

# SDU as an SDG University: With a focus on the communication and implementation at Kolding Campus

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## Abstract:

In June 2019, University of Southern Denmark (SDU) launched themselves as a United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) University with the slogan #ourglobalgoals. A video, where the dean, Henrik Dam, explains the future incentives for the institution, was sent out to the organisation as the first information about the change. Students and employees have expressed that the announcement was a surprise. Moreover, SDUs decision has been greeted with both optimism and criticism in the organisation and in the public debate.

The paper will focus on SDUs new master-narrative as an SDG university and the reactions to the new image and the implementation, focusing on Kolding campus. The methods used are informal conversational interviews, photo- and auto-ethnography, and looking into public debate and information from the university.

The findings are analysed through relevant literature and theory on narratives in organisations and stakeholder theory. The findings suggest a lack of communication and involvement of the staff and students prior to the announcement of the changes. The emerging theme is that the master-narrative from the administration is conflicting with the narrative in the organisation. The interviewed staff and students support a sustainable university, though they find it challenging to experience the promised changes.

## Introduction:

The University of Southern Denmark (SDU) announced before the summer break in 2019 that they would become a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) University. ("Our Global Goals", 2020). The 17 goals were formed by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 and are now adopted by all Members States (Sustainable Development Goals, 2020). They are built on the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000. The UN describes that the 17 SDGs as *"An urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership"* (2020). The goals are covering combatting of climate change, end poverty, improvement to health, education and spur economic growth among others which should be tackled by 2030 by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) (Sustainable Development Goals, 2020). The goals are used in several settings, as an example, Danish businesses are being encouraged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019) to implement the SDGs to create business opportunities, and universities are ranked according to their work concerning the goals at The University Rankings's webpage (2020). Due to the increasing use of the SDGs, they have also been criticized as difficult to implement and inconsistent (Bali

Swain, 2018). The following section will focus on the announcement and the implementation of SDGs at SDU.

The University of Southern Denmark has received mixed reviews from staff, students and in the public debate about their new corporate image. Moreover, several students are not familiar with the UNs Sustainable Development Goals and that their university is working with the goals as a part of their new corporate strategy.

This paper will first explain how the administration of SDU has communicated its new corporate image as a university that is working with the SDGs. The paper will look into how the SDGs have been implemented, with a focus on Kolding campus, based on the data that has been obtained from informal conversational interviews with staff and the students and information from the university. Furthermore, the future visions for SDUs work with the goals will also be described.

This paper will discuss the SDUs new master-narrative, counter-narratives, self-storytelling, green-washing and emerging themes from the data. Through narrative analysis of the collected data from informal conversational interviews of students and staff at SDU, newspaper articles and information provided by SDU, the paper investigates if the administration of SDU succeeded in creating a coherent narrative about their work with the SDGs throughout the whole organization. On the basis of the last analysis, this paper will focus on the lack of communication of the SDGs internally in the organization that has been pointed out by both student and the staff, which include researchers and other employees.

## Literature review/Theory:

Cornelissen (2017) states that, an organisations corporate image is constructed symbolically by their communication, and how this communication leads them to be seen by their most important stakeholders, which is both external and internal stakeholders. Furthermore, Cornelissen (2017) argues that there is more than only an exchange of communication from the administration to the different stakeholders when it comes to corporate communication. He claims that it can have certain advantages for a company to invest in the development of a corporate image, where he focuses on three different themes; 1) “Distinctiveness”, in order for both external and internal stakeholders respectively to recognise and identify with the corporate image. 2) “Impact”. 3) “Stakeholders”; where it is important to send out a consistent image of themselves, also for the internal stakeholder, which can be the employees. According to Cornelissen (p 86, 2017), if “*companies fail to send out a consistent image (often by failing to*

match all their internal and external communications), it threatens employees' perceptions of the company's integrity: they are told one thing by management, but perceive something different in the marketplace." He argues that corporate communication is an essential part of managing a corporate image.

