Alternative University Appraisal (AUA): Reconstructing Universities' Ranking and Rating Toward a Sustainable Future

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Abstract The ranking of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become increasingly common in recent years. Oftentimes however, the criteria used in these rankings appear to be Eurocentricly defined. Consequently, universities in developing countries often find themselves marginalized and at a disadvantage in such ranking systems. To address this matter, there is a vital need for the reconstruction of criteria used in these ranking systems. The Alternative University Appraisal (AUA) is one of a number of projects emerging from a network of universities known as ProSPER.Net (the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research) which offers a possible solution to this issue. The primary objective of the AUA is to facilitate and encourage Higher Education Institutes to engage in education and research activities for sustainable development and to raise the quality and impact of these activities by providing benchmarking tools that support diversity of mission, as well as a framework for sharing good practices, and supporting dialogue and self-reflection. Three integral steps were taken to achieve the ultimate project goal of creating a dynamic community which would enable the reorientation of higher education toward sustainable development. The first

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involved the development of the AUA Model. To this end, an AUA Peer Consultation Model was developed as the second step. The final step saw the development of a Peer Consultation System which provides HEIs with the perspective needed to enable reorientation toward sustainability and assist them in identifying specific areas that need to be addressed and improved. By utilizing the AUA model, universities can aspire to attain better sustainability ratings through conventional and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) measures.

Keywords Higher education assessment · University rating system · Education for sustainable development · Peer consultation · Sustainability assessment tools and methodology

Introduction

Sustainable development is now widely considered the ideal model for development through which economic, environmental, and societal equity is to be attained in any plan aimed at inclusive and balanced national development. Governments and institutions around the world are growing increasingly aware of the need for sustainability implementation in all areas of public and private mechanisms—and institutions of higher education are not exempt of this phenomenon. This path to a better future that serves the interests of all global citizens brings with it a need not just for a revamp in the manner in which education—specifically tertiary education, is carried out at universities in the country, but also for a new and more inclusive instrument through which to gauge the transformations that are bound to occur in the nation's public universities in line with the values and tenets of sustainable development.

Universities have conventionally been defined as centers for teaching and research. Through their teaching activities, universities tend to offer specialized training for different sectors of society, as well as the education essential for personality development. Additionally, university education also boosts theoretical knowledge among the different divisions in society while offering practical solutions to deal with societies' dilemmas. The traditional framework of a university often consists of a close circle of students and lecturers—frequently referred to as the "ivory tower". As an elite component within mainstream society, this circle has, throughout history, had the privilege of influencing societal agendas in order to meet its own goals. However, in light of the changes brought about by the new millennium, universities all over the world are beginning to realize that their roles are also rapidly changing in a globalizing world. As Komiyama (2011, p. 322) argues; "sustainability demands a realignment of existing academic disciplines. Whereas academia has moved inexorably toward fields of in-depth specialization, sustainability seeks comprehensive, integrated solutions to complex problems. It therefore requires a restructuring of education and research that spans multiple disciplines."

The understanding that a university's full benefits can only be obtained when the university and society are organically linked together is increasingly commonplace. In other words, the needs of the society must be at the center of a university's activities, and the university must be willing to undergo flexible adjustments in order to accommodate society's changing needs. In an era of globalization, universities and colleges also have an impact through their global procurement, offshore partnerships as well as through the education of national and international students. Their potential influence on economic development, poverty alleviation but also health and community building should not be overlooked (Boks and Diehl 2006; Galang 2010; Lotz-Sisikta 2011, Tilbury 2012).

Recognizing the role which education can play in the development of societies that are more equitable and sustainable, the United Nations launched the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) in 2005. As mentioned in Sect. "AUA Methodology" of the 2009 Bonn Declaration, "Education for sustainable development is setting a new direction for education and learning for all. It promotes quality education, and is inclusive of all people. It is based on values, principles, and practices necessary to respond effectively to current and future challenges."

