Enhancing Sustainable Development Goals in Higher Education: A leaderful practice approach to partnering for the goals

The Global Learning Experience *Plus*

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Abstract

Purpose. From a leaderful practice perspective, this case study focuses on illustrating the impact of the synergic use of collaborative online and face-to-face international learning approaches for enhancing the integration of sustainable development goals (SDGs) into master's (M) level curricula. Higher Education (HE) institutions have a relevant role in implementing the United Nations agenda for sustainable development and there is an ongoing debate on how HE can contribute to shape individuals driven by responsible values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Case. We focus on the outcome of a partnership between two HE institutions, in the UK and USA. Two course teams jointly designed a consultancy-type experiential module that involved an initial block of collaborative online international learning and a second face-to-face one. The aim of the module was to allow mixed student teams from both institutions to provide consultancy to non-profit organisations based in the USA.

Outcome. The initiative generated a distinctive dynamic where the student teams and the non-profit organisations prolonged their relationship to beyond the duration of the project. It also established a stronger connection between the two HE institutions which identified a greater overlap between their respective underpinning institutional values. Finally, the case was displayed as inspirational for responsible management education at the PRME (Principles for Responsible Management Education) Global Forum.

Originality/value. Our case study shows how the adoption of a leaderful practice outlook can act as a key action enabler on all three levels that reflect the direction of mainstream scholarship on the integration of SDGs into HE curricula: underpinning paradigms, attitudes and behaviours, and agile pedagogical approaches. With our case we show that the partnership between institutions that strive to integrate SDGs experiential learning international initiatives into Higher Education M level curricula has a generative power that goes beyond mere curriculum design. It can give rise to 'unexpected' outcomes. In our specific case, it generated incremental innovation in collaborative modes of learning, and it provided a context for accelerating the construction of a collective social responsibility ethos among students from different countries, institutions, and academic backgrounds.

Keywords: COIL *plus*, collective social responsibility, innovation, leaderful practice, PRME.

Introduction

This case study has a twofold purpose: to illustrate the enhancement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) integration into Higher Education postgraduate curricula, and to illustrate how experiential learning opportunities for students can be a springboard for developing responsible management skills. There are also two parts constituting the context in which our case study unfolds: international partnerships and management of non-profit organisations. Our work is inspired by the need for a systemic effort to catalyse the achievement of SDGs in a pervasive way by shifting the underpinning paradigm driving HE, promoting attitudes and behaviours that foster relatedness, and using pedagogical approaches that encourage student involvement in knowledge co-creation. After proposing the adoption of a leaderful practice outlook in conjunction with the key theoretical contributions on the assimilation of SDGs in Higher Education, we illustrate the context, objective, design, implementation, and feedback tied to our case study initiative. We then discuss the reflections and positive unexpected turns our experience revealed, as well as the avenues for future exploration and action.

SDGs, responsible management education, and leaderful practice

There is a vast literature on the assimilation of SDGs in Higher Education. Some scholars have looked at the gaps in terms of diversity and inclusion, collaboration, health, and wellbeing that HE programmes still present, despite the strive to contribute to sustainability (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2020); while others have looked at the need to establish greater cooperation between the university and the industry (Pacher, Valakas, and Adam, 2020). To illustrate our case, we specifically draw on contributions that discuss what initiatives can be implemented in business programmes to advance the SDG agenda. García-Feijoo, Eizaguirre, and Rica-Aspiunza (2020) conducted a comprehensive review of studies related to how SDGs can be embedded in the life, activity, and programmes of business schools. They identified three distinct levels that reflect the direction of mainstream scholarship in this field. At the core there is a change of paradigm that should foster the development of sustainability driven values in both curricula and students. The second level relates to contributions that emphasize the attitudes at the basis of the interactions that animate programmes and extracurricular initiatives with the purpose of training 'future managers' that can socialise empathy and agility to support sustainable values (Kolb, Fröhlich, and Schmidpeter, 2017). Finally, the third level reflects scholarly contributions discussing pedagogical approaches that help develop SDG awareness. In this respect, scholars stress the