According to Bamberg (2004) a master-narrative can be described as "plotlines, master-plots, dominant discourses, or simply story lines or cultural texts" (Lundholt, Maagaard & Piekut, 2018, p 359, Bamberg, 2014). Lundholt, Maagaard & Piekut (p. 4, 2018) describes counternarratives in the following way: "In the Communication as Constitutive of Organizations (CCO) approach to organization, counternarratives are the numerous, ever-present narrative processes that challenge the organization's "authoritative text." An authoritative text can according to Kuhn (2008), be described as a collective text that is abstract represented by "direct attention and discipline actors by portraying particular phenomena, as well as forms of knowledge and action, as (in)appropriate and (un)desirable (p. 1236). Counternarratives interact with such texts by "confronting" or even "influencing" them (Kuhn, 2017, p. 22)." (Lundholt, Maagaard & Piekut p. 4, 2018). According to Lundholt, Maagaard & Piekut, (2018) a counter narrative cannot be seen without a master-narrative. They argue an organization can use the counternarratives as a resource that can be used as a management tool to, for example overcome the obstacles that can happen with change communication and change implementation (Lundholt, Maagaard & Piekut, (2018)

Cornelissen (2017) describe organisational branding as how the organization tries to "differentiate itself from its competitors and to attain a preferred 'position' in the minds of consumers and other stakeholders" (Cornelissen, 2017, p 93-4), which is heightened by visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, consistency (Cornelissen, 2017: p 93)

Furthermore Cornelissen (2017) presents several models. One of them (Hatch and Schultz, Cornelissen, 2017, pp 98) is described as a useful tool to address corporate branding and the alignment between culture, vision and image. According to Majken Schultz (Cornelissen, 2017, pp 96), "the focus in corporate branding is on how an organization can formulate an enduring corporate identity that is relevant to all its stakeholders." The model addresses the gaps (vision–culture, image– culture, image–vision) that can create misalignment in the branding of the organisation. (Cornelissen, 2017)

Schoeneborn, Kuhn & Kärreman (2018) addresses that "Communication Constitutes Organization" (CCO). They describe that according to the CCO scholarships, the organisations, exist and change, "though interconnected communications Communication (2018, p 476), and that the CCO "imagining organization as communication—where communication is not

*merely a participant in organization but, much more radically, is equivalent to organization”* (p 476, 2018). Schoeneborn, Kuhn & Kärreman (2018) refers to that “*Cooren, Bartels, and Martine (2017), drawing inspiration from Dewey (1916/1944), offer a useful encapsulation of this conceptual transformation: “instead of just envisaging communication as something that happens in organization, the CCO movement paradoxically proposes to study how organization happens in communication”* (p. 513, 2018, p 476). Schoeneborn, Kuhn & Kärreman (2018) describe three different dimensions of CCO scholarship; that are focusing on the communicative constitution of 1) *organizations* 2) *organizing* 3) *organizationality*.

Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert (2012) addresses Corporate Responsibility (CR) as standardization in organisations, where they differentiate between the diffusion, entrenchment, and narration perspectives. They describe that CR standardisations are a consequence of the last two decades of awareness about sustainability and responsibility, in which the companies and organisations need to consider how they would like to position themselves according to their impact on the environment and on society. In their article they argue that if an organisation fails to integrate ethical prescriptions and be transparent it can lead to green-washing, for example lead by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012). This is illustrated in a figure “Correspondence plot of narrative dynamics”, that addresses failure-, success- and commitment narratives. (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012, p 831).

## Background:

This section will address the single study case about SDU and their implementations of the SDSs

### The SDG announcement at SDU

The 24th of June 2019, a newsletter from the dean's official email address was sent to the students and employees at the University of Southern Denmark. The email stated that SDU wanted to be the first sustainable university in Denmark, hence the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would become SDUs goals (“Vores Verdensmål/ Our Global Goals”, 2019). First, they described that the SDGs would become the mandatory curriculum. Secondly, that they would launch 17 new 1-year master programmes – that would cover each of the 17 SDGs. Furthermore, a video featuring the dean, Henrik Dam, where he revealed the future work with the Sustainable Development Goals, while he was juggling with seventeen big SDG cardboard boxes, was launched at the official SDU webpage.

