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Author(s)	Enkhtur, Ariunaa; Rakhshandehroo, Mahboubeh
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Using Social Space Perspective to Explore SDGs Curricula Localisation: Case Study at Two Japanese National and Private Universities

Ariunaa Enkhtur¹  | Mahboubeh Rakhshandehroo² 

¹Center for Global Initiatives, Osaka University, Japan | ²Kwansei Gakuin University, Osaka University, Japan

Correspondence: Ariunaa Enkhtur (enkhtur.ariunaa.cgin@osaka-u.ac.jp)

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the concept of the Production of Space this article examines how sustainable development agenda was localised—in design, operation and students’ lived experiences—in two international education programmes at two universities in Japan. We analysed relevant programme documents, interviews with faculty members, students’ reflective notes, as well as the authors’ autoethnographic journals. The findings show that the local and institutional context influenced the SDGs curriculum design (representations of space or the conceived space). The virtual and physical learning spaces, the pedagogy and the operation of the programme (spatial practice or perceived space) shaped students’ interaction and learning outcomes (representational space or the lived space). As instructors attempted to adopt SDGs in their teaching (through perceived space) and as students tried to gain interdisciplinary knowledge through SDGs (through lived space), both parties negotiated and challenged the programme design shifting the conceived spaces. Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the localisation of SDGs within the internationalisation of higher education by employing Lefebvre’s spatial analysis. This approach reveals the complex socio-spatial dynamics at play, offering insights into how educational environments are constructed and experienced.

1 | Introduction

Preparing students with knowledge and skills to live sustainably and contribute to achieving sustainable development has increasingly become an important mission across universities. In Japan, the education for sustainable development (ESD) has been promoted by a series of government initiatives as well as local communities and the universities (Liu 2021). While the ESD initiatives has been successfully embedded in the basic curriculum for primary and secondary education, it has been less coherent in higher education institutions lacking interconnections with other education reforms (Kitamura and Hoshii 2010), such as internationalisation of higher education (Edwards and Ashida 2021).

Emerging literature discuss how higher education contributes to sustainable development through its international engagement (McCowan 2023). From one hand, internationalisation activities at higher education institutes exacerbates global issues through academic mobility and its impact on climate change (Shields 2019), by adopting western neoliberal ideologies in international education programmes or global partnership initiatives further expanding the global inequality (da Silva and Pereira 2024; Zemach-Bersin 2020). On the other hand, higher education institutions positively contribute to sustainability through international research collaborations to produce innovative solutions to local and global problems and preparing graduates with skills and awareness to tackle global issues (Ramaswamy et al. 2021).

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In the context of Japan's aging society, declining birth rate, and decreasing college student population, coupled with the growing pressure on higher education to contribute to economic revitalisation through the development of skilled graduates, there has been a strong national push for internationalisation (Yonezawa 2014; Ota 2018). While the internationalisation of higher education is included in Japan's official strategy for achieving the SDGs through collaborative research to drive innovation or by fostering the type of human resources to meet the SDGs (MOFA 2017), little research exists that explored how SDGs agenda is localised in internationalisation engagement at Japanese universities.

Drawing on the production of space theory (Lefebvre 1991), this study aims to explore two institutional cases in Japan where the SDGs have been introduced in international programmes, one in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme and the other in international student exchange programme. Both case universities located in Kansai region, Japan and are Top Global University project universities that received government funding in last 10 years (2014–2023) with an aim to lead with innovative programmes in Japan and globally. Both programmes introduced SDGs framework for the development of global competencies including English language skills. Analysing how the two courses were localised, implemented and experienced from spatial perspectives, we explore the inter-relationship between the course design (conceived space), implementation (perceived space), and students' and teachers' experiences (the lived space). As Gulson and Symes (2007) wrote, drawing on spatial theories help us to identify the competing rationalities in educational policy and practices (p. 98). Lefebvre's production of space theory enables a discussion of the tensions and opportunities across abstract course design, everyday operation and instruction, and lived experiences to reclaim spaces where curriculum is lived as meaningful spaces of imagination and possibility (Davies 2024).

2 | Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Due to widespread environmental degradation and pollution during the 1960s and 1970s, significant environmental awareness emerged worldwide underscoring the human responsibility for preserving the environment. In the wake of Carson's (1962) work, Environmental Education emerged as a response to environmental destruction, which was further expanded to include wider dimensions, forging the Education for Sustainable Development (Wals and Kieft 2010).

In 2005 the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was launched following the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg where Japan proposed the 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development'. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, SDG 4 on Quality Education emphasised the importance of education in general and ESD in particular for achieving a sustainable future. The Target 4.7 on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship further emphasised ESD (Comfort 2024).

Higher education institutions have initiated efforts to incorporate ESD into their curricula, although it has been often implemented as part of broader campus sustainability initiatives for instance campus greening (e.g., Grierson and Hyland, 2012; Azapagic, Perdan, and Shallcross, 2005; Barlett and Chase, 2013; Barth, Michelsen, Rieckmann, and Thomas, 2016; Barlett and Eisen, 2002 cited in Jodoin 2019). Despite various initiatives, however, ESD has not been systematically considered in higher education, and the extent to which it has been localised is unknown (Jodoin 2019).

Higher education for sustainable development (HESD) has encountered several challenges due to institutional resistance to change (Johnston 2013), or because the SDGs concepts were not easily transferable to content areas (Kleiman 2010). However, HESD has been cited as leading to positive outcomes, including student-centred learning, cultivating critical thinking skills and enabling students to communicate complex sustainability knowledge to cope with change (Leicht, Heiss, and Byun 2018). Moreover, HESD is critical to developing students' ability, motivation and desire to actively participate in finding solutions to SD issues and problems (Mogensen and Schnack 2018). The purpose of teaching ESD is therefore to empower and motivate student subjectively to take action for sustainable development.

