

MAPPING OUT A PLAN TO FACILITATE STUDENT SDG ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN JAPANESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is said to play an essential role in Japan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation policy, with students recognised as key stakeholders. However, there is currently a lack of empirical studies about how universities in Japan are empowering and mobilising their students to take action for the SDGs. The present paper addresses this gap by exploring how students at a private Japanese university want to take action for the SDGs, and the extent to which this aligns with the sustainability targets of their university. The study also seeks to establish whether obstacles exist to connecting the students' wants to those of the university administration. Qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview with the university president, with the results subsequently used to develop a survey administered to students (n = 28) enrolled in an elective English course about the SDGs. The findings indicate that although students are eager to take action for the SDGs in alignment with the university's goals, their engagement is hindered by a lack of awareness of existing university initiatives and constraints on their time.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the United Nations general assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Central to this agenda are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 goals and 169 targets which aim to mitigate a range of global issues pertaining to the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic, and environmental. At present, one of the key arguments within sustainable development discourse is the necessary incorporation of the SDGs into universities (Alcántara-Rubio et al., 2022). Universities are ideally placed to contribute to the societal transformation required to

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achieve the SDGs as they have the unique capability to “find, explore and translate progressive ideas; to seek and adapt new critical lenses; and develop creative ways of unsettling the world” (Steele & Rickards, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, universities have a vital role in shaping the future generations of leaders, professionals, and global citizens who will be central to this transformation (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020). Consequently, universities are increasingly expected to actively engage with the SDGs and demonstrate their sustainability impact on the world (Steele & Rickards, 2021).

Universities have the capacity to contribute towards SDG innovation through research, education, innovation and leadership (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Among these, education is considered to have the greatest potential, as evidenced by its inclusion in the 2030 Agenda both as a standalone goal (SDG 4, Quality Education), as well as a critical means for achieving the other SDGs (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020; Rieckmann et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). In addition, Target 4.7 of SDG 4 explicitly calls for a greater focus on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), while several other targets for SDG 4 specifically refer to learning and teaching activities within universities (UN, 2015). ESD is defined as an educational approach that can empower learners with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to take action for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020) and is closely aligned with the SDGs (Rieckmann et al., 2017). Therefore, universities can contribute directly to sustainable development by integrating the SDGs and the principles of ESD into formal curricula (SDSN, 2017). Furthermore, successful ESD implementation is also said to require empowering and mobilising young people (UNESCO 2020), who can then be active participants in the pursuit of sustainable development by engaging in both co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Steele and Rickards (2021) argue that universities can facilitate this engagement by affording students the opportunity for more active involvement in practical SDG-related projects, which not only develops students’ skills and knowledge, but may also “enhance their capability and confidence to engage with SDG issues beyond the classroom” (p. 189).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has long been a supporter of ESD and began formulating plans for its implementation across educational institutions soon after the SDGs were adopted by the UN. Despite progress at the primary and secondary school level in Japan, ESD integration in higher education has been slow to develop (Jodoin & Singer, 2018). Nevertheless, higher education is said to play an essential role in Japan’s SDG implementation policy (Ashida, 2023) and as a result, Japanese universities have started to prioritise the SDGs more (Edwards & Ashida,

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2021). To further Japan's progress in achieving the SDGs, MEXT (2021) has established a revised ESD implementation plan. In accordance with the ESD for 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2020), the plan identifies empowering and mobilising Japan's youth as a priority action area, highlighting the need to "support voluntary activities by all youth, and to create mechanisms for reflecting the voice of youth in society" (MEXT, 2021, p. 13). In addition, this priority action area calls for the encouragement of self-initiated sustainability efforts of young people, as well as providing opportunities for them to express their opinions about sustainability issues. While higher education institutions are identified as key stakeholders in this priority action area, there is currently a lack of empirical studies about how universities in Japan are empowering and mobilising their students to take action for sustainable development.

To fill this knowledge gap, the present study explored how students from Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) would like to take action for the SDGs, and the extent to which this aligns with KUIS's sustainability targets. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do KUIS students enrolled in an SDGs course want to take action for the SDGs within their university?
2. How does KUIS want students to take action for the SDGs?
3. What are the obstacles to connecting students' wants to those of administration?

