Chapter 1
An Introduction to the Sustainability of Tertiary Education in Asia: Collaborations, Transformations, Global–Local Tensions, and Future Developments

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Asia is probably one of the most important centers of the global sustainability and sustainable development. The Asian region houses three quarters of the world's population and resources. It includes three out of the top-five global economies, which account for more than half of the world's economic growth. The scope and intensity of the sustainability-related challenges in the region are only proportional to the vastness of its territories, high-speed economic growth, booming demographics, and cultural diversity. The growing share of Asia in the global sustainability can be rather accurately estimated by the fact that Asia along accounts for almost half of the world's carbon dioxide and methane gas emissions.

These emergent dynamics are also reflected in the situation of Asian tertiary education sectors, which have been undergoing an 'explosive' expansion during the past two decades (Szmigiera, 2021; UNESCO, 2014; Williams et al., 2021). In 2021, China's public universities and colleges awarded a record number of degrees to over nine million undergraduate and over half a million postgraduate students (MoE, 2021). In another example, India has an estimated annual tertiary enrollment of forty million undergraduate students, which projects exponential figures in the country's demographic dividend—its young and highly educated workforce—over the next decade (Government of India, 2020).

The geopolitical notion of the 'Greater (Eur)Asia,' a cooperative union of China, Russia, India, and the Central Asian countries, suggests a possibility of shifting the gravity center of global sustainability discourse closer to the Asian region (Erşen, 2014; Subbetto & Shmakhov, 2020). The earliest in-depth analysis and consideration on shifting sustainable higher education discourse toward the East started when the World Bank (Brunner & Tillett, 2006) and Asian Development

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Bank (ADB, 2011) released their reports on Asian tertiary education and its impact on regional economic development. They described rapid economic development, demographic trends, growing demands for knowledge production and public preference for tertiary degrees as some of the reasons behind the expansion of the tertiary sector in the researched countries. Furthermore, a collection of papers published by the Institute of International Education under the sponsorship of the US Department of State, *Asia: The next higher education superpower?* (Lefebure & Bhandari, 2015) echoed the reports by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank and highlighted dynamic trends, diverse challenges, and future opportunities for regional tertiary education. These findings coincided with the implementation years of the United Nations' Millennium Sustainable Goals (UN, 2000) and informed the subsequent 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

The foregoing international organizations' analyses of the regional tertiary education sustainability challenged a common assumption that the 'East' needs to reach the level of the 'West.' The education systems of Asia appear to be switching from following Western tertiary models to modeling after their own successful practices. Asia now aim at producing graduates who meet global educational standards while satisfying the demands from their diverse, dynamic, growing and, in some cases, booming economies. These, together with the geopolitical turn for the 'Greater Eurasia,' have given a new twist to scholarly investigations of the region's tertiary education that placed Asia from the periphery of sustainable development discourse into its core (Brehm & Kitamura, 2022; McCowan et al., 2021). Related investigations such as those in the present edited volume address some of the following questions: How have such Asian higher education models been brought about? How sustainable are they as new challenges unfold?

A rare subject just about thirty years ago, Asian tertiary education studies are now attracting a large number of scholars who consolidate the field with authentic research problems and novel and extensive field works (Liu 2021; Park & Savelyeva, 2022; Savelyeva, 2022a, 2022b). It is very timely to get a systemic look at such scholarly developments across different Asian tertiary education systems with their unique structures of tertiary education, nature of their operations, and sustainability commitments. This edited volume provides an interdisciplinary and trans-boundary analysis of the sustainability of tertiary education systems in South Korea, Kazakhstan, Russia, and China and includes regions such as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Ural-Siberian and the Far Eastern regions of Russia.

The studies in this volume reflect on the complexity of the tertiary education systems within the regions and tensions inherent to international geopolitics and social-economic-environmental developments in Asia. Approaching sustainability as a West-born concept and an extrinsic political doctrine, the studies describe different challenges of adopting Western sustainability by a culturally distinct Asian tertiary sector. Furthermore, the studies in this volume suggest the greater binding of the 'sustainability doctrine' with the notion of human–nature relationships, cultural roots, traditions, and histories of the place in order for sustainability to start making sense, to manifest itself, and to be fully accepted.

Although international reports and official sustainability-related datasets feature regional tertiary education affairs and levels of the universities' sustainability policy engagements, they might not reflect the actual changes in the minds of people in Asian campuses (Liu et al., 2022; Savelyeva, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Savelyeva & Douglas, 2017a; Savelyeva & Rickards, 2017b; Savelyeva & Park, 2019, 2022). One of the objectives of this volume is to identify tensions in the implementation of sustainability in order to come up with an incisive and culturally sensitive vision for the future development of sustainable tertiary institutions in Asia. Another objective of this volume is to offer local perspectives to the implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by Asian universities.