3 | Education for Sustainable Development in Japan

Japan has a long history of education for environmental conservation and promoting educational institutions' role in exploring ways to coexist with nature (Kitamura and Hoshii 2014). For example, Japan established ESD hubs as UNESCO-associated schools and created a network of universities to support these schools (Nomura and Abe 2010). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) developed guidelines for ESD at all levels of education (MEXT 2016). The formal ESD activities are under the responsibility of MEXT, whereas nonformal ESD activities are under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment (MOE).

Many universities have been actively proposing projects to prepare environmental leaders in developing countries, or serving as local or international leaders in ESD programmes collaborating with government entities such as MEXT and MOE or local schools (Liu 2021). For example, the Associated Schools Project University Network (ASPUUnivNet) is a 'nation-wide university network in Japan that provides support for UNESCO Associated Schools to conduct educational activities' (Liu 2021). On the other hand, sustainability-linked research and green campus efforts are growing.

Despite these initiatives, Singer and Nagata (2017) argue that the ESD implementation in curricula and student-led initiatives at Japanese universities lag behind those seen in primary and secondary schools and universities in many other developed nations. Although there are many ESD-related programmes in Japanese HEIs, there is a lack of linkage between different subjects and programmes (Kitamura and Hoshii 2014).

Recently, a growing awareness of ESD in Japan is driven by the promotion of the SDGs and is seen in advertisements throughout the country (Icihnose 2019). Despite the proliferation of SDG-related advertisements in the Japanese media (Ueno and Dooley 2022), there is very little research work to explore the extent to which these initiatives contribute to the understanding of SDGs among Japanese university students (Icihnose 2019; Jodoin 2019).

Nevertheless, a small but growing body of recent research has demonstrated positive outcomes for ESD at Japanese universities. For instance, students are becoming increasingly aware of their role and the need to act ambitiously in the creation of an environmentally sustainable society, at least about the local environment, community welfare, and depopulation of communities (Icihnose 2019). A study by Jodoin (2019) also demonstrated that ESD can positively influence students' environmental literacy, as well as motivate them to take action.

4 | Internationalisation of Higher Education and Sustainable Development

While the contribution to the society through education, research, and service has been one of the main roles of higher education institutions, this 'third mission' has been disconnected from universities' internationalisation agenda (Jones et al. 2021). On the other hand, international engagement of higher education institutions is highly relevant to sustainable development in both positive and negative ways (Nikula and McBride 2023). Shields (2019) showed that the CO₂ emissions from student flights were between 14.01 and 38.54 megatons in 2014, similar to the annual emissions of the entire country of Croatia or Jamaica. The ways in which universities reinforce existing hegemonic status quo in their global partnerships, international student recruitment, approaches to curriculum internationalisation (Stein 2017), and employment practices have negative impacts to global equity, justice, the sustainable development (McCowan 2023). On the other hand, through intentional programming and pedagogy, study abroad programmes and at home internationalisation activities have potentials to develop intercultural understanding and global citizenship (Tsiligiris and Ilieva 2021). Moreover, equal and ethical partnership both with local and global communities in research and education contribute to global justice (da Silva and Pereira 2024).

Internationalisation policies in Japanese higher education has been largely driven by domestic demographic shift and the intensifying global competition. The aging population and low birth rate in Japan have led to a shrinking pool of domestic students, prompting universities to recruit students from overseas. Japan's economic stagnation, on the other hand, prompts universities to re-evaluate its traditional reliance on domestic markets for talent and innovation. On the global stage, Japan faces increasing competition from rapidly emerging economies and knowledge hubs. To maintain its position as a leader in technology, innovation, and research, Japanese higher education institutions view internationalisation as a tool to develop a globally competent workforce, called 'global human resources' (Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development 2011).

In Japanese national action plan for SDGs, higher education is mentioned for its role in accepting international students under the action plan of 'empowering all people', promoting collaboration with industries and international partners and creating inclusive environment for young, female or foreign researchers (Edwards and Ashida 2021, 113). On the other hand, the government-funded project for internationalisation of domestic universities, such as Top Global University (TGU) began to report on institutions' activities related to SDGs (SGU website) and calls for online education models in international education that is more accessible (Sato 2022). In this paper, to explore the dynamics between the internationalisation and sustainable development agendas in localisation of SDGs curriculum in Japanese higher education, we conducted autoethnographic case studies on two courses situated in international education programme.

5 | Theoretical Framework

We draw on the production of space theory (Lefebvre 1991), as the heuristic conceptual framework to analyse the interrelationship between the abstract, everyday, and lived spaces of SDGs courses in two university settings. This spatial analysis adds depth to pedagogic analysis of this paper helping us to explore contested meanings behind the curriculum design, the teaching and the learning space and how students' experiences are shaped by these social spaces. Space, according to this theory, is socially constructed through power, structures and relationships (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005), continually shaped by social processes. Lefebvre's 'spatial triad' comprises 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational spaces' (Lefebvre 1991). These concepts are often interpreted by scholars such as Soja (1996), Elden (2004) and Shields (2005) in English as 'perceived space', 'conceived space' and 'lived space' respectively.

