

**Finnish and Romanian Students' Understanding of Sustainable
Development Goals in Higher Education**

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ABSTRACT

Educating students of all levels from kindergarten to higher education in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is of high importance due to global goals for education as well as the life-long process of a single individual to become a better global citizen. Academic research and educational policies in recent years have focused a lot on pre-university levels and less emphasis was put onto higher education students' perspective. Thus, the paper aims at analysing the students' perceptions on what are the most important SDGs to learn about and describing students' understanding of how much these SDGs are being integrated into their studies. Results coming from a quantitative survey for students will be presented. Context analyses in which certain SDGs were selected by students from Finland and Romania will be conducted and variables such as the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, degree-specific differences, along with the influence of other institutional actors (university strategy, educational policies, governmental policies,

countries' 2030 Agenda, etc.) were considered. Differences and communalities were presented.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, higher education, global citizenship, diversity, cross-cultural research

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed and adopted in 2015 to end poverty in all its forms and to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental, by 2030. Government leaders from 193 countries established at the United Nations General Assembly a new framework to redirect humanity towards a sustainable path, contemplating 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators proposing action plans. As a result of this every country is expected to create goals to reach 17 ambitious goals and governments have created their roadmap agendas, policies, and actions to reach the objectives of these goals. Higher education institutions have been given an important role in the implementation of these goals and especially in global citizenship education. (UNESCO, 2023.) Education is central as in addition to Good Quality Education being the SDG 4, education is also mentioned in five other goals and is linked to almost all the other SDGs in one way or the other (UNESCO, 2017). Quality education is expected to lead to development outcomes for individuals, communities and countries with the goal of better access to employment, better nutrition, health, reduction of disparities (e.g. gender disparities) as well as more engaged citizens through actions of civil engagement to goodwill and common good for all for example in the fight against global challenges such as climate change, poverty etc. However, big differences exist in higher education institutions regarding the way in which they are implementing SDGs into their operations.

Thus, the current paper seeks on one hand to present the way in which SDGs are integrated into higher education institutions, and on the other hand to present the students' perceptions from two higher education institutions (one from Finland and one from Romania) regarding the importance of SDGs into the curriculum. A comparison between students' perceptions will be made considering the country they currently study in, and different socio-demographic variables like gender, family cultural

background, international studies. Possible explanations of their choices and conclusions are included at the end.

2. Higher education institutions and SDGs

Higher education institutions have a moral duty to contribute to society and to lead the development work for a better future. HEIs have a responsibility to provide skills and competencies for future professionals to respond to challenges of sustainable development (Garcia-Feijoo et al., 2020). HEIs have, depending on the country and institution, taken an active role in teaching, and implementing the SDGs as suggested by UNESCO (2017) as it is generally believed that these goals cannot be achieved without the multifaceted role of HEIs. According to Leal Wilho et al. (2019) SDGs are globally fully integrated into teaching in 32% of universities in many ways, but in the majority of HEIs, SDGs have not been implemented in their strategic plans nor are they specifically addressed. In many HEIs SDGs can be found in strategies but they are not implemented into the operational level e.g. into teaching or research or campus facilities and concrete applications are lacking (Leal Wilho et al., 2019 & Serafini, 2022).

Governmental goals could give a framework for HEIs to implement SDGs. For example, Finland wants to meet EU's climate commitments for 2030 and achieve the targets set in Climate Change Act for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent by 2030 and wants to be world's first carbon-neutral society by 2035 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022). This determined HEIs in Finland to address specific actions in their strategy. In other countries, like Romania there is not such a direct link between governmental goals from 2030 agenda and the HEI strategies, or at least not for all the SDGs. HEIs' sustainability efforts can influence the overall institutional reputation, having a considerable impact on the brand value of the undergraduate education (Leal Filho et al. 2018). To boost its brand HEIs globally have shown a growing interest in reporting their achievements in SDGs as institutions can identify themselves as trailblazers in the matter or as is the example of LUT University in Finland which shares the same campus facilities with LAB University of Applied Sciences (De La Poza, 2021). According to THE Impact Ratings LUT belongs to the world's top 15 in sustainable consumption and production. (LUT University, 2023.) Similarly, LAB University of Applied Sciences has selected Circular Economy as its strategic focus areas in addition to Design, Innovations and Health. However, students' understanding regarding SGSs have been studied less.