This paper hopes to contribute to the growing body of case study research concerning the SDGs in higher education by providing insight into the perceptions of university students in Japan, in addition to highlighting internal and external obstacles to SDGs implementation in higher education institutions. After outlining how universities can empower and mobilise students to take action for sustainable development, the paper explains the data collection methods and contextual factors of the university focused on in this study. It subsequently presents and discusses the data before concluding with suggestions for future research.

How Universities Can Empower and Mobilise Students

It is today's youth and future generations who will be most impacted by the consequences of unsustainable development (UNESCO, 2020) and as such, they have "both a critical stake in ensuring the SDGs are achieved and also a critical role in contributing to their achievement" (SDSN, 2017, p. 13). Empowering and mobilising young people is therefore crucial for achieving the SDGs, and universities can utilise their unique access to large numbers of students to directly contribute to sustainable

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development. As previously stated, this can be achieved first by integrating ESD and the SDGs into the formal curriculum. However, there are various other ways to provide students with opportunities to engage with sustainable development. Some examples may include (SDSN, 2017, p. 13):

- Using the SDG framework and the development of solutions to sustainability challenges as the basis for student co-curricular activities
- Encouraging and supporting the development of student-led organisations to engage with the SDGs
- Promoting student volunteering activities which align with the SDGs
- Helping students to set up communities to mobilise their campus through events or projects related to sustainability
- Giving students opportunities to participate in university governance decisions concerning the SDGs

Universities can also foster sustainability by incorporating co-curricular community-engaged learning opportunities, whereby students collaborate with external partners to address sustainability challenges. According to Agusdinata (2022), university-led community engagement initiatives are becoming increasingly popular and this is in part due to students expressing a demand for real-world experiences related to sustainable development. In addition, Wiek et al. (2016) present a series of case studies to exemplify how student engagement with real-world sustainability projects can help students to develop key sustainability competencies by experiencing and adapting to various sustainability challenges. Similarly, Briggs et al. (2019) explore co-curricular opportunities for student engagement with the SDGs through various student-led initiatives and volunteer programs, highlighting that collaboration with teachers and members of the local community can help students to develop change agency skills. Universities can further mobilise students by encouraging and supporting the development of student groups with a sustainability focus.

Furthermore, universities should involve students in governance decisions concerning the SDGs. Governance in universities refers to the leadership structures that oversee its policies and decision making processes (Abubakar et al., 2020) and is considered a key component for implementing the SDGs in higher education (Purcell et al., 2019; SDSN, 2017). Moreover, researchers such as Purcell et al. (2019) and Steel and Rickards (2021) suggest that making progress towards the SDGs will require leadership at all levels, including the involvement of students. According to the literature, this is often achieved through the

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development of sustainability focused committees made up of different stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students (Brugmann et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2019). Including students in the decision-making process can enable universities to ensure that their SDG initiatives align with the needs and concerns of the student body, while also giving students a sense of agency and ownership.

In summary, university students have the potential to bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and creative solutions to sustainability challenges (UNESCO, 2020), and existing research has demonstrated how empowering and mobilising students can contribute to the implementation of the SDGs in higher education (Brugmann et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2019). However, Mallow et al. (2020) make the valid point that “there is no one-size-fits-all approach to embedding sustainable development” (p. 47), and in order for universities to prioritise the SDGs, it is necessary to consider what obstacles they face. Such barriers may include a lack of student or teacher motivation to engage with the SDGs (Okubo et al., 2021), access to funding (Blasco et al., 2021), or indeed the influence of government priorities on university practices (Edwards & Ashida, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Case studies have been widely utilised in research conducted by higher education institutions aiming to outline their sustainability practices (Brugmann et al., 2019; Jodoin, 2020; Purcell et al., 2019), since they provide in-depth, real-life examples that showcase the challenges, successes, and lessons learned from sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, case studies offer practical insights and guidance into the implementation and outcomes of sustainability practices, which can be “a critical asset for developing sustainability programs at other higher education institutions” (Brugmann et al., 2019, p. 5). Thus, a case study design was adopted for this research. Specifically, the research began with a qualitative phase in the form of an interview, and the data collected was analysed and subsequently used to develop a survey which utilised both quantitative and qualitative items. This study is exploratory in nature and does not intend to make generalisable claims. Rather, it aims to gain initial insights and understanding of one specific context.