Higher education Institutions have been in constant struggle for their sustainability programs to be recognized. Assessing universities has been an object of study for a long period of time, however, there has been little agreement on the evaluation methods, frameworks and indicators that would be appropriate for the assessment of ESD performance in HEIs. The AUA project addresses that gap. The AUA is aiming to (Kansal et al. 2013, p. 63):

1. Evaluate and assess an institution's ESD activities by using the new assessment tool;
2. Enable the institution to consult with the AUA dialogue committee on ideas, concerns, problems, and solutions based on the results of the new assessment; and
3. Invite the institution to an ESD learning community where they can provide, receive and share best practices with other institutions and partner organizations.

Universities for Sustainability

With regard to the connection between the definition of sustainable development and the concept of education, Agenda 21—the international action plan drawn up at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, Rio 1992) identifies education as a crucial component in bridging the divide. It clearly states that "education is critical for promoting sustainable development' and that 'countries should stimulate educational establishments in all sectors, especially the tertiary sector, to contribute more to awareness building." (Agenda 21 1993), Chapter 36.3/36.10.d).

Although sustainable development may appear to be a relatively new concept in higher education, it is important to note that many sustainability-related activities and elements are already in place in the existing curricular structures of many universities around the world. Therefore, it is necessary to bear in mind that sustainability in higher education is not so much a revolution as it is an *evolution* of currently existing platforms. On the other hand, it is also important to note that in many instances, the current framework of higher education is unable to accommodate sustainability on its own and therefore a fundamental change is needed if it is to be made compatible with the sustainability agenda. According to Sterling (2003), p. 42, "Sustainability does not simply require an 'add-on' to existing structures and curricula, but implies a change of fundamental paradigm in our culture and hence also in our educational thinking and practice. Seen in this light, sustainability is not just another issue to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but a gateway to a different view of curriculum, of pedagogy, of organizational change, of policy and particularly of ethos."

In a (Carlson 2006) article on sustainable campuses in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Carlson argues that university initiatives on sustainability are only minor steps that aim to project the appearance of sustainability—in other words, a form of "greenwashing." Echoing this sentiment are criticisms by certain groups who point out that universities are taking a very slow approach with regard to sustainability integration in comparison to corporate entities.

In light of such criticisms, Cortese's (2001), p. 12 definition of a sustainable university may prove invaluable in assisting us in our understanding of the fundamental elements of a sustainable university—"A sustainable university can be considered as an institute of higher education as a whole or as a part, that addresses, involves and promotes, on regional or global level, the minimization of environmental, economics, societal, and health negative effects in the use of their resources in order to fulfill its main functions in teaching, research, outreach and partnership, and stewardship among others as a way in helping the society make the transition to sustainable lifestyles.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Ranking of Institutions of Higher Education

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are an integral part of any Higher Education Institution's management. The auditing tool used in the measuring process fully depends on the purpose of the measuring being carried out. For this matter, the objectives and scope of the measurement should be well defined before the audit takes place. Certain elements such as financial limitations are deciding factors on how deep or detailed the audit should be. The expertise of those conducting the audit should also be a matter of high consideration as well—on the other hand, there should also be an approximate expectation of how cooperative the audited

entity will be with the auditors. Since the auditing process requires massive date collection, bilateral cooperation is of vital importance. Therefore, the parameters for this measurement should be relevant to the condition and setting of each HEI. For the purpose of ranking, various parameters may be considered such as: research excellence and/or influence, student choices, eventual success and/or demographics, on surveys, and others. However, as Rocki (2005) argues; "The variety of methodologies, and thus of criteria used, suggest that any single objective ranking could not exist."

Ranking exercises among universities—especially through the assessment of the quality of HEIs is gaining worldwide momentum. As Huang (2003) explains, university evaluation encompasses both academic performance (often discipline-based) and administrative performance. There are several elements involved in expanding this demand. As described by Stella (2006), these elements involve "shrinking resource allocation for higher education from public funds, increasing competition among HEIs and growing awareness about value for money among the public." Therefore, universities that are able to obtain higher standings in ranking lists are also more likely to receive funding and other relevant resources.