The research of Zamora-Polo et al. (2019) developed a questionnaire to students and researched students' knowledge about the SDGs in Spain. Similarly, in Italy and in Nigeria quantitative studies among students were conducted which showed how low students' understanding of SDGs was, yet how much interest they showed towards learning about them. For example, in Nigeria 56% of respondents expressed positive interest towards learning about SDGs, 43% were aware of them and 4.2% reported having good knowledge of SDGs (Smaniotto et al. 2020, Omisore et al. 2017). A study in Romania showed a perceived knowledge of sustainable development, construct directly linked to SDGs, below average for business students even though the students in the third year perceived themselves as having better level than those in their first year (Piroșcă et al., 2020). In this era of globalization, it is essential to train students to competences that enable them to be global citizens who know how to position themselves in globalized and changing world (Boni et al., 2017).

Systematic literature review conducted by Serafini et al. (2022) shows that in 18% of the articles analyzed, initiatives for the integration of the SDGs in the curricula of the courses and disciplines offered by the HEIs exist. As an example, from GLOBDIVES project partner countries, in Finland at LAB University of Applied Sciences all students must complete a course called Orientation to Sustainability Thinking (2 ECTS) as a part of their core competences during the first year and hence, sustainability is being integrated into all curricula. In addition, the institution has an international Bachelor's degree program in Sustainable Solutions Engineering taught completely online that it offers to interested students. LAB University of Applied Sciences has selected SDGs 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 17 to its strategic focus points. As an educational institution SDG 4 is not selected specifically as good education is seen as the core of the existence of any educational institution. Similarly at LAB University of Applied Sciences all RDI-projects must list and integrate SDGs into their actions which can be seen also on projects' websites (LAB University of Applied Sciences, 2023). This selection is like one proposed by Mader and Rammel (2015) who suggest that research-based knowledge created by universities is most relative to Goals 4, 9, 12, 16 and 17 even though all students need to understand the implications of the entirety, develop knowledge and skills required to live sustainably in the world of tomorrow that can be uncertain. In Romania at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, university's strategic documents do not contain any mentioning of SDGs, education for sustainability being mentioned as an expected implicit result.

However, a Gender Equality Plan exists containing goals for introducing gender issues in teaching and research, gender balance in management positions and in recruiting, promotions, and career development. (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 2021)

In Finland integrating SDGs in all operations of a HEI is a strategic focus that is being implemented from RDI activities to learning, teaching and campus facilities as they all are interconnected. At Aalto University teachers have analyzed the contents of their courses from the perspective of sustainable development goals (SDGs) and defined then between one and three most important SDGs for their course content. This makes it easier for students to find courses addressing sustainable development themes that are of particular interest to them and give them a possibility to deepen their knowledge and even to specialize themselves in specific SDGs. According to Aalto University (2020) SDGs 9, 12, 11 became the most popular SDGs implemented in courses. However, all HEIs in Finland are not this far in implementing SDGs in their operations and for example at LAB University of Applied Sciences teachers are only encouraged to integrate SDGs and global themes in broader sense in their courses, but this can easily change soon.

In Romania, HEIs have a very different approach relating to SDGs. Some universities have included SDGs in their strategic plans (Babeş-Bolyai University, 2016; University of Bucharest, 2021) and they publish their outcomes on yearly bases related to SDGs implementation in research, courses, campus, international collaborations, while others focus through their mission on developing responsible, active citizens in society (e.g. Babeş-Bolyai University, 2020), having still punctual initiatives in this regard (e.g. Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 2017). For example, Babeş-Bolyai University introduced the UBB Goes Green strategy first in 2016 and completed it in 2020 with initiatives related to: waste management, adoption of green technologies, transforming roof buildings in green roofs. Alexandru Ioan Cuza has projects funded from both internal and external sources to protect and preserve nature, offer equal opportunities to all students, however they are not put into SDGs' framework. Another research revealed that challenges like funding deficiencies, a lack of experienced officers to adopt sustainable development, and improper public policies might represent barriers to better incorporate education for sustainable development (Lazarov and Semenescu, 2022).