- **Spatial Practice (Perceived Space):** Refers to the daily routines and practices that shape and are shaped by the physical environment, the common practices and normalised functions of the space, (Lefebvre 1991, 33) such as the operational aspects of the SDGs programmes.
- **Representations of Space (Conceived Space):** Involves the planning and design of spaces, reflecting the institutional goals and visions that guide the programme design.
- **Representational Spaces (Lived Space):** Encompasses the personal and subjective experiences of individuals within the space, including students' and teachers' interactions and learning outcomes (see Figure 1). It refers to how meaning is attributed to spaces through subjective experiences and feelings (Kellock and Sexton 2018). In this study, the lived space encompasses the lived experiences in virtual or physical classrooms, and their learning outcome. con

Lefebvre's theory makes it possible to explain how the institutional context and the course design directs and regulates the implementation of SDGs courses in two international education settings. And how these abstract spaces of curriculum design are delivered and mediated in a way that is suitable to the local

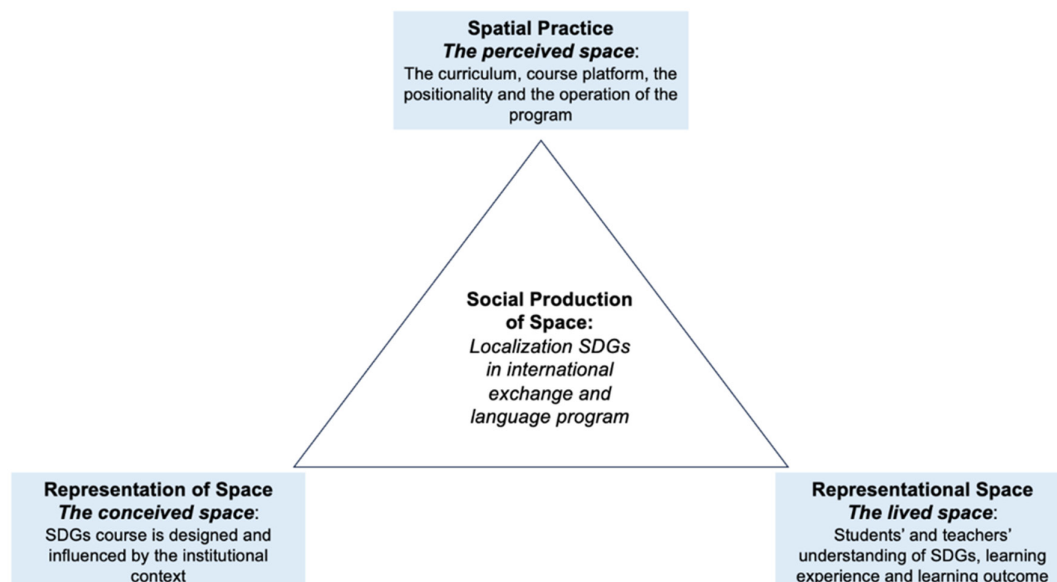


FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework.

programme and students' levels, and made meaning by the students and teachers. Spatial analysis allows exploration of how spaces become educational or learning space, influencing learning outcomes, creating inequities, and either opening or limiting possibilities for new practices and knowledge (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2015). The spatial framework extends beyond physical spaces to include digital spaces as well. As digital technology becomes integral to the learning experience, understanding how online and digital spaces impact learning, and how learners negotiate and transform these spaces, is crucial (Harrison 2018).

The localisation of SDGs curriculum involves the process of adapting educational content, materials, and approaches to be more relevant and responsive to the cultural, social, economic, and linguistic contexts of the learners and the particular local situation or context (Zguir, Dubis, and Koç 2021). This process is not only negotiated by the programme designers but also by the students and the teachers. By drawing on the production of space framework, we can examine the meaning ascribed to the SDGs curriculum by the learners, the course designers and the teachers, as well as the ways SDGs are translated in the specific programme at the specific institution. In learning spaces, the conceived-perceived-and lived spaces may have overlapping threads that have gaps, unintended consequences, or contradictory elements (Boys 2011). Sheehy (2009) argues that these imaginary physical and lived spaces can be adjusted and adapted as individual learners negotiate and inscribe their own lived experience onto both the perceived and conceived spaces.

In our study, we explore how the SDGs was targeted in two programme designs (the conceived space), how it was operationalised or implemented (the perceived space), and how students and teachers make meaning to their experiences (lived space), and how this interrelationship shape the localisation process of SDGs in international education and exchange programme.

6 | Positionality Statement

Both authors are insiders of the case programmes. The first author designed one of the course programmes along with other colleagues and both authors were main facilitators of the case programmes. Both authors were involved in teaching and assessing students' learning outcome. The insider perspective helped the researchers to have contextual understanding of the programme, utilise their observations throughout the programme implementation and their discussions with other faculty members. To improve the validity of our analysis, we compared our reflective autoethnographic accounts and our interpretations of the data giving outsider perspectives in each other's programme analysis.

7 | Methodology

To explore and compare the two case programmes from spatial perspectives, we employed a case study design (Yin 2014). The case study approach was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of localisation of SDGs in international education programmes, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of its complexities and dynamics. The research design entails the careful selection of case universities and the collection of data from multiple sources, including document review of publicly available materials, interviews with faculty members from the two case programmes, and students' reflective notes and learning diaries. Additionally, as insiders of case programmes, we used autoethnography (Canagarajah 2012) in the format of reflective journal entries and notes sharing with each other. By employing this methodology, our aim is to offer a detailed and insightful analysis of the case programmes, shedding light on the underlying factors, relationships, and contextual influences that shape the programme implementation.

After completing the ethical review process, the authors began writing retrospective reflective entries about the course design

and the implementation process. The authors held regular meetings from October 2022 to August 2023 to exchange the journal entries and to interview and question each other's experiences. In summer 2023, the authors collected additional publicly available documents related to the two universities' internationalisation and SDGs strategies and engagement. In late summer, the authors conducted additional interviews with faculty members who designed the programmes. In fall, the authors analysed reflective notes (U1) and learning diaries (U2) from students who took the course in 2022 academic year.

The following Table 1 shows our data sources:

Both case universities are Top Global Universities in Japan receiving government funding in last 10 years with an aim to lead with innovative programmes in Japan and globally.

