Examining the role of Scotland's enterprising universities, towards achieving SDG focussed social equality and economic outcomes

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Abstract

The United Nations’ 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envisage a future of inclusivity, justice, opportunity, and prosperity, whilst maintaining environmental limitations. Universities play a central role in promoting these values, towards equitable, peaceful, and productive societies. In Scotland, the government’s \textit{National Performance Framework}’s eleven outcomes evidence relevant rhetoric of resonance across education and industry sectors, allowing pragmatic partnerships and progress to be made.

Focussing on SDGs 4 (\textit{Quality Education}) and 8 (\textit{Decent Work and Economic Growth}), this paper examines the current landscape and activities of Scotland’s enterprising universities in fostering social equality and positive economic outcomes. Furthermore, the paper investigates the multifaceted relationship between universities, enterprise ecosystems, and SDG-focused initiatives.

Given the significance of these goals to enterprise, educational institutions have a critical responsibility to foster a culture of learning supporting opportunity and creation. This necessitates a concerted effort to provide education that is accessible and inclusive to all individuals. By doing so, educational institutions create an environment that nurtures the growth and development of individuals, and values of equality, justice, and social responsibility. Additionally, access to decent work stands as a crucial priority within SDGs. This underscores the significance of enhancing social justice and proactive measures from both employers and policymakers.

In Scotland, decent work policy initiatives have been proposed yielding mixed results. In 2013, the Scottish Government introduced a fair work agenda to align with the ‘Fair Work Convention’, albeit lacking firm policy support. While both the local government and unions have acknowledged job quality issues, putting forth a series of policy ideas, concepts of decent work have not yet ascended to the apex of policy priority in the country. Acknowledging education and industry factors towards enterprising outcomes, notable strides have been witnessed in Scotland with the release of several publications including 2023’s \textit{National Innovation Strategy} and \textit{Entrepreneurial Campus} reports. These emphasise the need for synergy across sectors and clusters for innovation, the engagement of ecosystems, and aligning regional resources and capabilities.
Assessing the journey of Scotland's enterprising universities in advancing SDG focused initiatives is essential to gauge their impact and identify areas for improvement. This paper critically examines the progress made thus far, drawing insights from successful case studies while acknowledging challenges encountered. The analysis of such highlights instances where Scotland's enterprising universities have so far contributed to SDG-aligned objectives. These success stories display tangible impact of university-led initiatives on fostering social equality and driving economic growth within local communities, regions, and beyond.

Despite the progress achieved, Scotland's enterprising universities face a range of challenges in their pursuit of SDG-focused initiatives. These obstacles include limited resources, regulatory constraints, and barriers to collaboration with external stakeholders.

To maximise the social and economic impact of university-led initiatives aligned with the SDGs, this paper offers actionable recommendations for stakeholders. These recommendations include enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration, expanding community engagement efforts, and advocating for supportive policy frameworks. With progression in this regard, Scotland's enterprising universities can strengthen their contribution to sustainable development outcomes and create lasting positive change in society.