ANALYSIS

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Learning in action: embedding the SDGs through the Reach Alliance



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Abstract

There has been increasing practical and scholarly interest in the engagement of universities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, there has been limited examination of international university collaborations focusing on the SDGs and how they become embedded within universities. Addressing this need, this article explores the experiences of three members of the Reach Alliance a consortium of eight higher education institutions from around the globe. Reach supports students and faculty mentors to study how critical interventions can be made accessible to those who are the hardest to reach. This work aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education), as well as SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals) and the Goal's second universal value of leave no one behind. This commitment to connecting education and societal engagement resonates with Goddard et al.'s work on the civic university as both "globally competitive and locally engaged" (2012: 43). This article focuses on University College London (UK), Ashesi University (Ghana), and Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico), selected for their diverse structures and geographies. For each case, we examine how the Reach Alliance initiative has been institutionally embedded, as well as the role of local and global partnerships in making the case for supporting Reach. We find that Reach's organisation as an international network has encouraged its adoption by host institutions. The initiative's emphasis on both local concerns as well as the global goal and networks has also resonated with host institutions. This article will be of interest to those working in sustainability and higher education when considering strategies for introducing or increasing SDG-focussed research and teaching.

Keywords Higher education, Sustainable development goals, University collaboration

Introduction

In recent years, higher education institutions' commitments to societal engagement and advancing the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have accelerated, and the incorporation of the SDGs in teaching and research has been widely recommended [1].¹ More recent scholarship explores how this works

³Business Administration Department, Ashesi University, Berekuso, Ghana ⁴Social Sciences and Government, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico in practice [2] and the transformative potential of the SDGs for universities [3]. Adding to this literature, we focus on how a multi-university, SDG-focussed initiative has been embedded into host institutions and the role of local and international ties in host institution's support for the initiative. While sustainability-focussed networks have been studied from the perspective of joint research and curriculum design [4, 5] and their functions [6], less work has compared the adoption and adaptation of university network initiatives.

We examine the case of the Reach Alliance (https:// reachalliance.org), a team-based research and leadership initiative that originated at the University of Toronto, Canada, in 2015 and now operates at eight global universities. The initiative supports research projects that



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are aligned with the SDGs and the value of leaving no one behind. We focus on how and to what extent Reach has been adapted and embedded in three of the participating universities in three different countries: University College London (UCL; UK), Ashesi University (Ghana), and Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico). These experiences are organized around the themes of embeddedness within university structures (institutionalisation), engagement with the local context, and global partnerships.

These themes were selected to both highlight the importance of institutionalisation as well as the growing interest in engaging a global framework on the local level [7, 8]. Embeddedness captures the extent to which the initiative is integrated into the university; this may involve funding, recognition in the curriculum, or integration in strategic planning. El-Jaladi et al., citing Holland [9], focus on longevity and argue that "institutionalising partnerships... helps to build transparent and sustainable relationships" [7, p. 5]. In addition, embedding programmes into the university also corresponds with what [3], describe as the institutional steering effects of the SDGs on universities. Finally, networks like Reach have been recognised to have political, motivational, psychological, informational, and skills-sharing functions, as summarised by Kahle et al. [6, p. 2], this article, we also highlight reputational functions, by which global membership and local engagement helps to bolster the profiles and sustainability bone fides of participating universities.

The additional themes of local engagement and global partnership are used to explore the tensions and complementarities of the local adaptation and implementation of the Reach Alliance with value placed on global goals and the global partnership. Here we draw on the literature on the importance of international cooperation in higher education [4, 10]. Concomitantly, local engagement and local impact have increasingly become important for universities in maintaining their legitimacy and social license to operate [11], particularly in dense urban settings where university estates and student housing compete with local needs. In this regard, a focus on localising the SDGs has practical, philosophical, ethical, and strategic benefits and implications. This work thus adds to the discussion of international cooperation in higher education on the SDGs [4], including the collaborations spanning the Global South and Global North to enhance their work in SDG-driven research and impact.