The announcement harvested both optimism as well as criticism among the students, staff that read it, but also politicians and citizens became involved in the debate. First, some of the criticism addressed that a university should not be political, which they argue is the case when the organisation is working with a political tool framed by the United Nations ("Jyllands Posten", 2019, Schmidt Astrup, 2019). Secondly, that research is forced in the direction to only focus on research that fit into the box of one or more of the 17 SDGs ("Jyllands Posten", 2019, Schmidt Astrup, 2019). In a debate contribution to Altinget – a newspaper - the dean of the social science Jens Ringsmose and pro-dean of research Sten Rynning, both from SDU, argue on behalf of SDU, that *"The criticism of SDU's use of the word goals is undifferentiated and with flaws"* (2019). Their statement is supported by Steen Hildebrandt and Katherine Richardson, both professors at respectively the University of Aarhus and Copenhagen. They state that *"Universities play a key role in producing knowledge and education that will enable the achievement of the UN's 17 global goals. A coordinated effort at the Danish universities is, therefore, an obvious step towards the achievement"* (2019).

Thirdly, the students and staff were surprised by the sudden image change, that almost seemed like a PR stunt. The discussion about greenwashing was raised among the students and staff because it could be challenging to see if the university was fulfilling their agenda. Furthermore, the researchers that were already working with sustainability, e.g. SDU Life Cycle Engineering, felt that their research and expertise was not included in the new strategies. The researched ended the interview with *"but maybe the institute leader was informed and included before the announcement"*. These opinions are not to be found in the public discussion but are retrieved by semi-structured interviews and conversations (see data section).

The university has tried to implement their new corporate image and master narrative with a grand workshop for both employees and students in a warehouse in the outskirts of Odense, far from all of the five campuses in Denmark. Unfortunately, there was a lack of students represented at this workshop, especially from Esbjerg, Kolding, Sønderborg and Slagelse. Instead, small initiatives that are related to the SDGs are now being established, among others an SDG group for students and employees at Kolding campus, initiated by Marianne Wolff Lundholt the institute leader of Design and Communication, SDU Kolding, Anne Lieberg, Malu Uldall Møller and myself. The same institute has assembled at Global Goal group, mainly with staff, where the implantation of the goals is being discussed. Similar initiatives may be happening at other institutes and campuses. Furthermore, some courses at Kolding campus are now trying to implement the themes from the Global Goals in the curriculum. Still, knowledge about the SDGs among the students and implementation in the curriculum is missing.

During the research, the information about the SDUs visions for working with the Global Goals, are only to be found at their webpage, that currently (February 2020), state that they among others will " 1) Work with but not necessarily for the SDGs, within research, education and administration. 2) Respect the individual's freedom of research and as such, the right to choose subject-matter and method of research, in accordance with the Danish University Act. 3) Educate the students to have knowledge of the SDGs. 4) Consider all the global goals to be equal and thus work with all the SDGs and not just a select few. 5) Support the employees and students that can and wish to work with the global goals. 6) Special award for SDG-focused work. 7) Educational activities within the sustainable development goals". The section about the new 17 SDG 1-year master programme is currently not present at SDUs webpage ("Our Global Goals", 2020), which also have been a source for discussion and criticism among the staff and students. For future initiatives, some of SDUs goals are to use less plastic, better waste sorting, less food waste, sustainable buying, and paperless university. The university states that they work with and not for the SDGs ("Our Global Goals", 2020).

It has been eight months since the Henrik Dam announced the new master narrative. From Photo-ethnography at Kolding Campus, the Goals are barely visible, only a small poster at the library and 12 posters on the fourth floor with some of the research that has been related to the SDGs. There is no official trash sorting, and the students and staff are still expressing missing a visible and behavioral change. Change can take time in a huge organisation, which was expressed by one of the people that were interviewed (see data section).