As argued by Huang (2011); "Ranking shows a university's relative strength and weakness as compared to its peer institutions in the areas represented by the indicators." There are a number of mainstream higher education ranking systems around the world whose indicators are utilized by HEIs for self-appraisal, namely; the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Ranking. Interestingly, the use of such ranking systems results in several implications on the universities that utilize them, i.e., they stimulate competition among these universities, provide some of the rationale for allocations of funds; and they help to differentiate among different types of institutions as well as different programs and disciplines (Sadlak and Liu 2007). However, as with any other assessment system, the framework and parameters used are always debatable, and this in turn fuels the continuous search for an alternative system.

In Search of Alternative Ranking/Rating Systems

As Tyehimba (2004) argues, "The education system reflects the norms, values, biases, assumptions, and socio-economic priorities of the ruling elite. From kindergarten, children are indoctrinated according to the dominant values of the mainstream." For many centuries, the mainstream formal education systems in many countries have heavily borrowed or been influenced by colonial Eurocentric values and regulations; additionally, the Eurocentric ideology has also invaded the sphere of higher education in many developing countries. The drawback of this phenomenon is that the Eurocentric ideology ignores the contributions made by developing nations with regard to the global body of science and knowledge as the Eurocentric perspective is often considered to be "superior" to those of other

cultures. Blaut (2000) argues that Eurocentrism as a phenomenon are "false claims by Europeans that their society or region is, or was in the past, or always has been and always will be, superior to other societies or regions." Eurocentric perspectives are often based on a number of belief systems—some of which include that Europe is a continuously developing and progressing entity as opposed to the stagnant conditions of non-European states/communities, that Europe's progress is due to an inherent intellectual/spiritual superiority; "the belief that the only manner in which non-Europe may develop is by handouts given to them by Western civilizations such as new ideas, commodities, settlers, etc., which in turn are paid for by non-Europe via raw materials, plantation products, labor, art objects, etc. (Chilcote 2000)."

The full benefits of a university can only be made to manifest when both the university and the society it is located in are organically linked together. In other words, a university's activities must be flexible enough to factor in the needs of its society—given society's rapidly changing needs and trends. This directly rejects the Eurocentric ideology of homogenizing knowledge and science in favor of the countries of the North.

With large pools of disciplinary experts, high quality research facilities, state-of-the-art infrastructures, and a cohort of students with varied academic interests, universities have considerable comparative advantages in promoting prosperity within the communities they serve. For this reason, the universities of the developing nations have the opportunity and advantage to refer to their rich traditions and history, which have played a pivotal role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge throughout history. That being said, it is also important to understand that a single solution such as Eurocentrism cannot be devised as a global gold standard.

An aspect of higher education specifically affected by Eurocentrism is the ranking system of universities, which generally focuses not only on the university as a whole but also on various activities such as teaching, research, and/or trainings. However, the criteria used in these rankings are often Eurocentricly defined. Therefore, universities from developing countries often find themselves marginalized in such ranking systems. In order to overcome this matter, a number of nations from around the world have proposed certain initiatives geared toward reforming the current ranking systems of HEIs.

The Birth of Alternative University Appraisal (AUA)

Although they have been in existence for decades, conventional ranking systems utilize a rigid and rather inflexible approach toward their grading of tertiary institutions. It is quite plain to see that such guidelines are counterproductive to the well-being of institutions that wish to pursue alternate forms of educational development such as sustainability integration or in the case of HEIs in developing nations, face a lack of financial means by which to fund such research and grants.

In the long run, these criteria serve to inhibit creativity and stunt the growth of universities that would otherwise be open to new, creative development ideas, and only function in further strengthening the position of HEIs that comply with the now increasingly irrelevant and archaic ranking criteria.

In light of this dilemma, the AUA initiative was developed as a mean by which to create a learning community among universities that are engaged in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the Asia–Pacific region. The AUA is one of a number of projects that has emerged from a network of universities called ProSPER.Net—the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research, which has a membership of approximately 20 universities and academic institutions from around the region.

