The Future17 Programme: Students lead real-world, global sustainable initiatives

Abstract

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consists of 17 Global Goals and was launched in 2015 to address challenges such as climate change and social inequities. Achieving the agenda requires a coordinated global effort by multiple stakeholders, including universities. The Future17 Programme, cofounded by QS and the University of Exeter, connects students and businesses across the globe to collaborate and address these pressing problems. As an early member, the University of Auckland participated in the first 2023 cohort with students and mentors working on different global projects. Using a case study approach combined with a collaborative autoethnography, the authors share their insights and experience as mentors to student teams. The findings indicate significant gains in the project goals of developing 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, cross-cultural collaboration and problem-solving among students. These positive outcomes serve as a beacon to other universities to join the global programme.

Keywords

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Interdisciplinarity, Collaboration

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Introduction

As the world faced major global challenges that required concerted global efforts, the United Nations launched the Global Goals, which consisted of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They are designed to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace, prosperity and a better quality of life for all. Basically, the SDGs are aimed at transforming the world by calling for action to address challenges across three domains of economic, social and environmental issues. Called the UN Agenda for 2030, promoting the SDGs is the responsibility of all actors and agents in the world including governments, non-governmental organizations, and higher educational institutions (HEIs).

As the champion of SDGs, the UN promotes them in HEIs through its affiliates such as the UN Academic Impact (UNAI) which brings academics, students, scientists, researchers and think tanks together. UNAI goes a step further by identifying 17 different universities as UNAI SDG Hubs, one for each goal. Further as the critical role of HEI in promoting the SDGs is recognised universally, the global rankings bodies like Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) started ranking universities separately on sustainability performance. Given the increasing emphasis on the SDGs, in 2022, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and the University of Exeter joined forces to establish the Future17 Global Education Programme (Future17, na), a global initiative to support students in developing 21st century skills and in finding innovative solutions to real-world problems associated with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

When it comes to higher education, it has been well established that active learning, and experiential learning in particular, has a lasting impact on students (Kolb, 2015): Students who actively participate in their learning, especially through targeted and relevant

experiences, achieve higher levels of knowledge acquisition and retention, are more motivated to learn and satisfied with the learning process, and are better able to translate their theoretical learning into practical applications. An experiential learning approach also gives students more responsibility and authority to engage in and manage their own learning (Morris, 2020). Using real life cases, or global challenges such as in the Future 17 programme, students can proactively apply their knowledge, help find solutions to solve real-world problems, and engage with organisations outside of their education institution through contextually-rich concrete experiences.

When the University of Auckland joined the Future17 programme, the authors joined as volunteer mentors to the student teams. They acted as a mentors during the period from March to June 2023 on projects dealing with single use plastic pollution and women empowerment through technology training programmes. While the mentors were from New Zealand, the business partners and the projects were in a different country. The student teams were multinational in their composition. Figure 1 shows the structure of collaboration by different participants in the programme.

Figure 1

Method

We use a case study approach combined with collaborative autoethnography to present the narrative, analyse contextual factors and present our findings. A case study research approach is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). According to Yin, case studies can be used to explain, describe or explore events or phenomena in our everyday contexts in which they

occur (Yin, 2009). The collaborative authoethnography is a research method that builds on the traditional autoethnography. It involves 'researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their socio-cultural contexts (Arnold and Norton, 2021). Using these two approaches, we hope to gain insights into the structure, process and benefits that the Future17 programme achieved during our participation as mentors. We hope that the findings would encourage other universities in the Australasian region to join the Future17 Global Programme that affords a unique opportunity to all stakeholders such as the participating universities and business partners.

Case Background

The Future17 Global Education Programme was launched in 2022 by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and the University of Exeter (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022). The Future17 programme is a new global initiative to support students in developing 21st Century skills and in finding innovative solutions to real-world problems associated with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The programme brings together students from multiple countries, disciplines, and business partners to work on challenges related to the 17 SDGs of the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030, aiming to create a better global future. When the University of Auckland joined the program in early 2023, universities from four continents were part of the programme, namely the University of Exeter (UK), The Chinese University of Hong Kong, American University in Cairo, Luiss University (Italy), Stellenbosch University (South Africa), University of São Paulo (Brazil), and the University of Auckland (New Zealand). The authors joined the Future17 programme as academic mentors to support and guide a team of students from multiple countries and institutions.

Taking a fresh approach to educational innovation, the Future17 programme enables students to collaborate with peers from participating universities and with carefully selected

partners to work on projects addressing business challenges using the SDGs. These partners are drawn from businesses, charities, NGOs, etc who self-express interest in the programme and undergo a rigorous selection process. For example, the 2023 challenge programme that ran from February to May 2023 consisted of 34 projects that were carefully selected by the global project team. The participating projects covered different topics such as plastic waste, women's empowerment, female technology training, exporting, digital promotion, etc., which were all examined from the SDGs perspective. Students were initially selected by their respective universities through a thorough application and recruitment process which included personal interviews, whereas the central Future17 team then formed teams of 5-6 students based on the students' interest in the available projects. The final teams consisted of students from a range of universities, different academic backgrounds and disciplines, and from a range of different tertiary education levels (undergraduate, masters, PhD). The projects ran for eight weeks during which the student teams worked on a given business problem to develop actionable solutions for the business partners in line with the SDGs. However, selected students started their preparation early by learning about design thinking to use it as part of the project orientation as they got ready to tackle sustainability challenges. Details on the project design and structure can be found in Appendix A.