Case Study: Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS)

KUIS is a private university located in Chiba, Japan. The university was founded in 1987 as an extension of the Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages in Tokyo but has since grown to become one of the prominent universities in Japan for international studies (Times Higher Education, 2023). In the spring of 2022, the university had 4,170 undergraduate

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students representing several departments: English, Asian languages, Spanish and Portuguese, International Communication and Japanese language and culture.

Interview with KUIS President

The president of KUIS, Miyauchi Takahisa, agreed to participate in the study and took part in a semi-structured interview. The decision to interview president Miyauchi was based on his vocal support of the SDGs, as well as his professional role as the most senior stakeholder in the university. Initial contact was made with the president’s office by email outlining the principle aims of the study and his proposed involvement. Written consent was given for an audio-recorded face-to-face interview which took place privately in the president’s office at KUIS in July 2022. While the question prompts were presented in both English and Japanese, the interview was conducted in English and lasted approximately one hour. The interview consisted of 6 open-ended question prompts (Table 1) which were related to the study research questions directly or were developed from the literature. The data from the interview was subsequently used to develop a survey to be administered to students.

Table 1 Semi Structured interview guide

#	Guiding question
1	Do you think a) prospective and /or b) current students are interested in the university stance, participation in or ranking in the SDGs?
2	Does KUIS have any specific SDG targets? If so, what are they and what is the university doing to move forward with an SDG focus?
3	Are you aware of any funding that the government provides for universities to promote SDG activities? If so, has KUIS made any efforts to apply for it?
4	Is KUIS involved in any local community projects or initiatives to promote the SDGs? If so, could they provide a platform for student involvement?
5*	Would the university be interested in helping students to implement SDG initiatives?
6*	What obstacles to achieving the SDGs does the university face?

Note: *Answers research question directly

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Study Participants

The study participants consisted of 3rd and 4th year students from the International Communication department who were enrolled in an elective English course about the SDGs. The study focused on these particular students based on the assumption that by being enrolled in an elective course, the students would have some preexisting interest in the SDGs. Consequently, a survey was administered to the participants in the penultimate week of the course in the Spring 2022 semester, by which point the students had studied about the SDGs in detail.

The survey was presented in both English and Japanese and conducted through Google Forms. The survey consisted of 9 questions (Table 2) including open-ended questions to enable respondents to elaborate on some of their responses. The survey was sent to all 28 students enrolled on the course, and 28 responses were returned. The sample group ($n = 28$) consisted of 25 students in their third year of study at KUIS (89%), and 3 in their final year (11%). Students were advised that participation was voluntary and that choosing not to participate would have no bearing on their course grade. This was particularly necessary since the author of the study is also the teacher of this elective course. All students enrolled on the course volunteered to participate in the study and indicated their consent on a bilingual consent form in accordance with the university's research ethics policy. All identifying data related to the students has been removed for the purposes of publication.

Table 2 Survey questions

#	Question
1	Did you choose KUIS because of their SDG focus?
2	Are you interested in the SDGs? If so, which ones?
3	Why are you interested in these particular SDGs?
4*	Do you think KUIS students should help the university to achieve the SDGs? Why (not)?
5	Which SDG(s) do you think KUIS should prioritise, if any?
6	Why should the university prioritise these particular SDGs?
7	Do you know if KUIS is currently doing anything that promotes the SDGs or is SDG aligned?

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8* To contribute to KUIS, what would you personally do, if anything, to take action for the SDGs at KUIS?

9* What barriers do you think could prevent you from taking action for the SDGs at KUIS?

Note: *Answers research questions directly

Qualitative Analysis

The interview was recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, an AI-powered transcription service that converts spoken language into written text. The transcription was then manually reviewed to correct any errors. After an initial reading to get a general sense of the content, significant segments of the interview were labelled with seven descriptive codes. These codes were then refined into two broader themes. Thematic analysis of the survey data produced eleven codes from the open ended responses, which were subsequently separated into three main themes.

RESULTS

Interview Data

Table 3 illustrates how codes from the interview were used to develop emergent themes to explore SDG implementation and engagement at KUIS.

