

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the management and politics of higher education in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

This doctoral research investigates the role of various stakeholders, particularly those in leadership positions, in the implementation of sustainable development (SD) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the German state of Baden-Württemberg. Through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of semi-structured interviews with 23 participants across different HEIs, including presidents, sustainability officers, and student representatives, the research seeks to answer three main questions: (1) What is the role of different stakeholders in the implementation of SD in their respective institutions? (2) Are stakeholders familiar with political frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? (3) Is there a common understanding of theory and practice regarding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in German HEIs? The study is grounded in a broad literature review on sustainable development, sustainable higher education, and related topics. It aims to augment our understanding of how HEIs can effectively engage in sustainable development.

Full paper

Our modern world has to address immense challenges: poverty, gender inequality, global health issues, climate change leading to an increasing number of natural disasters, political extremism, terrorism, the flow of refugees, and the limitation of natural resources are only some examples (Rockstrom et al., 2009; BMBF, 2017). In order to tackle these challenges, the world requires a social transformation. Education is one of the primary keys to achieving such a transformation (BMBF, 2017: p.7), as stated by the former general director of UNESCO, Irina Bovoka: "There is no more powerful transformative force than education [...]." (UNESCO, 2015: p.4). However, what kind of education do we need to achieve such a transformation?

When we look at the specific role that HEIs play in the implementation of sustainable development, both science (Etzkorn & Singer-Brodowski, 2017; Bauer et al., 2018; Sonetti et al., 2019; Holst & Seggern, 2020 and others) and politics (Talloires Declaration, 1990; Earth Summit, 1992; Rio +20 conference, 2012; Agenda 2030, 2015a; and others) agree that HEIs play a crucial role and can be involved in all

aspects of Sustainable Development (SD), e.g., environmental, social, economic, and institutional (Davim & Leal, 2016) and in the different dimensions of the HEI System: education, research, operations and community (Cortese, 2003). The question that arises following the specific role of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is how a successful transfer of theory into practice can work and, in particular, who must take what role regarding successful practice. This question goes hand in hand with the theme of this year's SRHE conference: "Higher Education: A Place for Activism and Resistance?"

This research is part of a three-year doctoral research project, which focuses on the analysis of three main questions affecting the implementation of ESD in HEI.

- What is the role of various stakeholders, with a particular focus on HEI's leadership and management positions, regarding the implementation of SD in their respective institutions?
- Are stakeholders familiar with political frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Action Programme (GAP), or the National Action Plan (NAP)?
- Is there a common understanding of theory and practice regarding ESD in German HEIs?

An axiology approach was chosen as the underlying philosophy for this research (Saunders et al., 2009: p. 116ff). The theoretical approach is phenomenological constructivist (Burrell & Morgan, 1989). The research methodology is qualitative (explorative and causal) in the form of a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Buche & Carstensen, 2009) to compare individual stakeholders of HEIs via semi-structured online interviews, including presidents, sustainability officers, and student representatives (George, 2022). These will be recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated, and analyzed via MaxQda with the principle of Kuckartz (Kuckartz, 2016).

The work is underpinned by a broad-based literature review based on key terms concerning the research topic, summary and understanding of common research trends, and relevant topics in SD. The literature review includes information from over 400 sources, including peer-reviewed papers, books, conference papers, political agendas, and others.

The sample of this study are HEIs in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. This was chosen because Baden-Württemberg is one of the biggest federal states, both by size and inhabitants, it has the most HEIs of any federal state and also has a wide variety of HEIs types.

In total, there are 87 HEIs in Baden-Württemberg. 7 HEIs have been selected, including State-run Universities, Universities of Excellence, Universities of Education, Universities of Applied Science, and the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg. The selection of these 7 HEIs is primarily based on the availability of all three areas to be investigated and secondly by the size, measured in terms of the number of study participants. Reasons for the selection by size are representativeness, impact, data availability, visibility, risk management, and others.

The research comprises a total of 23 interviews, including the interviews with the three described stakeholders of the seven selected HEIs, one representative from the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts Baden-Württemberg, and one representative from civil society.

By December 2024, a broad theoretical understanding of the implementation of SD in HEIs in Baden-Württemberg based on a broad literature review, in addition to initial results from qualitative research,

will have been completed. The focus of this paper will be a presentation of examples of best practices, obstacles in the implementation of SD, and the responsibilities involved.

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