In line with transformative learning HEIs are supposed to provide students with skills to think through complexity, learn through dialogue and communication, engage in deep reflection, and develop worldview and values such as sensitivity in addition to other important skills and competences they need for their vocational expertise and to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs (Leal Wilho et al. 2019). An intergenerational sense of responsibility that does not just involve thinking and reflection, but also practical measures and experiences are needed (Serafini 2022). At LAB University of Applied Sciences these practical measures and experiences include e.g. a scale of biowaste that attracts students and other restaurant visitors to reduce food waste from the daily lunch buffet they enjoy on campus or the new modus operandi that a sapling is being planted in the alumni forest by student union members to honor every graduate from the institution as an act for climate protection (LAB University of Applied Sciences, 2023). Education and cultural change can lead to a more sustainable lifestyle and comprehensive wellbeing. (Prime Minister's Office 2022.) In addition, HEI teachers' role as educators is being enforced by sustainability teaching (Lazzarini et al., 2018). The more these topics are being addressed throughout the curricula, students' understanding regarding the importance of their outcome raises and because of that single individual's behavior towards their implementation can change as well and hence contribute to national SDG goals.

There is a research gap as far as how much students' understanding in SDGs has been researched related to global citizenship and diversity, how do they define these concepts and perceive the need for these topics to be taught at HEIs or whether they feel that SDGs are implemented in their courses. Research conducted in GLOBDIVES -project in Finland, Lithuania, Germany, Romania, and Spain addresses this research gap, has conducted research in these topics and has developed study materials for teaching diversity and global citizenship in higher education. In this article the focus is on data gathered from students studying in Finland and in Romania.

3. Methodology

The paper aims at analysing the Finnish and Romanian students' perception regarding most important SDGs to learn about related to global citizenship and diversity management and the variance of their perception. A quantitative method was used, using a survey with closed questions

questionnaire. The sample consists of students from two partner universities of GLOBDIVES project, LAB University of Applied Sciences (LAB) and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University (UAIC), a total number of 487 respondents being considered. Beside the question related to the perceived importance of SDGs, other ten questions were related with socio-demographic points such as gender, age, level of studies and field of study. The results from Romanian (n = 302) and Finnish (n = 185) respondents are compared. Even if as many as 65 of respondents who listed Finland as their current country of residence responded to the survey in English as LAB University of Applied Sciences has many international degree programs, their results are excluded from the Finnish-Romanian comparison.

The questionnaire included biographical questions related to language, country, gender, age, field of studies, level of studies, international experience, family background and friends. Then followed the main part, which included the 17 SDGs, together with the request to select the top 5 most important SDGs for Global Citizenship, Diversity and Diversity Management. Finally, respondents were asked about the importance of the Global Citizenship and Diversity Management course (a 5-point Likert scale) and their preferred learning method (online; hybrid; traditional teaching on campus in seminars).

At the data processing and analysis stage, data systematization and standardization were performed, and the frequencies and characteristic values (average) were estimated. Subsequently, ANOVA analysis was performed to identify the significant differences between the answers of the respondents belonging to different groups by various influencing factors. The analyses were carried out in IBM SPSS v.20.

4. Results

This section represents the main findings of the research focusing on students' responses from Finland and Romania regarding SDGs importance to be taught in higher education.

Table 1 comprises information related to the comparative structure of the sample in terms of identification questions for Finland and Romania. We can observe a similar structure in terms of gender: both the respondents from Finland and those from Romania are predominantly female, with male respondents representing approximately a quarter (Finland) and a third (Romania) of respondents. The students from Romania mainly come from the field of Business, administration, law (80.5%), followed by those from Information and Communication Technologies (12.6%), while the

respondents from Finland come from the field of Health and welfare (34.9%), followed by Business, administration, law (21.5%), Engineering, manufacturing, and construction (19.4%) and Arts, design and humanities (17.2%). As for the level of education, Bachelor's degree respondents represent the majority in both countries, followed by a minority of master's students, while Romanian respondents also include PhD students (2.4%).

In terms of international experience, both for Finland (58.1%) and for Romania (47.7%), the majority of students do not have any international experience, and there are more students with past international experience from Finland than from Romania, while a bigger part of Romanian respondents are currently in a mobility (4.0%) or would like to be an international student (41.7%) compared to Finnish respondents.

Both in Finland (46.2%), and in Romania (65.2%), the respondents most frequently come from homogenous families, but it should be mentioned that in Finland, however, students more frequently grew up in multicultural families (15.6%) or have friends from different countries (38.2%).

