



On January 26th and 27th, the Centre for Sustainable Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) held their third conference on the Critical Perspectives on Governance by Sustainable Development Goals: Education, Sustainability and Inclusive Development. This conference focused on SDG 4 which relates to inclusive education. The event included multiple rectors of Dutch universities, researchers, members of youth organisations, and representatives from social movements. The conference focused on obstacles to an inclusive education, such as social inequalities and the lack of diversity in senior management at universities.

Day 1

The opening session of the conference was moderated by Joyeeta Gupta, the director of the Centre for Sustainable Development Studies. She posed questions to Professor Karen Maex (Rector Magnificus of UvA), Professor Vinod Subramaniam (Rector Magnificus, Vrije Universiteit, VU, Amsterdam), Professor Inge Hutter (Rector of the Institute of Social Studies, ISS), and Professor Charlotte de Fraiture (Vice Rector of IHE-Delft Institute for Water Education). These rectors discussion focused on the following themes:

- University responses to social movements,
- Restructuring and reforming university curriculum
- Changing university hierarchies
- Reforming spaces to ensure diversity and inclusivity.

Ms. de Fraiture highlighted how social movements engage with three challenges facing society: climate change, ecological degradation, and inequality. Mr. Subramaniam discussed how diversity reforms are slow to be reflected in university staff and Ms. Maex addressed the problem of fake news. Finally, Ms. Sirin discussed the difficulties refugees face in integrating in universities. They all agreed that (1) students must be included in addressing student priorities, (2) students are aware, informed, and have ideas that could facilitate change (3) that creating links with social movements could be the answer to solving diversity and inclusivity issues, and (4) that safe spaces are necessary to discuss these problems.

After the panel discussion, the rectors departed, opening the floor to social movement representatives. These representatives were Benjamin Jabold (Climate University Rebellion), Daniel Guinness (Our Bodies our Voice), Ella Risse Macleod (UN Youth Impact), Stacey Lamptey & Ueja Tijhumino (Black Ladies of Groningen), and Senem Sirin (UAF- Association for Refugee Students). The representatives held a Q&A session discussing ideas for university change, student participation in university decision making processes, change in curricula, and refugees in universities. Several of the youth representatives emphasised the need for student involvement in university decision making processes as well as a need for student forums to discuss management and policy at the university. When talking about curriculum changes, the representatives proposed that students should be involved in the creation and communication of new university policies and that there should be diversity in the groups that make curricula decisions. Both the opening session and the Q&A with social movements showed the importance and value of student input in educational decision making. Both these sessions also showed the need for reforms in the educational systems to address challenges like climate change and to ensure diversity.

Day 2

The second day saw an opening session, a round of panel discussions, and the closing of the conference. During the opening session, Mario Novelli's keynote speech focused on international development and education. After his speech, the panel session was opened to Fiona Dove (Executive director of the Trans-National Institute), Cornelius Hacking (a senior policy advisor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and Arjen Walks (Professor of Transformative Learning for Socio-Ecological Sustainability at Wageningen University and UNESCO Chair of Social Learning for Sustainability). The session was moderated by Mieke Lopes Cardozo, assistant professor of Education and Inclusive Development at UvA.

The speakers focused on three themes: (1) digital poverty, (2) the SDGs, and (3) the involvement of academics in policy. Ms. Dove discussed digital poverty and the gendered effects of COVID. Mr. Walks, how universities focus on the success or failures of states to implement the SDGs and not on the targets or why each is important. Mr. Hacking introduced the topic of the involvement of academics in policy making emphasising the need for a bridge between academic language and reality.



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Mr. Novelli spoke about educational corporations and the profits they receive from providing basic education. The panel discussed education, early marriage, and gender equality. Johanna Koehler (VU), Floris Burgers (University of East Anglia), Nashia Ajaz (Her Choice, UvA), Mr. Burgers, and Esther Miedema (UvA). Panelists presented their work on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in Kenyan schools (Ms. Koehler), education and child marriage in Uganda (Mr. Burger), and education and child marriage in Pakistan (Ms. Ajaz). Questions from the audience were about the link between vocational and professional skills and later marriage for girls, the concept of sexual purity, and challenges faced by girls in Kenya without access to water.

The conference was closed by Professor Dr. Geert ten Dam, the president of UvA, who moderated a discussion between Dr. André Nollkaemper (Dean, Faculty of Law, UvA), Dr. Han G. van Dissel (Dean, Faculty of Economics & Business, UvA), Dr. Agneta Fischer (Dean, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, UvA), Dr. Peter van Tienderen (Dean, Faculty of Science, UvA), Dr. Karin Arts (Deputy Rector, ISS, EUR), Drs. Lucy Wenting (Director, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, UvA), and Dr. Pieter van Beukering (Director, Institute of Environmental Studies, VU). The speakers were asked questions about (1) the steps taken to address the challenges of inequality, injustice, and ecological degradation in university curricula, (2) meeting the SDGs, (3) the benefits of co-creation in education, (4) progress in ensuring diversity, (5) teaching sustainable development in universities, (6) the speed of change in universities, and (7) university inclusivity.

To close the event, Ms. Arts mentioned that some progress has been made by universities in addressing challenges in their curriculum. The discussion was fruitful and highlighted the importance of student perspectives in education and the importance of diversity, sustainability, and change in universities.

UN Youth Impact appreciated the invitation to join the opening session and look forward to attending the next conference.