Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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33. Unlocking a new generation of leaders: How universities can support students' inner development goals

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Abstract

This chapter explores how universities can advance the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. Originating as a response to the SDGs' call for inner human development, the IDG framework outlines five dimensions and twenty-three core capabilities—including self-awareness, intercultural competence, and creativity—vital for fostering human flourishing and enabling systemic change. As key drivers of societal transformation, universities have a unique opportunity to cultivate these skills through integrative curricula, inclusive learning environments, service-learning, global engagement, and wellbeing initiatives. By embedding the IDGs into Higher Education, institutions can empower students to become ethical, reflective, and action-oriented leaders equipped to create lasting social impact.

Keywords: development; framework; qualities; skills; society; sustainability

Introduction

In today's rapidly changing global landscape, the need for effective leadership has become vital. Leaders must possess not only technical expertise but also a diverse set of essential skills and capabilities, including self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, communication, intercultural competence, and creativity (Jordan, 2021). Recognising the significance of these qualities, universities play a vital role in supporting students' holistic development. One framework that aligns seamlessly with this objective is the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) framework.

Universities are recognised as key stakeholders in driving societal transformation and are tasked with contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda (Zhou et al., 2020 Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020; Serafini et al., 2022). The United Nations (UN) itself has emphasised the importance of equipping all learners with the knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable development (Crespo et al., 2017). However, this extends beyond mere conceptual understanding to encompass the capacities required for individuals to become catalysts for systemic change.

The IDG framework reflects the values, attitudes, and behaviours necessary for creating a positive impact (Bartlett et al., 2020). It represents a comprehensive set of skills and attributes that are essential for individuals and organisations to effectively address the complex societal challenges outlined in the UN Agenda 2030 and the seventeen SDGs. The framework provides a valuable starting point for assessing both personal and collective proficiencies, as well as how institutions can facilitate the necessary personal growth for sustainable development.

By prioritising the development of these skills and qualities, universities can foster personal and professional growth in students, nurturing future leaders who actively engage with the SDGs. This approach will not only benefit individuals but also contribute to the advancement of communities and society as a whole, leading to positive social impact (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

This chapter aims to explore how universities can effectively utilise the IDG framework to support a new generation of leaders, promoting a more hopeful and humane approach to education.

Understanding the Inner Development Goals framework

This initiative stems from the recognition of a flaw in our collective actions to establish a sustainable global society. Whilst we have extensive knowledge about the conditions, causes, and potential solutions to issues such as climate change, poverty, and public health, progress towards the United Nations' Agenda 2030 goals has been slow (Jordan, 2021). Arguably, there has been a lack of focus on fostering the necessary abilities, qualities, and skills among individuals, groups, and organisations that are pivotal in realising these visions.

When confronting complex tasks, such as the SDGs, conventional education and learning alone are insufficient. A wide range of cognitive, emotional, and other qualities are required, as demonstrated in various research fields, such as adult learning, development, and strategic leadership (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

In essence, the IDGs aim to identify, promote, and support the growth of relevant abilities, skills, and qualities for inner development. By providing a comprehensible framework that describes these skills and qualities, the project seeks to mobilise broader engagement and encourage relevant target groups (Jordan, 2021). This aims to significantly increase their investments in developing these vital attributes, thereby enhancing their capacity to address global challenges.

The initial phase of the framework, conducted in 2020–21, determined the skills necessary to address the contemporary challenges we face. It involved two surveys, in which over 1,000 individuals participated. The surveys aimed to identify the skills needed for sustainability, inner development, and leadership, which were common interests among all participants. Considerable attention was paid to ensuring a broad representation of participants across diverse sectors, including politics, NGOs, businesses, researchers, and individuals (Jordan, 2021).

Following the surveys, a co-creative process led by Jordan (2021) was initiated to categorise the twenty-three skills and qualities identified. This process involved the collaboration of prominent institutions, organisations, and individuals such as IKEA, Spotify, the EU Erasmus+ programme, and academics from Harvard. Together, they grouped the skills into five dimensions, synthesising the collective wisdom and expertise of participants. The current IDG framework is set out in Table 33.1.