In examining how the Reach Alliance has been adapted to each university, the paper demonstrates that each institution's particular strategy reflects the unique governance and goals of the university [12]. However, despite this heterogeneity, each university shares a focus on connecting internationally as a way of advancing its SDG work. The global aspect of Reach—both the international consortium and the orientation towards the SDGs—also was a useful means of mobilising support within the university as well as attracting strong students. Similarly, local engagement works in different ways; however, for each university localising SDG challenges helped engage research faculty and tap into broader arguments about a university's license to operate.

These findings suggest that SDG-focussed initiatives benefit from a dual-global (networked, transnational) and local (context-driven, human-scale)-perspective on the SDGs and that their success is tied to their institutional embeddedness. Connecting education and societal engagement resonates with Goddard et al.'s work on the civic university as both "globally competitive and locally engaged" [13, p. 43]. This may be of interest to higher education institutions considering ways to increasingly introduce the SDGs into their teaching, research, and engagement strategies, as well as suggests the importance of international higher education coalitions in bringing SDG initiatives to universities. We find that SDG initiatives particularly benefit from being both embraced and embedded holistically into the structures and processes of their host universities [14], while also networking globally.

The following section describes the Reach Alliance's objectives and origins in greater detail, before moving to a short examination of each of the three cases. These cases were chosen to engage with universities that differ on key characteristics, including size, geography, research intensively, and public vs private status. The next section discusses the three comparative cases, before concluding.

The Reach Alliance

The motivating puzzle behind all Reach case studies is how to get important goods, services, and information to those who are hard to reach [15]. This includes populations that are isolated, for example, due to infrastructure, disability, or because they are administratively invisible. The strategy cannot be to double down on existing service delivery approaches. Instead, this puzzle demands new thinking and approaches. This challenge has motivated Reach research questions including vaccine provision in remote Indigenous communities in Ontario, Canada; providing renewable energy access for nomadic herders in Mongolia; and the use of biometric data in facilitating cash transfers to Syrian refugees in Jordan. This focus aligns with the SDG universal value of 'leave no one behind' [16].

The Reach Alliance was created in 2015 at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, University of Toronto. The Reach Alliance is a student-driven, faculty-mentored research and leadership initiative examining how critical interventions and innovations reach those who are the hardest to reach: those living in extreme poverty, the geographically remote, administratively invisible and marginalized. Our research has been featured in leading outlets (BMJ Global Health, Lancet, Bulletin of the WHO, etc.), and our in-depth case studies are available on the Reach website. To date, the Reach Alliance has launched more than 70 case study reports across over 30 countries, authored by researchers at eight leading global universities: University of Toronto, Technologic de Monterrey, Ashesi University, University of Cape Town, University of Oxford, University College London, Singapore Management University, and University of Melbourne.

Methodology

For this paper we examined the experiences of three universities, engaging the themes laid out in the introduction. The three universities (UCL, Ashesi University, and Tecnológico de Monterrey) were selected from the eight participating universities for their diverse structures—two private, one public (UCL)—and geographies —Europe, West Africa, and Central America—allowing the authors to explore areas of similarity or convergence, despite their heterogeneity.

The short cases were compiled by authors from each university, as key informants, reflecting on their experiences. This approach follows the call from Francis and Hester to honour the insights of researcher-practitioners: "If inquiry requires data – as we believe it does – then why not take our own experiences and actions as our data? All you need is ready to hand – your capacity for selfreflection" [17, p. 35]. This article builds upon discussions between the authors and participants in the 17th Higher Education Reform (HER] Conference, entitled "Sustainable Development Goals: Their potential and relevance for higher education policy and reform," which took place in 21–23 June 2023, at the University of Glasgow.

The cases are based on each author's subjective experiences. The lead author then used these cases to create Table 1 and to assess the strength of institutional embeddedness and the relative importance of localisation and global partnerships. This table and the qualitative assessments were then refined through discussion and reflection among the authors. This combination of individual experience and collaboration "contributes to a more in-depth understanding and learning of the self and others" [18, p. 288]. This process helps to mitigate some of the limitations of not conducting broader-based survey or interview research.

Short cases: UCL, Tec de Monterrey and Ashesi University

The following cases examine how the Reach Alliance was piloted and embedded within these three universities, each with differing sizes, contexts, and structures. As noted above, whilst the initiatives are distinct, they share a dual focus on global and local engagement. It is also important to note that each of these universities is involved in a range of SDG activities across teaching, research, operations, and partnerships; while important, describing these broader portfolios and the role of Reach therein is beyond the scope of this article.