importance of putting in place project-based learning (Pérez-Sánchez, Díaz-Madroñero Boluda, Mula, and Sanchis, 2020; Zwolińska, Lorenc, and Pomykała, 2022) and initiatives where students can liaise with organisations for which to devise corporate social responsibility solutions (López, 2022) and feel empowered by adopting hands-on approaches in their learning journey. García-Feijoo et al. (2020) emphasize the need to work on all three levels for embracing a more humanistic view based on training socially responsible, morally oriented, and conscientious individuals. In this perspective, the work of Moon, Walmsley, and Apostolopoulos (2018) puts forward the importance of working across disciplines and having HE institutions adopt governance structures facilitating it. A systemic effort aimed at (1) shifting the underpinning paradigm, (2) promoting attitudes and behaviours that foster relatedness, and (3) using pedagogical approaches that encourage student involvement in knowledge co-creation would catalyse the achievement of SDGs in a pervasive way. The literature we considered also puts emphasis on the value of experiential learning as an enabler of students' engagement with sustainable values and practices (Melles, 2015).

We would argue that the adoption of a leaderful practice (Raelin, 2004, 2011, 2014, 2016) outlook can act as a key action enabler on all three levels – underpinning paradigm, attitudes and behaviours, and agile pedagogical approaches. Springing from relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), leaderful practice is based on the principle that there is no one single individual who is responsible to mobilise action and make decisions on behalf of others. It centres on the notion that a community is co-created by all who are involved interdependently in its development. We posit that this type of approach can support the assimilation of SDGs into the system of values, practice, and ethos of HE institutions as well as in students. Leaderful practice lays on the principles of collectiveness, concurrency, collaboration (Raelin, 2014) and ethics of care (Gilligan, 1977). Drawing on Raelin's contributions (2004, 2011, 2014, 2016) collectiveness means that anyone involved in a selected context can be empowered to lead; concurrency means that leadership relationships can occur simultaneously in a selected context; collaboration means that participants work together and co-create knowledge and understanding in a way where everyone is the expression of the group. The ethics of care principle (Gilligan, 1977) means that participants preserve the dignity of every single member contributing to a selected context. We would argue that leaderful practice can be the bonding element in HE settings that strive for training socially responsible, morally oriented, and conscientious individuals. Our case study illustrates an example of how this dynamic unfolded between two international partner institutions, and their participating students and members of Faculty.

Case study

Context

The context in which our case study unfolds is made up of two aspects, such as the international partnership between Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the UK and DePaul University in the USA, and the American non-profit sector.

Regarding the former, the two universities first started their collaboration based on short collaborative online international learning initiatives (COIL) specifically involving the Nottingham Business School (NBS) at NTU and the School of Public Service at DePaul, on conversations related to sustainability and sustainable development goals. The success of this collaboration generated a distinctive relationship between NBS and the School of Public Services. Such relationship aimed at wanting to take the joint work on SDGs to the next level, one that did not rely exclusively on online conversations, but that had a practical experiential component inspired by SDGs. The principles of collectiveness, concurrency, collaboration (Raelin, 2014) and care (Gilligan, 1977) at the base of leaderful practice led the two teams to create a collaboration setting characterised by the: 1) exploration of new ideas unconstrained by predetermined patterns; 2) recognition, understanding, legitimization, and appreciation of all voices involved as equal; 3) challenging of dominant narratives; 4) inclusivity; 5) legitimate and constructive voicing of all forms of expression; 6) exploration of reciprocal interests and how to meet them constructively. This partnership and value-related aspect of the context was then paired with the choice of a specific sector in which the teams from NBS and the School of Public Service decided to operate, the non-profit sector. This choice was driven by the belief that working with non-profits could stimulate students' reflection on career aspirations driven by a collective responsibility ethos.

In a review of studies in the non-profit sector, Coule, Dodge and Eikenberry (2022) suggest that there might be a resurgence of social movements that foster reflection on the challenges presented by the 21st century, namely immigrant crisis, Brexit, populism, and environmental crises. Understanding how social action is constrained and exploring ways in which it can be fostered for achieving the collective good, constitutes a constructive setting in which students can develop their critical thinking and apply their skills. Non-profit management represents a constructive way for students to learn about aspects that would otherwise be overlooked in for profit companies. There are four dimensions that identify the peculiarity of non-profit management, such as, the unique legal context, the unique ownership structure, the unique financial and capital structure, and the unique accountability context (Dicke and Ott, 2023).