Final deliverables were initially outlined by the partner, however, these were then further discussed and scoped through the collaboration between the student team, mentors, and partner. Deliverables took various shapes and forms, depending on the project: Teams created brochures, marketing plans, strategy maps, Excel sheets, posters, games, written reports, slide decks, etc. Ultimately, the deliverables needed to solve the partner's challenges and provide documentation in the best suitable format. On top of those deliverables, student teams provided a written summary piece of their work to the Future17 team, along with a live

presentation to the Future 17 team, mentors and partner. These two pieces (the presentation and the report) were then marked by two mentors.

Contribution of academic mentors

Overall, the role of the academic mentor is critical in the success of the projects: As students were from different countries, along with a co-mentor from a different university, we had to liaise between the Future17 partner and the student teams. Our main role was to help define the project's scope, encourage students' fair and active participation, provide clarifications and pointers to help students with their investigation and develop actionable solutions. We also coordinated with the business partner and the Future17 Programme Coordinator to arrange meetings and clarify project outcome formats. Same as for a regular university course, we also had to assess the student team's performance using a rubric that was converted into grades. Some students used these grades as credits for their degree programmes.

As mentioned previously, 34 projects were part of the latest round of the Future 17 programme. Both authors were involved in very different projects: One project focussed on creating a fundraising strategy and sourcing details of potential sponsors and funders for a University in Pakistan that wants to empower women in the use of technology to improve their employability opportunities. As many Pakistani women face challenges in accessing education, economic opportunities, and any form of political empowerment, the partner University posed the challenge of generating tech training programme resources, and fundraising for resources. The student team for this project consisted of two PhD students from the American University Cairo, two postgraduate students from the Stellenbosch University, and three undergraduate students from the University of Auckland. The other mentor on this project was also from the Stellenbosch University. The student team researched the business and social environment, created an extensive list of free (global)

educational training programmes, proposed sponsor organisations who offer established support programmes, created marketing material to send out to potential sponsors, and created a strategic implementation plan including detailed next steps for the partner. This was collated over the duration of the project, and then presented to the partner at the culmination of the project.

The other project focussed on addressing a single use plastic problem in India. Being the most populated country in the world, the use of single use plastic posed enormous problem. The task was to develop strategies to address the problem.The business partner is this case is a Mumbai based startup called Fillable. None of the students or mentors were located in India. The student team for this project had six students but two dropped out. The final team consisted of two masters students from the American University of Cairo, a masters student from Stellenbosch University of South Africa and one undergraduate student from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. These students were studying Public Administration, Economic Development, Global Studies, Law and Chemistry. The other mentor for this project was an English teacher for the American University of Cairo. In the initial meeting by the organisers, we were forewarned that sometimes the projects were not clear or too big in their scope. As it turned out, the student team and our business partner, Fillable, wanted students to address the problem of single-use plastic in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) sectors. Hence, early in the project, we discussed with the business partner to limit the project scope to only B2C to make it manageable within the eight-week time frame. Despite not being located in India, students examined the social cultural aspects of India, the market size for the business and advised specific strategies like collaboration between vendors and manufacturers, incentive options, and taking advantage of government new rules to reduce single use of plastic and expand to

other cities in India. The project report was 120 pages and provided a detailed
implementation plan for the business partner at the end of the project.

Findings and Implications

Reflecting on and analysing our participation, it is clear that our projects largely
achieved its purpose. All three key parties involved in each indidivual project benefit from
their participation in the Future 17 Programme. Table 1 explains in detail the key takeaways
for each of those three key stakeholders.

Table 1

Even though the outcomes of the projects were a presentation and a written piece for
the business partners, students gained several skills in the process: Student teams organised
regular meetings (often once per week), conducted secondary research using thinking
principles and the SDG lens, employed critical thinking and problem-solving skills to
examine the relevant environments, and collaboratively developed their deliverables. In the
process, they also learned about group collaboration skills, time management and project
management skills, honed their skills in using online collaborative tools (e.g., Zoom and
Google Drive), gained an understanding on how to respect other cultures and manage cultural
differences, communicate effectively, enhance leadership skills, and systematically develop a
set of feasible and actionable solutions, which they showcased through concise presentations
and a written piece. The key takeaway was developing new capabilities to appreciate and
apply SDGs to create a better future for the world.

The business partner is a major beneficiary as they receive probono consultancy
services from future global leaders, aka students. Many business partners would otherwise
not be able to engage a collective of intelligent, outcome-driven individuals such as the

student team, due to their lack in financial resources. The final presentation and report provides different actionable solutions that address the business' problem. It helps the business partner to have a fresh perspective from a team of global students, who are not financially or subjectively influenced by the project and offer an objective action report. Most projects resulted in tangible outcomes that could be applied, implemented, or made use of by the business partner in the short-medium term, therefore, having the ability to have a real impact on the business' goals to address one (or several) of the 17 UN SGDs.