The SDGs and their mandate for universal implementation of sustainability targets added a new challenge for Asian tertiary institutions. Assigned with the critical mission of 'providing students and learners within their sphere of influence with the knowledge, skills and mindsets to address the SDGs through their current or future roles' (SDSN, 2020: p. 3), universities have generally pledged their commitment to the cause. However, outcomes so far suggest that the responses of tertiary institutions in Asia vary dramatically in the level of their commitments and contributions. We see the Hong Kong public universities in full structural alignment with the SDGs, while there is a scattered response to the SDGs in the campuses of Ural, Siberian, and the Sakhalin regions of Russia. We can also see international university presidents signing global collaborative agreements over the SDGs such as the case of the South Korean tertiary institutions engaged with SDGs over an ad hoc nation-wide online academic platform.

The SDGs are not only about contributions and commitments to the tertiary education sector. Mapping and implementing an international agenda such as the SDGs in the complex and uneven terrains of Asia unveil large scale local-to-global sustainability burdens. The ongoing global health crisis, which is directly related to the SDG3 *Health and wellbeing,* illustrates how globalization-related challenges such as the mobility of a large population and high speed of exchange of goods and services create a fertile ground for pandemic.

Most of the authors in this volume adopted exploratory, participatory and critical perspectives that provide authentic insights into the sustainability issues in their respective tertiary sector, thus, allowing the voices of people to be heard. The collection of the twelve studies featured in the volume, contributes to the research arena of the SDGs' qualitative indicators by fostering a cross-cultural dialog among sustainability stakeholders of Asian tertiary education, yet implications beyond Asia. Due to a limited number of chapters in the volume, instead of covering every country in Asia, this volume adopts constructivist positioning for in-depth analyses of the selected sustainability-related policies, frameworks and discourses in tertiary education in South Korea, Kazakhstan, Ural-Siberian and the Far Eastern parts of Russia, China and its Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Rather than employing an issue-based structure, the volume organization features the authors' authentic ways of considering, investigating and discussing different aspects of university sustainability in Asian tertiary education. It is worthwhile noting that the authors of this volume

interchangeably use the terms 'tertiary education' and 'higher education' to refer to post-secondary educational systems and structures in their respective territories.

Organization

The 2022 UNESCO report on higher education for sustainability (Parr et al., 2022) declared that universities' main contribution to the SDGs is that of radical transformation of minds, policies, practice and agencies. Yet, as the SDG17 *Partnership for the Goals* suggests, such transformation could only be materialized in the process of international collaboration. In their attempt to ensure firm and resilient SDGs-related transformations, universities would inextricably face local and global tensions while keeping their strategic vision on the future. With this rationale in mind, the chapters in this volume are organized into four sections, namely, *Collaborations*, *Transformations*, *Global–Local Tensions,* and *Future Developments*. The chapters in this volume draw on inquiries and experiences from 12 research projects conducted in Asia.

The opening section, *Collaborations*, contains studies on the complexities of tertiary education partnerships and cross-border agreements driven by national cooperation policies of South Korea and Kazakhstan with China, and the contribution of a regional UNESCO Hong Kong office to strengthening regional partnerships with the SDGs' program implementations.

The Chap. 2, *Sustainable Tertiary Educational Collaboration: Korea's Shared Experiences and the Challenges,* by Ji-Soon Chang (2022) shares Korean achievements as a 'sustainability donor' to the developing Asian countries through its tertiary education cooperation programs. Chang suggests approaches and methods to resolve global issues in developmental cooperation in a new era of the SDGs.

Aisi Li (2022) in the Chap. 3 of this book, *Nurturing a Good Neighbour: A Review of Sino-Kazakhstani Higher Education Cooperation,* focuses on the thirty years of the China-Kazakhstan tertiary education cooperation. Drawing on the case studies from the University of Shanghai Cooperation organization, Confucius Institute, and Xinjiang tertiary sector, Li argues that the cooperation benefits the China's national development plan and the country's regional security strategy.

Hong Kong researchers, Stephanie Wing Lee, Samson C. W. Ma, and Ngok Lee (2022) in the Chap. 4 *Delivering Programs on Education for Sustainable Development and UN SDGs in Mainland China and the Hong Kong SAR* apply an analytical framework for a detailed assessment of the sustainability programs offered by the Hong Kong-based UNESCO China tertiary institution, Hong Kong Institute of Education for Sustainable Development.