In recent years, both universities are increasingly promoting SDGs, mapping existing practices while implementing new programmes, to demonstrate their societal impact. At the national university case (U1), the first author and her team developed and implemented the SDGs course for domestic and overseas students at partner universities. Mainly driven by the pandemic restriction on student mobility, the programme aimed to promote international student exchange, and nurture students' global

communication and problem-solving skills. At the private university case (U2), the second author and a team of EAP teachers developed and implemented a lecture bridge course focused on SDGs. The creation of this course involved revising and updating the existing curriculum by incorporating fresh insights from the SDGs that were previously not considered within the former curriculum. U1 case is a short-term intensive exchange programme for mainly undergraduate students across different disciplines studying in Japan and overseas. U2 is a year-long mandatory programme for policy studies students to develop EAP skills. Table 2 shows the two cases and their goals, structure, and student targets.

First, each researcher analysed the cases independently. By using Nvivo 14, we went through the text documents including autoethnographic data, interview transcripts and students' reports to identify the overarching themes that explain the phenomena of SDGs curriculum design and adaptation at the case institution. In this process, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines, we became first familiarised with the data by reading them for a number of times and writing notes if needed. Once we identified repeated patterns coding the documents using the NVivo software, we developed the initial list of themes. Then, we shared our analysis with each other providing outsider perspectives and improving the validity of our analysis. While comparing

TABLE 1 | The data in the study.

National university case (U1)	Private university case (U2)
Reflective autoethnographic journal	Reflective autoethnographic journal
Interviews with a faculty member	Interviews with two programme designers
Institutional documents (for instance, the institutional master plan, internationalisation strategy document)	Institutional documents (for instance, the SDG strategy document, internationalisation strategy document)
Students' reflection notes ($N = 77$ papers)	Students' reflective learning diaries ($N = 100$ diaries)

TABLE 2 | The programme descriptions.

	National university case (U1)	Private university case (U2)
Course goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop knowledge about SDGs and their relations to students themselves • Help students propose a local action to address a global challenge • Strengthen communication skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop EAP skills such as effective academic discussion, note taking, and academic writing • Develop students' understanding of SDGs issues
Classroom/platform	Synchronous virtual format: 30–45 min lecture 30–45 discussions	In-person with a few online lessons due to the pandemic (Reading → Lecture → Discussion → Writing) Each lesson 100 min
Duration	Intensive short term; 8–9 classes	Two semesters 28 weeks
Instructors	Experts on SDGs subject areas from Japan and overseas	EAP instructors
Students	Students from home university and overseas partner universities	Students in policy studies department (including both Japanese and a few international students)
Credit	1 credit	2 credit per skill (total 8 credits)

the two cases, we jointly developed themes creating overarching categories to answer our research questions. In following sections, we first describe each case illustrating the three spaces.

8 | Findings

8.1 | National University Case (U1) Description: SDGs Exchange Programme

8.1.1 | Spatial Practice (the Perceived Space): SDGs Intensive Course

The course was facilitated by four faculty members in international education sector who invited expert lecturers and guest speakers to give topical lectures and lead discussions. To reduce physical and logistic barriers and to enable students join from wherever they are, the programme was offered fully online, utilising virtual platforms. The online platform also made it easier for faculty members and the guests overseas to join the programme during the summer holiday. Students had 90-min synchronous class every day for 10 days, in addition, they watched on demand videos of other professors' lectures. At the end of the course, students were invited to think of individual and collective action plans in their community by picking up some of the thematic areas covered in the class. The course was open to both undergraduate and graduate students from any disciplinary fields with no prerequisite knowledge or experiences. The course was entirely taught in English; however, students were not required to submit English language proof to enrol in the course.

8.1.2 | The Representation of Space (the Conceived Space): The Course Design and Its Relations With the Institutional Context

The U1 has a long history with its local community, owing its foundation to the local citizens. As one of the top national comprehensive research universities in Japan, the university has been active in environmental education and education for sustainability. In 2005, it was one of the five national universities supported by the government to launch a master's education programme, Integrated Research for Sustainability Science Program, to develop specialists in sustainability field. In 2018, the university launched a think tank aimed at identifying and seeking solutions to social issues in collaboration with community stakeholders. In addition, the university has launched a SDGs website that maps its contributions to SDGs through research, education, and social activities. The website is published only in Japanese and the case programme is one of the few international programmes listed.

The U1 was one of the Type A universities in the Top Global University (TGU) project. One of its goals in TGU was to 'find solutions to global-scale problems' and 'nurture leaders of global society...with the ability to make meaningful contribution to the wellbeing of society'. Although the university's internationalisation policy documents do not specifically mention the SDGs, it often mentions the university's role for building sustainable local and global society, in collaboration with community, industry and global partners.

With this strong commitment to society, the SDGs curricular and co-curricular programme was designed during COVID-19 pandemic, as a way to connect students online across different localities and help them understand SDGs from local and global perspectives. In 2022, the course consisted of four main themes relevant to Japanese context—Gender, Decent Work, Climate Change, and Biodiversity—discussing the relevant SDGs and the underlying issues under each topic from Japan's and global perspectives.

8.1.3 | The Representational Space (the Lived Space)

The course enrolled 135 students from 15 countries/regions studying at 19 different universities in 7 countries/regions. Sixty-six per cent (89 students) were female and 44% (46) were male students. About half of students (53%, $n=69$) were from humanities and social science fields and the rest were from engineering and technology (21%, $n=28$), public health and medical sciences (14%, $n=19$) and natural sciences (8%, $n=11$). Majority of students were undergraduate (69%, $n=92$) but also had master's course students (24%, $n=33$) as well as doctoral course students (7%, $n=10$).