Table 1. Sample structure

Variable	Value	Frequency, %	
		Finland (out of 185)	Romania (out of 302)
Gender	Male	26.3%	34.8%
	Female	67.7%	64.2%
	Other	3.8%	0.3%
	Prefer not to answer	2.2%	0.7%
Field of studies	Business, administration, law etc.	21.5%	80.5%
	Engineering, manufacturing and construction	19.4%	0.7%
	Health and welfare	34.9%	0.3%
	Information and Communication Technologies	5.9%	12.6%
	Arts, design and humanities	17.2%	0.3%

	Social sciences, journalism and information	-	1.3%
	Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	0.5%	3.6%
	Other	0.6%	0.7%
Level of studies	Bachelor	86.0%	79.1%
	Masteral	14.0%	18.2%
	Doctoral	-	2.6%
International experience as a student	International student for a term	7.5%	5.3%
	International student for a whole academic year	4.8%	1.3%
	International student at the moment	0.5%	4.0%
	Would like to be an international student	29.0%	41.7%
	Do not have any experience from abroad	58.1%	47.7%
Family background and friends	Multicultural family and environment	15.6%	11.6%
	Homogeneous family and environment	46.2%	65.2%
	Have friends from different countries	38.2%	23.2%

Students were allowed to pick five most important SDGs for Global Citizenship, Diversity and Diversity Management (Table 2).

Table 2. The list of SDGs

SDG	
GOAL 1	No Poverty
GOAL 2	Zero Hunger
GOAL 3	Good Health and Well-being
GOAL 4	Quality Education

GOAL 5	Gender Equality
GOAL 6	Clean Water and Sanitation
GOAL 7	Affordable and Clean Energy
GOAL 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth
GOAL 9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
GOAL 10	Reduced Inequality
GOAL 11	Sustainable Cities and Communities
GOAL 12	Responsible Consumption and Production
GOAL 13	Climate Action
GOAL 14	Life Below Water
GOAL 15	Life on Land
GOAL 16	Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
GOAL 17	Partnerships to achieve the Goal

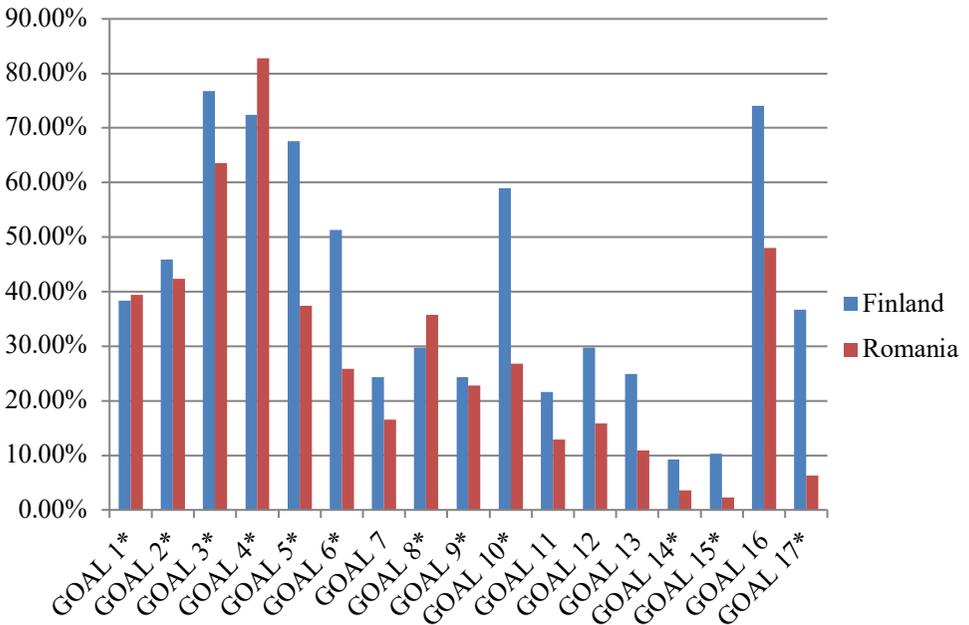


Figure 1. Students' ranks of SDGs in Finland in Romania

Note 1. * - the difference between the responses from Finland and Romania is statistically significant according to the results of ANOVA analysis.

Significant differences were registered between Finnish and Romanian students for 12 SDGs. The largest differences (between 20-30 points) were registered for SDGs 5, 6 and 10. Romanian students considered SDG 4 and SDG 8 more important than Finnish ones, while Finnish respondents considered the other 10 goals more important.