Table 3 Codes and themes developed from interview data

Codes	Themes
Student interest in SDGs	
Facilitating student action and participation	University's role and student engagement
Institutional support for SDGs	
Challenges and strategies in implementing SDGs	
Government support	Practical implementation of SDGs
Lack of systematic approach at KUIS	
Enhancing interdepartmental communication and collaboration	

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University's Role & Student Engagement

President Miyauchi explained how education and initiatives related to the SDGs are becoming more prevalent in Japanese higher education, and that the goals provide guidance for students to consider global issues. In addition, KUIS recognises that future employers may require graduates who are SDG literate. Consequently, the president stated that while KUIS does not have a specific target or policy regarding the SDGs, the university's principal aim is to "provide high quality education" and to produce graduates with the qualities and skills necessary to address sustainability challenges, adding that "our priority is how much we can foster human resources who can commit themselves to discovering and solving issues with the SDGs as a starting point. It is our duty to prepare the environment for students to do this."

At the same time, the president stressed his desire for students to engage more actively with sustainability issues in order to develop their knowledge, and outlined a range of SDG initiatives at KUIS which have laid the foundations for students to do so. Since 2019, KUIS has conducted an annual SDG Awareness Week on campus, as well as hosting the Japanese SDG awards national conference and various SDG-focused lectures and seminars. Furthermore, KUIS is involved with several regional collaborations which are conducted through the university volunteer centre. It is the president's hope that more students will engage with such practical activities to deepen their understanding of sustainability issues, as highlighted in the following comment:

I want students to become aware of these issues not through reading books, but through reality by themselves [...] Once students have experienced real action, they may get some improved or developed inspiration and to talk about what the next action is. This experience may push them to think more deeply.

Implementation of the SDGs

President Miyauchi highlighted several challenges to implementing the SDGs at KUIS. For instance, he described the guidance from the government as "quite vague" and added that attempts to get an SDG grant had so far been unsuccessful. In addition, the president suggested that SDG engagement is not progressing as expected due to a lack of awareness about existing SDG initiatives within the university, as exemplified in the following comment:

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We believe that one of the reasons why SDGs activities and collaborations are not spreading is that the organisation of students, faculty members, and staff members is vertically divided and the activities of each are not visible within the university.

The president acknowledged that the university is yet to establish a systematic approach to connecting the SDGs to students and other faculty members, and explained that plans are in place to develop a platform that aims to link students, staff and faculty to raise awareness of SDG practices at KUIS.

Survey Data

Table 4 illustrates how codes from the survey data were used to develop emergent themes to explore student awareness of and engagement with the SDGs at KUIS.

Table 4 Codes and themes developed from survey data

Codes	Themes
SDG knowledge & interest	
Impact on daily life	SDG awareness
SDGs in Japan	
Role of students	
SDG initiatives	
Collaboration	SDG engagement at KUIS
SDG communities	
Volunteering	
Student life balance	
Complexity of SDGs	Barriers to taking action
Funding & authorisation	

