Article

Enhancing a career development curriculum by embedding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals provide a framework for addressing global challenges, linking environmental sustainability to individual and social well-being and social justice. This article explores how embedding the SDGs into career development can enhance career exploration and contribute to a sustainable future. Drawing on experiences from teaching a senior career capstone course, it highlights strategies for integrating the SDGs into career interventions. Key components include developing personal mission statements, researching organisations, analysing future work trends, and conducting informational interviews. The article also presents anecdotal evidence of the course's impact on students' thinking and provides practical advice for implementation.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; career development; higher education; social justice; curriculum; Canada

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations created the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering a comprehensive framework for addressing global challenges. Described as 'a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into

the future' (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024a, para. 1), the SDGs were conceived to guide national and international policies. At the same time, there is an opportunity for career development professionals (CDPs) to leverage the SDGs as a framework that can enrich career planning and exploration.

As the need for sustainable careers increases (De Vos et al., 2020), it is important for individuals to consider sustainability alongside their career aspirations (Russo et al., 2023). The SDGs can provide a robust framework for integrating these considerations and linking environmental sustainability to individual and social well-being, as well as social justice (Ho, 2023). By embedding the SDGs into career development practices, CDPs can help clients explore meaningful work opportunities that contribute to global solutions.

This article is a reflective thought piece, drawing on the author's practical experiences from teaching a senior career capstone course and insights presented at the 2024 NICEC conference. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the article offers actionable strategies and reflections on the integration of SDGs into career development practices. While the integration of SDGs into career curricula shows significant promise, this piece provides an exploration of the potential benefits and the ongoing efforts needed to fully realise their impact in diverse educational and professional contexts.

The SDGs

The SDGs, adopted by all 193 UN member states, address a wide range of global challenges. The 17 goals, as well as the 169 targets based on the goals, focus on issues such as poverty, inequality, health, education, and climate change. For instance, an SDG with an explicit connection to career development is SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), aims to 'promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all' (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024b, para. 1). Key indicators for SDG 8 include reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training.

At the heart of the SDGs are the 5Ps: Planet, people, prosperity, peace, and partnerships (UN, 2015). They guide the overarching mission of the SDGs.

- **Planet**: Protecting our natural resources and climate for future generations.

- **People**: Ensuring all humans can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality.

- **Prosperity**: Ensuring all can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives.

- **Peace**: Fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

- **Partnerships**: Implementing the SDGs through a spirit of global solidarity and strengthened partnerships.

In 2020, the UN launched the Decade of Action (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2024c) to accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. The initiative calls for urgent and transformative measures to address the most pressing global challenges before they lead to irreversible consequences for our collective livelihoods. The Decade of Action emphasises the need for increased ambition, financing, and global partnerships to drive the change necessary to meet the SDGs' targets.

Recent research has emphasised the relevance of these goals, not only at the policy level, but also in shaping individual aspirations and career planning. Santilli et al. (2023), for instance, developed a scale for assessing individuals' alignment with the 2030 Agenda, demonstrating the utility of the SDGs in personal goal setting and career development. Moreover, Sterling (2001) advocates for sustainable education as way to reconceptualize learning, aligning educational goals with broader societal needs—a concept central to the SDGs. Such research highlights how the SDGs can serve as a guiding framework for students and professionals alike, encouraging them to think critically about their roles in global sustainability.

The SDGs and career development

The SDGs share several commonalities with the principles and objectives of career development. Firstly, both are fundamentally oriented towards achieving social justice. The SDGs aim to ensure that no one is left behind by, addressing inequity issues and promoting global partnerships. Similarly, the field of career development emerged from a commitment to social justice, with one of its primary aims being to provide career guidance to alleviate poverty and support underserved populations in finding meaningful and decent work (Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Hooley et al., 2018; Jones, 1994). This in turn aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Watts (1996) provides a foundational perspective on the socio-political ideologies that underpin career guidance, highlighting how the field can serve various ideological purposes. Watts reinforces the idea that career guidance is not ideologically neutral but can be directed toward achieving broader societal goals, including those related to social justice and sustainability. Career development, thus, plays a critical role in addressing inequalities and promoting equitable opportunities for all. Robertson (2021) expands on this by arguing that career development policies can be designed to support broader societal goals, including those articulated in the SDGs. This perspective underscores the potential for career guidance to not only address individual aspirations but also contribute to social justice and economic sustainability on a global scale.