The next section, *Transformations*, includes studies that present authentic sustainability traditions and apply a historical approach to their explorations of the systemic changes in Asian tertiary systems. In the Chap. 5 of this volume, *Laozi for Tertiary Education and Sustainability: Principles, Logic and Holistic Relevance,* Orlando Nang-Kwok Ho (2022) outlines how principles from an influential ancient Chinese classic, Laozi's *The Book of Logo and Virtues*, can aid tertiary curricula and foster

sustainability. The Chap. 6, *Elite to Mass to Universal: The Historical Development, Internationalization and Sustainability of Tertiary Education in Hong Kong*, written by Siu-Wai Wu and David Sorrell (2022), takes a historical approach and investigates a century of Hong Kong tertiary education's sustainable development under the pressures of internationalization and 'universalization.' The Chap. 7 of the same section *Liberal Studies Reform and Sustainability Consciousness in Hong Kong Tertiary Education,* written by Tamara Savelyeva (2022c) discusses sustainability consciousness of Hong Kong graduates fostered under a compulsory liberal studies curriculum. The chapter analyses the potential impacts of the 2021 curriculum reform on the sustainability mind-set of the Hong Kong youth and discusses the 'sustainability consciousness with a nil participation paradox,' which depicts the core of the research findings.

The third section of the volume, *Global–Local Tensions*, contains an 'islands' collection of this volume. It presents Russian Sakhalin and China's Hong Kong regional studies that reveal local voices of the indigenous minority groups and local tertiary students, and discuss local educational policies in connection to sustainable development of their corresponding regions. Fang Gao and Henry Chi Yin Liu (2022) in their Chap. 8 *The Empowering Potential of Higher Education for Underprivileged Ethnic Minorities' Sustainable Development in Hong Kong: Educational Policies for Access and Equity* critically evaluate the effectiveness of government support for boosting capacities and access to tertiary education for the marginalized members of the local ethnic minority groups. The Chap. 9 of this volume, *Transforming Tertiary Education Environments for Sustainable Development of the Sakhalin Region in Russia* by Irina Balitskaya and Nitika Jain (2022) speaks about the multicultural aspects of tertiary education sustainability. The authors investigate the ways universities address demands, needs and aspirations of the various ethnic groups living on Sakhalin Island of Russia's Pacific Region. Chapter 10 *Institutional Brand Construct and University Sustainability* by Nan Jia and Jae Park (2022), presents a multiple case study on universities' brand-building strategies for fostering 'corporate sustainability.' Nan Jia and Jae Park discuss the ways universities use corporate sustainability as a goal and method to achieve their regional and global standing, while dealing with the increasing pressures to boost their social and economic impacts in the society.

The last section of the volume, *Future Developments*, covers some strategic developments in the tertiary sectors' of the Ural and Siberian regions of Russia, the mainland China, and China's Hong Kong SAR, and discusses institutional approaches to sustainable development in universities. The Chap. 11, *Vocational cum Pedagogical Tertiary Education and Sustainable Development in Russia,* by Galina Sikorskaia and Tamara Savelyeva (2022) provides a history and policy overview of the tertiary Vocational-Pedagogical education in Russia and discusses the strategic factors for sustainable development with a qualitative case study.

Luxi Zhang, David Sorrell, Paul Adams, and Bob Adamson (2022) in their Chap. 12 *Creating a Sustainable College Performance Evaluation in China* discuss challenges and tensions of the nation-wide college performance evaluation (CPE)

system implemented in Chinese universities in connection with the country's Double First Class University Plan for modernization of the Chinese tertiary education sector.

The Chap. 13 of the volume Elza I. Pechertsa's (2022) *Formative Assessment for Lifelong Learning, Effective Teaching, and Sustainable Development in Russia* evaluates an implementation of formative assessment for lifelong learning and sustainable development in the Russian education system. Elza I. Pecheritsa's study discusses challenges for universal adaptation of the assessment tool in the country's secondary through tertiary levels.

In Chap. 14, *Towards a General Framework of Sustainable Tertiary Education*, Tamara Savelyeva (2022d) sums up the findings presented in the volume and derives an insightful, culturally relevantframework for the future development of sustainable tertiary education in Asia. The resulting general framework consists of the three features: Sustainability, Institutional Rationalization, and Educational Mechanisms.

All these contributions share a common claim that one of the most effective ways of achieving strategic goals of sustainable development is through enhancing the quality of tertiary education. As different tertiary education traditions within Asia are fast evolving amidst challenging contexts, from globalization to pandemics, there is a hope that a sustainable development of tertiary education in the region can be realized only by a collective effort of its stakeholders. The contributors of this volume are committed to sustaining higher education institutions through their research, teaching, and exchange of knowledge with community both local and international.

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