SDG Awareness

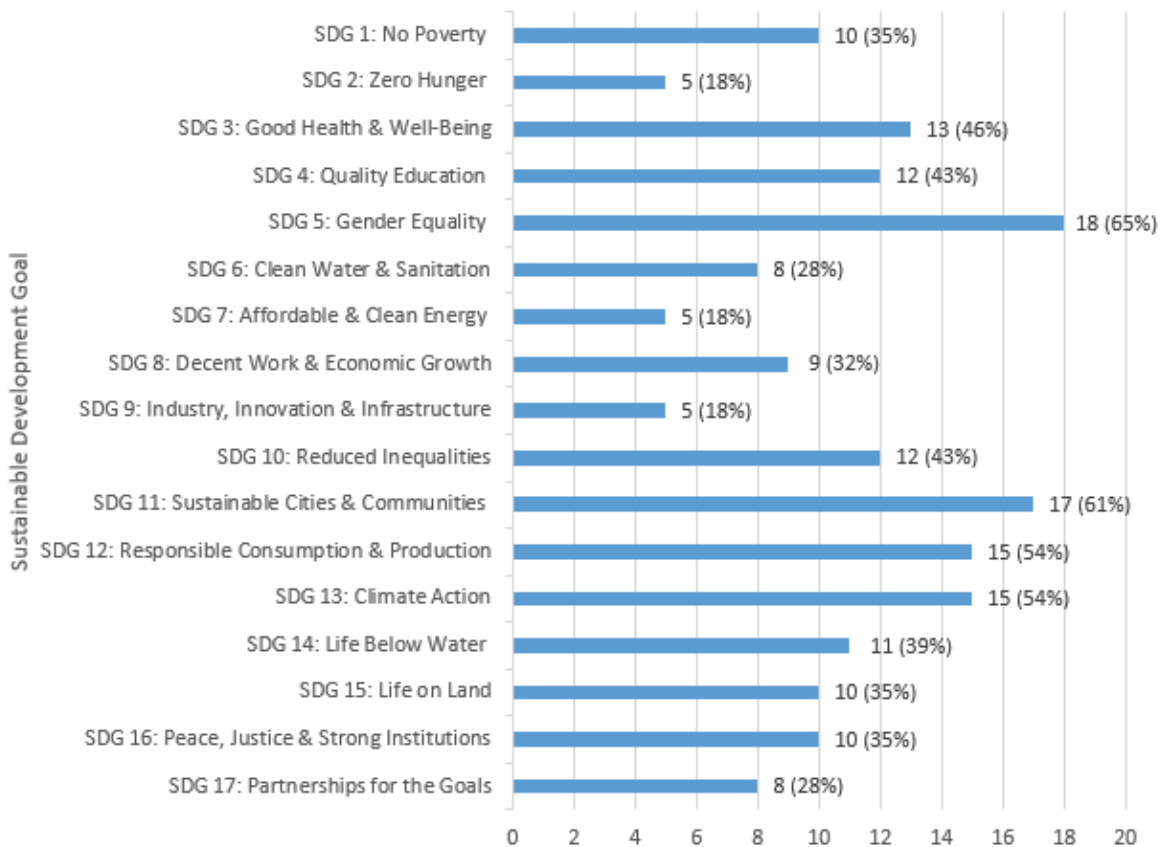
Figure 1 outlines the specific SDGs that participants were interested in. All 17 SDGs were selected at least 5 times, with the three most popular goals

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in the sample being SDG 5 (Gender Equality) with 65%, followed by SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) with 61%, and SDGs 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production) and 13 (Climate Action) with 54%. Participants recognised that particular global issues would have a direct impact on their lives both now and in the future and were interested in related SDGs. For instance, participants noted how their own consumption habits could impact sustainable development and many expressed their concern about the effects of climate change and global warming, as illustrated by the following comment:

Recently I can feel the weather is very strong, the reason is climate action. It is really related to our daily life. It made me recognise [sic] if we don't do everything to protect the environment, the situation will be worse.

Figure 1 SDGs participants were most interested in



Similarly, participants were able to identify SDGs which Japan is struggling to achieve or that they felt were particularly important in Japan. For instance, gender equality was frequently described as a

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“problem,” with reference to the lack of women represented in politics as well as examples of participants outlining personal experiences of gender inequality. One participant shared their perspective, stating, “Recently I did job hunting because I'm a 4th year student [...] the number of women in management is really low. I think we have to change this situation and the first step is to know about gender equality.”

SDG Engagement at KUIS

Many of the participants were aware of existing SDG initiatives at KUIS, such as volunteer programs, the annual ‘SDG Awareness Week’ and various SDG related seminars and workshops on campus. However, nine of the participants (32%) were unaware of any initiatives at all. Despite this lack of awareness among some, all participants ($n = 28$) felt that students at KUIS should help the university to achieve the SDGs in some capacity. In particular, many participants emphasised the importance of collaboration and multi-stakeholder involvement to achieve the SDGs, and highlighted the potential for more progress if the student body supported the sustainability efforts of the university. As noted by one participant, “If only the university tried to do it, it would be a small thing, but with KUIS students, the power would be big.”

In addition, some participants emphasised the need for students to take responsibility for sustainable development. Participants stated that since students are already learning about global issues, they have a responsibility to use that knowledge to take action. At the same time, participants also recognised the specific skills or values of students as a means for taking action for the SDGs. For instance, some participants felt that by studying at a university of international studies, the students at KUIS had developed the communication skills and global perspective necessary to achieve the SDGs. Specifically, participants referred to the importance of cultural awareness and language ability to foster effective communication and collaboration for sustainable development. One participant emphasised the need for immediate action: “We have to take action. First of all, we should know the word of SDGs and we should consider these goals are related to our future life. To change our serious situation, students should help the University promote the SDGs.” Another participant stressed the role of students as global citizens, stating, “The SDGs aim to achieve the goals by 2030 and I think students are responsible for contributing to them as a global citizen.” Additionally, one participant also highlighted the creative capacity of students and the potential for this creativity to lead to new approaches to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, noting, “I learned more detail about the SDGs and I thought there is room for improvement. Young generations who have flexible ideas can help the university promote the SDGs.”