University College London (UCL)

The Reach Alliance was established at UCL in 2021, with discussions and exchanges beginning in 2019, including the faculty mentors travelling to Toronto in March 2020 to attend the Reach Symposium and see both the University of Toronto students and mentors in action. Reach is now in its third year at UCL. UCL is a large and globally recognised, research-intensive public university located in London, UK.

Embeddedness

The theme of embeddedness for UCL raises important observations regarding the challenges—and opportunities—of the SDGs to push universities to support (and adapt to) cross-disciplinary work. Recognising the challenge of finding an appropriate home for cross-disciplinary and partner-driven work, Reach is housed in the Global Engagement Office [GEO). The GEO oversees global collaborations for UCL, including a long-standing relationship with the University of Toronto.

Table 1 A comparison of embeddedness, localisation, and global partnerships

University	Embeddedness	Localisation	Global partnerships
University College London	Low-Medium—situated in Global Engagement Office, not credit-bearing	Medium—pursuing a mix of local and international projects; part of 'third mission'	High—strong interest in demonstrating linkages to the global SDG agenda and university network
Tec de Monterrey	High—recognised for academic credit, scaled across Mexico	High—pursuing local projects; part of 'third mission'	High—strong interest in connecting students and faculty internationally
Ashesi University	3 3 .	High—pursuing local projects; part of 'third mission'	High—strong interest in connecting students and faculty internationally; linked to global rankings

This approach for embedding Reach at the UCL-wide rather than departmental level had the advantage of avoiding the monopolisation of the initiative by a single discipline or perspective; faculty mentors have been drawn from disciplines including maternal medicine, public health, political science, and engineering. In addition, it signals that Reach is linked to UCL's global profile, wider academic networks, and mobilisation for the global goals. This reflects a primary framing of Reach as a partnership activity—rather than a research or teaching activity—at UCL. This echoes Abubakar et al.'s [14], focus on sustainability as a driver for transdisciplinary and partnership-driven work [19]. The initiative has been successfully recognised within UCL's SDG strategy, illustrating its strong profile and novelty.

However, this positioning within the university at GEO has not been without governance and coordination challenges. The GEO does not oversee decisions regarding curricula or research, which may limit the pathways for institutionalisation. It is also not specifically dedicated to SDG-driven work, although it has supported joint funding calls with UCL's Sustainability Initiative. UCL, like many universities, treat research activities and income as sharply distinct from other impact-focused and partnership work. In practice, this means GEO was less experienced in supporting the Reach teams around using funds and securing high-risk ethical approvals. While the GEO was well-placed to lead the partnership with the University of Toronto, it lacked expertise and systems for managing research funds and processes, creating ambiguities between the office, finance, and participating departments. This has been managed through the creativity and 'bureaucracy hacking' [20, pp. 4-5] of skilled members of each of these groups.

Localisation

In the first year of Reach, the team decided to pursue a local case, building off the ongoing research of mentor Dr Sara Hillman, a maternal health specialist; subsequent years have involved both local, UK-based and international cases.

Taking the first year as an example, the team looked at access to maternal care by refugees and asylum seekers in the London borough of Camden, where much of the UCL campus is located. This decision was both practical —travel remained challenging even as the COVID-19 pandemic was easing—but also spoke to a commitment at UCL to seeing the SDGs as a local, not just global set of goals. SDG-related challenges exist in the University's neighbourhood and are not isolated to low-income countries.²

The student researchers conducted interviews across a range of stakeholders, focussing on those working within hospitals and advocates for the affected women. The students also conducted follow-up activities with these stakeholders, as well as published and disseminated a case study report [24] and an academic article [25].

Global partnerships

Finally, despite the focus on localisation—three of the four Reach projects at UCL have taken place in the UK the Reach Alliance's international ties have emerged as a key part of the initiative and its success at UCL. Through Reach, UCL strengthens its links and connections to the University of Toronto, to the other Reach universities globally, and to the UN's universalised SDGs. This has been expressed materially through both online collaborations and presentations, as well as through important convenings, which bring together students and faculty members. Indeed, this paper is an expression of new networks being built between academics across four geographies.