The results of the survey demonstrate that Romanian students consider Quality Education to be the most important SDG in the context of Global Citizenship and Diversity Management: 82.78% of the respondents included it in the top 5 important factors. On the 2nd place, at almost 20%, there is Good Health and Well-being, and on the 3rd place, at another 15% distance, is situated the goal of Peace and Justice Strong Institutions. Zero Hunger and No poverty are also in the top 5 SDGs. No significant difference between subgroups was registered for the first SDG chosen, meaning Goal 4, Quality Education is important to be part of GC &DM.

On the other hand, the least important objectives of sustainable development in the context of Global citizenship and Diversity include Life on Land (only 2.32% of respondents considered it important). Life Below Water (3.64%) and Partnerships to achieve the Goal (6.29%).

The results show that Finnish students consider Good Health and Well-being with 76.76%, Peace and Justice Strong Institutions with 74.04% as well as Quality Education with 72.43% as most important SDGs. Gender Equality and Reduced Inequalities belong also to the top 5 SDGs whereas Life on Land with 10.27% and Life Below Water with 9.19% are evaluated as least important ones related to Global Citizenship and Diversity Management.

A clear difference in research results can be seen in students' evaluation about whether their institution raises awareness for global citizenship and diversity. Only 53% of Finnish students responded that their institution raises awareness for the topics, the figure being 80% from Romanian respondents. Raising awareness happens mostly through integration to other courses or online, but through intensive programmes or longer courses which are more common in Finland. In Romania addressing the topic within different courses, organizing seminars, workshops or international weeks are also a commonly used function to raise awareness to global citizenship and diversity. Here it is important to notify that the survey was answered during autumn 2022, when the impacts of covid-19 could still be seen in the form of less events organized. Also most of the

Romanian respondents were from business field of study, a field in which is more common for teachers to integrate SDGs into subjects.

Table 3. Significant relationships between sociodemographic factors and the most important SDGs

Factor		Significant SDGs (Sig < 0.05)	Finland		Romania	
Name	Value		Number of respondents	Mean	Number of respondents	Mean
Gender	1	GOAL 1: No Poverty	Not significant		105	0.467
	2				194	0.345
	3				0	0
	4				2	0
	1	GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality	49	0.286	Not significant	
	2		126	0.548		
	3		7	0.714		
	4		4	0.500		
Family background and friends	1	GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being	Not significant		35	0.714
	2				197	0.675
	3				70	0.486
	1	GOAL 4: Quality Education	29	0.621	Not significant	
	2		86	0.337		
	3		71	0.493		
	1	GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions	29	0.517	Not significant	
	2		86	0.663		
	3		71	0.394		

Note 1. Gender values meaning: 1 = Male; 2 = Female; 3 = Other; 4 = Prefer Not to Answer.

Note 2. Family background and friends values meaning: 1 = I grew up in a multicultural family and environment; 2 = I grew up in a homogeneous family and environment; 3 = I have friends from different countries.

The results of ANOVA analysis suggest significant differences between groups of respondents depending on certain factors and the frequency of selection of a certain SDG as important for Global Citizenship, Diversity and Diversity Management. In Table 3 we present only significant relationships between socio-demographic factors and the SDGs within the top five by frequency of mentioning by the respondents from Finland or Romania. Thus, only two factors of influence can be found in the table: Gender and Family background and friends.

As for the Gender factor, in the case of Finland, the results of the analysis demonstrate that the gender of the respondent significantly influences the frequency of identifying the Reduced inequality objective as important. Male respondents consider this objective as important the least often, females consider it important almost twice as often, while people of another gender – the most frequently. The people who preferred not to mention their gender consider Reduced inequality as important in 2 cases out of 4. It is important to mention here that the majority of respondents in Finland were female, and the number of respondents of another gender is only seven.

In the case of Romania, Gender significantly influences the choice of the No poverty factor as important. Thus, male respondents consider it as important more frequently than female respondents, while respondents who preferred not to mention their gender (there were only 2) never considered it important.

The second factor that significantly influences the choice of the most important SDGs is Family background and friends. In the case of Finland, it significantly determines considering of two objectives as important: Quality Education and Peace and Justice Strong Institutions. Thus, Quality Education is considered important the most frequently in the case of people who come from multicultural families and the least in the case of those who come from homogenous families. People who have friends from different countries are situated in the middle in this respect. Then, Peace and Justice Strong Institutions is considered of high importance for Global Citizenship and Diversity most frequently by people who come from homogenous families (in approximately two-thirds of the cases), while the importance drops considerably in the case of people coming from multicultural families (the average score is 0.517) and is the lowest in the case of people with friends from different countries (the average score is 0.394).