AUA Methodology

In order to create the AUA assessment tool, several existing ESD assessment tools were carefully analyzed and evaluated: the College Sustainability Report Card, the Earth Charter (EC)-Assess, Monitoring and Assessing Progress during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) in the Asia–Pacific Region, and the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS). Several meetings in Japan, Malaysia, and India were held and extensive tours undertaken to collect feedback and promote the new model. Dialogue with a variety of stakeholders at local and international conferences, meetings, and other events helped shape the system, as did dialogue within sustainability-related networks such as the International Association of Universities (IAU), Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), International Conference on Sustainability Science (ICSS), and Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) Forum in Japan. As a result of these efforts, the AUA Project was recognized by more than 150 institutions. AUA core member meetings also helped shape the design of the system.

Alternative University Appraisal (AUA)

The endeavor was initiated in 2009 through the conception of the AUA Model which sought to appraise universities via an alternative set of perspectives while completely doing away with conventional ranking systems. The Mission Statement of the AUA is also unambiguous in its developmental objective, i.e., the AUA seeks to "facilitate and encourage institutions of higher education to engage in education and research for sustainable development and to raise the quality and impact of these activities by providing benchmarking tools that support diversity of mission, as well as a framework for sharing good practices and supporting dialogue and self-reflection (Senaha 2010)." A fundamental goal of the AUA

undertaking is to bring about an Alternative University Peer Consultation System that focuses less on the ranking of universities and instead places a greater emphasis on the rating of universities.

In addition to the above-mentioned constructive qualities of the AUA Model, the initiative also functions as a tool for self-reflection between partnering institutions thus enabling HEIs to assess their individual ESD involvements. It is believed that through this process, HEIs can specifically identify areas of ESD which need to be addressed in the future with a vision of protecting and enhancing the diversity of tertiary education and also recognize the contextual strength of individual universities—contrary to the "one-size-fits-all" approach of conventional mainstream assessment systems. In line with this ambition, the AUA Model is expected to function as the first step in AUA peer consultancy among universities and ESD experts in addressing ESD in diverse ways with the aim of sharing good practices and strengthening their respective initiatives. The aim of the project is not to propose an appraisal system for a small subset of universities that reject mainstream ranking systems and wish to choose an alternative path, but instead to advocate the empowerment of a Higher Education Institution to decide for itself the development strategy of its own establishment. In addition to this, "the AUA system does not only recognize the good practices of participating universities that consciously espouse the principles of ESD, but also aims to shape the ways in which universities operate for a more sustainable future in accordance with the AUA's system of recognizing diversity, innovation, and change toward sustainable development thus functioning along the vein of other alternative appraisal systems such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the International Council for Higher Education (ICHE) Observatory Project and the University Rating System for ASEAN/Southeast Asia which is currently being developed (Ubukata 2010)."

At the outset, the AUA Model acts as a form of self-review for such universities and encourage self-awareness of their own strengths/weaknesses in the field of ESD in order to further deepen and promote their activities (AUA Website, 2012). There are also two rationales for the AUA in mind; first to enhance the value and attractiveness of universities engaging in ESD and second, to create a learning and supporting community to improve their practices. The reason for these rationales is clear; as we embrace Education for Sustainable Development to serve the educational needs of the twenty-first century and to accomplish the goal of the UNDESD in regard to sustainable development incorporation into the academia, the goal should no longer be to create a ranking system that places an emphasis on which educational institution is surpassing others, but instead to develop a rating system that will encourage and foster universities within the network to attain a level of academic and sustainability excellence and by so doing, create a conducive environment for mutual cooperation between partnering academic institutions of higher learning.

The Alternative University Appraisal system also seeks to facilitate and encourage institutions of higher education to engage in education and research for sustainable development, and to raise the quality and impact of such activities by

providing benchmarking tools that support the diversity of missions as well as offering a framework for sharing good practices and facilitating dialogue and self-reflection. The core members of this endeavor come from a multifaceted background, comprising a number of institutions that are focused on the sustainability agenda and acting as agents of change in their respective capacities. The core members comprise of Hokkaido University, Teri University, Yonsei University, Universiti Sains Malaysia, the United Nations University—Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) and the Asian Institute of Technologies.