In each class, the expert faculty member gave a lecture on the topic followed by discussion sessions among the students. Then students were assigned into breakout rooms with about 5–7 students in one room. During the final class, students brainstormed their own roles and possible action plans at university and local environment. During the course, students shared local news and articles relevant to the themes that they were studying. On learning management system, students posted the news item and why they selected the news and how they link the news item to the course. Each student had to comment at least on two students' posts to give feedback, pose questions, or exchange opinions. In addition, during the course, students utilised emoji, chat functions in Zoom to show support and interact with their peer students.

Students highly valued the rich lecture materials from different disciplinary backgrounds and the discussion with peers in different parts of the world. Comparing the local situations with peers in different cities/towns, learning about the current news relevant to the lecture materials, was one of the highlights in students' reflective notes.

8.2 | Private University Case (U2): SDGs EAP Programme

8.2.1 | Spatial Practice (the Perceived Space): EAP SDGs Programme

In 2020, the course was re-created by the programme director and three program' faculty members. The programme designers viewed that the SDGs were relevant themes to students' majors, in policy studies, and that they would prepare the students better for their future careers. The second author and a team of EAP instructors developed and implemented an EAP lecture bridge course focused on the SDGs. Prior to the re-creation of the course, the theme of the course was not about SDGs and covered topics related to students' field of studies such as tourism or technology. The structure of the course remained somewhat the same,

which followed the problem-solution genre to expose students to different issues and foster their critical thinking skills to propose various solutions for these issues through comprehensive English language education. The course was first implemented in the Spring semester 2021, then was developed further with the involvement of a bigger group faculty members in the programme from Fall 2021. The course was designed to cover all SDGs in one academic year, combining related SDGs into seven themes:

Spring Semester.

Unit 1: Poverty and Hunger.

Unit 2: Health and Well-being.

Unit 3: Education and Institutions.

Unit 4: Gender Inequality.

Fall Semester.

Unit 1: Industry and Infrastructure.

Unit 2: Affordable and Sustainable Cities.

Unit 3: Climate Action.

8.2.2 | The Representation of Space (the Conceived Space): The Course Design and Its Relations With the Institutional Discourses on a Symbiotic Society

The U2 has a strong reputation as one of the top Japanese private universities. It was one of the Type B universities selected for the TGU project in 2014, in which it aimed to support its students to 'acquire the ability to live globally, and to become true World Citizens'. The university is attempting to prioritise 'quality internationalisation', establishing an environment with an increased interaction with overseas partner institutions. The internationalisation initiatives do not mention SDGs specifically; however, 'SDGs' or 'sustainable development' have appeared in numerous SDGs courses and/or research works in particular for the past 10 years.

In 2011, the university established the following basic principles as a vision for the future '... to cultivate and nurture the knowledge and skills necessary for independent and self-reliant living in society ... and for the creation of a symbiotic society of the 21st century and its sustainable development'. The university aims to 'contribute to the creation and sustainable development of a symbiotic society' while utilising the SDGs in all project activities, particularly in education. Similar to U1, U2 has also launched a website that maps its contributions to SDGs, but with a specific focus on SDGs courses with the motto 'Think globally. Act locally'. The website is published only in Japanese and some SDGs courses are not listed, including the one studied in this paper.

8.2.3 | The Representational Space (the Lived Space)

The students took the course as part of their EAP requirements to improve their English for academic purposes skills.

The main area of achievement for many students was the improvement of their English academic skills, such as listening skills, academic discussion, and academic writing. However, despite the course's emphasis on EAP skills, students' reflective learning diaries demonstrated that they have acquired knowledge of the SDGs.

A greater interest in the SDGs was demonstrated by students from the higher English proficiency stream than by students from the regular stream. Although a large number of students found it difficult to grasp the course content, in particular those with low levels of English proficiency, many students provided positive feedback on the course and overall positive reflections.

The course enrolled 368 students. 98% (361) students were Japanese and 2% (7) were international students from neighbouring Asian countries. 53% (195 students) were female and 47% (173) were male students. 100 students gave consents to use their reflective learning diaries for this study. All participants were from policy studies majors and were undergraduate students. The student cohort was divided into two streams based on TOEFL scores (regular and honours (higher level)).

Each week, all student cohort read articles to prepare for their lecture. They then attended the lecture delivered by the director of the programme in a big lecture room. The lecturer made the lecture interactive by providing several Kahoot quizzes and discussion activities. Students took notes while listening to the lecture and used their notes to make a lecture summary and discussion question for their discussion class and wrote reflective learning diaries. Honours students were also asked to do independent research every week and share their findings on the theme of the week with their peers in their discussion class. The students then attended their weekly discussion class in which they learned discussion techniques and discussed the lecture content. This was followed by attending their writing class, learning about academic writing skills and working on writing an essay about the target SDGs.

In following sections, we compare the two cases illustrating the inter-relationship of three spaces in the process of localising the SDGs in the international and English programmes.

9 | The Program Design in Relations to the Institutional Context

The local context, including institutional goals, societal norms, and local priorities, is part of the 'representations of space' or conceived space. It shapes the programme's design and the selection of SDGs topics that are emphasised. For example, the focus on gender equality or environmental sustainability reflects the local societal issues and institutional commitments to these topics. While both case programmes had goals in alignment with the institutional visions and the internationalisation strategies, the U1 case was more influenced by the institutional discourses on contributing to the society and preparing the youth to take action in the society.

The faculty member who developed the programme said,

‘the initial co-curricular program that we designed was very successful attracting a large number of students at our partner universities overseas and making the institution visible globally in this area. It was supported by the institutional leadership for its fit with wider institutional visions... And receiving this support, we were able to add additional components to the program in the following years, including this SDGs summer course... as part of an online international exchange program’

(faculty member, U1)

On the other hand U2 case's faculty members developed the programme to make the English language classes more relevant to the students' majors viewing the SDGs as relevant to 'problem and solution genre' in policy studies. While the programme aligns with the institutional and departmental discourses of 'promoting internationalisation and global education so that students will acquire the ability to live globally, to become true World Citizens', the faculty members did not explicitly link their programme with the institutional discourses.