## Methods, Data collection and auto-ethnography

This study is based on a single case "SDU as an SDG university, with a focus on the implementation at Kolding Campus. The data collection has taken part from 6/2019 to the 2/2020. On the basis of the insights I have gotten due to my involvement of the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals at SDU, I will in this section have an auto-ethnographic approach, and use semi structured and informal conversational interviews to collect the data. This is inspired by Anne Starbæk Bager (p. 35, 2015), where she state "*involving auto-ethnography that enables me to use my personal insider knowledge*" I will argue that I am an active stakeholder and my data collected is also influenced by this position, which is interesting to explore in this paper. (Starbæk Bager, 2015). Furthermore, I have sampled information from 4 newspaper articles, 1 email, 1 video, Publications from SDUs webpage about their work with the SDGs, photo-ethnography, a

report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and information retrieved from University Impact Ranking.

## Results:

The result will address the information retrieved from SDUs webpage (Our Global Goals, 2020), an auto-ethnographic approach to my role in the implementations of the SDG's at SDU, photo-ethnographic around campus, an interview with the janitor, students and staff.

### Information about the implementations of the SDGs retrieved from SDUs webpage and the administration

During the research of SDUs strategy of the implementation of the SDGs at the university I contacted several employees that could have the information. I was referred to read newsletters and retrieve information from SDUs webpage "our global goals" (2020). This information can be seen in the background section in this paper (p. 5)

### My role in the SDG's at SDU/Auto-ethnographic as data-collection

When I started at SDU Kolding in 2018, I was amazed by how little the university did, especially for trash sorting, but also that it seemed that they did not have any aim to be sustainable. Little did I know that the administration was planning to launch themselves as an SDG university in June 2019. In the meantime, I started a local volunteer organization, where the aim is to create awareness, behavioral change and social network among the volunteers and other green initiatives ("Food:RE:Formers", 2020). For the work, I was awarded as climate hero in Kolding 2019. Due to this, I became a stakeholder in Kolding and SDU regarding sustainability, which is one of the reasons that I got involved at SDU.

When the administration launched themselves in June 2019 as an SDG university, I was surprised. Like many others, I could not see a coherence between the deans' announcement and how the university presented itself. There was a mismatch of their new master narrative and reality. I immediately created a counter-narrative that did not fit the master narrative. Instead of complaining, I saw this as an opportunity to demand action and support to do something about the universities approach to become more sustainable and actively work with the goals. I started my field research to investigate the new agenda. Through conversations with both students and researchers, I found that they were as surprised as me. The newspapers had debate sections, where greenwashing was mentioned, which also was something that came up in the conversations. Some researchers already work with the goals, but now they had to do it more structurally.



With the support from a professor from ITPD, I got the contact to Marianne Wolff Lundholt, head of Design and Communication (IDK), SDU Kolding. Due to my position and involvement of a greener agenda in Kolding, I felt that I had the capacity to assist in reaching the students, in order for them to get involved in shaping the new image.

Marianne accepted my invitation, and I was invited to participate in IDK's SDGs meetings. Based on this, we agreed to create the framework for an organization for students and employees that are interested in working actively with the implementation of the SDGs.

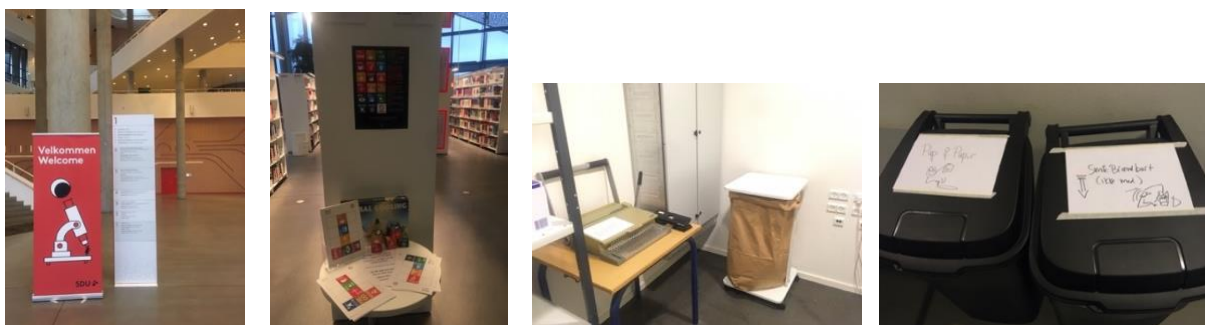
Though my work, also as an instructor for the first years ITPD students, I have gotten insights, both in the organizational level, but also the opportunity to present the goals and create awareness about a sustainable awareness to the students.