In terms of the legal context, even if the non-profit sector has some characteristics of both the private and the public sector, it does not relevantly overlap with any of the two. From a legal point of view this limits the range of strategic options available to a leadership team requiring the search for inventive, customised, and innovative management solutions. In terms of ownership structure, non-profit organisations are typically owned by a segment of the community they serve, with governing bodies that act as stewards of the assets of the organisation (Dicke and Ott, 2023). In terms of the financial and capital structure, non-profits fund their activities with a mix of philanthropic resources from diverse sources which impose their own expectations, objectives, and accountability to the non-profit they support. Those diverse and inconsistent funding modes influence the already complicated business models of non-profits. Finally, in terms of the accountability context, non-profit management is challenged by the diffused and unclear accountability that is typical of organisations influenced by multiple stakeholders each of which would like to occupy a more prominent decisional role compared to the others. Crafting a course of action that balances those varied expectations and demands further challenges the management of non-profits. Those four dimensions contribute to delineate the contextual peculiarity of organisations operating in the non-profit sector suggesting the positive learning challenge it can offer to students approaching it.

Worldwide, there are 10 million non-profit organizations or NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). These entities employ 7.4% of the workforce. 70% of the staff at international non-profits are paid workers, while 29% are volunteers (Zippia, 2023). The economic conditions that prompt a greater need for philanthropic giving have changed. Long standing traditions, systems, policies, and boundaries that had been erected to separate the non-profit and for-profit sectors are now changing and this further justifies the need for greater insight into the sector. In taking a cursory glance at the non-profit (NGO) sectors of United Kingdom and the United States, one notices the latter is 10 times larger in terms of charities (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission). The non-profit sector in the United States is robust and is the third largest employment sector after retail and manufacturing. To become a designated non-profit organization in the US, an entity must first become a corporation registered in a state. Then once the entity is a corporation, it applies for a tax-exempt status from the federal government. It is important to recognize that the words 'non-profit' should not communicate 'non-revenue.' Many non-profit organizations in the US have a large revenue base as well as assets. An example of this is

AARP which is a well-known non-profit organization. In 2021, it had $2.1 billion in revenue (GuideStar).

There are more than 1.8 million non-profit organizations in the USA, a number that is almost three times as large as it was a twenty years ago. And those 1.8 million non-profits employ over 10 % of the US workforce – over 12 million people – which means more people work in the non-profit sector than work in the auto industry, the technology industry or the gas and oil industries. Additionally, 1.5 million non-profits are registered as 501 (c)(3) organizations which means they have a special designation as a public charity with the federal government to which anyone can and contribute both financially and in terms of their time. Giving plays a critical role in the economy and the American social fabric. While the larger business and celebrities are often recognized publicly for their giving, almost half of charitable donations are from individuals with household incomes under $100,000. It is estimated that the non-profit sector puts or generates $1.5 trillion quarterly into the economy annually. This means 5.7 % of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the United States comes from the non-profit sector (Zippia, 2023). A substantial portion of the $2 trillion US non-profit organizations spend annually, is the more than $826 billion they spend on salaries, benefits, and payroll taxes. Also, non-profit staff members pay taxes on their salaries, as well as sales taxes on their purchases and property taxes on what they own. Non-profit organizations consume goods and services that create more jobs. They also spend $1 trillion annually for goods and services, ranging from large expenses, like medical equipment for non-profit hospitals, to everyday purchases such as office supplies, food, utilities, and rent (National Council of Non-profits).