‘I haven't heard anything about SDGs and internationalisation at [U2], and our course hasn't been recognized from the university as an SDG course yet. Our course is very young. We're still sort of developing it... I'd say in maybe the next 5 years, once it's established and once people, you know, the higher ups sort of understand what we're doing, it might get recognized ...’

(faculty member, U2)

However, the programme designers viewed that the SDGs framework is significantly related to the programme discipline and the international aspect of the programme, in English.

‘[we developed the course because] SDGs are important and helpful framework to consider global issues, also to consider them from a local perspective and to come up with a solution for them, which is basically related to our students' field of studies (policy studies). Not all of our students are going to go on to governmental jobs or anything like that. But even so, I think it's a very good theme for our students... I think it's a good theme to follow, especially for English education’

(faculty member, U2)

In addition, both programmes were isolated from other SDGs activities at their respective universities. While U1 was linked with the institutional internationalisation activities and was listed in the institutional SDGs website, the programme was not linked well with other SDGs activities at the university, being run as part of international exchange subject. As for U2 case, it is developed in isolation from the other activities at the institution. While there are many SDGs related courses, they are built, implemented, and evaluated independently, as the faculty

members in both institutions said that there are many SDGs courses within the university but are designed and implemented in isolation.

While the case programmes were directly or indirectly had goals in alignment with the institutional SDGs and internationalisation goals, the faculty members designed the programmes with their own motivations and interests. For U1 it was to promote student mobility during COVID-19 pandemic and for U2 it was to make the programme more relevant to real life situation—the actual problems and solutions in policy studies programme. However, with lack of strategic integration with institutional SDGs activities, these programmes were conducted as isolated projects with little or no institutional-level impact (Krantz and Gustafsson 2021; Grainger-Brown and Malekpour 2019).

10 | Students' Interest in the SDGs Shaped by Local Contexts

The local context shapes students' engagement with the SDGs, as they relate the programme content to their own lives and local surroundings, creating a personal understanding and connection to the global goals. Students mentioned they chose the course to further understand an issue that they notice or have experienced themselves.

‘Declining working age population is one of the serious problems which we should tackle as soon as possible. One the other hand, it is widely said that inviting workforce from other countries is a good solution. So, I truly would like to focus on this issue regarding the foreign workers in Japan’

(Student, U1)

Further writing about her interest she wrote,

‘I have had an experience of working in the special hospital for cancer, where the number of aged people is rapidly increasing and some of them need specific care because of dementia or deteriorating physical conditions. In most cases their family take care of him or her, however when it turns to be difficult to do so, help from care-givers are required’.

Approaching the issue of foreign workers from the domestic context of aging population and increase necessity for care-workers, the student aims to learn more about ‘the conditions they work and their socialisation in Japanese culture’ from the SDG 8 decent work. This example on local issues such as Japan's aging population and the role of foreign workers demonstrates how the local context (conceived space) influences the students' interests in SDGs.

U2 course was one of the core subjects that students have to take. However, their interest was also clearly shaped by the local discourses on SDGs and the issues that they notice close to themselves. In U2, students' learning diaries showed that

they were interested in the SDGs, in particular, issues related to Japan. As the genre was problem-solution, students reflected on problems that they notice and solutions they proposed.

‘I can understand why the renewable energy is low rate in Japan. Especially, the fact that Japan has fewer flat places is a difficult problem. If people make them flat, forest and mountain decrease. Forests are useful for the CO₂ emission and mountain is beautiful place. So, people have the little space of renewable energy plants. I want to know more about the best possible ways we can use renewable energy sources in Japan’.

Students’ reflections show their interests in SDGs in understanding and interpreting issues close to their own experiences. During the course, students were able to draw connections between these personal experiences and local situations with global context comparing with other countries under the SDGs framework.

‘I could learn gender issues from a global point of view as I discussed with foreign students listened to different gender issues in other countries. It enables me to think about the gender issues in Japan objectively by considering other countries’ issues. After I learned about the gender issues globally, I thought about them from a local point of view. In Japan, many people still consider housework and child-raising are women’s jobs. I think that not only empowering women but also educating men is necessary. Also, I believe that people around me and I should change our stereotype that women should do housework and child-raising before I try to change the idea throughout Japan or worldwide’.

(Student, U1)

‘In Japan, even if women study hard and get the jobs they want, they are paid less than men and cannot hold higher positions. It is not fair that there is a difference in salary for the same job, and this should be changed...In developing countries lack education of women are problem that leads gender inequality. Women who lack access to education have no place to work and are dependent on men, which widens the gender gap and creates a negative cycle’.

(Student, U2)

In proposing solutions (U2) or actions (U1), students also reflected on local issues. Many students in U1 programme discussed about joining student clubs and volunteer activities,

‘A problem in Osaka Bay is the large amount of litter generated by human activities, such as litter floating

on the sea and on beaches. What I can do is to participate in events that has a purpose of picking up litter in Osaka area’.

U2 students also proposed concrete individual actions,

‘I was so surprised about the number of Green Jobs because I didn’t know so much about Green Jobs. I would like to choose Green Jobs’.

‘I learned that different use of transportation can have different effects on climate change. I learned that simple activities can mitigate climate change, so I want to do something good for the environment’.

In this lived space, students reflect on and discuss on topics chosen in the course that were close to their experiences (conceived space) and connect global SDGs to their local realities. As students made meanings of local issues by examining it from SDGs framework and the targets, they became more interested in taking collective actions.

