

Engaging Green Champions for an Effective Higher Education Green Transition

Identifying key aspects to better engage individuals in HEIs in sustained growth for the Green Transition

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Abstract/Outline

Sustainability has become an integral part of life on campus (Sugiarto et al., 2022), with Higher educational institutions (HEIs) being recognised as key drivers in enabling the attitudinal change needed towards a more sustainably aware society (Sonetti et al., 2016) and successful integration of the green transition within HEIs being very much dependent on sustainability advocates or “green champions” (Wood et al., 2016; Davis, 2012). However, despite the recognised increase for the pro-sustainability movement (Pereira Ribeiro et al., 2021) and the objectives of the European Green Deal (EGD) encouraging education for the green transition, actors at all levels within HEIs have been slow to incorporate sustainability (Dlouhá et al., 2017).

There are a number of individual case studies describing “what” certain institutions have done to achieve a greener culture however little research exists on the identities of individual actors “who” engage and contribute to this green culture, their needs, motivations or perceived barriers to entry. Even less research has been conducted, using a comparison case study method, to examine “how” institutions successfully achieve a campus-wide, cross-disciplinary, multi-level green culture (Taylor et al., 2012).

Addressing the call in the literature for further research into the aspects to better engage all individuals in HEIs in sustained growth for the green transition, the research can contribute to the understanding of sustainability engagement among all actors in HEIs and the potential for progressing the green transition across the sector.

The primary objective is to explore the identities and attitudes in HEIs to better understand how to bridge the gap towards a more engaged green champion community on campus that empowers a sustained green transition. As a pilot study, the paper considers the barriers that HEI actors perceive to be standing in the way when engaging in sustainability concerns on campus and their attitudes towards sustainability engagement. The qualitative information was gathered in 2023 through a survey to all three HEI co-horts, students, staff and management. The novel dataset contains responses from 77 people, across the three co-horts, from HEIs across 5 countries, Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Netherlands and Portugal. The qualitative data provides rich information on the current and existing knowledge gaps, attitudes, challenges and confidence levels relating to the green transition.

The main findings show that overall, the three groups surveyed experienced low levels of knowledge and confidence in core areas for capacity building established in the EGD. We can however see that depending on their role as a student, staff member or manager, that areas of interest, levels of confidence, knowledge and perceived barriers vary. Further investigations to determine these levels across disciplines, job functions and departments could be conducted to assess green champion profiles and attitudes with the aim of increasing engagement.

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This general review of the findings uncovers barriers to progressing the green transition within in the higher education sector; a sector which is historically lacking in green research. Furthermore, solutions are offered to address and overcome these barriers from a multiple stakeholder perspectives within this sector.



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