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In terms of what they would do personally, many participants stated that they would take action for the SDGs by engaging in some form of volunteering at KUIS. For instance, several participants expressed an interest in supporting existing initiatives provided through the KUIS volunteer centre, such as a food bank and a local beach clean project. One participant stated that they were already involved in various sustainability initiatives on campus and would "contribute to the SDGs through these activities."

In addition, some participants felt that by taking an elective course about the SDGs, they were already contributing to the goals by developing their knowledge and understanding of sustainable development. Furthermore, participants saw the potential to raise awareness of the SDGs by sharing what they had learned through various means, such as social media campaigns, SDG events on campus, or by developing a student community focused on sustainability. One participant expressed a desire to actively engage in these efforts: "If I can, I would like to join the student community [...] I will advertise the SDGs activities as a campus advisor and a student of KUIS with social media and talking with senior high school students."

Barriers to Taking Action

Despite the fact that all participants ($n = 28$) felt that students at KUIS should help the university to achieve the SDGs, they cited a range of challenges to doing so. Participants highlighted a lack of time as one of the main obstacles to taking action for the SDGs. For instance, several participants highlighted that as 3rd and 4th year students, they needed to prioritise their time for job hunting and preparing for interviews. In addition, other students stated that they did not have enough time because of the length of their commute to and from university, or having other commitments, such as a part-time job, club activities, or spending time with friends and family. As one participant remarked, "We have classes and part-time jobs. Scheduling is one of the main barriers [to taking action]." Another participant acknowledged the conflict between volunteering and other responsibilities, stating, "I know volunteer [sic] is a good way to take a step forward. But I'm not sure I can choose to volunteer instead of a part-time job or hanging out with friends."

Furthermore, participants referred to the sheer scale and complexity of the SDGs and felt that without the involvement of many other stakeholders, their personal efforts to take action would be ineffective. While one participant felt that student interest in the SDGs was low in general, other participants stated that the university has failed to

advertise existing initiatives effectively. This was deemed as a reason for the current lack of awareness of existing initiatives, as well as a barrier to the success of any future initiatives. In addition, some participants felt a sense of powerlessness within their university to effect change, due to the need for financial support or permission to get initiatives started. As one participant observed, "We have to get permission from the University. It needs a long time and isn't easy. Also it's challenging to gather enough people." Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying, "I think it's difficult to do it alone. I need to cooperate with other students who are interested in SDGs, teachers, and the university." Additionally, concerns were raised about the lack of effective promotion of events: "Lack of advertising, so students don't know what kind of event there is. If we want to organise some event, maybe it is difficult to collect other organisers."

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to establish how KUIS students enrolled in an SDGs course want to take action for sustainable development within their university; the university's perspective on how students should take action for the SDGs; and the obstacles to connecting students' wants to those of the university administration. The data shows that students who participated in this study are interested in taking action for the SDGs. They recognise that achieving the SDGs will require the involvement of multiple stakeholders including themselves as university students, and they demonstrate an awareness of key sustainability challenges within Japan and how their lives may be impacted by them. In addition, they propose various examples of how students could potentially take action for sustainable development, such as collaborations between students and the local community via the university volunteer centre, or supporting the development of student community groups on campus.

From the university's perspective, the interview with President Miyauchi suggests that KUIS's principal aim regarding student engagement with the SDGs is to provide the educational environment necessary for students to address sustainability challenges, and to foster opportunities for students to actively participate in sustainability initiatives on campus. Therefore, it would seem that the ways in which participants would like to take action for the SDGs are supported and encouraged by the KUIS president and could be facilitated by the university. Yet, as this study has shown, KUIS currently lacks the framework to make these opportunities for SDG engagement clear to students, and as President Miyauchi stated himself, the existing sustainability efforts of students, faculty, and staff members "are not visible within the university", which is perhaps why