Objective

The objective of the Global Learning Experience *Plus* organised by NTU and DePaul relates to the possibility of incorporating in the curriculum an opportunity that focuses on students experiencing elements of SDG8, SDG12, and Responsible Leadership and Management. Specifically, in terms of SDG8 we aimed at emphasising the importance of promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable work for all; in terms of SDG12, we aimed at emphasising the importance of developing the capabilities to promote sustainable consumption and production of goods and services; and finally, in terms of responsible leadership and management, we aimed at emphasising the importance of generating sustainable value for business and society by working towards an inclusive and sustainable global economy. In our partnership with DePaul University, students worked with non-profit

organisations based in Illinois. The key priorities were two. The first one was tied to the notion of support to minority and disadvantaged cultural communities ensuring equal access to cultural and educational services, fostering sustainable preservation of cultural heritage (Skvarciany and Astikė, 2022; Meier, 2023). The second priority was tied to the notion of sustainable food production and consumption (Lambert and Desmet, 2023).

Design

The Global Learning Experience *Plus* was designed based on three weeks of collaborative online international learning (COIL) and one week of face-to-face interaction. COIL "is a pedagogy that helps create an environment to foster the development of intercultural competence skills with the use of technology to connect classrooms in distinct geographical locations" (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020, p.110). Normally, working on a COIL initiative requires a structured type of collaboration between teams that teach a similar type of subject, in two different institutions and countries. In our case, the two course teams worked intensely on mapping the module learning outcomes, number of hours, reading material, types of synchronous online tasks, type of consultancy challenges the students were going to be presented with, as well as the schedule which was characterised by three weeks of COIL using a jointly chosen e-learning platform, and one week of face-to-face interaction. Once this joint creation phase was completed, the two teams shifted to the quality approval one, submitting the module specifications to the quality team for feedback. From a structure point of view, this is how the Global Learning Experience *Plus* was designed:

Week 0 – Preliminary Phase

Task	Activity	Purpose
Providing an overview of the course for host (US institution) and guest (UK institution) students.	The course team developed a module handbook containing all the key dates and activities for the module.	To give students a clear understanding of the structure, timelines, activities, and goals of the module/course.
Group Allocation	The course team divided students into teams with a mix of institutions. A Microsoft Teams page was created for the whole cohort, comprising the US (host) and UK (guest) students, with separate pages for each team.	To create diverse teams and facilitate students working with different countries and academic backgrounds.
Icebreaker Session	Students were asked to create an individual video clip about themselves (via Flip), sharing key information whilst also sharing a local colloquialism about their hometown/region. They were also encouraged to post comments and observations against each other's videos.	To encourage students to virtually interact with each other. To develop positive team dynamics and understand the different cultures and backgrounds they were from.

Week 1 - Initial Phase

Task	Activity	Purpose
Allocating a first group task to be carried out remotely	Each group was assigned a task relating to several *non-profit* organizations' case studies. Using their allocated Microsoft Teams pages, the groups discussed the case studies and answered pre-set questions. Group work included video meetings as well as non-synchronous work via Microsoft Teams, in line with general COIL guidelines.	To start understanding the *non-profit* industry. To build relationships within an international context. To enable students to work internationally, across time zones and utilising current technologies to resolve challenges.

Week 2 – Development Phase

Task	Activity	Purpose
Allocating each group to a real *non-profit business* which submitted a real-life challenge to be investigated.	Teams worked collaboratively via Microsoft Teams to review their company challenge. They set up a video meeting with their company during this week to gather more information and details about their challenge.	To clarify the challenge student were dealing with. To research the industry each assigned non-profit business was/is operating within and gain a clear understanding of the marketplace. To develop relationships within each international team of students. To create a working relationship between student teams and businesses and gain a deeper understanding of what each non-profit business was looking for.

Week 3 – Core Phase

Task	Activity	Purpose
Travelling to the host institution and completing the business challenge, culminating in a live assessed group presentation to each business involved.	A range of visits to non-profit organizations were set up over the week to give the group a better understanding of the non-profit environment and the dynamics that differentiate it from the for-profit sector. These included: ▪ A visit and talk from the Art Institute in Chicago. ▪ A visit, talk and a volunteering experience at the Greater Chicago Food Depository. ▪ A visit and talk from Chicago White Sox Baseball Club. ▪ A talk and Q&A from a non-profit entrepreneur hosted by the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center at DePaul University. Importantly, the teams meet up face-to-face to further develop relationships and to address their business challenges.	To develop a real understanding of cultural differences on an individual and corporate level. To work within an international team to deliver a high standard presentation in a corporate setting. Presentations to participating non-profit businesses were hosted by the Ronald McDonald House Charities at McDonald's World Headquarters in Chicago. To gain a clear understanding and appreciation of the non-profit sector and the impact it has on society.

