THE PERFORMANCE OF EU CEE UNIVERSITIES AGAINST THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) play an important role in raising societies' consciousness regarding the sustainability of our planet – a key issue for everyone. The purpose of this paper is to present and assess the performance of universities in EU CEE-11 countries (the 11 Central and Eastern European Member States of the European Union) against the UN SDGs. For this, we analyse the results of EU CEE-11 universities in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings that are available in four editions (for the period 2019-2022). The results of the analysis reflect the still quite modest level of SDG awareness in higher education in the region, but also the progress in this respect (the increasing number of universities participating in the ranking), as well as the differences between the individual countries. Based on these findings, we identify and describe specific proposals for raising SDG awareness and strengthening SDG-related actions in EU CEE universities, contributing also to the strengthening of their reputation in the international higher education community.

Keywords:
UN SDGs, Central and Eastern Europe, higher education, Times Higher Education, rakings

JEL:
A13, I23, Q01

University of Maribor Press
DOI https://doi.org/10.18690/um.epf.3.2023.18
ISBN 978-961-286-736-2

1 Introduction

Sustainable development is a widely known expression today, reflecting the multiple challenges humanity realized during the last few decades it faces. Sustainability has several aspects other than environmental. After 2000 these have also been recognized as features of sustainability; now they are part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN). Today, all individuals and organizations have their roles to play regarding all these aspects.

This paper discusses the performance of higher education institutions in the 11 Central and Eastern European member states of the European Union (EU CEE-11), universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings. After a brief outline of the theoretical and historical background of sustainable development, the methodology will be presented. That part is followed by the presentation of the results and their interpretation, including future-oriented concluding remarks.

2 Theoretical Background

Sustainable development has become one of the most discussed multidisciplinary issues in the last half-century. The starting point of reflection was in most aspects the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, where the participants set up an action plan based on 26 principles and 109 recommendations outlined in the Report of the Conference (United Nations, 1973). The definition of the notion of "sustainable development" came 15 years later, with the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987). After some important steps following the Brundtland Report (the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal), it was the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 that has put sustainability again into the focus of attention of masses of people.

In 1995, the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization (World Trade Organization, 1995) has already explicitly referred to the objective of sustainable development. The adoption of the Kyoto Protocol (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1997) was an important milestone.

However, the difficulties arising around its ratification (the fact that the document could enter into force only in 2005, and that the United States have not ratified it) have shown the difficulty of the issue, even with the pragmatic approach emphasizing the "common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities" of the countries of the world.

The multidimensional nature of the issue of sustainable development was made clear to everyone with the definition of the 8 UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, defined in the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000). Even though most objectives had not been fulfilled by the target date (2015), the multidimensional reflection had developed further. In 2015 the UN Member States have adopted the 2030 Agenda including the 17 SDGs (United Nations, 2015) which, since then, constitute a cornerstone of the analyses on sustainability.

Among recent scientific analyses on higher education and sustainable development, Owens (2017), discusses SDG 4 and the buildup of university strategies for reaching it. Chankseliani – McCowan (2021) discuss the role of SDG 4 and mention the THE rankings. Boeve-de Pauw – Gericke – Olsson – Berglund (2015) and Crespo – Míguez-Álvarez – Arce – Cuevas – Míguez (2017) provide empirical examples for potential actions in higher education for reaching the SDGs. In Hungary (the country of the author), Lányi – Kajner (eds.) (2019) provide a panorama on sustainability in higher education.

3 Methodology

This paper presents the performance of EU CEE-11 universities in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, considering the results of the overall ranking. These rankings are available for four years, for the period of 2019-2022, concentrate on four broad areas (research, stewardship, outreach and teaching) and consider all 17 SDGs.

Any university providing data on SDG 17 (briefly defined as partnerships for the goals) plus at least three other SDGs can be included in the overall ranking. The final overall score of the university is the combined score in SDG 17 (with a 22% weight in the final score) and of the scores in the top (from the point of view of the given

university) three scores of the other 16 SDGs (with a 26% weight each in the final score).[1]

For this paper, we have selected and analyzed the overall results of the EU CEE-11 universities from all four editions of the THE Impact Rankings. The method used in the paper is descriptive statistical analysis providing a basis for further research along the paths described in section 5.

4 Results

The THE Impact Rankings are quite new; this is reflected in the increase in the number of participating countries and universities every year (see Table 1). The development of the participation of EU CEE-11 universities is in line with the general trend; as for the 2022 THE Impact Rankings, 106 universities from 10 of the EU CEE-11 have been included.

Table 1: World and EU CEE-11 countries and universities in the THE Impact Rankings

Year	Number of universities participating	Number of countries/regions represented	Number of EU CEE-11 universities participating	Number of EU CEE-11 countries represented
2019	467	76	17	7
2020	768	85	33	8
2021	1118	94	47	9
2022	1406	106	61	10

Source: Author's compilation based on THE Impact Rankings data (2021).