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almost a third of the study participants were unaware of any SDG initiatives at the university. Thus, in order for KUIS to better promote opportunities for student engagement with the SDGs, it would benefit from implementing some changes. For instance, Brugmann et al. (2019) argue that developing inventories of campus-wide SDG initiatives provide the infrastructure to “support a bottom-up groundswell of sustainability engagement” (p. 16) by connecting instructors who teach sustainability content with students and other stakeholders. Their study found that making such inventories visible and accessible led to increased student participation in sustainability initiatives. Therefore, a first step for KUIS would be to create a campus-wide inventory of existing sustainability practices, ranging from courses which have some sustainability focus, to specific SDG initiatives and opportunities for extra-curricular engagement with the SDGs. This information should then be made easily accessible and conspicuous to students as well as other staff and faculty members via the university intranet, or by developing the SDG platform proposed by President Miyauchi. In addition, case study research has highlighted the success of developing sustainability focused committees made up of different stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students (Brugmann et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2019). Consequently, KUIS would gain from establishing such a sustainability committee to facilitate leadership strategies from both the top-down and bottom-up.

Furthermore, the survey data highlights the fact that students often lack the time to be able to commit to sustainability projects alongside other responsibilities, commitments, and activities. Briggs et al. (2019) present similar findings and suggest that encouraging collaboration and more formal involvement of other university staff and teachers may ease the perceived pressures of the time commitment felt by students. Moreover, they suggest greater communication from academic staff of the benefits of involvement with SDG initiatives, such as their sustainability impact, while also sharing the achievements of existing projects so their impact is recognised and celebrated. Similarly, Brugmann et al. (2019) detail how student involvement in SDG initiatives could be rewarded and incentivised by making sustainability projects credit-bearing or earning a certificate to recognise their contributions. KUIS could implement such strategies to create a more supportive and inclusive environment that allows students to participate in sustainability projects, while managing their other responsibilities and commitments effectively.

Limitations

A limitation to this study was that due to the small sample size of the survey ($n = 28$) and the fact it was limited to third and fourth year students from the International Communication department, it is difficult

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to make any generalisations beyond the context of this specific case study. In addition, since the students in the study sample were enrolled in an SDG course, it is likely that they were already interested in the SDGs and so the results may not be representative of the general student population at KUIS. Further, as the students surveyed were attending an international studies university, their interest in global issues may have skewed their responses. In light of these limitations, future research should aim to explore the attitudes of first and second year students, as well as students not enrolled on SDG-related courses. It would also be of interest to see if similar attitudes are held by university students attending STEM- or business-focused universities. Finally, the author recognises that their own role as both the researcher and teacher of the participants brings its own biases. For instance, despite being informed that their responses to the survey would have no bearing on their grade, the study participants may have given answers they believed would align with their teacher's expectations, or that they perceived as socially desirable. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how student responses differ when the survey is delivered by a third party.

CONCLUSION

Universities play a crucial role in empowering and mobilising students by providing opportunities for active engagement with the SDGs and encouraging students to take action for sustainable development through ESD. In this study, a qualitative case study approach was used to better understand how students at KUIS, a private university in Japan, want to take action for the SDGs, the extent to which their choices align with the SDG targets of their university, and the perceived obstacles to connecting the wants of both parties. The paper has shown that students at KUIS do want to take action for the SDGs and they have ideas of how they want to do so. Further, the actions that students want to take align with the goals which the university itself has, as stated by the KUIS president. Yet there remains a disconnect between the students' wants and those of the university. This paper has outlined suggestions to mitigate this issue, specifically by creating a campus-wide inventory of existing sustainability practices and opportunities for SDG engagement, and making this information accessible to students and other university stakeholders. In addition, the author suggests that KUIS should establish a sustainability committee made up of students, staff, and faculty in order to connect all university stakeholders and foster sustainability leadership from the top-down and bottom-up.

The study also has limitations with regard to the study sample and any future research should aim to achieve a more representative sample of

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the student population at KUIS by including students from all years and course disciplines. Additionally, it would be interesting to collaborate with other universities in Japan to see if similar attitudes about taking action for the SDGs are held by students from various majors.

Finally, the study raises questions about how well broader institutional and policy structures support Japanese universities in implementing the SDGs. While the literature suggests that universities will be pivotal in achieving the SDGs, there remains a lack of clear guidance to systematically implement the goals in higher education (Leal Filho et al., 2021), and any sustainability engagement is impacted further by the financial resources available to universities (Blasco et al., 2021). If the Japanese government is truly committed to implementing ESD and the SDGs, it should provide clearer guidelines and increased financial support to ensure universities can effectively contribute to the goals.

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