Week 4 – Reflection Phase

Task	Activity	Purpose
Reflecting on the overall COIL and face-to-face experience. Completing an individual reflective report on the international experience.	Students completed a 2000-word written report (these can be tailored to each institution) analysing the research and findings they made for their business, including the tools and research methods adopted in the process. Students also completed a self-reflection on the experience based on what they learned from working with non-profit organizations, in line with considerations on inclusive and sustainable work for all, sustainable consumption, and sustainable value for business and society.	To gain a deep understanding of the concept of working internationally in a real-life environment. To understand how cultures vary and how to adapt to different situations. To understand the important role of the non-profit industry and to potentially inspire future involvement within it. To understand the importance of promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable work for all (SDG8). To understand the importance of developing the capabilities to promote sustainable consumption and production of goods and services (SDG12). To understand the importance of generating sustainable value for business and society by working towards an inclusive and sustainable global economy (responsible leadership).

Implementation

The activity is hands-on rather than just theoretical and centres around student teams taking the lead. The latter are mixed, such as they are composed by Nottingham Trent University and De Paul University students. They were assigned a task to resolve by the end of four weeks (duration of the module). This hands-on activity allowed them to experience the core business of the organisation and develop a clearer idea of what the challenges are and how

they can be addressed. Regarding the implementation, from the starting point where the idea originates to the completion of the module, the project takes 18 months which comprise the quality and academic standards evaluation process at both institutions. The key reflections springing from the implementation of the Global Learning Experience *Plus* are tied to:

1) *Timeline*: setting a reasonable timeline for drafting and planning the initiative as well as acting on the feedback from the University quality assurance team. When running the process for the first time, it might take between 15 and 18 months for institutions based in different countries and subject to different quality assurance processes.

2) *Team meetings*: during the design and project approval phase, regular meetings between the project teams are important for fostering mutual understanding, building a common ground, establishing common protocols, identifying priorities and courses of action. In the Global Learning Experience *Plus*, the team organised one face-to-face week in the UK. That significantly impacted on the quality of the content and details of the module as well as on members' personality fit.

3) *Openness to different mindsets, pedagogical approaches, and change*: collaboration over time facilitates mutual understanding and acquaintance of alternative teaching approaches which influence the shaping and development of the module. The latter becomes the result of a true crafted, synergic effort, encompassing a value that goes beyond that of the individual experience of the people that work on it.

4) *Openness to other possibilities that can develop from the project*: working side by side with the team from a partner institution over an extended period can offer scope for exploring initiatives that go beyond the remit of the one that is being designed and planned. The relationships and experiences springing from the collaboration can represent the basis for future joint work. Leaving space for that to happen is an enriching experience for participating Faculty.

5) *Feedback and reflection*: these are critical when assessing, adjusting, and redesigning a module that involves working across cultures, mindsets, and countries, like the Global Learning Experience *Plus*. Feedback needs to be approached at the level of the institution as well as at the level of Faculty and students. In the Global Learning Experience *Plus*, the two participating *institutions* can discover an overlap of organisational values that offers scope to explore further avenues of international collaboration, possibilities that go beyond mere staff and student exchanges. From a *faculty* point of view, the effort of designing and implementing the module is significant and needs to be reflected in participants' workloads. The more detailed the

module plan during the design phase, the easier it is to manage unexpected turns during the actual experience. An all-to-all communication approach facilitates the implementation and addresses the need to tweak aspects of the experience based on all team members' voice. From the *students'* perspective, adding a week in person at the end of the three-week COIL allows them to develop the skill of intercultural adaptation agility by interacting with students with different values, attitudes, and beliefs. The benefits of combining the online with the face-to-face reflect also in the relationship student teams build with their client companies. While the three weeks online allow the development of the relationship withing student teams and between teams and clients, the face-to-face week strengthens those relationships setting the base for those to last beyond the duration of the project. The benefit of the face-to-face week extends to the possibility of students visiting their clients' premises, delivering their consultancy recommendations to clients in person, living the emotion and managing the tensions such moments can stir in 'real-world' professionals.

