Sustainability self-assessment for HEIs and its potential for sustainability strategies

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Abstract

HEIs play a crucial role in promoting environmental sustainability and advancing sustainable development in society. In this context, sustainability disclosure is a suitable instrument for communicating social responsibility and presenting internal sustainability assessment of the entire institution in accordance with the whole-institution approach. However, even if an increasing number of HEIs is interested in disclosing information regarding their sustainability performance, there are hardly any standardized or defined sustainability assessment and reporting processes or criteria specifically for HEIs.

The projects UNISIMS (co-funded by the "German Federal Foundation Environment") and GET-AHED (co-funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+-programme) are seeking to deliver on this endeavour. Both projects are aiming to develop tools for sustainability self-assessment which are to allow for standardised and strategic sustainability reporting at HEIs. This proposed paper focuses on the projects' potential for embedding sustainability self-assessment tools in HEIs' sustainability strategies.

Introduction

In order to achieve the aim of climate neutrality by 2050, all of society across sectors and communities must collaborate to achieve holistic solutions. In the public arena, higher education institutions (HEIs) are as yet not considered to be at the forefront in this endeavour, however they can play an essential role in transiting towards carbon neutrality and sustainable societies and economies (Lucaci, 2022, Weber, 2012). As pointed out by Prieto-Jiménez et al. (2021), HEIs can be considered "priority organisations and agents of change".

Many European HEIs already show considerable performance when it comes to greening; due to their experience and expertise, particularly with a view to societal engagement, they are well-placed to take a leading role in the green transition. For reaching prominence in the pertinent public discourse, however, the higher education (HE)-sector will have to reflect strategically on how to boost its own visibility and performance (Lucaci, 2022), and to integrate greening and sustainability aspects into their institutional strategies more systematically.

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Background: Introduction to sustainability self-assessment for HEIs

The role of HEIs in promoting sustainability and advancing sustainable development in society has been regarded as crucial in pertinent academic literature. In particular, HEIs bring a lot of expertise and experience to our collective transition towards a sustainable society, which are anchored in all of their three missions (Findler et al., 2018; Karatzoglou, 2013; Prieto-Jiménez et al., 2021; Weber, 2012): Firstly, HEIs educate future citizens and leaders, and increase sustainability knowledge, awareness, and technologies required to achieve the sustainability agenda (Alshuwaikhat et al., 2016; Amaral et al., 2015; Bizerril et al., 2018). As teaching and educational institutions, they also impart various attitudes, skills and competencies that flow into future societal developments. In addition to passing on specialist knowledge at a scientific level, HE is also expected to shape (leadership) personalities and thus the willingness to take on responsibility. The concept of education for sustainable development is explicitly aimed at action and design skills. Secondly, through high-quality research, HEIs make a significant contribution to an enlightened society by generating, critically reflecting and transferring theoretically and methodologically supported knowledge. HEIs thereby generate findings on global and human development towards sustainability and thus play a key role in the transformation to a sustainable society. Through research and teaching, they have a direct influence on the solution patterns of socially relevant problems and the competence development of future decision-makers (Adams, 2013; Lopatta & Jaeschke, 2014). Finally, within their third mission, HEIs play a decisive role in innovation ecosystems and are experienced in informing and involving multiple stakeholders, including citizens (Régent et al., forthcoming).

In addition to the challenge of integrating sustainability into their three missions as well as into operations, HEIs are also faced with the responsibility of dealing with sustainability reporting (Adams, 2013). However, there are hardly any standardized or defined sustainability reporting processes or reporting criteria specifically for HEIs. Nevertheless, an increasing number of HEIs is interested in disclosing information regarding their sustainability performance.

Approach: Case study-analysis of empirical examples

The proposed paper provides insights into two empirical examples (cases), which are funded projects to establish sustainability assessment tools for HEIs. Both projects are aimed at standardising sustainability reporting in the HE-sector and lifting the issue of an environmentally sustainable HEI to the strategic level. Standardization can help to save time, material and personnel resources at HEIs. In addition, a standardized instrument for sustainability assessment can be more easily integrated into the organizational structure of the university and institutionalization can be more cost-effective.