These symbolic and material practices around global partnerships are valued by the university, faculty, and students. Indeed, UCL calls itself 'London's Global University,' and the idea of a global, outward orientation is important to its identity. As noted above, UCL's Reach initiative is housed in the GEO, which is dedicated to fostering global partnerships. Understanding Reach not only in terms of UCL's local impact but also its global profile and work on the SDGs, has been an important benefit of participation and informs its location within the university.

Tec de Monterrey

The Reach Alliance was established at Tec de Monterrey in 2020, with discussions and exchanges beginning in 2019, including the faculty mentors travelling to Toronto in March 2020 to attend the Reach Symposium and see both the University of Toronto students and mentors in action. Reach is now in its fourth year at Tec de Monterrey. Tec de Monterrey, founded in 1943, is a private Mexican educational institution known for its emphasis on innovation, research, and entrepreneurship. The university boasts multiple campuses across 29 cities in Mexico.

Embeddedness

In accordance with this educational philosophy, interdisciplinary experiences began to play a fundamental role in the student's academic journey. At this point, the concept of joining the Reach Alliance originated through one of the institution's six disciplinary schools of Tec de Monterrey, specifically, the School of Social Sciences and Government.

Tec de Monterrey started with a pilot team of four student researchers from the Monterrey campus. However, due to the outcomes achieved through the project involving student researchers and faculty, it was scaled to multiple campuses. Now, with a more robust structure and multidisciplinary teams, it faces the challenge of securing sufficient financial resources to support a program like Reach Alliance, which has become one of the most sought-after options by students from various areas of study and has limited resources.

To support this work the university has adapted the participation of researchers in an *Applied Research Clinics* program that allows the student to obtain the opportunity not only for internationalization but also to complete social service hours that are part of their graduation requirements. By contrast to UCL, Tec has been able to recognise Reach research as credit-bearing and embed it strongly within the university's educational structure.

Localisation

Tec de Monterrey students have focused their research on communities that have been systematically ignored and marginalized by society. These communities continue to be vulnerable due to the deeply entrenched social and economic structures in the country, as well as pervasive societal inequality. The local focus not only highlights the challenges these communities face but also underscores the importance of giving voice to those who have been historically silenced and empowering them to overcome the hurdles on their path toward a more equitable and just future.

When referring to the local context, it not only includes neighbouring communities of the city where Tec de Monterrey has campuses but also an extended focus nationally. Some examples of communities where this program has worked with include indigenous communities that have migrated to larger metropolitan areas in the country, medical students providing basic health services in resource-limited rural areas across different states, communities situated in ecologically endangered zones, and incarcerated women with young children in their early childhood stage.

The decision to focus on local communities has been a valuable strategy. By concentrating on national issues, greater relevance and deeper engagement from the students are achieved, as they are addressing challenges that directly impact their surroundings. This strengthens their sense of civic responsibility and provides them with the opportunity to implement concrete solutions that enhance the quality of life for people in their immediate environment. This approach also aligns with Tec's commitment to the development of future leaders.

Global partnerships

For Tec de Monterrey, internationalization opportunities represent a key tool for the global positioning of the institution as well as improving educational quality. The Reach Alliance has become an opportunity to collaborate with other academic institutions and professors worldwide, not only for students but also for the faculty; through Reach, there have been seven, in-person exchanges between Tec and the University of Toronto. This encourages the development of multilingual skills and the ability to work in global settings.

Each student/researcher participating in the program also has the chance to acquire skills from faculty members of other universities, while sharing perspectives with peers from different countries, broadening their global outlook. This alliance now stands as an international platform for the dissemination of their research, extending its reach beyond the local sphere and offering them the opportunity to continue working with researchers from around the world to deepen and exchange ideas collectively.

One example is the opportunity that researcher Alejandra Martinez had to participate as part of the Reach Alliance delegation at the New York for the American Field Service (AFS) Youth Assembly titled "Celebrating Ways Youth Lead as Agents of Change for the Global Goals" that took place in mid-2023. For Alejandra, this meant the chance to be part of a global event that brings together young leaders and change agents aiming to set the course toward achieving the 2030 agenda through activities carried out among hundreds of young global citizens from nearly 100 countries. This event also enabled knowledge exchange among leaders, educators, and activists, enriching her path as a future social leader.

