them? Our study provides nuances to such generic assumptions. As demonstrated by our data, there is much diversity in how Nordic universities incorporate SDGs in their strategic plans and in their visions about the future. While the call to act is strong and univocal, also underlining the ethical responsibilities for universities to respond (UNESCO, 2022), our findings suggest that it may be easier for some universities to respond than others.

Our findings indicate that large comprehensive research universities often relate to the SDGs in ways that may be characterized as symbolic adaptation, that is, as an image. These universities treat SDGs in very generic terms and are also quite vague in the formulation of strategic ambitions. We also find a tendency that universities having a more specialized disciplinary profile are more selective regarding their mention of the SDGs and how to realize strategic objectives in relation to them. The latter finding fits well with the assumptions of the comparative advantage perspective in that more specialized institutions can use their academic profile as a lens for accommodating the SDGs in ways that further strengthen their existing profile (Porter, 1979).

Why some larger comprehensive universities—which undoubtedly also may have unique disciplinary strengths, resources, and capabilities—have not chosen to highlight these strengths as a response to the SDGs is an interesting question. The obvious explanation is, of course, that the SDGs for these institutions are not really aligning with their strategic ambitions and that the mentioning of the SDGs is merely related to reputation management (Christensen et al., 2019). However, alternative explanations may also exist. For example, one could argue that larger and more comprehensive universities may have more trouble selecting one or a smaller set of SDGs as prioritized areas for strategic engagement because of internal competition among several strong academic areas or even a lack of managerial ability to prioritize (see also Moon et al., 2018). The latter explanation would suggest that these universities are perhaps less “rational” and strategic than previous studies have suggested (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Related to this, it could also be argued that institutional strategies of large universities are poor measures for understanding what these institutions actually do in relation to the SDGs.

In the analysis of the strategies and plans from both specialized and comprehensive universities, we also find few references that connect the SDGs to values explicitly defined as “Nordic.” Historically, traditional Nordic values have been associated with concepts such as inclusion, equity, and gender equality. Because these values are very visible in the SDGs, one would expect that they would be easily adaptable for the Nordic institutions as

immaterial competitive advantages they could exploit (Porter & Kramer, 2006). The fact that these values are not connected to the notion of what is “Nordic” might suggest that these institutions either are so regionally focused that emphasizing inclusion, gender equality, or equity would not stand out in the institutional competition within the region or that Nordic institutions are becoming so globally oriented that they are overlooking some of their inherent traditions and characteristics (Geschwind & Pinheiro, 2017). In principle, one could even argue that because some SDGs focus so strongly on gender equality, equality, and inclusion, they might represent a possible “export” of the key Nordic values to the global scene—hinting at the possible antecedents of globalized ideas (see also UNESCO, 2022—demonstrating how some Nordic institutions are active agenda-setters for the SDGs).

If the SDGs do not represent a return to traditional Nordic values, are they then contributors to new visions for the Nordic institutions represented in our sample? One interesting feature that is visible in the strategic plans is how the SDGs represent new challenges for universities as organizations. In the plans, we find specific references to the need for changes in how the universities themselves may contribute to a more sustainable development—by cuts in air travel, by encouraging more recycling at campuses, or by facilitating more cycling for students and staff. These kinds of adaptations could be seen as related to the observation made by numerous researchers (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Seeber et al., 2015) that universities have become more “normal organizations,” being met with the same kind of expectations and accountability claims as the organizations in other societal sectors. Although this transformation is often associated with a more managerial and rationalized university that evokes negative implications for teaching and research (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013), with respect to the SDGs, one could argue that this “normalization” may have more positive implications. Hence, becoming a more normal organization may contribute to a revised self-image of the universities, underlining their own responsibilities in more concrete ways than before. Of course, the question that could be raised is whether this introspective view might take attention away from the external responsibilities expected from higher education (UNESCO, 2022).

However, one could also argue that the current focus on air travels, recycling, and other organizational actions to become a more sustainable organization is yet another example of the ability of universities to decouple and shield their core academic activities—teaching and research—from the continuous stream of new external expectations directed at universities.

Conclusion

We started our article by positioning the Nordic universities as being at the cross-roads between a more neoliberal globalized higher education sector while also being entangled in their Nordic legacy, with higher education playing an important role in advancing a more equal, fair, and inclusive society (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Pinheiro et al., 2018; Välimaa, 2018). By taking the SDGs as an example of new globalized agendas, we investigated how Nordic higher education institutions adapted to the SDGs in their strategic plans.

In light of recent writings about a new neoneoliberalism arising and affecting higher education (Douglass, 2021), our study also contributes to the possible limits of globalization and how globalized ideas are being translated within local contexts. Based on our analysis, we can conclude that globalized ideas such as the SDGs are becoming widespread

and reflected in the strategic plans in Nordic universities. Whether this means that Nordic universities are all in when it comes to implementing the SDGs in their core activities is another matter. Although some institutions indeed seem to take onboard the SDGs as a foundation for future strategic actions, many analyzed universities seem to reflect a more symbolic adaptation style characterized by highlighting the SDGs as important but without specifying more concretely how the institutions themselves will take action as a result.

By contrasting two theoretical positions, we contribute to the research by examining the many different and parallel ways in which higher education institutions adapt to globalized ideas. The difference between comprehensive and specialized universities in how they select and respond to the different SDGs suggests that these ideas might contribute to more standardization and differentiation in parallel processes.

What is most surprising is how the SDGs seem to have evoked a new sense of organizational responsibility in those Nordic universities aiming at reducing their carbon footprints. Although this sense of responsibility is far from unique in a global setting, it points to the many different implications that can be identified as universities have been transformed into more normal organizations.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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