Being—Relationship to Self	Thinking—Cognitive Skills	Relating—Caring for Others and the World	Collaborating—Social Skills	Acting—Enabling Change
Inner Compass	Critical Thinking	Appreciation	Communication Skills	Courage
Integrity and Authenticity	Complexity Awareness	Connectedness	Co-creation Skills	Creativity
Openness and Learning Mindset	Perspective Skills	Humility	Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence	Optimism
Self-awareness	Sense-making	Empathy and Compassion	Trust	Perseverance
Presence	Long-term Orientation and Visioning		Mobilisation Skills	

Table 33.1 The IDG framework (Inner Development Goals, 2023)

The skills and qualities mentioned in Table 33.1 have undergone multiple revisions in collaboration with practitioners and researchers to ensure their accuracy. However, the more detailed descriptions, presented below in Table 33.2, are the author's own interpretations and have not undergone the same level of scrutiny (Jordan, 2021). It is also recognised that these individual skills and qualities often overlap and rely on one another. Understanding the interconnections between them is an essential task for research and theory development. Therefore, they should be considered a work-in-progress, serving as a starting point for further reflection, revision, and refinement, enabling individuals with different theoretical preferences to employ them as a pedagogical tool (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

Being—Relationship to Self	Thinking—Cognitive Skills	Relating—Caring for Others and the World	Collaborating—Social Skills	Acting—Enabling Change
Cultivating our inner life and developing and deepening our relationship to our thoughts, feelings and body help us be present, intentional, and non-reactive when we face complexity.	Developing our cognitive skills by taking different perspectives, evaluating information, and making sense of the world as an interconnected whole is essential for wise decision-making.	Appreciating, caring for, and feeling connected to others, such as neighbours, future generations, or the biosphere, helps us create more just and sustainable systems and societies for everyone.	To make progress on shared concerns, we need to develop our abilities to include, hold space, and communicate with stakeholders with different values, skills, and competencies.	Qualities such as courage and optimism help us acquire true agency, break old patterns, generate original ideas, and act with persistence in uncertain times.
Inner Compass Having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole. *Links to: Connectedness, Long-term Orientation and Visioning, and Perseverance.*	**Critical Thinking** Skills in critically reviewing the validity of views, evidence, and plans. *Links to: Perspective Skills*	**Appreciation** Relating to others and to the world with a basic sense of appreciation, gratitude, and joy. *Links to: Humility, Openness, Learning Mindset, Presence, and Mobilisation Skills.*	**Communication Skills** Ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate own views skilfully, to manage conflicts constructively, and to adapt communication to diverse groups. *Links to: Presence, Humility, Perspective Awareness, Openness and Learning Mindset, and Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence.*	**Courage** Ability to stand up for values, make decisions, take decisive action, and, if need be, challenge and disrupt existing structures and views.

Integrity and Authenticity	Complexity Awareness	Connectedness	Co-creation Skills	Creativity
A commitment and ability to act with sincerity, honesty, and integrity. *Links to: Self-awareness*	Understanding of and skills in working with complex and systemic conditions and causalities. *Links to: Critical Thinking, Sense-making, and Perspective Skills.*	Having a keen sense of being connected with and/or being a part of a larger whole, such as a community, humanity or global ecosystem. *Links to: Sense-making, Complexity Awareness, Inner Compass, Appreciation, Empathy and Compassion, Humility, and Inclusive Mindset.*	Skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stakeholders, characterised by psychological safety and genuine co-creation. *Links to: Trust, Communication Skills, Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence, Mobilisation Skills, Openness and Learning Mindset, and Perspective Skills.*	Ability to generate and develop original ideas, innovate and being willing to disrupt conventional patterns. *Links to: Openness and Learning Mindset, Perspective Skills, and Co-creation Skills.*

Openness and Learning Mindset	Perspective Skills	Humility	Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence	Optimism
Having a basic mindset of curiosity and a willingness to be vulnerable and embrace change and grow. *Links to: Critical Thinking, Complexity Awareness, Perspective Skills, Humility, Creativity, and Communication Skills.*	Skills in seeking, understanding and actively making use of insights from contrasting perspectives. *Links to: Openness and Learning Mindset, Sense-making, Complexity Awareness, Critical Thinking, and Inclusive* *Mindset and Intercultural Competence.*	Being able to act in accordance with the needs of the situation without concern for one's own importance. *Links to: Openness and Learning mindset, Self-awareness, Connectedness, Empathy and Compassion, Presence, and Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence.*	Willingness and competence to embrace diversity and include people and collectives with different views and backgrounds. *Links to: Communication Skills, Connectedness, Co-creation Skills, Perspective Skills, and Humility.*	Ability to sustain and communicate a sense of hope, positive attitude and confidence in the possibility of meaningful change. *Links to: Appreciation*