Regarding the students from Romania, Family background and friends significantly influence the choice of the Good Health and Well-being factor among the five most important SDGs. This is considered important most frequently in the case of respondents who come from multicultural families, a little less often in the case of those from homogenous families and much less often in the case of respondents with friends from different countries.

The need for a course in Global Citizenship and Diversity Management was seen positively by Finnish and Romanian respondents. From Romanian students 59 % and from Finnish students 56% evaluated

the course as either very important or important. The preferred modes for studying the course were online or hybrid forms, with the hybrid form being more preferred by 50% of respondents in Romania.

5. Discussion

Higher education reforms have been a current topic in both countries. Romanian government wants to decrease the gap between rural (8.2%) and urban (44%) areas in participation in HE (European Commission, 2022). The Presidency launched a long debated Educated Romania project in 2016 and proposed a new Law of Education for HE in 2023, emphasizing on topics such as involving universities more in society and increasing their roles in reaching Romanian SDGs' targets. Some 2030 objectives for higher education refer to increasing the number of people participating to HE studies, increasing the flexibility of universities in offering courses for adults, emphasizing the international cooperation and increasing international mobilities among students. (România Educată, 2021)

Similarly Finnish government wants to raise the number of graduates from HEIs to 50% per generation and granted HEIs with about 2300 more study places in 2022 to educate students especially in study fields such as social and health care, engineering, ICT, social sciences, and early childhood education and care (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2021). In addition, the previous Finnish Government wanted to triple the number of international students studying in Finland from 5000 to 15,000 a year by 2030 as the country is facing demographic challenges such as an aging population and historically low birth rate of 1.32 documented in 2022 (Statistics Finland, 2023). The ambitious goal that 75% of international graduates would stay in Finland has been set and immigration procedures such as granting a student visa for the entire study time in the beginning of studies has been implemented to smoothen the integration process to Finland. (Finnish Government, 2021.) Current news in the topic concern students as education is valued highly in both countries. (European Commission, 2022 & Valtioneuvosto, 2021.)

Finland was the least fragile country in world for nine years in a row according to 179 nations listed in the 2021 Fragile States Index. However, in 2023 Finland dropped to the third position, whereas Romania reached the 50th rank in global comparison and has been climbing up in the ranking during the last ten years. (Fragile States Index, 2023.) A sudden change in the security environment can endanger the feeling of safety and stability.

International events affect decision-making and mindset and therefore it was not a surprising research result that both Finnish and Romanian students prioritized Peace and Justice Organizations higher than presumed, and in Finland on 2nd in Romania on 3rd position. Russia's attack on Ukraine affects people in neighboring countries clearly as the war is close and this could be seen clearly in the research where Spanish students perceived the same sustainable development goal to be the 14th most important one. In Finland people's general opinion about joining NATO changed within a couple of months when Russia attacked Ukraine. For the last 20 years only 25% of Finns supported NATO membership until 54% of Finns thought positively about the membership in March 2022 and in February 2023 the figure had peaked at 80% (Kantar Public, 2023 & Koivisto, 2022). This change in mindset led to the fastest accession procedure ever in the history of NATO.

Mental health issues and students' weakened possibilities to get into therapy have been discussed broadly in Finland in recent years as mental health problems grew aggressively during covid-19 when students were studying independently and online, and the feeling of loneliness grew. According to a nationwide study conducted by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare every third student in higher education was suffering from anxiety and depression while among female students the figure was as high as 40%. Students' possibilities to get care and therapy appointments were challenging due to the lack of therapists and long waiting times of as long as three months as the demand doubled in 2022 (Kosonen, 2022). Hence the feeling of belonging to a student community especially among students who started their studies was lacking as every fourth female and every third male student felt that they did not belong to any group. The lack of feeling of belonging was double with at least 25-year-old students. (THL, 2021.) In addition, students further in their studies had great challenges with motivation and finishing their studies (Kosonen, 2022). Similar results were found in Romanian literature that showed high levels of stress and boredom proneness due to covid-19 lockdown, female students feeling more higher levels of stress (Dumitrache et al., 2021).