The Annual Reach Alliance Conference in 2023, hosted in Monterrey, stands out as a pivotal opportunity for Tec de Monterrey to elevate its international standing and fortify collaborations with other institutions. This event served as a platform for the institution to actively connect with prominent global universities, government entities, and national and international civil society organizations. Through such engagements, Tec de Monterrey showcased itself as a university adept at establishing significant partnerships that profoundly influence student education.

Moreover, this conference provided Tec de Monterrey with the chance to work closely alongside the University of Toronto in the meticulous planning and organization of the event. This collaborative effort not only contributed to the success of the conference but also strengthened the bond between the two universities, fostering a durable and mutually beneficial relationship.

Ashesi University

The Reach Alliance was established at Ashesi University in 2022. Ashesi, established in 2002, is a relatively small liberal arts private university, which is located in a periurban community, Berekuso, outside Ghana's capital, Accra. The Reach initiative aligns with Ashesi's mission to develop ethical entrepreneurial leaders with courage and compassion to transform Africa (http://www.ashesi. edu.gh). With over 22 African countries represented across a student population of approximately 1400, the University educates students to be intentional about the challenges the continent faces and ways in which they can intervene. This is aligned with the strategic plan for the 2020–30 decade, dubbed Beyond the Horizon: The Strategic Plan for Ashesi's Third Decade - Ashesi University.

The academic team at Ashesi is intentional about incorporating the SDGs and the Africa Agenda 2063 goals and aspirations into the academic content. Thus, when Ashesi was approached to join the Reach Alliance in 2021, the synergy was realised, structures were developed, and the program started. The initiative is now in its second year at Ashesi after a successful first year.

Embeddedness

As mentioned, Ashesi actively encourages its students to explore both the SDGs and the Africa Agenda 2063 aspirations and goals. Courses that expose students to these global goals while guiding their interests. One such course is the Creative/Entrepreneurship and Research Internship (CaRINE) class. The CaRINE class is available to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and provides an avenue for students to explore varied interventions through research, creative, or entrepreneurship projects, under faculty supervision. CaRINE was thus deemed as the right home for the Reach initiative as it allowed students to not only undertake a research project of interest with institutionalised supervision, funding, and other support structures but they can also earn course credit for the work they put in.

For the first year, the project started in the second semester of the academic year. The students registered for one semester of CaRINE and were hired by the Prof Adei Research Studio at Ashesi as Research Assistants on a paid summer internship to complete the second half of the 8-month project. The Prof Adei Research Studio also provided the students and supervisors with administrative and logistics-related issues. Integrating the project into existing structures in the University helped to provide the needed resources and support for research excellence. The downside was that some potentially great student researchers could not register for CaRINE for the semester for varying reasons, and those who were not available for the summer internship had to drop out. One researcher, who was stronger and would have been a good value add to the team had to be replaced.

In the future, the plan is to make it optional for students to join CaRINE, though we believe that the benefits of joining will outweigh the benefits of not joining, and students will be able to get course credits. Those who cannot join will be required to audit the class. The project(s) will, however, be enrolled as part of the CaRINE projects and benefit from supervision, funding, and other resources available to projects in CaRINE. This will also guarantee that the supervision of these projects will count towards the loads of faculty supervisors. This will incentivise them to commit to the initiative, even though we admit that the responsibilities will be about threefold that of a regular CaRINE project.

The above embeddedness of the Reach Alliance into existing structures in the University ensures that the researchers and their supervisors are appropriately supported and motivated to execute good quality research while enjoying the peace of mind required to focus on the research and not on logistics and support.

Localisation

With one of the focal points of the institution's strategic plan being in the health space, the academic team discussed how it can support healthcare delivery, preventative health, and the supply and value chains of health and wellness generally. It sought this agenda from a transdisciplinary perspective considering that the team was grounded in the humanities, business, computer science, and engineering. After a series of conversations, the year prior to the Reach pilot, the academic team decided to focus on a topical challenge the Government of Ghana and its health ministry were struggling with at the time. This was the issue of access to beds in hospitals. The academic team thus decided to probe the issue of the No-bed Syndrome which different researchers were trying to tackle (e.g. https://pubmed. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37234197/).