Hokkaido University (HU), the secretariat of the AUA Project, is strategically committed to contribute to the creation of a sustainable society through its educational activities. HU developed an international initiative utilizing its strength as a global research university in 2005 in response to a call from the international community to realize a sustainable society and promotes "Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)" for citizens from all over the world.

Teri University recognizes that quality human resource is the biggest asset for a society to progress on the path of sustainable development and has been engaged in offering higher education through programs related to sustainable development for the past 10 years. In addition to this, the university also acknowledges that institutions of higher learning play a major role within the broader context of social, scientific, political, and cultural reforms which drive the economic progress of a society. Furthermore, its programs emphasize the theory–practice connection by including stakeholder interaction as part of the curriculum in all its programs.

Yonsei University acknowledges the importance advancing international cooperating research institutes such as ProSPER.Net and plans to host the UN Center for Sustainable Development while also establishing the School of Asian Studies in order to carry out various education and research program especially with regard to sustainable development. Yonsei has pledged to continue to support efforts for mutual growth through great research opportunities such as the AUA.

The UNU-IAS is part of the United Nations University (UNU) system, comprising of a network of Research and Training Centers and Programs (RTC/Ps) which are assisted by associated and cooperating institutions and scholars from around the globe. The Institute applies a strong policy-oriented research program designed to promote strategic approaches to sustainable development. Research consists of advanced and multidisciplinary methodologies accompanied by post-graduate education and capacity development activities, particularly for developing countries while engaging experts from many disciplines in the natural, social, and life sciences for the development of informed policymaking that meets sustainable development challenges.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has embraced the vision of becoming a sustainability-led university of world-class standing and has embarked on a range of missions through which specific objectives and activities are expected to contribute to the achievement of the overall sustainability vision. One such mission of great significance is the decision to establish the Center for Global Sustainability Studies (CGSS@USM) which functions to mainstream sustainability into the entire fabric and rubric of the university while working with all other relevant

sections of the University, regional and international sustainability organizations, national and regional governments, private sector, civil society groups, and NGOs to promote sustainable development, paying particular attention to the disempowered *bottom billion*.

Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) has, for more than four decades, acted as a bridge between the developed countries and the developing and less developed countries in the region. With its multinational community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, AIT offers a unique multicultural context for the exchange of ideas, the development and transfer of advanced technologies, and innovative approaches to shared problems. AIT's future orientation is based on education and research toward the sustainable development of the region, strengthening the knowledge, development, and business capacity of the region, and supporting communities and their economic development and integration into the global economy.

The AUA Functioning Mechanism

As an integral part of achieving the ultimate goal toward creating a dynamic community of practice for reorienting higher education toward sustainable development, the AUA Model was created, which includes self-awareness questions designed to help interested HEIs enhance their related activities (AASHE 2010). The model was developed in consultation with a variety of stakeholders through international/local conferences, meetings, and consultations. It is not intended to intensify competition among HEIs or to impose a uniform, predetermined ideal university model upon them; rather, it aims to provide perspective to enable consideration in their efforts to reorient themselves toward a sustainable future and help them identify specific areas to be addressed and improved.

The AUA system consists of three components: Self-Awareness Questions (SAQs); Benchmarking Indicators Questions (BIQs); and Dialogue. SAQs and BIQs serve as a data source and make up the foundation for dialogue among universities. Dialogue is the component through which the institutions share concerns, best practices, and generally foster an ESD learning community. In addition to these three components, the AUA project also created an ESD Archive, which is a repository of ESD activities conducted by HEIs (ProSPER.Net 2012).

The characteristic of the AUA Self-Awareness Questions include; Facilitation of universities' selection of ESD focus areas to be assessed, Provision of a mixture of quantitative (objective) and qualitative (subjective) questions—some of which require narrative responses, and Encouragement of universities' self-awareness regarding their own strengths and weaknesses through question responses (The AUA Model 2011). The AUA Self-Awareness Questions consist of four main sections namely; *Governance, Education, Research and Outreach*. This assessment is for overall SD or any specific SD area for which the IHE would like to be assessed. Answers to the questions should only include the data that is relevant to

SD or SD sub-themes which are chosen by the HEI. The assessment sub-themes are chosen according to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) which includes gender equality, health promotion, the environment, cultural diversity, rural development, peace, human security, sustainable development, sustainable consumption, or sustainable urbanization.