Finland has a good track in gender equality as the Global Gender Gap Report ranks Finland at number three in 2023 after Iceland and Norway. Finland has 140 years of history in equality and the country wants to be a global leader in gender equality (Global Gender Gap Report & Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023.) Even if more than half of the goals set by the Finnish Government for 2020-2023, such as comprehensive

reform of the legislation on sexual offences, the extension of gender equality planning obligation to early childhood education and the Act on Legal Recognition of the Gender of Transsexuals were reached, still many goals such as achieving gender balance in company boards of directors or limiting mediation in cases of domestic violence, promoting pay transparency or preventing discrimination due to pregnancy or family leave through legislation are still being processed. Many of these topics are actively discussed in the media and as an example, the increase in domestic violence in relationships can be mentioned. In 2022 an increase of 21.2% was documented by the research of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and this means an increase of 7.9% to 2021. From the victims of domestic violence 52% were underaged girls and 74% adult women (Tilastokeskus, 2023.) In addition, gender segregation in secondary and higher education is significant in Finland as 84% of students studying social and health care or 76% of students of natural sciences are female in universities of applied sciences whereas in engineering 82% and in ICT 80% of students are male (THL, 2023). Salaries in sectors dominated by women such as social and health care, education and services are weaker, thus there is still a lot to be developed in terms of gender equality. Similarly, in Romania the level of gender equality has registered an oscillating evolution, demonstrating some positive trends, specifically in the field of education and in terms of women's incomes during the last five years. These trends have led to the reduction of some gender disparities, though there are still significant areas where the level of gender inequality and the vulnerable situations faced by women in Romania remain high. (Romanian Government, 2022). Domestic violence is affecting women specially (79.6% out of adult victims), the number of reported cases to the police being in increase in the last three years (Băluță and Tufiş, 2022).

It is important to address the SDG of Reduced Inequalities. An overwhelming majority of the Romanian population believes that they have been discriminated against (75%), while only 29% of them know how to proceed legally in these situations. According to a study conducted by National Council for Combating Discrimination on 1406 respondents, two out of three Romanian citizens believe that discrimination is a current problem. The most affected by discrimination are people infected with HIV/AIDS (65%), but also drug users (57%) or people with mental or physical disabilities (55-56%). Other categories prone to discrimination are people of Roma ethnicity (49%), LGBTQI+ people (49%), and institutionalized children (48%). Only 7% of respondents said that they

would accept a homosexual as their relative, while 12% of them would want an LGBT person to be their colleague. In the opinion of the interviewed people, preventing ethnic discrimination is considered a priority in Romania. Regarding the areas in which discrimination is manifested, most respondents mentioned obtaining a job (50%), access to medical services (45%) and access to education. (CNCD, 2016.)

In Finland ethnic minorities and especially people of colour suffer from structural racism and according to research conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018) Finland is the most discriminating country in Europe out of a sample of 12 countries. Experiencing racism in an issue people with African roots face in Finland daily in public places, schools and at workplaces. Racism in education can be found in all educational levels and the Finnish education system is based on a narrow-minded and homogenous understanding of a who is a Finn. People who look and are different are still often being categorized as immigrants even if they might have been born in Finland. Teaching in schools focuses strongly on Europe and other parts of the world including their cultures, histories, and diversities, get much less attention. (Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutetun selvitys 2020, p. 21, 24.) In Finnish work life 60% of Finnish people with African roots have faced discrimination from their employer, colleagues, or customers both in public and in private sector and these acts of discrimination have been especially related to recruitment, treatment at workplace, slower and more difficult chances of being promoted despite success at work and educational background, salaries and other benefits related to work. Anonymous recruitment is used by only 7% of Finnish companies (FIBS 2023). People with a non-Finnish family name are much less invited to job interviews compared to their countrymen with a Finnish family name. The highest value in the Finnish job market has a Finnish woman whereas immigrant men with roots in Iraq and Somalia have the lowest value (Ahmad, 2019). These discriminating acts have been discussed in the media for several years even if their occurrence has varied. It is no excuse for discriminating actions, but it is important to take the historical perspective into consideration according to which immigration to Finland is a very recent phenomenon that has started in bigger numbers first in 1990s when bigger groups of Somalian and Iraqi refugees moved to Finland. A second bigger wave of immigrants came to Finland in 2015 due to the war in Syria and the migration boost it caused in its neighboring countries as well. Some crimes targeted at Finnish women committed by these refugees as well as the growing popularity of the right-wing populist