The Reach student research team thus focused on the challenges related to access to hospital beds. It was a good project to embark on because it not only contributed to the findings for these government institutions, but also contributed to the work being done by different faculty and student researchers and innovators in hopes of contributing to the narrative, exploring gaps in interventions, and the development of innovative solutions—all from a transdisciplinary perspective. This was all going to be consolidated into a stakeholder symposium, a white paper, different research reports and case studies, and possibly an academic narrative.

The Reach case study project focused on SDG 3: ensuring a healthy life and promoting well-being, and the Africa Agenda 2063 Goal 1: a high standard of living, quality of life and well-being for all citizens and Goal 3: healthy and well-nourished citizens.

At the end of the Reach project, the research team gained an in-depth appreciation of the degree of complexity healthcare stakeholders are exposed to and how an institution like Ashesi, without a health programme, can contribute through interventions that tackle some of these underlying issues. It uncovered a myriad of systemic issues that contribute to the unavailability of hospital beds, with lessons about healthcare that could aid in improving delivery. The project was thus not only focused on the Ghanaian context but also on the context of the University and how we can be significant to the health landscape.

Global partnerships

Collaborating with the Reach Alliance has granted opportunities for both students and faculty mentors to engage with peers from partner institutions from across the globe, as well as the experts engaged by the Alliance. The students have benefitted from the soft skills, research experts, and leadership coaches engaged by Reach.

They have also benefitted from and given other students the opportunity to benefit from engaging with students from other geographical contexts to build relationships that could develop into partnerships across continents in the future. They have also had the opportunity to learn about contexts other than their own and have appreciated different challenges that the marginalised and hard to reach populations are facing in different parts of the world. These are crucial lessons which will position them as better and more informed global citizens to impact the world positively. Other opportunities included students being involved in meetings and conferences where they got to interact with the Reach staff team and members of partner universities inperson.

The faculty mentors have had the opportunity to engage with other faculty mentors in in-person meetings, and these have fostered conversations about potential collaborations across universities beyond the Reach Alliance. This publication is a show of how three mentors and the executive director have collaborated to share our learnings, not to mention serving on a panel at an international conference. These will not only project the work being done by the Reach Alliance, but also showcase work being done by our home institutions.

These opportunities have contributed to exposing both the faculty and the students to global discourse and have helped the team to learn about different contexts to enrich both teaching and learning at our home university. The Reach Alliance additionally has enabled the university to bring even more life to the institution's priorities and the SDGs, which we can document as part of our impact outputs for the Times Higher Education Rankings. Ashesi remains in the top 10 for Africa and the top 2 for Ghana.

Results

Looking across the above cases, we can observe different strategies for institutional embeddedness, as well as the relative level of importance or salience given to local engagement and global partnerships for investing time and resources into the initiative. Table 1 summarises these areas from the above case descriptions.

The authors, in the discussion, typify the level of embeddedness in UCL structures as 'low-medium', reflecting that the Reach Alliance has been formally incorporated into credit-bearing modules and that its location in the GEO, while excellent for highlighting the value of the partnership, does not embed the Reach Alliance in established areas that govern teaching and research. By contrast, in the other universities, Reach has been formally incorporated into curricula, and they can thus be characterised as having a 'high' level of embeddedness.

In terms of localisation, UCL again differs from the other universities, which have not sent student groups abroad to complete case study research. However, in all three universities, local engagement through Reach has been viewed as a key benefit of the programme, connecting to universities' increasingly recognised responsibilities to contribute to their communities as their 'third mission' [26]. The importance of global partnerships was ranked 'high' across all three universities, although as is discussed in the next section, the drivers may differ.

