Global Engineers: key professionals for Sustainable Human Development

KEY FINDINGS

Engineers with a broader capacity are needed to contribute to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1]. The SDGs seek to complete the unfinished business of the MDGs and respond to new challenges. They are action oriented, global in nature and universally applicable; and constitute a holistic, indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development. These goals will integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and recognize their interlinkages in achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions.

Technical and technological innovative solutions are expected to play a key role in addressing the vast majority of the SDGs. Engineering does and can play a major role in combating global poverty. The “global” engineer needs to take a wider perspective and understand the potential for improving lives of the poor worldwide, through the appropriate design and use of technology [2].

SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT NEEDS PROFESSIONALS

During this year 2015, the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2000 will give way to a new formulation of international action, based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1]. The SDGs seek to complete the unfinished business of the MDGs and respond to new challenges. They are action oriented, global in nature and universally applicable; and constitute a holistic, indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development. These goals will integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and recognize their interlinkages in achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions.

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Such considerations must therefore be an integral part of the two essential stages in the engineering profession, namely:

a) Training – Sustainable human development aspects need to be increasingly included within higher education (engineering) curricula.

b) Practising – The standards that regulate engineers’ professional competences shall specifically recognise practising in a context of development.

UNESCO and other international stakeholders advocate for the recognition of the **Global Citizenship Education (GCE)** vision [3]: “It is a concern with the relevance of knowledge, skills and values for the participation of citizens in, and their contribution to, dimensions of societal development which are linked at local and global levels. Global learning can make a positive contribution to a globalised world by helping students learn about the challenges our world faces and think critically about how to deal with issues such as poverty, inequality and sustainability.”

Higher Education can and must be also part of the GCE vision; however, current debates at EU and international level have not yet explored in detail the role that Higher Education should play within GCE. A latest example can be found in the programme of the forthcoming European Development Days in June 2015, where Higher Education has conspicuously fallen out of the agenda.

**CURRICULAR CHALLENGES IN PREPARING GLOBAL ENGINEERS**

Higher education needs to prepare engineers with conceptual and practical instruments to recognise and deal with the challenges posed by an increasingly complex and inter-dependent world. The European Union recognizes the important role higher education plays for development. Official DEVCO regional support focuses on the development and modernisation of higher education in those countries that participate in the external cooperation programmes of the EU [4]. The two main components of DEVCO’s support are i) the capacity building of higher education institutions and ii) mobility of students, academics and staff. However, such important support is not formally encompassing the role of the engineers being trained within the EU. Higher education in Europe is largely defined and administered at state level, and the only area where a coordinated EU action can be found is student mobility (ERASMUS + programme).

Since 2013, the **GDEE project** (http://gdee.eu), an initiative led by top EU universities and NGOs delivering training services and infrastructure projects, has explored the challenges in widening the traditional training of engineers, and developed tools and materials accordingly. The key conclusions of the GDEE analysis are:

A. Engineering practice needs to incorporate global skills and competences, further than greener ones [5], such as being able to work in a range of complex social and cultural environments, being culturally sensitive and being able to recognise broader social needs and agendas [5].

B. Universities, teachers and quality assurance agencies do not have a common understanding and proper guidelines to implement, evaluate or provide accreditation of these global competences into the engineering degrees. International experiences have shown that the first step should be the promotion of global competences explicitly included in the curricula, and the second step should be to include evidence in the monitoring and evaluation of the degrees. **Global civil society organizations should be involved** in the quality assurance (QA) of global competences, in line with previous analyses of QA within the European Higher Education Area [6].

C. Global Learning is an area of increasing interest in higher education, helps to raise the profile and prestige of the university. Engineering students are aware of the importance of including global competencies in their curriculum, and have a strong motivation for it.

D. Global learning in engineering education is directly related to the **Research for Development practice**, especially in MSc and PhD programs. Work on research and education for development is published in relevant scientific journals, and in sector-related conferences. However, the research for development impact is hindered by the inertia of the mainstream international quality assessment of Science. Novel subjects as Development Studies in top scientific databases could help engineering sciences researchers, as well as social scientists, to highlight their current contributions in these fields.
GLOBAL DIMENSION IN PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERING COMPETENCES

In 2008, 'The Global Engineer' report [7] laid out a conceptual methodology to incorporate the competences of a 'Global Engineer' into the professional accreditation standards (in the UK), comprising 5 sequential stages. Based on recent policy discussion in Spain, Italy and the UK, the GDEE initiative proposes an evolution of this concept to factor in the need for a cyclical approach:

1. Map the key issues and skills that define the global dimension of Engineering
2. Map linkages with the already existing learning outcomes within Engineering practice standards
3. Identify opportunities to embed the global dimension whilst delivering learning outcomes
4. Link course components to form a cohesive and integrated learning
5. Monitor and evaluate teaching innovations against learning outcomes

Experience in the UK: The British Engineering Council is the UK regulatory body for the engineering profession; it sets and maintains the standards (UK SPEC) for the engineering profession and sets the overall requirements for accreditation. The Engineering Council licenses over 20 professional engineering institutions (such as the Inst. of Civil Engineers, Inst. of Mechanical Engineers, Inst. of Engineering and Technology, etc.) to undertake accreditation within these requirements, interpreting them as appropriate for their own sector of the profession and maintains the database of accredited degree programmes. Also, the Engineering Council sets and maintains the internationally recognised standards of professional competence and ethics that govern the award and retention of these titles.

The post-2015 agenda and SDG momentum are pushing the mapping of global engineer skills and competences to the top of the agenda. It is the time to advocate for a Global Dimension approach in Engineering degrees, schools, professional associations and accreditation bodies.
REFERENCES


The GDEE Project

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GDEE is now a growing network, with the following partners (April 2015):