In the following sections I will present data I collected from conversations and meetings with the students, professors, study and institute leaders, janitors, the cantina, the administration, photo-ethnographic research at the campus of Kolding, SDU and information gathered at the accessible portals about the sustainable implementations of the SDGs.

#### The campus and the janitor:

When you enter Kolding Campus, a roll-up is welcoming you. The sign seems new but does not include a logo of the sustainable development goals (picture 1). Around campus, there are no visible sign of the SDGs or information about them are only to be seen on an A3 poster in the library (picture 2). The trash sorting in the classrooms contains only one bin for everything. Only at the printing room, a bag for paper is visible (picture 3). With further inspection, one of the bags for paper is filled with plastic. On the fifth floor, where the design studios are located, two trashcans are labelled with homemade signs in Danish "paper and cardboard" and "Small burnable – not food" (picture 4), but with almost no content in them.

Around campus, the paper is easily accessible and, in some classrooms, scattered around creating a messy appearance. The campus does not reflect the image of an SDG university from a visual perspective.



*Pic. 1: Welcome to Kolding Campus, pic. 2: SDGs at the library, pic. 3: A paper trashcan at the printer room, pic. 4: Trashcans with homemade signs in Danish.*

After the photo-ethnographic research, I had a conversation with the janitor. I asked him if there were any new initiatives around campus since the SDG announcement.

*“Well, we are trying to sort the trash in big containers outside, but sometimes, especially when Ubåden – the student café - have had some parties, the containers are filled with things, there are not supposed to be in the container”,* he continued;

*“It can be difficult to get things implemented, it can take some time, but I have tried to create awareness about it”.* During our talk, he pointed out that the whole building is not very easy to make sustainable, e.g. the lightbulbs can only be the old type, not the LED, that would last longer.

*“When the light in the foyer needs to be changed, we rent a lift, this cost money and time that could be spent elsewhere.”* He pointed out that there needs to be a behavioural change among both students and employees. *“When there is a new event, there is just being bought new roll-ups, but instead of buying new ones, they could be re-used. Now they just pile up, also the tables over here.”* I asked him if they have announced it to the students that they could get free stuff. To this, he replied no. When I informed him about the new SDG group, he was very interested in it.

#### Students:

At SDU’s webpage (Our Global Goals 2020) it states that all new students will get an introduction to the SDG’s when they start the study. It is not specified who is going to conduct the introduction. Last week, I held a guest lecture for the students at IT and Product Design about my work with Food:RE:Formers (2020). Since SDU is an SDG university (2020) and that the organization is working with SDG’s, especially goal 12.3.1a+b (Food loss and waste index) (2020), I included a brief introduction to the goals. The class had around 35 participants, where no one was familiar with the millennium development goals, and only 5-6 student knew about the SDGs. Only 1-2 was aware of the fact that SDU is now an SDG university.

Later, I talked with two students that attended the class. Both were surprised that SDU is branding themselves as an SDG university, as one of the students said;

*“I only got a newsletter when I started, stated something with the Sustainable Development Goals, but I didn’t make the connections”.*

She continued: *“On the other hand, I was very surprised when I started, that we used that much paper and that there is no trash sorting. I guess by being a designer you use a lot of materials, but you can, of course, think about if you really need to print that thing, or if it’s just nice to have.”*

The other student elaborated:

*“If the campus was covered with green plants, instead of these grey metal plates”, he points out of the window “I would get an impression that this is a university that is working with sustainability, now I don’t see anything that creates that impression, only a grey building.”*

By talking with several students at the campus, mostly ITPD students, several of them are concerned about the environment and would like to take action in making a change, but do not think that they can do anything about it themselves. When they were presented to the future SDG group, several of them expressed interest and contributed with ideas related to the SDGs at SDU.