Self-aware-ness	Sense-making	Empathy and Compassion	Trust	Perseverance
Ability to be in reflec-tive contact with own thoughts, feelings, and desires; hav-ing a realistic self-image and ability to regulate oneself. *Links to: Presence, Humility, Integrity and Authenticity, Openness, and Learning Mindset.*	Skills in seeing patterns, structuring the unknown and being able to consciously create stories. *Links to: Crit-ical Thinking, Complexity Awareness, and Perspective Skills.*	Ability to relate to others, one-self, and nature with kindness, empathy, and compassion and address related suffer-ing. *Links to: Appre-ciation and Connectedness.*	Ability to show trust and to cre-ate and maintain trusting relation-ships. *Links to: Integrity and Authenticity, Communication Skills, and Co-cre-ation Skills.*	Ability to sustain engagement and remain determined and patient even when efforts take a long time to bear fruit. *Links to: Inner Compass and Long-term Orientation and Visioning.*

Presence	Long-term Orientation and Visioning		Mobilisation Skills	
Ability to be in the here and now, without judgement and in a state of open-ended presence. *Links to: Humility, Self-aware-ness, Open-ness, and Learning Mindset.*	Long-term orientation and ability to formulate and sustain commitment to visions relating to the larger context. *Links to: Critical Thinking, Com-plexity Aware-ness, Perspective Skills, Persever-ance Humility, Creativity, and Communication Skills.*		Skills in inspir-ing and mobi-lising others to engage in shared purposes. *Links to: Commu-nication Skills, Co-creation Skills, Trust, Inclusive Mindset, and Intercultural Competence.*	

Table 33.2 Detailed descriptions of the skills and qualities in the IDG framework and their links (Stålne & Greca, 2022)

The role of universities in promoting the IDG framework

The IDG Framework allows an appreciation of the multifaceted nature of inner development. As an organic process that aims to expand personal and collective growth as human beings, there is no guarantee of achieving the desired outcomes. It is essential to acknowledge these uncertainties and cultivate dedication, discipline, patience and trust in oneself and the process. Learning communities, such as those found within universities, provide a conducive environment for undertaking this journey (Stålne & Greca, 2022). This includes communal support and trust, enabling individuals to make sense of their experiences and benefit from shared perspectives. Universities can also play a crucial role in maintaining the joy of inner development, exploring its links to collective and structural change without disregarding its individual significance.

The framework also aligns with common graduate attributes, also known as graduate qualities or learning outcomes, and refers to the specific skills, knowledge, and qualities that a university aims to develop in its students throughout their academic journey (Barrie, 2012). They play a crucial role in shaping a university's education strategy by guiding curriculum development, improving student outcomes, enhancing employability, and contributing to the overall reputation of the institution. Like the IDG Framework, these attributes are intended to foster holistic development and equip individuals to become successful and responsible citizens in society. Therefore, universities can be seen as vital stakeholders in driving societal transformation and playing a multifaceted role in achieving global ambitions such as the SDGs (Zhou et al., 2020; Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020; Serafini et al., 2022).

Supporting Inner Development Goals in universities

Transformational learning, defined as the expansion of consciousness through which an individual can question themselves about their feelings, beliefs, assumptions, and perspective on their purpose (Simsek, 2012) arguably steps beyond the bounds of "traditional" education, but is a fitting approach for the IDGs. Transformational learning embraces a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to education, offering ample

opportunities for personal development, expression, emotional intelligence, social connectivity, and exploration. This transformative journey allows individuals to undergo profound shifts in their self-awareness, core values, and perspectives on the world, and the way they interact with others.

In addition, transformational learning programmes are rooted in participatory pedagogical methods, where students take an active role in their learning journey. Through continuous experiential involvement, they play a vital part in shaping the content and direction of the programme. Educators in this context adopt the role of facilitators, creating a nurturing and supportive environment that encourages deep reflection and critical engagement (Kiely, 2005). This involves not only exploring theoretical concepts but also applying them in practical scenarios.

At the core of transformational learning lies the incorporation of transdisciplinary perspectives and integrative epistemologies. By drawing from various disciplines and knowledge systems, this approach allows individuals to exceed traditional boundaries of learning, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. As a result, participants are encouraged to challenge their existing beliefs and value systems, opening up to new and expanded forms of meaning-making (Yukawa, 2015). This process enables learners to undergo significant personal and intellectual growth, resulting in a deep impact on their perspectives and interactions with the world. The following are just some suggestions as to how universities can embrace transformational learning and, in turn, the IDGs.

Curricular integration

Integrating inner development components within the academic curriculum reinforces their importance in the overall educational experience. Universities can include courses or modules that explore topics such as emotional intelligence, intercultural communication, ethics, and mindfulness practices. By infusing these aspects into the core curriculum, students can better connect theoretical knowledge to their personal growth journey (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

Inclusive learning environments

Creating inclusive learning environments is fundamental to supporting students' inner development. Universities must prioritise building a culture of respect and acceptance, where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel valued and heard. This involves promoting open discussions, encouraging active listening, and creating safe spaces for dialogue on sensitive topics. Through diverse perspectives and exposure to different viewpoints, students can develop empathy, critical thinking skills, and a broader understanding of the world around them (Keyser et al., 2022).