The country distribution of the participating EU CEE-11 universities is presented in Table 2. The figures reflect several factors: the differences in country size (and the roughly corresponding differences in the number of universities in the countries), as well as eventual differences in realizing the possibility of participation. Of course – as is also the case with overall data – the universities included still represent a relatively small (but increasing) part of higher education institutions in the region. The more the present trend of broadening participation continues in the years to

[1] Further details on the methodology of the THE Impact Rankings can be found at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/impact-rankings-2022-methodology (which is also the source of the overview of the present paragraph). The full information on the latest methodology is available at https://the-impact-report.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/Impact+2022/THE.ImpactRankings.METHODOLOGY.2022_v1.3.pdf.

come, the more relevant the Impact Rankings and the participation in them, and the positions of the participating higher education institutions will become.

Table 2: The country distribution of EU CEE universities in the THE Impact Rankings

Year	BG	CR	CZ	EE	HU	LT	LV	PL	RO	SI	SK
2019	1	-	4	-	2	-	2	1	5	-	2
2020	1	-	5	-	6	-	4	5	7	1	4
2021	1	1	7	-	6	-	5	12	10	1	4
2022	2	2	6	-	8	3	5	15	13	2	5

Source: author's compilation based on THE Impact Rankings data (2021).

Table 3: Positions and country distribution of EU CEE universities in the THE Impact Rankings

Range	2019	2020	2021	2022
1-100	2 LV 1, SK 1			
101-200	5 CZ 2, HU 2, RO 1	2 HU 1, LV 1		1 LV 1
201-300	4 LV 1, PL 1, RO 2	6 CZ 1, HU 1, LV 1, RO 2, SK 1	3 HU 1, LV 2	3 CZ 2, LV 1
301-400	(Category: 301+) 6 BG 1, CZ 2, RO 2, SK 1	6 HU 1, LV 1, PL 2, RO 1, SK 1	5 HU 2, LV 1, RO 1, SK 1	6 CR 1, CZ 2, LV 1, RO 2
401-600		13 BG 1, CZ 2, HU 2, LV 1, PL 3, RO 3, SI 1	9 CZ 4, HU 1, RO 3, SK 1	6 CR 1, CZ 1, HU 3, RO 1
601-800		(Category: 601+) 6 CZ 2, HU 1, RO 1, SK 2	15 BG 1, CZ 1, HU 2, LV 1, PL 3, RO 4, SI 1, SK 2	10 BG 1, HU 2, LV 1, PL 4, RO 1, SK 1
801-1000			14 CR 1, CZ 2, LV 1, PL 8, RO 2	15 HU 1, LT 1, LV 1, PL 6, RO 3, SI 2, SK 1
1001+			1 PL 1	20 BG 1, CZ 1, HU 2, LT 2, PL 5, RO 6, SK 3
Total	17	33	47	61

Source: Author's compilation based on THE Impact Rankings data (2021).

Table 3 presents the position of EU CEE-11 universities in the THE Impact Rankings in all four years. Due to the steady increase in the number of participating institutions worldwide, results are not directly comparable: a certain (e.g., top 200) position in 2022 (with 1406 universities participating worldwide) can be considered more valuable than the same position in 2019 (with 467 universities participating worldwide). The broadening of the circle of participating institutions also explains some seemingly 'deteriorating' positions; participation itself, however – especially regarding the novelty of the ranking – is a positive thing.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Very basic analysis of the overall performance of the EU CEE-11 countries' universities shows a few characteristics that are in line with the general trend observable in the THE Impact Rankings:

- Every year, more and more higher education institutions use the opportunity to participate.
- The universities that have already been listed (with very rare exceptions) continue their participation in the rankings.
- In line with the increasing participation, it becomes more difficult – but as the data show, by far not impossible – to get into the upper categories of the rankings.

Of course, there is much room for more activity in higher education – in general and in the EU CEE-11 countries – in the field of sustainable development. The THE Impact Rankings can contribute to enhance the visibility of the universities which is crucial for them in the competition that characterizes the higher education market. There are also other possibilities to show an institution's commitment to sustainable development[2], but the visibility gains from the ranking with the relatively small efforts that are needed for it can make it attractive for more and more universities.

[2] An important example of that is the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Programme with over 800 signatories from all over the world. For 2023, 47 higher education institutions have been selected as 'PRME Champions', with 2 of them from the EU CEE-11 (one from Hungary and one from Slovenia). For details, see https://www.unprme.org/prme-champions.

Despite the short history (but at the same time: due to the high future potential) of the THE Impact Rankings, a more detailed analysis of their results provides interesting research opportunities. During further research, special attention should be paid to the following aspects:

- The performance of the participating universities against the individual SDGs – which of them are the most/least 'popular' (present in most/least cases in the top 3 SDGs of the institutions)?
- The performance of EU CEE-11 universities regarding the individual SDGs – are there some specific 'CEE patterns', special approaches, or do these institutions follow paths that are similar to the general approach of universities worldwide to the issue of sustainable development?
- With the stabilization of the number of participants expected in the future, the deeper analysis of the positions in the rankings – how can the participating universities maintain or improve their positions in the rankings?

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