11 | The Learning Spaces (Perceived Spaces) Shaped Students’ Interaction (Lived Space)

The perceived space of learning including the classroom, the teachers and the way the courses were delivered shaped students’ learning experience. The U1 case was entirely virtual with synchronous online classes and unsynchronous discussion board and on-demand videos related to the course themes. The online format enabled the programme to enrol students from different universities overseas and to join one virtual zoom classroom. The virtual exchange format and the use of breakout rooms for discussions (perceived space) facilitate diverse interactions among students.

Students reflected on their discussion experiences,

‘In typical Japanese teaching methods, we rarely discuss. In contrast, this class was mainly discussion. I prefer the later because we can be active to the point where we get interested in a new topic I have never considered before’.

Another student said,

‘This course had students from many different countries, so it was amazing to hear about the different perspectives. One thing I found super interesting was different countries priorities of SDGs’.

The zoom platform was managed by the programme facilitators and the teaching assistant who provided technical support to the lecturers and the students. The facilitators divided the students into breakout rooms, making sure there were diversity in each room. Before the discussion, students learned how to efficiently

communicate with students from different backgrounds, levels of English, and was asked to take one of the three roles—facilitator, rapporteur, and the timekeeper that helped students to be actively involved in the process.

The U2 was mainly in-person with a few of the classes held online due to the pandemic. As the programme was held over two semesters, the classes continued for longer period developing closer learning space among the students and the instructors. The classes were sequenced in a way to develop students' English skills through reading, listening (via lecture), discussion and writing classes conducted separately in link with each other. The course coordinators facilitated the programme to develop and link the contents in collaboration with the instructors. While the lecture classes were held in large classrooms (with pre-lecture reading homework), the discussion and writing classes were more intimate with smaller number of students (between 7 and 17 students per class). Small class made it easier for students to ask questions and receive peer/individual feedback from their instructors.

The in-person space made it easier to make friends. As this course was implemented right after the emergency online learning during the pandemic, students finally had a chance to meet each other in person and do group works together. The peer support helped them to support each other in understanding the content better, and to be able to ask questions to their teachers. For instance, a U2 student wrote, 'I liked conversation with my teacher, and I liked discussion with friends' or 'I had fun especially in discussing or chatting with classmates about lecture topic'.

The virtual space (U1) made it interesting for students to hear diverse students' experiences joining from different locations and have conversations about what issues affect their lives in different ways. However, it had time difference and technical challenges for students to be fully engaged in class—sometimes students disappeared from the zoom due to internet issues or they had to juggle trainings organised by the home universities. On the other hand, the classroom experience in U2 made it easier to interact and build relationships. In other words, the way the course was facilitated, and the classroom space (the perceived space) influenced students' learning experiences.

12 | Lived Experiences Challenged the Conceived Spaces

Students' interest and their learning experience was greatly influenced by the programme design and the curriculum, which represent the conceived space. The operational implementation of these designs (perceived space) created specific learning environments that shaped students' interactions and engagement (lived space). This spatial perspective reveals the complex interplay between institutional goals, practical execution, and personal experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of how educational spaces influence learning. However, at the same time, students also demonstrated individual agency in navigating the programmes regardless of the programme goal. While the U1 mainly aimed to develop students' SDGs

understandings, students utilised the course to practice English and develop intercultural skills through the understanding of situations in different countries. Similarly, while U2 mainly aimed to develop students' English skills for academic purposes, the students showed great interest in the academic understanding of SDGs.

In addition, students challenged the programme design. In U1, students requested longer discussion time because once the class ends there would be no after-class informal talk time among students to build friendship. Students in U2, on the other hand, were developing their English skills for academic purposes. Thus, the course content on SDGs topics was initially hard for students in lower English level classes. One student wrote in their learning diary, 'the lecture is too difficult. I feel like some of the SDGs content might be even difficult in Japanese. Learning lots of vocabulary is difficult too'.

Instructors in U2 also challenged the course design as many of whom are English language instructors without specialty knowledge in SDGs themes. This lack of specialty knowledge in SDGs frustrated the faculty members to deliver the course, raising similar concerns as the students,

'The material was quite difficult for lower-level students and a lot of them just couldn't keep up. Because these students struggled with the material, both the concepts and the language, a lot of them were unable to focus on using discussion techniques, which somewhat defeated the purpose of this course [Discussion]. Using more familiar material would allow students to better focus on discussion'.

(faculty member, U2).

The programme designers viewed SDGs as convenient framework to build interdisciplinary international programme and to foster students' understanding of various problems while developing their English and other communication skills. However, it was challenging to deliver the programme to meet these diverse needs. In the following year, the programme designers adjusted the course contents providing a vocabulary list and activities to make it easier for students to follow the contents. This shows how the lived experiences of teachers and students challenged the programme design or the representations of space and negotiated the way the programme was delivered (spatial practice) in consequent years.

13 | Discussions and Conclusion

Sustainable development goals (SDGs) provide an excellent framework in internationalisation activities in higher education to bridge disciplines and local and global space (Zguir, Dubis, and Koç 2021). However, the actual practice can be shaped differently in local contexts (Campbell, Nguyen, and Stewart 2023). This study illustrated the process of ESD localisation in international education programmes at two Japanese universities by drawing on the production of space theory. By applying Lefebvre's (1991) production of space theory, we explored the intricate relationship between programme design (the

representation of space or conceived space), implementation (the spatial practice or perceived space), and the lived experiences of students and instructors (the representational space or lived space). This spatial approach reveals the complex socio-spatial dynamics that shape learning environments and their outcome, as suggested by scholars such as Gulson and Symes (2007) and Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk (2015).