UNISIMS

At its core, the UNISIMS project aims at a participatory definition and operationalization of sustainability criteria in the form of an indicator catalogue and the design of a web-based benchmark-system, and focuses on the university fields of teaching, research, transfer, governance and operation in the German HE-sector. Currently, 25 pilot HEIs and 23 interested institutions have been recruited for the participatory development of the indicators for HEIs sustainability assessment and reporting.

The methodological approach includes several steps. Firstly, a systematic literature review of scientific databases and analysis of available frameworks and tools at the (inter)national level have been done. This information was systematized for each of five sustainability-related areas (teaching, research, transfer, governance, and operations). Secondly, through a participatory approach, the relevant areas and indicators were discussed and further developed within several workshops. Thirdly, a survey (response rate in average 50 questionnaires) for each of five areas was conducted that aimed at a prioritization of the identified indicators. Furthermore, the advisory board has continuously participated in the development of an indicator set. Finally, a piloting phase of each area has been implemented by pilot HEIs and interested institutions. The results will be available in the form of a brochure and as an online tool.

GET-AHED

The Erasmus+-funded project GET-AHED is based on the model and principals of the EU's HEInnovate[3] online self-assessment tool and will allow HEIs to assess themselves in terms of the level of integration of environmental sustainability aspects across a range of dimensions and indicators. To achieve this, a qualitative and quantitative meta-study on existing tools (as for example outlined in Tumbas et al., 2015, Mapar et al., 2020, Wafa et al. 2022) and related studies (as e.g. Stöger et al., 2021) was conducted, aimed at extracting and condensing a taxonomy of sustainability dimensions and indicators, as well as the relevant thematic areas.

Moreover, the GET-AHED platform will comprise two further tools, which are a training tool and an energy efficiency tool for HEIs. The three tools are supposed to interact in a way that users who have weak scores in any of the self-assessment dimensions will be led to respective training contents or best practices in terms of energy efficiency at HEIs (a more detailed description can be viewed at Régent et al., forthcoming).

Results: Sustainability self-assessment and reporting at the strategic level – potential of the two projects

Two major significant steps for HEIs to operationalize sustainability in their practices have been identified as (1) understanding sustainability through introducing statements and policies, and (2) assessing sustainability through systems and tools (Alghamdi et al., 2017; Shriberg, 2002). The assessment and reporting of sustainability activities plays a critical role in the advancement towards sustainability in the sense that it orients the institution towards important action areas, compares efforts of the institution internally and externally, involves stakeholders, and provides a basis for planning improvements (Alghamdi et al., 2017; Berzosa et al., 2017). In practice, sustainability assessment and reporting of HEIs are still in its infancy, considering only a small proportion of HEIs worldwide has attempted to disclose their performance and the quality of information is considered rather low (Adams, 2013; Lozano, 2011; Sonetti et al., 2016) - this in the face of the numerous sustainability self-assessment tools that have been existing throughout the past decades (e.g. Mapar et al., 2020).

In this context, sustainability reports are a suitable instrument for communicating social responsibility and presenting the internal assessment of the sustainability of the entire institution (whole-institution approach). Furthermore, a sustainability report can show how the challenges of sustainable development are actively addressed by the respective HEIs. HEIs are therefore increasingly turning to voluntarily producing sustainability reports in order to transparently present their contribution to sustainable development and to sharpen their institutional sustainability profile in the long term.

Reflection

Given that there is already a considerable number of existing comparable tools (which, however, have failed in becoming a standard in the HE-sector), it will be of importance to add value with the UNISIMS and the GET-AHED sustainability assessment-tools. As Mapar et al. (2020) state, "(…) the progress of the existing tools is still inadequate to assess the university system in an integrated way by covering all sustainability dimensions and core elements as well as the main activities of HEIs". Also, the authors point out that successful implementation of tools requires active involvement of different stakeholders. Both UNISIMS and GET-AHED have been tying in with this issue.

Conclusively, the potentials of the two related projects in terms of environmental sustainability self-assessment for HEIs and their overall contribution to delivering on the European Green Deal can be summarised as follows:

- Implementation and standardization of sustainability reporting
- Whole-institution approach
- Awareness among multiple HEI-representatives and divisions

[3] https://www.heinnovate.eu/en

- Participatory approach contributes to an increased acceptance and usability
- Complex environment can be addressed

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