Secondly, the SDGs call for a collective effort to tackle the world's most pressing challenges by leveraging individual knowledge and talents. Career development assists individuals in identifying their strengths, interests, and skills, and through doing so, enable them to discover opportunities and environments where they can effectively utilise these attributes (Brown & Lent, 2012; Chen & Hong, 2020). Arur and Sharma (2019) emphasise that the SDGs act as semiotic resources within career guidance, providing students with a framework through which they can navigate their career decisions in a way that aligns with global priorities. Savickas' (2013) career construction theory supports this, as it aligns personal strengths with broader societal needs, a concept central to the SDGs. This approach enables individuals to construct careers that not only fulfill personal goals but also contribute to societal well-being.

Thirdly, by aligning personal skills with global needs, individuals can pursue professional roles that are both meaningful and impactful. This alignment empowers them to realise their purpose and contribute to their communities in significant ways. The SDGs provide a framework encouraging individuals to perceive their potential impact as extending beyond their immediate surroundings, fostering a sense of global responsibility (Wilson, 2018).

Integrating personal and professional goals with broader societal objectives enhances motivation and satisfaction. As well, Di Maggio et al. (2020) highlight the importance of career adaptability in the context of sustainable development, suggesting that by incorporating SDGs into career education, students are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce, develop resilience, and maintain hope as they pursue careers that contribute to global well-being. Finally, Nota et al. (2023) discuss the importance of inclusivity, sustainability, and equity—core aspects of the SDGs—in guiding career development practices, reinforcing that career guidance should consider not only individual success but also the well-being of society and the environment, aligning personal career goals with the broader objectives of the SDGs.

The SDG framework thereby prompts individuals to consider several essential questions (Ho, 2021):

- What is the world I want to live in?
- What global problems or opportunities need my attention?
- How can my talents and experiences address these problems?
- What do I care about?

Integrating the SDGs in a university career capstone course

Education 4100 (EDUC 4100) is a fourth-year undergraduate course at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), open to all students with at least 60 course credits, which is equivalent to completing two years of undergraduate studies. KPU is a regional teaching university with five campuses in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. The University's teaching designation ensures that classes are small, with a maximum of 35 students per course section.

As a popular elective, EDUC 4100 attracts students from various disciplines, including arts and humanities, business and commerce, sciences, health sciences, and design. The multidisciplinary makeup of students fosters interdisciplinary discussions, encouraging students to draw from their academic fields while learning from their peers, ultimately enhancing the class's collective learning experience. EDUC 4100's course objectives include (KPU, 2024):

- reflecting on educational experiences by examining artifacts;
- investigating and preparing for work and further educational opportunities;
- developing representational portfolios for post-university life; and
- considering what it means to be 'educated' in students' own context.

The design of EDUC 4100 is intentionally aligned with pedagogical ideologies that emphasize social justice, sustainability, and the development of a global consciousness. As Watts (1996) argues, career guidance is not ideologically neutral; it often reflects socio-political values that influence how career development is practiced. In this course, the integration of the SDGs is a deliberate choice to align career education with these broader societal goals. According to Winter (2023), effective careers and employability

learning should empower students to navigate their career paths while being mindful of their broader societal and ethical responsibilities. EDUC 4100's use of SDGs as a guiding framework aligns well with this approach, fostering a learning environment where students are encouraged to reflect on how their careers can contribute to global challenges.

The subsections following explore specific course components and how the integration of the SDGs enhances career development and learning for students.

Personal mission statements

A major component of the course is the ePortfolio project, where students identify a realistic professional opportunity that they may pursue as a next step. Within their ePortfolio, they compose application documents and assemble a complete package for their chosen opportunity, such as a first job after graduation, or application to graduate or professional schools.

A central element of the ePortfolio is the personal mission statement. To craft this statement, students begin by examining organisational mission statements to understand their purpose: What is the organization's ultimate goal, and how does it intend to achieve it? What challenges does it aim to address? These questions help students reflect on their own professional aspirations by asking similar questions: What do they aim to accomplish in their professional lives after graduation? Who are the people and communities they wish to serve? How do these individuals and communities benefit from their work and efforts? Overall, this exercise enables students to identify their core values, align their actions with these values, and seek future workplaces that support this alignment.

In addition to creating their personal mission statements, students provide a brief description of their development process, resulting in a rationale statement where they highlight the SDGs they aim to advance. For instance, Alyssa, an accounting student, created the mission statement: 'I enable people to make informed decisions they can feel confident about.' She reflected on how her work in providing accurate financial data aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) through the use of management accounting practices to address resource inefficiencies. While mission statements are designed to be brief for ease of memorization, the rationale provides space for students to ponder the significance of each component in their statement and how they plan to succeed in their future professions while addressing global challenges.

Organisational research

In the course, students also research organisations they aspire to join, or if they are hoping to start, entrepreneurial ventures, emulate. This research involves examining seminal company documents such as mission and vision statements, strategic plans, and corporate social responsibility mandates. Through this analysis, students assess how their own values align with those of the organizations, thereby facilitating informed career decision-making (Smith et al., 2023).

