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Fostering Sustainable Development Through Organizational Institutionalism: A Role for Higher Education?

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Abstract: It is now widely accepted that ongoing degradation of the environment is driven in significant part by weaknesses in relation to collective action. This conceptual study considers how higher education could more effectively support sustainable development by promoting the incorporation of an institutional logic of sustainability into organisations. The study identifies a set of characteristic features of a logic of sustainability, including norms that give expression to a collective capacity for change, promote attention on multiple perspectives, and allow for accommodations with other institutional logics. The study teases out what higher education would look like if it were to support a basis for collective action grounded in norms that promotes sustainable development within organisations. It thus offers an innovative paradigm for higher education that advances collectives within student learning, taking the sector beyond a focus on sustainability in relation to curricula or university estates.

Paper: It has been argued that weaknesses in relation to collective action underpin ongoing degradation of the environment (Poteete and Ostrom, 2004). It is thus important to consider new ways in which collective action might be promoted that addresses sustainable development. One longstanding focus for understanding collective action, indeed, has centred on the notion of an institution, a system of norms that influences how people interact with each other (Thornton *et al.*, 2012).

This paper outlines a pathway by which universities might strengthen the institutions that influence sustainable development, exploring the following research question: "In what ways is it possible for higher education to support organisational institutionalism in order to sustainable development?" The research design is framed as a conceptual analysis (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015), one which offers a synthesis of existing work within the field of organizational institutionalism. More specifically, the study explores how graduates could be enabled to work within organisations that promote an institutional logic of sustainability, where a logic is understood as a socially-constructed pattern of norms that enables members of the institution to find meaning in their daily activity and that offers a taken for granted set of categories that shape actions.

A collective basis for organisational life, and for education

Montabon, Pagel and Wu (2016) argued that an institutional logic that remedies environmental degradation should incorporate norms that rule out harm to the environment. We can contrast this with a logic of the market in which norms promote what is most likely to increase profits. According to Leicht and Lyman (2006), however, a logic of the market dominates both organizations offering professional services as well as those engaged in activity that has long been seen as commercial. It is thus apparent that norms that legitimise change from existing patterns of activity will be essential in addressing environmental degradations (See also Boström, Andersson, Berg, Gustafsson, Gustavsson, Hysing et al., 2018). The challenge of introducing a new logic into an organization, though, means that it is valuable to consider the treatment of multiple institutional logics. In many cases, then, pressures towards the inclusion of multiple institutional logics within organizations will imply that those operating within them should possess the capacity to attend to differing perspectives simultaneously, even if it remains the case, according to Schneider and Clauß (2019), that if one is to create sustainable value then a social or ecological mission has to be sufficiently central. Norms that promote attention to differing perspectives should thus be regarded as an integral aspect of what is entailed in a logic of sustainability. There may, however, be ways to frame multiple logics that incorporate compatibility between them. For instance, one means to promote at least a measure of compatibility between a logic of the market and a logic of sustainability is to promote norms that advance a localisation of activity. According to foci Glover, Champion, Daniels and Dainty (2014) an awareness of local and regional considerations in planning should complement any focus on higher-level planning.

There would be a range of ways for universities to prepare graduates to contribute to systems of norms that are predicated on sustainability. This would require one to consider graduate employability as a capacity to act as an agent within the workplace in ways that contribute to the maintenance and elaboration of collectives (Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, 2021). In this, one would expect to see pedagogies that transgress the hegemonies that prevent sufficient progress on sustainability (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid & McGarry, 2015). This would entail universities offering forms of education that go beyond disciplinary silos. There is scope in this for professional education that crosses boundaries and opens professionals up to other viewpoints than their own. Alongside a focus on graduate employability, one would expect to see universities prioritise partnerships with organisations that exhibit an institutional logic of sustainability. This could entail an engagement of universities in regional partnerships, the inclusion of social-movement integrated learning and a priority given to the development of locally-relevant knowledge.

Conclusions

There are ways forward to address the challenges of sustainable development if we see collectives as the subject of education, as much as individuals. This would mean that the capacity to work within an institutional logic of sustainability is seen as a key aspect of what it means to be employable. This paper offers insights towards the development of an educational paradigm that is predicated on collective well-being, a paradigm that could enable higher education to contribute more directly to the realisation of a sustainable future for humanity.

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