

Response submitted online

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Dear Department for International Development,

Please find below our consultation response on the process for the UK's first Voluntary National Review (VNR) of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

**EAUC – The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education:** UK's first Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Response on behalf of our Members (United Kingdom and Ireland)

#### **About the EAUC**

Our passion is to create a world with sustainability at its heart. That's our vision. We exist to lead and empower the post-16 education sector to make sustainability 'just good business'.

The membership of the EAUC comprises higher and further educational institutions, with a combined budget of some £25 billion, responsible for educating over 2 million students supported by half a billion staff.

We have regional and country chapters, with member institutions connected deeply with business, industry, health and civic bodies at local levels, with reach internationally via their research, innovation and student mobility.

#### **We believe**

- That UK and Irish education should be a global leader in sustainability
- That educational institutions have a responsibility as anchors in their communities to be agents of change
- That education has a unique opportunity to transform lives and communities
- That education is at the heart of global sustainability
- That every student should have access to sustainability education
- That education should reflect best practice in operational sustainability
- In being flexible and adaptable to find solutions for a resilient future
- In the value of international collaboration

#### **Our values**

- Pioneering - driving sustainability through innovation
- Independence - our own unique voice
- Collaboration - together we go further
- Role Model - leading by example
- Empowering - supporting and inspiring our members

#### **Response to consultation:**

- ***What do you think worked well in the UK's VNR stakeholder engagement process?***

The engagement events organised around the country did work well – they were well organised and had suitable senior representation able to answer questions. However – that is about all we can commend, and while they were good, they felt adhoc. There were not enough of them, and communication was limited. Follow up has also been minimal.

- ***What could the UK have done differently/better to engage stakeholders?***

First of all – the SDGs were agreed upon by UN member states (including the UK) at the end of 2015, and therefore we must start by looking at why it has taken until late 2018/ early 2019 to start to engage with stakeholders domestically on the SDGs.

There should have been a comprehensive plan from the beginning on how the UK was going to fulfil its SDG obligations, and it should have featured the VNR as the biennial reporting functionality of this plan. There is no doubt that Office for National Statistics have been working to track data on the SDGs far earlier than the VNR, but stakeholders are the key to qualitative data, which has formed a large basis of VNR and stakeholder engagement had not been attempted until the last second. The process to gain qualitative information mostly consisted of DFID asking civil society to suggest case studies of SDG orientated work to feature in the VNR. This was a fairly superficial and inefficient way to do this. The VNR thereby implied the UK Government was fully aware of the initiatives it featured and it had a good relationship with those undertaking these measures – but it doesn't.

The initiatives submitted did not reflect the breadth of work those in civil society are doing on the SDGs at all, and the whole process of gaining them was very much at arm's length, to make the government look good at an international event. When in reality; which domestic SDG initiatives can the Government say it has supported? Who has it engaged with prior to the VNR process? A lot of this comes down to one of the most fundamental issues in the management of the SDGs in the UK, and that is: it sits in the wrong department. While the SDGs should be integrated into every department (far more than the current cursory mentions in the Single Departmental Plans), the lead should be a minister in either DEFRA or BEIS. Sitting in DFID means the domestic side of the SDGs has been severely neglected – as outlined in the [UKSSD report 'Measuring Up'](#) published in July 2018: "Out of 143 targets we considered relevant to the domestic delivery of the Goals, UKSSD found that the UK is performing well on 24% of them. There are gaps in policy or inadequate performance for 57% of them, and 15% where there is little to no policy in place to address the target, or where performance is poor." While there have been some attempts to address these issues, they have mostly been in the form of surveys like this, that ask the questions, followed by reports like the VNR that give vague outlines on a potential remedy. For example, in response to the stakeholder engagement issue pointed out a year ago, the VNR says: 'an effective mechanism will also be established to enhance stakeholder engagement'.

Scotland, meanwhile, has outlined the 'SDG Network Scotland', an open coalition bringing together the voices of over 300 people and organisations, that helped formulate its input to the VNR. England has not really got anything comparable and we find this a little odd. Replicating something like this would be an obvious place for the UK government to start working on stakeholder engagement with the SDGs.

- ***The [UK's VNR](#) (page 213) outlines plans to establish a mechanism to enhance stakeholder engagement on domestic implementation of the SDGs. Do you have any views on the format of the mechanism or who should be involved?***

We believe a multi-stakeholder SDG advisory group is necessary – as outlined above.

[SDG Network Scotland's](#) open coalition would be good to replicate, it describes itself as below:

“Scotland’s SDG Network has been formed out of a demand to increase working together and partnership across Scotland and beyond. The Network is here to build awareness and engagement across civil society, business and government. Where possible, it will support the implementation of the SDGs in Scotland and aims to ensure that the voices of those committed to sustainability are heard by key decision makers.

“The Network brings together different perspectives and offers a powerful vehicle to develop messages through consensus to facilitate coordinated and collaborative work with regard to these aims. With over 340 people and organisations now connected to us, we’re a small but fast growing movement.

“Anyone can sign up to the Network by joining our online forum. Our aim is to work as a collective voice in empowering communities and organisations to make use of the Sustainable Development Goals to secure a real change in Scotland.”

The other mechanism required is a better research process. There is a lot of SDG initiatives going on in the UK at the moment, and the Government is fairly unfamiliar with them. We submitted a case study, and attended an event, and while we recognise the VNR cannot feature everything, it felt like a really big missed opportunity that they have not followed up with us at all about the SDG Accord initiative we run, that facilitates knowledge exchange between universities and colleges around the world on the SDGs. The [SDG Accord](#) is a high profile International initiative that EAUC developed to ensure tertiary education was committed to playing its part in meeting the SDGs. This is a partnership initiative, with support from the UN’s HESI and many other global partners. It was launched at the end of 2017, and we currently have official commitment to the SDG Accord and its tenets from 102 Vice-Chancellors/ Principals and their institutions; of these, 42 are based in the UK and Ireland. The SDG Accord has an annual reporting process that captures a huge volume of information about what institutions are doing on the SDGs – which is presented to the UN High Level Political Forum each year. There is a ground swell of support here from the tertiary education sector, and yet, when we have tried to engage with DfiD on this topic, we have received little interest or support.

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***Do you have any other thoughts or reflections you wish to share on any part of the UK’s VNR process?***

For the SDGs to be delivered, they must be embedded into society, integrated into policies, strategies, plans, reporting, engagement, marketing – and be part of everything we do. This review should encourage initiatives that contribute towards delivery of the SDGs, emphasising the need for them to be integrated rather than standalone. Requesting ‘policies and projects’ is a useful first step but insufficient alone.

EAUC’s other consultation responses on this topic:

- [IDC on the SDG VNR](#)
- [EAC on the SDG VNR](#)

Yours sincerely,



Iain Patton, CEO, EAUC