The course also examines B Corporations (B Corps) as exemplars of organisations that balance profitability with social and environmental responsibility. B Corps are certified for their adherence to high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability,

and transparency (Canadian B Corp Directory, 2024). As part of the certification process, organisations articulate and substantiate how they align with the SDGs. In the course, students identify B Corps they want to learn more about, analysing how these organizations align their sustainability claims with concrete actions. This exercise helps students understand how leading organisations can 'walk the talk' by integrating sustainable practices into their operations.

Furthermore, students evaluate how organisations contribute to the advancement of the SDGs. They identify practical examples of organisational success and areas where the organisations may fall short. For instance, several students expressed interest in working for the United Nations (UN) and discovered that internship opportunities offered by the UN are generally unpaid. The finding prompted a class debate on the implications of accepting unpaid internships with their dream organisations, enriching the overall learning experience, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of career decisions. Students collectively generated recommendations, such as writing to the UN to express their concerns, explaining how unpaid internships might contradict SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). They also suggested the UN to identify funding partners to ensure interns can be compensated.

Frigerio (2024) emphasises the importance of recognising signature frameworks that guide career development practices, as well as their relationships, and impact on clients: 'The emancipatory potential of career development work and the importance of systemic perspectives (acknowledging the interplay of all influences in the individual, social, and societal environmental systems that the systems theory framework depicts) are further potential signatures' (p. 101). The UN debate illustrates one approach to teaching career development and highlights the importance of being attentive and responsive to student needs and curiosities, remaining flexible, and being willing to adjust strategies as learning evolve.

Future work trends

In EDUC 4100, students also examine various reports on the future of work (i.e., Creative Futures & CERIC, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). By synthesising information from multiple sources, students can identify key trends shaping the future and the implications for their professional trajectories. Doing so enables them to better position themselves to influence these potential futures by reflecting on their existing skills and experiences, as well as identifying those they need to acquire.

The integration of the SDGs adds a valuable dimension to this analysis as students evaluate whether these trends will facilitate or impede the advancement of the SDGs. For example, students interested in promoting SDG 4 (Quality Education) might investigate how emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), can enhance access to education for underserved populations. Concurrently, they examine the ethical considerations of using AI to fulfill SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), ensuring that technological advancements are leveraged responsibly and equitably.

Information interviews

The culminating course project is an informational interview assignment where students identify and interview three or more individuals who embody their potential future career

paths. Students prepare and pose questions to these professionals, gaining insights into their career journeys to inform their own career decision-making processes. A secondary project objective is for students to practice establishing networks within their desired fields, thereby gaining confidence in building professional relationships.

After conducting the information interviews, students reflect on the conversations and the key themes that emerged. They identify insights that confirmed or challenged their current career perspectives, evaluate their own performance as interviewers, and articulate their next steps, including additional individuals they might wish to interview. They also connect their reflections back to their identified SDG(s), often highlighting how their interviewees advance these goals through their work and how they can do the same in their work. For example, Kory, a criminology student, identified SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) as a primary interest. Through his interviews, he realized that his passion for ensuring a clean and adequate water supply could lead him to pursue a career in law. He noted that legal arguments can be made to ensure clean and safe water as a human right, a realization reinforced by his interviewees, who pursued law to protect human rights. This reflection helped Kory consider human rights law as a potential career path and how he can contribute to SDG 6 through legal advocacy.

Insights on impact

While this article is not intended to present empirical findings, it can be useful to consider the anecdotal evidence gathered through informal surveys conducted as part of the course wrap-up. In the survey, a question was posed to capture students' reflections on how the SDGs influenced their thinking about career development: 'In what ways, if any, did the UN SDG(s) help you learn more about yourself and your career development?'

Over two academic years, from Fall 2019 to Spring 2021, 367 students responded to this question. The qualitative responses revealed three distinct levels of reflection:

- **Individual level:** Students acknowledged that one person can indeed make a difference, recognising that daily actions can help advance the SDGs. However, they also realised the immensity of the challenge, understanding that no single person can address an SDG alone, which underscored the importance of collective effort.

- **Career level:** The SDGs expanded students' perspectives on potential career paths. They discovered that the SDGs and their indicators could help them identify additional occupations they had not previously considered. Moreover, students felt a sense of duty to serve as they see opportunities to contribute to the SDGs through their work and professional aspirations.

- **Community level:** Students came to understand that advancing the SDGs requires collective efforts. They realised the importance of collaboration and the synergies that can be harnessed by working together as a community of change agents, in both paid and unpaid roles they serve. This communal approach fostered a deeper appreciation for teamwork and partnership in achieving the SDGs.

