

200 Conceptualising the sustainability agenda in higher education

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Abstract

Sustainability and sustainable development have become ever-present ideas in higher education. Universities around the world now commonly build principles of sustainability into their mission statements, strategic planning, curricula and organisational structures. Yet the increase in action and debate hides a lack of clarity as regards what sustainable development is, and how, if at all, universities might support its realisation. This paper presents a theoretical exploration of these questions, putting forward a conceptual frame for understanding the range of ways in which the sustainability agenda can be realised. It distinguishes between three forms of engagement: projective – the fostering of sustainability in the outside society through teaching, research and community engagement; expressive – integration of sustainability principles into the functioning of the institution; and constructive – critical engagement with the concept of sustainable development itself. Implications of this framework are drawn out for practice in higher education institutions in the contemporary era.

Full paper

In recent years the idea of sustainable development has moved from the confines of geography textbooks and UN declarations to the centre ground of higher education rhetoric and strategy. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular have become a common framework around which higher education institutions (HEIs) both map their activities and actively align their work. Sustainability has become an apparently consensual idea around which to gather the diverse actors and functions of the institution, and provide a public justification of its existence (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021; McCowan 2019).

Yet despite this apparent consensus, there is a lack of clarity both as regards the notion itself and the ways in which higher education can engage with it. This paper presents a theoretical exploration of the notion and its relationship with HEIs, leading to a framework for both understanding and shaping future engagements. It distinguishes between three forms of engagement: projective – the fostering of sustainability in the outside society through teaching, research and community engagement; expressive – integration of sustainability principles into the functioning of the institution; and constructive – critical engagement with the concept of sustainable development itself.

In the first of these modes, sustainable development is something that HEIs help to bring into being, most commonly through teaching their students to be sustainable. This provision is sometimes integrated into existing courses, and conceptualised as a modification of professional training (i.e. the formation of sustainable engineers (Mitchell et al. 2021)), or involves the creation of new courses. In other cases sustainable development forms part of the general civic and personal learning of all students, and may occur outside of the accredited syllabus.

While the main way in which HEIs project themselves is through their graduates, there are also the areas of research and community engagement. The contributions of these areas to society have been the subject of significant attention in the UK and elsewhere in recent years through the 'impact' agenda, which has expressed itself in the policies of research funding and evaluation (McCowan 2018). HEIs now commonly map their various research and community engagement activities in relation to sustainable development, and particularly the SDGs.

Yet we can also see educational institutions in a different way, in having a real existence and value in themselves, in the here and now. HEIs are communities that matter – despite their transience – independently of the future and external benefit they produce. This idea can be understood as the expressive as opposed to the projective function of education. Much of the attention in this area has been focused on the carbon emissions stemming from international student mobility (see the analysis carried out by Shields 2019), and to a lesser extent staff mobility for conferences and fieldwork (e.g. Bjørkdahl et al. 2022) – leading to not a little soul-searching in institutions caught between the financial and reputational necessities of internationalisation and their guilty consciences.

These two modes capture much of what educational institutions do. However, there is an assumption in both of them that the ideas or purposes are predefined or externally generated. We might then point to another function of HEIs that is to generate new ideas about what is to be projected or expressed. For this we can employ the term 'constructive'. The notion of sustainable development is in fact a 'shell' concept, with its substantive meanings varying dramatically in moral and political terms. It represents a coming together of two hitherto separate strands of thought and action: firstly, national or international 'development' – as in the economic, political and social progress or improvement of societies; and secondly, the protection, conservation and regeneration of the natural environment. Yet the apparent win-win between these two ideas masks possibilities for continuing global injustices, making the constructive role of universities crucial in interrogating the concept.

Importantly then, the role of higher education in relation to sustainability is not only a one of impact, but also of critique and reconstruction of the ideas underpinning it. In this process, we can see an important regaining of protagonism for the institution. In remaining committed to sustained enquiry and deep reflection, in dialogue with action, and in the context of epistemic pluralism and diversity of ideas, higher education can lead a critical interrogation of the notion of sustainable development, and its re-imagination, setting in motion a positive societal contagion that may give us a chance of finding a way out of the current ecological crisis.

References

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