Staff/employees:

One of the things mentioned at the SDU webpage is the researchers work at the university and that the university supports research that is within the theme of SDGs. From semi-structured interviews with employees I got the impression that the researchers that already were working with the SDGs were questioning why they were not taken into consultation when the new corporate image was enforced and that it is difficult to see a change at the campus. An associated professor stated that *“we cannot even figure out how to sort our trash”*, when I asked him how they were working with the global goals at the university campus Kolding.

## Data analysis, Discussion and limitations

By examining the results from the data collection, a general theme is, that the master narrative sent out by the administration at of the university – SDU as an SDG university - conflicts with both the internal and external stakeholders’ perception of the university. This creates a counter-narrative among the stakeholders that criticises both the organisation’s communication of the implementation and how they are implementing their corporate image or lack of implementing the SDGs. Using Hatch and Schultz, model (Cornelissen, 2017, p 98) to address gaps in corporate branding, there is a clear sign of an “image – culture gap”, that is described as a *“Misalignment between an organisation’s image and organisational culture”* (Cornelissen, p 98). Cornelissen argues that this can create confusion, so the stakeholders are in doubt of what the organisation stands for (Cornelissen, 2017). Furthermore, there is also an “image–vision gap”, due to the fact that some researchers, staff and students do not feel that their knowledge about a sustainable approach to creating a university, that is working with the SDG, is taken into consideration. The stakeholder’s expectations are not living up to how the master-

narrative is being implemented at SDU. This is described by Labov and Waletzky (1997) in a paper written by Hyvärinen, (p. 456, 2008) *“Reading, watching or listening to narratives trigger expectations that the stories either confirm or betray”*. In this case, it can be argued that perhaps some researchers find that the administration has betrayed them, by not using their research regarding the implementation of the SDGs at the university.

Lundholt, M., Maagaard, C., & Piekut, A. (2018) argues that the counter-narrative can be used constructively, to understand and use in their strategic communication, instead of eliminating the counter-narrative. Looking into how Kolding Campus is working with the SDGs and the counter-narratives, with a focus on IDK, it seems that they are trying to implement changes that are fostered by the counter-narrative. This is seen by creating an SDG meeting group, though this group is primarily closed for students, and creating a framework of a student-led SDG supported by financing from SDU. Even though that small initiatives are starting to flourish, it can still be challenging to see that the campus is working with the SDGs. The missing trash sorting is a general theme that has been mentioned throughout all layers of the organisation. This has become a social object (p. 371, Stacey & Mowles, 2016) for the organisations stakeholder that conceptualise the critique of the insufficient communication and implementation of the SDGs.

Lastly, I will argue that by analysing the counter-narratives told by the stakeholders, SDU would benefit from greater inclusion of the staff and students, furthermore, reconsider their approach of communication, in order to create a coherent narrative throughout the organisation. This paper has certain limitations, due to the fact that it has been difficult to obtain knowledge about initiatives on other campuses than Kolding. Furthermore, when asked about the organisational strategies of implementation of the SDGs, I was forwarded to SDUs webpage (our Global Goals, 2020). I can, therefore, only refer to the materials and interviews.

## Conclusion

Though the finding this paper leads to suggest that there is a lacking communication and involvement of the staff and students prior to the announcement of the changes. The master-narrative cannot be recognised throughout the organisation and has created a counter-narrative. The emerging theme is that the master-narrative from the administration is conflicting with the narrative in the organisation. The interviewed staff and students support a sustainable university, though they find it challenging to experience the promised changes. This can, on the other hand, be seen as an opportunity to explore the counter-narrative and understand the organisation and use this to create a better understanding of the stakeholders in the organisation and how they would like to work with the new corporate image.

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