Discussion

This paper has outlined the experience of three members of the Reach Alliance from contrasting geographies and institutional settings, focussing on the institutional embeddedness of the Reach Alliance, localisation, and global partnerships. It finds that while the drivers of local and global engagement may differ, in all three cases localisation and global orientation were important for reputational reasons and tied to the universities' 'third mission'. These drivers are seen in addition to the political, motivational, psychological, informational, and skills-sharing functions summarised by Kahle et al. [6, p. 2]. The strength of the incorporation of the Reach Alliance initiative into the host institution did, however, widely differ, raising important questions regarding whether such networks and their benefits are more salient for less internationalised institutions.

More specifically, while the experiences of Tec de Monterrey and Ashesi University are closely aligned, they contrast with those of UCL, where embeddedness within the academic programme—as demonstrated through the awarding of credits—has been weaker. Similarly, while each case also highlighted the importance of global partners, for Tec de Monterrey and Ashesi University, there was significant emphasis placed on creating international experiences for their students as well as the benefits of being in a global network. By contrast, at UCL, which already has a largely international graduate student body, the more important aspect was the demonstration of engagement with the global goals and UCL's identity as a 'global university.' For UCL, existing ties to the University of Toronto were also critical.

The observed difference between UCL, Tec de Monterrey, and Ashesi University reflect their histories, public or private status, and geography, as well as their size and research orientation. As El-Jaradi et al. points out, in low- and middle-income countries "universities are grappling with the challenges of expanding research and academic capacity and fostering quality while maintaining equitable access and relevance to economy and policymaking" [7, p. 2]. In these cases, international cooperation and networks may be particularly valuable to help make the case to university leadership and administrator for the value of SDG-initiatives. Global coalitions like Reach may thus play a particularly important role in institutional transformation, although this would benefit from further exploration. This aligns with the work of Kahle et al., who find that universities benefit from network membership by "gain[ing] visibility for their sustainability projects" and "strengthen[ing] their sustainability-oriented reputation" [6, p. 20].

This study is necessarily limited, particularly in its focus on these three, relatively young cases within a single initiative. However, it marks a starting point for the examination of the connection between institutionally embedding international collaborations and initiatives within a university, most notably through the integration of these initiatives through being creditbearing, and efforts to pursue the global SDG agenda at the local level. The experience of the Reach Alliance across these three geographies points to the usefulness of an international, cross-university initiative in spurring the adoption of these practices, as well as the incentives within universities—amongst students, faculty, and leadership—to demonstrate and engage in global coordination and local impact.

Fruitful further research could extend this examination by looking at other international inter-university initiatives toward pursuing the SDGs, including deepening the analysis of how these collaborations are received and adopted at different types of universities in different geographies. The cases could also be expanded and deepened through further qualitative research.

Conclusion

The Reach Alliance provides a compelling example of an international consortium of universities applying (and adapting] a similar initiative to advance student-led research and impact on the United Nations' SDGs. The global network built by Reach, and its alignment to the global goals, helped to make the case for the adoption of the Reach Alliance at the three universities examined here. Indeed, the networking of universities, particularly across geographies, has been essential for making the set of work attractive to universities, suggesting the importance of such alliances in driving the further adoption of the SDGs into university teaching and research. These cases further suggest that the combination of local engagement and global goals and networks was also important to host universities, a reminder of the potential for bringing together local impact and global concerns.

Footnotes

^[1]The authors sincerely like to thank the reviewer for the thoughtful and actionable suggestions for improving our submission. These inputs are greatly appreciated, and we believe have made a significant difference in the quality of the paper.

^[2]Local engagement also has ethical implications; work in international development studies has long examined the power relations between local and international researchers, raising concerns of coloniality, harm, and research extractivism [21, 22]. This has been cogently summarised by Illich who, in a 1968 speech to US American volunteers headed to Mexico, stated: "if you insist on working with the poor... then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell" [23, p. 320]. Working locally, to some degree, begins to address this concern.

Abbreviations

- AFS American Field Service
- CaRINE Creative/Entrepreneurship and Research Internship Non-Major Elective
- GEO Global Engagement Office
- SDG Sustainable Development Goals
- UCL University College London
- UK United Kingdom

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Author contributions

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Data availability

Not applicable. Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

No human subjects, human data or human tissue were involved in this study; as such, ethics approvals were not required.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

None of the authors have financial or non-financial competing interests. All the authors are involved in the Reach initiative, the case discussed in the paper.

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