(A) Governance

In terms of Governance, the section is designed to assess the overarching administrative structure and policy directions of the HEI. "Governance" in this section refers to a basic framework to promote ESD which is capable of impacting ESD-related research and education most advantageously. This section is developed to assess the institution's understanding of, and commitment to, the chosen assessment sub-theme as well as to check if the assessment sub-theme is incorporated in its management strategy.

This section consists of five questions. Each question is accompanied by a "purpose" and the instructions toward answering the purpose. Figure 1 shows an example of a question in the Governance section:

(B) Education

Indicators/questions in this section are designed to assess curriculum, teaching, capacity development, and other learning opportunities your institution offers to its students, faculty members, staff, and communities. Consisting of nine questions, this section aims to assess mechanisms of delivering an understanding of sustainable development to students. Each question is accompanied by a purpose and its accompanying instructions. Figure 2 shows an example of a question in the Education section:

(C) Research

Consisting of four questions, this section is designed to assess the institution's efforts and commitment to ESD and SD research and consultancy. Each question is accompanied by the purpose and its accompanying instructions. Figure 3 shows an example of a question in the Research section:

Question 2. What action plans and policies are in place for the implementation of [*assessment area*] strategies? How is progress monitored and assessed?

Purpose

To assess if the progress of [*assessment area*] in your institution is self-monitored.

Instructions

Please include information on the level(s) at which [*assessment area*] is planned, e.g. at board level or at departmental level, and whether there is a separate committee for planning.

Fig. 1 An example of a question in the governance section (*Source* The AUA Model 2011)

Question 8. Does your institution employ any particular pedagogical or learning approaches that best represent your teaching in[*assessment area*] ? If so, please provide examples.

Purpose

To assess the institutional efforts for educational transformation.

Instructions

Please include a description of the approaches of such efforts as those in participatory learning, problem solving, community, engagement, transdisciplinary studies.

Fig. 2 An example of a question in the education section (*Source* The AUA Model 2011)

Question 17. Please describe incentives to encourage and foster innovation as well as multidisciplinary collaboration for the research in [*assessment area*].

Purpose

To assess the institutional systems to advance research for [*assessment area*].

Instructions

Please indicate incentive types, such as financial remuneration, appraisal mechanisms, infrastructure support, etc.

Fig. 3 An example of a question in the research section (*Source* The AUA Model 2011)

Question 20. Does your institution provide [*assessment area*]-related training and learning opportunities for society? If so, please explain. If not, please outline the reasons why.

Purpose

To assess the institutional efforts regarding the advancement of [*assessment area*] for the community at various levels.

Instructions

This may include information on non-credit short training courses or programs for continued learning in the community.

Fig. 4 An example of a question in the research section (*Source* The AUA Model 2011)

(D) Outreach

This section helps to assess the extent of transformation that the institution has undergone toward ESD and to understand the institution's outreach. Consisting of four questions, the purpose of this section is to mainly gauge the institution's involvement in the assessment sub-theme with the local community or with broader networks. Each question is accompanied by the purpose and its accompanying instructions. Figure 4 shows an example of a question in the Outreach section:

Intended Users and Timing

The AUA Model works efficiently when used by a committee consisting of multiple stakeholders of a university, as it reflects diverse opinions and encourages the parties involved to work together to reach a consensus on the ESD field under assessment. Committees may consist of university representatives such as management executives, faculty members, staff, and students as well as individuals from alumni associations, non-governmental organizations and/or non-profit organizations in related communities.

The model can be used at any time of the year, but the user should bear in mind that many of the questions require information based on annual data for fiscal years since 2005—a year considered to represent an appropriate benchmark as it witnessed the United Nations' declaration of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, to which we hope to contribute. It may therefore take a while for first-time users to collect information encompassing at least the last 5 years, but the burden on subsequent occasions will be lighter.