Global Learning Experience *Plus* epilogue: Reflections on PRME and avenues for future exploration

Driven by a leaderful practice approach (Raelin, 2004, 2011, 2014, 2016) and set in the non-profit context, our global learning experience between the UK and the US shows how it is possible to mobilise action and inspire decision on SDGs in a way that engages interdependently all the parties involved in its development, such as HE institutions, faculty, students, and stakeholders (e.g., client organisations). It also shows how the principles of collectiveness, concurrency, collaboration (Raelin, 2014) and ethics of care (Gilligan, 1977) facilitate not only the assimilation of SDGs into an M level curriculum design, but also the transition from theory to practice (e.g. students doing their consultancy work with non-profits considering SDG8 and SDG12), and from practice to values (e.g. students using the values of social responsibility, moral orientation, and conscientiousness to reflect on their lived experience).

We would argue that case of the Global Learning Experience *Plus* reflects the six principles of responsible management education, offering a readily sharable opportunity for HE institutions who aim to offer experiential learning inspired by sustainable practice. Specifically, our GLE *Plus* allowed the development of capabilities for students to create sustainable value for the non-profit organisations they supported during the project, reflecting on diversity, and recommending inclusive solutions capable of generating impact in the

context where those organisations operate. This is in line with the first principle of responsible management articulating the *purpose* of PRME. Our case also incorporates the values of global social responsibility in the type of activities and practices that our students carried out in their consultancies, meeting the *value* principle of PRME. The *method* we used to shape the Global Learning Experience *Plus* aimed at creating a framework for facilitating experiential learning and responsible leadership, a framework that could be easily adapted to other curricula and scaled-up. This was in line with the third PRME principle. We *designed* the GLE *Plus* in a way that engaged students in conceptual and empirical research for understanding the context, influence, role, and operating dynamics of the non-profit organisations they were assigned to, supporting the fourth PRME principle. Our initiative was based on fostering an active relationship with the managers of those non-profit organisations for us to understand the social and environmental challenges they were facing and to frame consultancy recommendations so to address those challenges. By doing so, our GLE *Plus* was supporting the fifth PRME principle on *partnership*. Finally, an underpinning aspect of our initiative was *dialogue*, which reflects the sixth PRME principle. Dialogue driven by responsibility, sustainability and inclusion allowed the construction and sharing of meaning among all the parties involved, such as educators, students, institutional partners, managers of the non-profit organisations involved, and external stakeholders. Pervading aspects blending those six principles in our GLE *Plus* were those at the base of leaderful practice. Empowering anyone involved to lead in the selected context, allowing for simultaneous leadership relationship to occur, working together towards the co-creation of knowledge, and acting compassionately with all the people involved in the setting were key in making the GLE *Plus* an experience that created sustainable relational value.

There were two positive, unexpected twists that emerged from this experiential opportunity. The first one is tied to the innovation in collaborative modes of learning, while the second is tied to the creation of a context for accelerating the construction of a collective social responsibility ethos among students from different countries, institutions, and academic backgrounds. In terms of the former, we paired COIL and in-presence, flipped classroom pedagogy, generating a hybrid model that allowed faculty and students to use a wider variety of teaching and learning approaches and mobilised a holistic achievement of the learning outcomes. In terms of the latter, the GLE *Plus* set the context for the development of cross-cultural adaptation agility, such as the alacrity of mapping and understanding others' values, attitudes, and beliefs for creating a common ground for dialogue. This zeal in cross-cultural adaptation does not merely apply to national cultures; rather, it applies to institutional and

subject/discipline related cultures too. The quicker the understanding of the underpinning values, attitudes, and beliefs characterising a setting, the better the partnership.

Our experiential initiative allowed us to reflect on the avenues for future exploration. We would argue that it can offer the chance to work across disciplines allowing faculty and students to work on paradigms that might be different from those framing their specific fields.

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