The conceived space in both cases was influenced by the universities' vision for social impact and sustainability (as reflected in the TGU and vision statements) and the locally relevant issues (e.g., gender issues). For instance, U1 is positioned as a leading national, research university aimed to become a world-leading university that contributes to global issues. Embodying this global ambition, the U1 case programme aimed to cover diverse students around the world. On the other hand, U2 is positioned as a leading private, teaching-oriented university aimed to develop its students to become global citizens. Although SDGs focus was not mandatory for the EAP course, the U2 case chose the SDGs framework as a way to prepare its students as global citizens. Here, the spatial analysis highlights the importance of how institutional visions and strategic goals can influence programme design. The conceived space acts as a framework that can either facilitate or limit the integration of sustainability practices within the curriculum. By examining this space, higher education institutions can better understand how their strategic priorities align with or diverge from sustainability goals, offering a pathway to more coherent and impactful integration of SDGs in international education.

The perceived space or the way the course was implemented had a direct impact on students' engagement with sustainability. The virtual learning environment of U1 enabled participation from a diverse group of students worldwide, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and exposing students to a range of perspectives on sustainability. However, the virtual format also presented challenges, such as technical issues and limited opportunities for informal interaction, echoing concerns raised by Al-Jaber and Al-Ghamdi (2020) about complexities of virtual learning environments in sustainability education. U2's in-person format fostered a different kind of engagement, where the extended duration and face-to-face interactions facilitated a deeper learning and relationship-building among students. These findings suggest that the design of learning spaces, whether virtual or physical, plays critical role in shaping the effectiveness of sustainability education within international program, as discussed by Harrison (2018). Institutions can utilise these insights to design learning environments that not only deliver content but also create opportunities for meaningful engagement with sustainability, thereby enhancing the overall impact of the program.

In addition, the implementation of the course was influenced by the faculty members' resistance to change (Johnston 2013). EAP instructors with no training in SDG disciplines were concerned about their lack of knowledge of and expertise in the SDGs. They were also concerned about their students' ability to comprehend the SDG content, which is necessary to effectively use the EAP skills when dealing with the theme of the SDGs. This concern was mentioned in Kleiman (2010) that SDGs concepts were not easily transferable to EAP content. This challenge highlights the

resistance between the three spaces as embodied in teachers' resistance of teaching the EAP course with SDGs themes as a result of their teaching experiences.

The lived space was where students negotiated and made meaning of their experiences, often challenging the initial course design. In U1, students used the programme not just to learn about SDGs but to practice English and develop intercultural skills, highlighting how internationalisation can serve as a conduit for sustainability learning (Leicht, Heiss, and Byun 2018). In U2, despite the course's primary focus on English for Academic Purposes (EAP), students demonstrated a significant interest in understanding the SDGs, reflecting a desire to connect their academic learning with global sustainability issues. The students in both programmes became more critical of local problems as they analysed them from local and global perspectives. Some students expressed their desire to take action and create change (Mogensen and Schnack 2018), such as setting up a student community focused on spreading the message of SDGs on their campus. Despite the differences in the two cases and different localisation processes, the programmes produced positive outcomes and motivated many students subjectively to take action for sustainable development. By highlighting the lived experiences of students, spatial analysis emphasises the active role of learners in shaping the outcomes of sustainability education. Students not only consume information but also contribute to the learning space, challenging and transforming it based on their own experiences and interests. Recognising this dynamic can help educators design programmes that are responsive to student agency, fostering an environment where learners feel empowered to engage with and act on sustainability issues.

Existing research shows that ESD integration in curricula and student-led initiatives at Japanese universities lag behind those found in primary and secondary schools (Singer and Nagata 2017), and that there are no clear links between different subjects and programs in Japanese higher education programmes related to ESD (Kitamura and Hoshii 2014). However, this study found that the localisation of SDGs international programmes occurred from the bottom up, driven by the negotiation between institutional context, programme goals, and the lived experiences of teachers and students. Our findings showed that the space is not fixed but is shaped by social relationships among different actors. Despite the challenges, localising SDG curriculum has resulted in positive learning outcomes for students, as educational content, materials, and approaches were adapted to be more relevant to the learners' and to the local context (Zguir, Dubis, and Koç 2021).

This spatial perspective contributes to the broader discourse on internationalisation and higher education for sustainable development (HESD) by providing a nuanced understanding of how educational environments are constructed and experienced. It moves beyond traditional pedagogical analysis to consider the socio-spatial dynamics that influence how students and instructors interact with sustainability concepts. The framework allows institutions to critically reflect on the alignment between their internationalisation strategies and sustainability goals. By understanding the interplay between conceived, perceived, and lived spaces, higher education institutions can identify gaps and opportunities in their current practices, leading to more

integrated and effective approaches to HESD (McCowan 2023). This alignment is crucial for developing globally minded individuals equipped to address complex sustainability challenges in diverse contexts (Tsiligiris and Ilieva 2021).

13.1 | Future Research Directions

Given the limited research on how ESD initiatives contribute to the understanding of SDGs among Japanese university students (Icihnose 2019; Jodoin 2019), further exploration is warranted. Future research should investigate the factors influencing different types of SDGs courses in international education. As higher education institutions increasingly prioritise long-term strategic internationalisation and aim to enhance their contribution to developing global citizens and solving global issues, the localisation of ESD programmes in institutional strategies would be valuable for higher education institutions.

By drawing on spatial perspectives, ESD professionals may consider aligning the programmes with institutional contexts, strategic goals and institutional visions and be aware of the competing rationalities from the designers, the implementers, and the students. Continued research in this area particularly in different national, geopolitical and institutional contexts will contribute to the ongoing development and refinement of HESD models and their impact on higher education internationalisation.

Author Contributions

Ariunaa Enkhtur: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, resources, funding acquisition. **Mahboubeh Rakhshandehroo:** conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Ethics Statement

The study followed ethical guidelines according to the Code of Ethics of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and acquired institutional ethical approval to conduct the research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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