Service-learning opportunities

Service-learning bridges the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application. Universities can encourage students to engage in community service projects, where they address social issues, contribute to the welfare of others, and develop a sense of social responsibility. By actively participating in service-learning, students cultivate empathy, leadership skills, and a greater understanding of the challenges faced by various groups (Salam et al., 2019). This may lead to increased motivation in addressing social and environmental issues, driving positive change in local communities and beyond.

Global and cross-cultural exposure

Exposure to global and cross-cultural experiences is a transformative aspect of a student's development. Universities can facilitate study abroad programmes, international exchange initiatives, and partnerships with institutions from different countries (at home). Such opportunities enable students to immerse themselves in foreign cultures, languages, and traditions. By navigating unfamiliar environments, students develop adaptability, intercultural competence, and a deeper appreciation for diversity (Kistyanto et al., 2022).

Mindfulness and wellbeing initiatives

Universities can implement mindfulness and wellbeing initiatives aimed at empowering students to effectively manage stress, enhance their focus, and cultivate emotional resilience. By integrating these practices, students' mental health and personal development can significantly improve, equipping them with the tools to handle stress and challenges more adeptly (McDonald & Scarampi, 2018). Through the provision of meditation sessions, counselling services and stress reduction workshops, and a commitment to promoting work-life balance, universities can foster a supportive environment that nurtures emotional resilience and self-awareness among their student community (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021).

By implementing some of these approaches, where appropriate, universities can effectively assist students in nurturing their inner capabilities, enabling them to grow into sustainable change agents. By emphasising the importance between inner personal development and external systems transformations, universities can create a holistic approach to driving progress in sustainability efforts (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

Limitations

The IDG framework's primary purpose is pedagogical, seeking to attract attention, engagement, and further development. It acknowledges the complex interrelation of skills and qualities, which can be unpacked into sub-skills and understood holistically. However, it does not delve deeply into this aspect, acknowledging the need for more specific theoretical frameworks (Stålne & Greca, 2022). Instead, the IDG framework aims to be open-ended and versatile, encouraging development and adaptations in various directions. There are several other limitations that are important to address.

Firstly, the framework's approach to skills and qualities is, arguably, from an individual perspective rather than a collective one, such as groups, organisations, communities, processes, or methods. Currently, the collective aspect has not received enough attention and warrants further exploration.

Secondly, a notable bias is the focus on the Western, "modernised" world, with limited representation from the Global South and independent cultures. For example, the majority of survey participants and contributing scientists are from Western countries (Jordan, 2021). This bias is evident in the choice of methods included in the toolkit, and the way it is organised and presented. Whilst some effort has been made to include diverse perspectives, this will need to be addressed further in future iterations.

Another bias exists within the framework itself, as it may lead educators to overlook practices targeting other aspects of inner development or sustainability. Of course, other needs and preferences should also be considered when designing a curriculum, whether it is institutional, industrial, or subject-specific.

Finally, the connection between inner development and sustainability (IDGs to SDGs) remains unclear, and while some methodologies show links, a comprehensive integration is yet to be achieved. This aspect will need to be explored in future phases of the IDG framework (Stålne & Greca, 2022).

Overall, the IDG framework aspires to initiate a mindful exploration of inner development's role in addressing sustainability issues and hopes to contribute to a better understanding of both fields. Future work will need to apply, test, and collect feedback on the toolkit in different contexts and environments. Within the Higher Education context, it is crucial to explore which skills and capabilities allow themselves to be measured so that curriculum and other interventions can be evaluated.

Conclusion

There is no shortcut to inner development, whether it is on an individual or collective level. As universities strive to prepare students for the challenges of the future, exploring and possibly integrating the IDG framework into educational programmes becomes essential. By nurturing skills and capabilities such as communication, creativity, and critical thinking, universities can unlock the potential of a new generation of leaders. Through curricular integration, experiential learning opportunities, and the creation of inclusive environments, universities can provide students with the tools and support they need

to develop the inner qualities necessary to tackle complex societal issues and create a more compassionate and sustainable world.

Steps toward hope

- Embed the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) into Higher Education to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda.

- Cultivate core capabilities such as self-awareness, intercultural competence, and creativity through experiential, integrative curricula.

- Implement service-learning opportunities to enhance students' practical engagement and societal impact.

- Promote global engagement and wellbeing initiatives to develop ethical, reflective, and action-oriented leaders.

- Empower students to create lasting social impact by prioritising the development of IDG-related skills and qualities.

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