One student succinctly connected career success with the SDGs, stating: 'I realised through this course that if I want to have a successful career, I need to think about how I want to serve the world first.' This quote encapsulates the transformative impact of integrating the

SDGs into career education, highlighting the shift in students' thinking towards a more holistic and purpose-driven approach to their careers.

In the future it will be important to build on these insights with a more structured and systematic investigation capable of producing robust empirical evidence. However, the current evidence does support valuable reflections on the potential impact of integrating the SDGs into career development curricula.

Advice for implementation

Having discussed various activities in the course that incorporate the SDGs, practical advice for integrating the SDGs into broader career development practices is shared in this section.

Utilise the SDGs for career exploration and purpose

As a first step to incorporate the SDGs into career exploration, CDPs can encourage clients to think deeply about their capabilities and how they can enable them to address global challenges. CDPs can start by using the SDG framework to guide conversations. For example, they might pose questions to clients such as, 'Which SDG resonates most with your personal values?' or 'How can your skills and interests contribute to solving global issues like climate change or inequality?' CDPs can also engage clients in a career mapping exercise where they identify potential careers that align with their chosen SDGs. For instance, if a client is passionate about SDG 13 (Climate Action), CDPs could help them explore roles in environmental policy, sustainable architecture, or renewable energy. Additionally, CDPs can help clients research and explore how specific industries are contributing to the SDGs, which might involve reviewing corporate sustainability reports, analysing industry trends, or even interviewing professionals in the field. A client who identifies SDG 4 (Quality Education) as their passion may explore roles in educational technology, nonprofit work, or policy advocacy focused on equitable access to education.

Encourage lifelong learning and flexibility

In today's rapidly changing world, fostering a mindset of lifelong learning and adaptability is crucial (McGowan & Shipley, 2020). One approach is to assist clients create a personal development plan that outlines how they can engage in ongoing education and professional development that align with their career goals and relevant SDGs. To do this, CDPs and their clients can research and recommend certifications, workshops, or courses in emerging fields like artificial intelligence or sustainable business practices, and then incorporate these possibilities into their personal development plan. Clients can also take part in scenario planning exercises to envision different futures based on trends like technological advancements or climate change, where CDPs can encourage them to ponder how being adaptable and continually learning can help them thrive in these potential futures. For instance, a client interested in SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) could be encouraged to pursue courses in digital transformation, smart infrastructure, or project management to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving job market.

Integrate values with career aspirations

Aligning clients' personal values with their professional goals is essential for long-term satisfaction and success (Arieli et al., 2020). To facilitate this alignment, CDPs can conduct workshops where clients identify their core values, then explore how these can be integrated into their career planning and decision making. At the same time, CDPs can encourage clients to research potential employers' values and mission statements to ensure they align with their own personal values. This research might include reviewing company annual and sustainability reports or speaking with current employees about the organisation's culture and ethics. Furthermore, CDPs can help clients search for job opportunities specifically within organizations known for their commitment to the SDGs, such as B Corporations or companies with strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. For example, a client passionate about SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) might be guided to seek out roles in sustainable supply chain management, as well as organizations that honour such practices, aligning their career aspirations with their commitment to reducing waste and promoting sustainability.

Advocate for social justice and collaboration

Promoting fairness, equity, and collaboration in career development activities is crucial for advancing the SDGs. Watts (1996) maintains that career development can serve various socio-political ideologies, and when aligned with social justice, it can empower individuals to challenge systemic inequalities. CDPs can encourage clients to consider how their careers can contribute to social justice by exploring roles in nonprofit organisations, social enterprises, or governmental agencies focused on reducing inequalities. Additionally, CDPs can support clients on fostering networks with like-minded professionals and organizations. This could involve attending SDG-focused workshops and conferences, joining professional groups, or participating in online forums that discuss social justice and sustainability. For instance, a client interested in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) might be encouraged to connect with local elected officials to learn more about advocacy, social work, or policy-making, in order to discover ways they can actively contribute to reducing disparities in society as a citizen and a professional.

Conclusion

Integrating the SDGs into career development practices offers a promising approach to aligning individual career aspirations with global sustainability goals. By embedding the SDGs into educational frameworks and professional guidance, we can enhance clients' sense of purpose and career satisfaction. This holistic approach empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to address global challenges, supporting the broader societal objectives of sustainable and equitable development. While the initial outcomes from implementing the SDGs in career curricula are encouraging, further exploration and adaptation in diverse contexts are needed to fully realise their transformative potential.

As career development professionals, our role is pivotal in guiding individuals to harness their talents and passions in ways that contribute not only to their personal success but also to the well-being of the planet and society. Through thoughtful implementation and continuous reflection, we can build a robust framework for career development that

endures, ensuring that our collective efforts contribute to a better world for present and future generations.

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