party The Finns with their strong anti-immigration messages can have had an impact on how important students see Reduced Inequalities as a SDG. Finland needs to be able to attract more work-based immigration to find employees as big generations born in 1950s are reaching their pension ages. Ethnic minorities in Romania are registering small numbers compared to other European countries, however after the 2021 census 6% of the population declared as being Hungarian and 3.4% as being Romani (INS, 2022). Even though Romania made some progress in solving racism and intolerance issues compared to last ECRI monitoring cycle, including those related to ethnic belonging, there is still much to be done to solve it. Racist and intolerant hate speech in public discourses as well as on internet, ethnic minorities being the most affected ones, are still widespread, racial discrimination cases are often misconducted and racial profiling against Roma are being reported (ECRI, 2019).

Even if Climate Change has been a broadly discussed topic for several years now and climate anxiety has according to Ogunbode et al. (2022) been found to be positively related to the rate of exposure to information about climate change impacts, the amount of attention people pay to climate change information, and perceived descriptive norms about emotional responding to climate change and pro-environmental behaviors and negatively to mental wellbeing, it was surprising to see that students did not prioritize it higher, but first on 12th position in Finland and on 14th position in Romania. It can only be assumed that climate change is seen as such a huge challenge where the actions of a single individual are not visible nor might be effective and the feeling of helplessness dominates over the will to act upon climate change.

Even if co-dependence on Russian gas, investments in alternative energies due to higher prices of energy and electricity, this concern does not show in students' priorities in an alarming manner as both Romanian (11th position) and Finnish (13th position) did not prioritize the goal that high.

In addition, even if there has been plenty of awareness campaigns in European countries to raise awareness to Responsible Consumption and Production, still the SDG was in students' priorities first on 11th (Finland) and 12th (Romania) position. Students' limited budgets make them often settle for fast fashion and cheaper bulk products in groceries instead of more sustainably produced and often more expensive products.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has tried to demonstrate how different the role of SDGs is in Finland and Romania and the institutions the samples were collected. It tried to connect societal developments and country-specific research results with students' understanding of important SDGs related to the teaching of global citizenship and diversity management to form connections between them and to discuss the role of SDGs and global citizenship education in higher education. The research results showed similarities as well as differences in Finnish and Romanian students' perception of which SDGs are more important than others in teaching of global citizenship and diversity management. The analysis of variables brought some interesting insights into how socio-demographic aspects such as gender or family background and friends affected students' choices.

Sustainable development goals can be embedded in higher education institutions in many ways from the institution's mission, teaching and learning to campus facilities, research, community projects and policies. Formal policies as well as teacher training are needed so that teachers learn how to integrate and address SDGs in their courses and assignments for students in a practical manner to bring awareness to them and to develop skills and competences engaged global citizens need in the globalized world. If SDGs are implemented into higher education, students have a chance to develop their field-specific competences related to SDGs as well as their transversal skills such as critical thinking, development of ethical skills and can hence become trailblazers for the change that is needed to reach country-specific goals for the SDGs. A multidisciplinary approach as well as experimental learning opportunities, such as internships and volunteering in addition to problem-based learning or hackathons connected with solving global problems are needed to implement SDGs into teaching and learning activities at HEIs. Closer co-operation with non-governmental organizations could create in students a better understanding of work opportunities in this sector and boost e.g. social entrepreneurship. We propose that HEIs would choose their strategic SDGs and create a systematic implementation plan for them with a follow-up plan and concrete measurements, integrate SDGs into institution's teaching, learning and RDI activities as well as incorporate them into practical measures on campus and student life to create experimental sustainability memories. In addition, disseminating awareness and communicating about achievements are recommended so that students also feel that their HEI is supporting SDGs.

HEIs with international degree programs should take a more active role in promoting global citizenship education, celebrating diversity, and

participating in national and local DEI-related events such as antiracism week or celebrating Pride. Growing into a global citizen is a life-long process and it does not stop when you become an adult and enter studies in higher education. Discrimination is a fact in Finland and in Romania and HEIs with their international academic communities should act as trailblazers for the rest of the society to accelerate tolerance for differences.

The limitations associated with this survey include that the name of the respondent's institution was not asked, and the survey was shared to students in addition to being sent to students' emails also on open platforms such as the News section on the institution's website for example in Finland. Hence, there is also the possibility that outsiders could have filled in the questionnaire. This quantitative study could have been complemented with in-depth interviews with some respondents and this could be an interesting research topic in the future.

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