The AUA Model is an important tool not only in encouraging self-reflection on the part of the user but also for subsequent AUA peer consultations between users and groups of ESD experts. Accordingly, the user is requested to provide responses and descriptions as candidly as possible, especially when unified opinions are not reached.

In brief, the steps for Usage of the AUA model include (The AUA Model 2011):

i. Accessing the AUA website and downloading the latest version of the AUA model.
ii. Forming a group consisting of university representatives such as management executives, faculty members, staff, and students as well as individuals from alumni associations, non-governmental organizations and/or non-profit organizations of related communities to answer the AUA self-awareness questions.

iii. Setting the ESD field to be assessed, such as (according to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development) gender equality, health promotion, the environment, cultural diversity, rural development, peace, human security, sustainable development, sustainable consumption, or sustainable urbanization. You may of course create your own field of ESD to be assessed.
iv. Filling out the institutional profile.
v. Answering the self-awareness questions.
vi. Submitting the results to the AUA Secretariat at Hokkaido University.
vii. Letting the secretariat know of any requests for specific individuals/institutions/organizations to be included as part of the AUA Peer Consultation Committee. This may be taken into consideration in the organizational process as the committee includes both AUA Core Member institutions and specialists in users' ESD assessment fields.
viii. Be prepared to hear from the secretariat regarding the peer consultation schedule.

The AUA Peer Consultation system works as follow:

i. The AUA Secretariat calls for participation by any university, especially in the Asia–Pacific region.
ii. The AUA Secretariat accepts applications from interested universities (to be made in the name of the head of the institution).
iii. Participating universities partake in orientation with the AUA Secretariat to share goals and plan the consultation process.
iv. Participating universities answer the self-awareness questions and submit the results to the AUA Secretariat.
v. The AUA Secretariat selects experts to sit on the AUA Peer Consultation Committee based on the results submitted by individual universities.
vi. Peer consultation is held between each participating university and the AUA Peer Consultation Committee for advice and to set ultimate goals.

Conclusion

Undeniably, quality assurance is an important need for university performance. However, it is equally important to consider the end-goal of such performance as well as the parameters in which this performance is framed. These considerations form the basis of this paper, which argues that ranking/rating systems are beneficial as long as they uphold the following major principles—Inclusiveness, Effectiveness, Responsiveness, and most importantly Contextualization. Although comparing findings from such systems may prove to be challenging, it is nonetheless important to note that universities in this era have attained such a degree of

globalization and diversity that good practices can now only be shared through the strong underpinning of contextual parameters. This is precisely the goal of AUA's attempts to mainstream rating among universities, whereby in a worst-case scenario, ranking/rating or appraisal initiatives ultimately benefit all and not just a particular segment of society. Ultimately, the entire measuring and evaluation process becomes a systemic educational learning process benefitting all individuals and entities involved.

To date, AUA project members have reported satisfaction with the overall self-assessment process. The AUA system has afforded them an opportunity for critical self-reflection, helped them reconsider their ESD practices, and helped pinpoint various strengths and weaknesses. There have been several concerns raised throughout the project regarding quantitative data. Feedback suggested that it was not possible or too labor-intensive to collect information dating back to 2005 and that some terms and expressions, such as "ESD courses", "full time positions", and "ESD-related jobs after graduation", were poorly defined and understood across countries, institutions, and even individuals. Those questions have since been revised and the latest version is more focused on narrative and qualitative questions that can be used as a gateway to dialogue by a growing number of institutions.

The objective is to transform the AUA system from a project to a service in 2012. The new service would be known as SUSTAIN (SUSTainability Appraisal for Academic Institutions) and would continue to expand the ESD learning community, raising the quality and impact of sustainability-related activities. Greater discussion is required in order to better define this new direction. In addition, the Dialogue component requires further financial support and greater assistance from external ESD specialists. The ESD Archive continues to operate well and will remain available for basic and comprehensive ESD references.

As AUA members recognize diversity, innovation, and change toward sustainable development, the project will continue to be refined. This continual improvement can help the AUA system become a guiding force that shapes the universities of today and tomorrow.

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