Mentors provided several services: Their involvement in guiding students in scoping the project early in the project is critical. Their regular support to the team, advise and guidance during the project period and challenging the team's ideas towards strategy development were imported to the outcome. Further, in instances where team members did not actively participate, mentors assumed the role of mediator, coach and encourager to help the team continue with their collaborative work and meet the important deadlines. The experience allowed the authors to gain capabilities in supporting a multicultural team that worked in multiple zones and address a real business or social problem. The skills can be transferred to the classroom in their respective universities.

Overall, participating in the Future 17 Programme allows all of these three parties to work collaboratively on a UN SDG challenge, to improve the future for current generations and those that come after. Students gain much desired 21st century skills and network with peers across the globe to help them join the workforce with improved employability skills. This can be seen as the key major satisfaction for mentors, as is always the case with committed academics all over the world.

Session Overview / Description

Our session can is planned for a 50 minute session (but can flexible).

- 0-5 mins: Welcome and presentation of some material for participants

- 5 - 10 mins: Icebreaker activity: Pairs of participants take a quick survey on climate change

  - Discussion of the results and feedback

- 10 - 25 mins: Our experience – objectives, target audience, mentors, timelines, key outcomes, and future skills, etc.

- 25 - 35 mins: Exercise working in groups of three-four on how we teach sustainability to students in universities

  - Discuss methodological and theoretical issues

  - Feedback to capture the methods of teaching

- 35 - 45 mins: Feedback session to capture summarising statements from each group (to help the researchers understand the value or otherwise of their work and so participants leave with a summarising the key takeaways of teaching or embedding or providing experiential learning)

- 45 - 50 mins: Invite more institutions to join Future17, thanks and close

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Appendix A

Timeline and scale

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Phase	Induction				Challenges							
Activity				Groups assigned	Intros	Groupwork					Mock pitch	Final pitch
Involved												

Delivered 2x per year:
- **Cohort 1:** September - December
- **Cohort 2:** January – April

Maximum 50 students per university per cohort.

Mid-challenge review

Summative assessment

How to make the most of Future17

Mentors	Partners	Trainings	Visibility
They are here to support and guide, but you run the project – own it.	Be prepared, engaged and impressive	LinkedIn for Career	Build your brand – now
Be proactive!	Internships are out there, ask if you are interested	Intercultural Communication	Interviews & Stories
		Powerful Presentation	Social Media

Figure 1: Key Collaborators
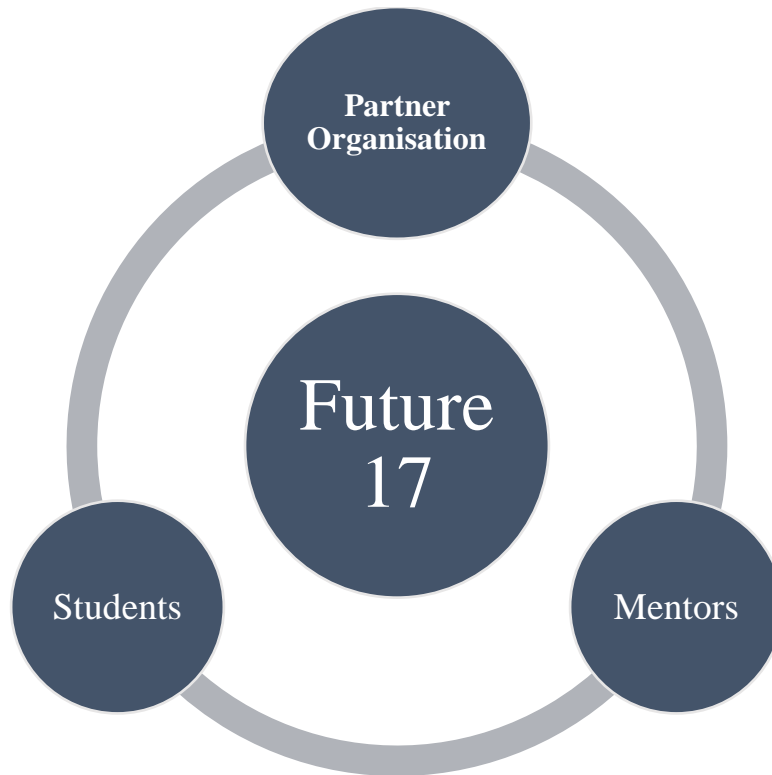
Table 1: Future 17 Programme Participation Benefits

Future 17 Programme Participants	Key Benefits
Students	Gain 21st century skills such as collaboration, intercultural communication, project and time management, leadership while solving a global SDG challenge for a real client.
Partner Organisation	Fresh insights into the project, business problem and an actionable report (probono).
Mentors	Experience of working on real-world global problems using a SDG lens while mentoring

	a team of multicultural, multinational global virtul teams. These skills are transferrable to their class rooms in their respective universities.